

Just the Way You Are



The Human Rights Campaign Foundation estimates there are 2 million transgender individuals across the United States, a group encompassing not only adults but also children and teens. Included in this definition is the growing number of individuals who reject traditional gender roles altogether, not identifying as either male or female. In an ever-evolving world where information is more accessible than ever, young people are coming of age with a stronger understanding of how their gender isn't necessarily the same as the sex they were assigned at birth, or, in many cases, with a desire not to be constrained by gender characterizations at all.

For many, especially older generations, these can be very difficult concepts to grasp. Entrenched thinking that boys are born as boys and girls are born as girls is not just taught, it's a societal, cultural presumption, especially among those who are confident and secure in a gender identity that conforms with expectations. Even those with an open mind willing to accept and embrace gender diversity can struggle with concepts such as gender transition, gender expression and gender fluidity.

In this month's focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, *School Nutrition* recognizes that gender identity issues increasingly impact today's school communities, requiring changes in both attitude and policy. For most of our readers, however, simply understanding the vocabulary and basic philosophies around these issues can be helpful in ensuring that interactions with student customers remain positive and welcoming.



UNDERSTANDING GENDER

The simplest way to start, say experts in this field, is by recognizing and accepting “gender” as a social construct; that is, an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society, rather than a proven fact (anatomy is only one biological aspect of gender identity). The basic acceptance of this particular social construct may go back hundreds of years, but that doesn’t make it a fact.

Consider other examples of how social constructs related to gender have dictated expectations and rules. Fifty years ago, many women in this country were barred from getting a job without their husband’s permission. Two hundred years before that, widows in early America were prohibited from inheriting money or property and were dependent on the closest male relative for support. Only a few decades ago, men were not encouraged to be nurses or secretaries—or school nutrition professionals! Women faced obstacles in becoming doctors, executives or superintendents. (And consider the social constructs on gender that the women in Afghanistan are still facing today!)

Were there occasions in your own childhood where you were discouraged from an activity because of your gender? Maybe girls were told they couldn’t play ice hockey, while boys were discouraged from figure skating. Did you receive toys that were more a reflection of your gender than of your interests? How did it feel when a trusted authority figure made an inaccurate, gender-based presumption about you?

These are all social constructs of gender, explains Katie Leikam, LCSW, who is a member of the World Professional Association of Transgender Health. “If [older generations] can reflect on how their own lives could have been different if there weren’t social constructs of gender identity, they may come to understand [today’s challenges],” she says.

For some people, their gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth based on their anatomy—but that’s not the case for everyone. “For some, their internal identity does not match their external biological identity,” says Dr. Sangeeta Gupta, founder of Gupta Consulting Group, which provides diversity, equity and inclusion solutions to organizations around the world.

Understanding Gender Terminology



Communication is at the heart of your connections with students. Understanding the terminology—and knowing what expressions to avoid—will help demonstrate your commitment to inclusivity.

Assigned Gender. A person's assigned gender is how they were classified at birth based on anatomy. A person's assigned gender is printed on their birth certificate. Avoid phrases like "biological sex" or "biologically male/female."

Cisgender. A person whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth. Cisgender individuals can still engage in different forms of gender expression, such as cross-dressing, without being transgender.

Folx. An alternative spelling of "folks" that emphasizes inclusivity of people across the gender spectrum.

Gender Confirmation Surgery. Sometimes called gender-affirming surgery, this is an umbrella term for several procedures available to trans patients, so their bodies look and function in a way that matches their gender identity. Not all trans people undergo gender confirmation surgery. Avoid using the outdated term "sex change" or referring to a trans person as "pre-op" or "post-op."

Gender Dysphoria. A clinical diagnosis recognized by the American Psychiatric Association wherein a patient suffers significant distress because their gender identity does not align with the gender they were

assigned at birth. Avoid the outdated term "gender identity disorder."

Gender Fluid. A person who does not identify as having a fixed gender. The individual may identify and present themselves as male at one point and female at another, as both male and female and as neither.

LGBTQ+. An acronym that represents an umbrella spectrum of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer or questioning of their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity. The plus symbol has come to represent other sexual identities.

Nonbinary. A nonbinary person is someone whose gender identity does not fit into the categories of male or female. A nonbinary individual could have characteristics of either gender, or they could express different characteristics from day to day. Nonbinary is a loose term that will have different meanings based on the individual.

Queer. Often used as a derogatory and provocative expression, "queer" is being reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community as an umbrella term that refers to anyone who is not straight and/or cisgender. It's an adjective that denotes a particular culture, with its own politics, academic

studies, literature and so on. For some, it represents "questioning" of one's identity rather than committing to a specific gender or sexual identity.

Sexual Orientation. While there is a cultural and political alignment between gender identity and sexual orientation, they are two totally separate identifications. The Human Rights Campaign identifies sexual orientation as: "An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people."

Transgender. An all-inclusive term for anyone whose gender identity does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender should be used as an adjective and can be shortened to *trans*. Avoid using "transgendered" (note the "ed" suffix) and "transsexual" unless these terms are explicitly preferred by the individual.

Transition. The process a trans person undertakes to express their gender identity in different aspects of their life. This could include changing their name and pronouns, dressing or grooming differently or undergoing hormone therapy or gender confirmation surgery.

Your school likely has children among its student body who fit this description and who, often with the support of parents, are exploring what it means to be **transgender**. Here's what *you* should know to better understand where trans youth are coming from.

First, gender identity isn't the same as gender expression. Think of all the ways you might recognize somebody as being male or female: their clothing, their hairstyle, their voice or even their mannerisms. These are all aspects of gender expression. Many trans people will express themselves to match their gender identity (one's personal, instinctive sense of self) by changing one or more of these attributes or other characterizations.

It's important to note that adopting traditional expressions of the opposite gender does not necessarily make a person trans. For example, girls can wear pants and still consider themselves girls, or boys can play with dolls and still be boys. Embracing specific expressions of the opposite gender is not the same as transitioning from one gender to another.

Not all transitions are the same. If a trans person grew up expressing as the gender they were assigned at birth, they may start expressing their true gender identity later in life. "If someone previously expressed a male gender, and now they are coming out as female, they might transition socially through changing their name, pronouns and how they dress," says Leikam. "If someone is medically transitioning, they may begin taking hormones or have surgeries like chest reconstruction surgery." Acceptance of this transition will vary based on the comfort level and the resources available to others in the individual's life.

Remember that a person's transition isn't always something you'll recognize. Some transitions may not even entail any change in expression at all—that's OK, too. Don't question their identity based on the way they look. "If a person says they are a different gender than their assigned gender, then just believe them," Leikam says.

EXPLORING GENDER

Children become aware of gender at a young age, but it might not be until years later that they *understand* or can articulate their own gender identity. "It depends a bit on which study you look at, but most children exhibit some understanding of gender at 18 to 24 months old, and they express their own gender at about age 3," says Dr. Amy Marschall, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist and parenting consultant with Resiliency Mental Health in South Dakota. "There is no harm in kids exploring their gender at any age, and it is OK if their concept of their own gender identity changes over time. This doesn't mean that a child's gender is a 'phase,' but as they get to know themselves better, the labels they feel are the best fit for them might change."

Because gender is a social construct, a young child often doesn't realize an activity or toy is considered predominantly masculine or feminine without being told as much. Leikam notes that resisting the practice of putting these expectations on children can free them up to explore gender. "When a child is gender creative, it is just giving them a noncommittal avenue to become their own person," she says.

RESPECT, KINDNESS, SUPPORT

As a school nutrition professional, you connect with kids every single day. You already know that even the smallest things you say and do can make a big difference in a child's sense of self. How should you conduct yourself in a way that's respectful and supportive of trans youth and those exploring gender identity? More importantly, is there anything you should definitely *not* do?

"The biggest thing ... [you] can do is to affirm the student's name and pronouns," says Leikam. "It takes a lot for a child to ask for others to use their

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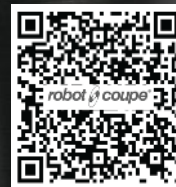
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name during attendance or throughout the class. Honoring this one request can make a world of difference in a child's life." [See the box below for more about pronoun usage.] Other ways to support these students include:

- **Avoid gender stereotypes when possible.** Allow and encourage children to enjoy all colors, toys, books, games, clothing and other activities. Don't attribute masculinity or femininity to anything if you don't have to. This includes giveaways and prizes that you might offer in conjunction with cafeteria promotions.

- **Don't assume a person's gender based on how they express or present.** It never hurts to ask a person's preferred gender, even if you think you can tell. In situations where you can't ask, *they/them* is an acceptable gender-neutral pronoun that can apply to male, female and nonbinary individuals. (For a glossary of terms, see the box on page 34.) Some people prefer the pronouns *they/them* to reflect their nonbinary or gender-nonconforming identity.

- **Provide students with a safe, judgment-free place,** especially during periods of the day when they have less supervision, such as lunch. Remember those can be occasions for bullying or harassment from their peers. Consider steps that you can take to ensure this behavior

doesn't happen in your dining rooms and that all children know they can relax and feel comfortable there. These steps might range from bulletin board displays about kindness to increased monitoring by adults or by student representatives. Coordinate with counselors or committees involved in anti-bullying initiatives.

- **Show respect to the student.** If you witness another student or teacher misgendering a trans student, gently correct them by reminding them of the student's name and/or pronouns. If *you* accidentally misgender a child, apologize and commit to getting it right in the future.

IT'S NOT A PHASE OR A TREND

If you've been working in school nutrition for a long time, you might notice that more students today identify as trans than you've ever seen in the past—but that doesn't mean this is a trend or a fad. "I often point out that it's not that these concepts are new, but that we now have young people who have access to the language to look into these things at a younger age," Marschall explains.

Leikam makes a similar point based on what she hears from parents that she works with. "Often, parents tell me their child is transgender *because* they have a queer friend group," she says. It can be helpful to understand that children (and adults) tend to make friends with individuals that share common interests, expressions and identities. So it's more likely that the friends group doesn't *compel* an identity exploration as much as provide a safe space for one to articulate self-initiated exploration already underway.

Although a child might find different ways of expressing their gender through their formative years, that doesn't mean their process of gender identity discovery is something the adults in their life should dismiss as just a phase—a point Marschall emphasizes to those who work directly with youth. "It is possible that a child will 'try on' different ways of expressing themselves, and they might identify with certain terminology related to their gender but later *stop* identifying with that," she says. "This simply means that they got to know themselves better, and another term resonates more with them now. Let them explore, and they can figure out what fits best for them."

ACCEPTANCE IS A PROCESS

While you may feel committed to supporting trans youth and students expressing other forms of gender identity, it's OK if a part of you wants to confess that you're having a little trouble processing this new cultural understanding. It's OK to take your time with these concepts and how they manifest in individuals that you know. It's OK to sometimes get the terminology wrong or slip up with an incorrect assumption. The most important thing is to remain respectful.

THE PRONOUN CONUNDRUM



Using the right pronouns when referring to a person is a way of being respectful and inclusive; pronouns are a key aspect of identity. But there are times when it might be hard to determine

upon first impression whether a person is male, female, nonbinary or gender-fluid. To eliminate confusion, more people are sharing their proper pronouns on official documents, social media bios and email signatures.

Some people prefer using the gender-neutral pronouns *they/them* to reflect their nonbinary identity. While this may come as a challenge to people who are not accustomed to using *they/them* to refer to a single person, it's now considered grammatically acceptable. As you would with the singular *you*, the singular *they* still takes a plural verb. If it's being used as a singular reflexive verb, you can say *themselves* rather than *themselves*.

Using the correct pronouns for trans youth in school settings is a way to let you know that you see them, that you affirm them at a time when they likely are struggling for acceptance. Sharing your own pronouns is a good start. "Hi, my name is Chris. My pronouns are she/her. What about you?" It may feel awkward at first, but with a little practice, it can become a common get-to-know-you question.

RESOURCES FOR TRANS YOUTH

Even when you're making your best attempt, you might find yourself with questions. Or maybe you have students (and parents) who need access to more information themselves. Here are a few valuable resources for trans youth and other LGBTQ+ individuals:

Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

A national nonprofit organization dedicated to ending discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals.

www.hrc.org

The Trevor Project. Provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ+ teens and young adults under age 25.

www.thetrevorproject.org

The Trans Youth Equality

Foundation. Advocates for trans, gender nonconforming and intersex youth ages 2-18.

www.transyouthequality.org

"Many individuals of any age are pushing back against gender pronouns or even the concept of gender expression or fluid gender identity," Gupta reports. "For them, your biological sex at birth determined many things: the way you dress, your behavior, gender role expectations, occupations." For these individuals, she continues, understanding that gender identity and expression can be different from their own experience is a difficult task.

But this isn't the first (or last) time our culture has seen a shift in social constructs around gender. History can be a very instructive lens and a good reminder to those who resist change. Gupta cites, as example, the initial rise of the prefix "Ms." as an option to replace "Miss" and "Mrs." The fact that women did not want to be identified by their marital status was a difficult concept for many people to wrap their heads around, and it met with quite a bit of initial resistance and mockery.

But you—and your colleagues—should just keep taking one step at a time on the road to cultural transformation. With a commitment to self-education on the topic, bit by bit, you will ultimately acclimate to it. "Make a point of consuming media with gender representation," Marschall suggests. "Following influencers with varying identities and reading about gender can help us keep an open mind." An open mind leads to an open heart, which should *always* be on the menu in school cafeterias. **SN**

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