Saleema Noon
sexual health educators

Smart decisions
start here.

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 SIECAN's Canadian Guidelines for Sexuality Education, CSHE:

- Is accessible to all people
- Promotes human rights (i.e. feeling safe, included and respected at school)
- 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 the 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 2SLGBTQIA+ 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

e saleema@saleemanoon.com
t 604.418.9417
w www.saleemanoon.com

On September 16, 2022 the Minister of Education and partners reiterated their support for SOGI:

"We know that each child expresses themselves in their own unique way and some have been bullied and ostracized in the past. All of B.C.'s provincial education partners for K-12 schools – public and independent – are standing together in solidarity to ensure every school is a place where all students deserve to be welcomed, included and respected in a safe learning environment, while being fully and completely themselves. No student should be excluded or bullied because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression."

See full statement here:
https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022ECC0075-001396

How do you talk about gender identity in your workshops?

At the K-Grade 3 level, the message is simply, "How we *feel* when it comes to our gender is separate from how our body *looks*." At the grade 4-7 level, the added message is, "Gender isn't binary, people can express their gender in many different ways". We are committed to using gender inclusive language in all of our workshops. We offer information, not values or preferences. And we acknowledge the scientific fact that trans and non-binary people exist at all ages and are deserving of being included in our conversation.

Will talking to young children about gender identity confuse them?

For some kids, the conversation goes over their head. For others, talking about gender openly helps them make sense of observations they've already made and answers questions kids already have. For non-binary kids, it gives them the knowledge and language to understand themselves better. For cisgender kids, 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 transgender and non-binary people, who also have a sense of their gender identity at this stage. Creating awareness and acknowledging differences doesn't change this, much in the same way that talking about families with two dads isn't trying to make them gay-- it's helping them learn about the world around them.
https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/childrens-health/in-depth/children-and-gender-identity/art-20266811

e saleema@saleemanoon.com
t 604.418.9417
w www.saleemanoon.com

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

Trans people have always existed. They include, for example, the two-spirit people recognized by certain North American indigenous 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 services and because we now have more education and safety around being coming out as non-binary.

What if coming out as trans is just a phase?

Kids, teens and even we as adults go through phases like eating a certain food every day, 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 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. 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. For example, approximately 1.7% (about the same amount of red-haired people worldwide) of the population are born with *intersex* traits: having reproductive or sexual anatomy, genetic makeup, or hormonal levels that do not seem to fit the 'typical' definitions of male or female.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/intersex-people
https://theswaddle.com/all-the-arguments-you-need-to-address-transphobia/

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-2SLGBTQIA+ 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. While we need to make space for differing perspectives, we need to honor the research that shows how important allowing students who have less common experiences to see themselves is, given their vulnerability.
http://sieccan.org/pdf/guidelines-eng.pdf

e saleema@saleemanoon.com
t 604.418.9417
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We also know that children are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and at greater risk of substance abuse and homelessness when their immediate caregivers are rejecting or hostile. The good news is that an increasing body of social science research reflects that gender-affirming behavior 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, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are 23% less likely to attempt suicide when schools include education on 2SLGBTQIA+ subjects or people. CSHE is proven to save the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+ 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?

Our content is derived from evidence-based peer-reviewed research that documents the significantly higher rates of violence perpetrated against trans and non-binary youth (see above). While we need to make space for differing perspectives, we need to honor the research that shows how important allowing students who have less common experiences to see themselves is, given their vulnerability.

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 tool that young people may use to “press pause” on puberty changes while they come to a better understanding of their gender identity. Puberty blockers are considered to be very safe overall, but we’re not sure if they have negative side effects on factors such as bone development and height. Also, we won’t know the long-term effects until the first people to take puberty-blockers get older. We stress that decisions about puberty blockers (like all major decisions) should be made together with their parents and health care team using medical best practices and careful consideration.
* http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/child-youth/affirmation-transition/medical-affirmation-transition/puberty-blockers-for-youth
http://www.bcchildrens.ca/endocrinology-diabetes-site/documents/transblockers-am.pdf
https://www.wpath.org/publications/soc

Do you tell kids they can access treatment without their parents knowing?
No.

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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 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 that diversity should be celebrated 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

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