

TEACHING ABOUT GENDER IDENTITY: FAQs

Do you talk about gender identity in your workshops?

Yes. We are proud to offer Comprehensive Sexual Health Education (CSHE) to our students. As defined in SIECCAN's Canadian Guidelines for Sexuality Education, CSHE:

- Is accessible to all people
- Promotes human rights
- Is scientifically accurate
- Addresses a wide range of topics
- **Is inclusive of the lived experiences of LGBTQI2SNA+ identities**
- Promotes gender equality
- Presents a balanced approach to sexuality (both the positive and negative aspects)
- Is provided by competent educators

Is talking about gender identity in elementary school classrooms supported by the BC Ministry of Education?

Yes. In 2016, the Minister of Education announced that all BC boards of education and independent school authorities were required to reference sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in district and school codes of conduct. Among other rights, it was stated that trans students in public and independent schools in British Columbia have:

- The right to an educational environment free from discrimination.
- The right to an educational environment free from harassment, violence, verbal abuse, threats and bullying.

<https://www.transrightsbc.ca/know-your-rights/education/>

That same year, the ARC Foundation (in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Education, the BC Teachers' Federation, school districts across BC, the UBC Faculty of Education and various local, national, and international 2SLGBTQ+ community organizations) created *SOGI 123*, an initiative aimed at supporting teachers and parents to create safe and respectful elementary and secondary school learning environments for all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Today, 60 out of 60 school districts in BC have officially indicated their support of SOGI 123. <https://www.sogieducation.org>



How do you talk about gender identity in your workshops?

At the K-Grade 3 level, the message is simply: “Someone with a body that looks like this may or may not identify as a boy/girl.” At the grade 4-7 level, the added message is: “These are the different genders you may have heard of.” We are committed to using gender inclusive language in all of our workshops. We offer information, not values or preferences. We acknowledge the scientific fact that trans and non-binary people exist at all ages and are deserving of being included in our conversations.

Will talking to young children about gender identity confuse them?

No. Because we adults didn’t grow up understanding gender as we do today, one might assume that this concept will be too much for kids to grasp. But young children understand gender much like any other foundational concept we teach them about their bodies -- like that there are three private parts on the body, or that the baby grows in the uterus (not the tummy). They are capable of understanding that gender is complex and that how we *feel* is separate from how our bodies *look*. For some, the conversation goes over their head. For others, talking about gender openly helps kids make sense of observations they’ve already made and answers questions they already have. For kids who are transgender or non-binary, it gives them the knowledge and language to understand themselves better. And for kids who are cisgender, it increases empathy and understanding and teaches the value of diversity.

<https://www.todaysparent.com/kids/school-age/young-children-need-to-learn-gender-identity/>

Will talking to kids about gender identity make them question their own? Or come out as trans?

No. Most kids begin to identify strongly with a gender around age 3. That includes kids who are transgender or non-binary – they also have a sense of their gender identity at this stage. Creating awareness and acknowledging differences doesn’t change this.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/childrens-health/in-depth/children-and-gender-identity/art-20266811>

How do you explain the fact that more kids are coming out as trans or non-binary?

Gender diverse people have always existed. They include, for example, the two-spirit people recognized by certain North American Indigenous and First Nations groups, such as Lakota Winyanktecha, as well as Hijras in India and Pakistan and Fa’afafine in Samoan culture. These “third-gender” people - who have social roles unique to their own cultures, distinct from being transgender or nonbinary - were and in some places still are valued and respected members of their societies.

<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/transgender-flourishing>

Today, we are seeing more openness at all ages as well as an increase in access to trans-affirming clinical care and services and because we now have more education and safety around being and coming out as trans or non-binary.

What if coming out as trans is just a phase?

Kids, teens and even adults go through phases like eating a certain food everyday, dressing a certain way or enjoying a particular type of TV show. But discovering one's gender identity is more than that -- it's a journey. Dismissing this self-discovery as a phase can be harmful during a time when children need support and validation from their parents and other caring adults in their life the most. We, as parents, need to honour their feelings and allow them to tell us who they are on their own timeline. And it's important to remember that questioning one's gender doesn't mean that a child is trans or non-binary. It's all part of the process of self-discovery.

<https://momentousinstitute.org/blog/when-very-young-children-question-gender-identity>

Biological sex is binary: male and female. Can't we just leave it at that?

Research confirms a strong biological basis for gender identity. Twin studies have shown that transgender identity, rooted in the brain, has a strong genetic basis.

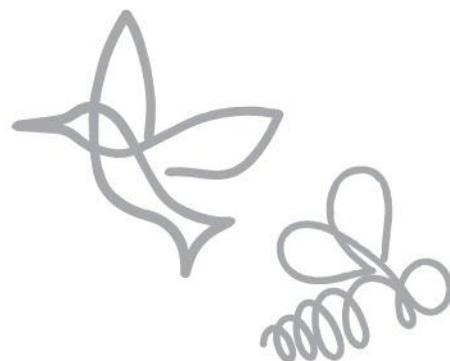
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22146048/>

In addition, biological sex may not be as binary as previously believed. Research shows that just under 2% (about the same amount of green-eyed people worldwide) of the population are born *intersex*, with reproductive or sexual anatomy, genetic makeup, or hormonal levels that do not seem to fit the "typical" definitions of male or female.

<https://www.unfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/UNFE-Intersex.pdf>

With such a small percentage of our population identifying as trans, do we have to make gender identity such a big deal?

Yes, we do. Transgender students report higher levels of harassment and physical assault due to their gender expression when compared to other students with sexual minority identities and non-LGBTQ+ students. In addition, transgender individuals are up to three times more likely than the general population to report or be diagnosed with mental health disorders and face a significantly heightened risk of suicide. <http://sieccan.org/pdf/guidelines-eng.pdf>



We also know that children are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and are at a greater risk of substance abuse and homelessness when their immediate caregivers are rejecting or hostile toward their identity. The good news is that an increasing body of social science research reflects that gender-affirming behaviour on the part of parents and other caring adults greatly improves mental health and well-being. In fact, it can be life-saving. As well, LGBTQ+ youth are 23% less likely to attempt suicide when schools include education on LGBTQ+ subjects or people. CSHE is proven to save the lives of LGBTQ youth.

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender-children-and-youth-understanding-the-basics>

<https://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Impacts-of-Strong-Parental-Support-for-Trans-Youth-vFINAL.pdf>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33106050/>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1054139X13003844>

<https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CSE-Federal-Factsheet-Sept-2021-Update-2.pdf>

Are your workshops based on research?

Yes. Our content is derived from evidence-based peer-reviewed research (see above). While we need to make space for differing perspectives, we need to honour the research that shows how important allowing students who have less common experiences to see themselves is, given their vulnerability. We teach to the fact that trans and non-binary people exist and are students in many classrooms that we visit.

Do you teach about pronouns in your workshops?

Yes, to intermediate students. In our Grade 4-7 workshops, we explain that pronouns are one of many ways that people can express their gender to the world. And we stress the importance of always referring to others with the pronouns they use (rather than the ones we think they should use).

Do you promote puberty blockers and surgery?

No. If students ask about them (which, in the older grades, they sometimes do), we explain that puberty blockers are a reversible tool that young people may use to “press pause” on puberty changes while they come to a better understanding of their gender identity. We stress that decisions about puberty blockers and other medical care (like all major decisions) should be made together with their parents or caregivers.

Do you tell kids they can access treatment (transitioning clinical care) without their parents knowing?

No.

Do parents get a say in whether their child participates in your workshops?

We wholeheartedly support parents being involved in decisions around how their kids receive sexual health education. It's for this reason that we offer a parent workshop at every school we visit as well as the opportunity to opt out (even though much of what we teach is mandated curriculum). We also acknowledge the rights of parents of trans and non-binary students who need these topics to be addressed so that their child can feel safe, acknowledged and respected at school. Parents of cisgender kids who value their kids learning from adults – other than them -- about compassion, respect and a celebration of diversity, also deserve a say.

Additional resources:

Unesco's international technical guidance on sexuality education
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

UNPF (United Nations Population Fund) on the benefits of teaching comprehensive sexuality education:
<https://www.unfpa.org/comprehensive-sexuality-education#readmore-expand>

<https://www.actioncanadashr.org>

<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/>

<https://genderspectrum.org>

<https://qmunity.ca>

<https://pflagcanada.ca>

<https://www.glsen.org>

