

Healthy Gender Development and Young Children

A Guide for Early Childhood Programs and
Professionals
National Center on Parent, Family and Community
Engagement

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The ability to recognize when things are the same or different is an important skill that children develop over time. It's only natural that they start asking questions to help them sort out the differences between boys and girls. It's easy to see how they may think that being a boy means doing some things and liking some things, and being a girl means doing and liking other things.



Create a Learning Environment that Encourages Healthy Gender Development

*Offer a wide range of toys, books, and games that expose children to diverse gender roles.

*Provide dramatic play props that give children the freedom to explore and develop their own sense of gender and gender roles.

*Avoid assumptions that girls or boys are not interested in an activity

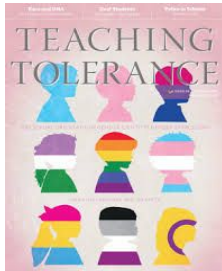
*Use inclusive phrases to address your class as a whole, like "Good morning, everyone" instead of "Good morning, boys and girls"

*Help children expand their possibilities—academically, artistically, and emotionally develop classroom messages that emphasize gender-neutral language, like "All children can . . ." rather than "Boys don't . . ." or "Girls don't . . ."



Demonstrate Support for Children's Gender Expression

Research has shown that when girls and boys act assertively, girls tend to be criticized as “bossy,” while boys are more likely to be praised for being leaders (Martin & Halverson, 1981; Theimer, Killen, & Stangorm, 2001; Martin & Ruble, 2004, 2009).



Engage in Discussions about Healthy Gender Development

It can be helpful to remember that play is the way that children explore and make meaning of their world. Be prepared to have conversations that honor a range of feelings, make space for questions, address concerns, discuss varied points of view, and offer resources.



Understand Developmentally Appropriate Curiosity about Bodies

What We Know



Children's Books that Support Healthy Gender Development



Understanding Differences Between Gender and Sexual Orientation

*Gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Gender identity is about who you feel you are as a person. Sexual orientation is about the gender of the people you are sexually attracted to.

*The age at which gender identity becomes established varies. Gender identity for some children may be fairly firm when they are as young as two or three years old (AAP, 2015; Balwin & Moses, 1996; Gender Spectrum, 2012; Zosuls et al., 2009). For others it may be fluid until adolescence and occasionally later.

*The age at which an individual becomes aware of their sexual orientation, that is, their feelings of attraction for one gender or the other or both, also varies. Such feelings may emerge during childhood, adolescence, or later in life (Campo-Arias, 2010; Gender Spectrum, 2012). At present, child development experts say there is no way to predict what a child's sexual orientation or gender identity will be as an adult (Bryan, 2012).



Selected References

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From Heather Bomsta MA MBA Michigan State University: Just a few places you might look ... GLSEN and Ready, Set, Respect! had ready-to-teach curriculum/ideas (in bold below):

- Healthy Gender Development and Young Children, A Guide for Early Childhood Programs and Professionals, National Center on Parent, Family & Community Engagement: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/healthy-gender-development.pdf>
- The importance of gender in early childhood education policy (The Brookings Institute): <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2018/11/05/the-importance-of-gender-in-early-childhood-education-policy/>
- **GLSEN** - national education organization focused on ensuring safe and affirming schools for LGBTQ students: <https://www.glsen.org/educate/resources>
 - Lesson plan for elementary students on gender stereotypes: <https://www.glsen.org/article/that-gender-stereotyps>
 - Beyond the gender binary and First Nations' Two-spirit identities (upper elementary): <https://www.glsen.org/article/beyond-gender-binary>
 - Anti-bullying lessons:
 - Garden of kindness - <https://www.glsen.org/article/garden-kindness>
 - Bullying based on appearance "Beauty is Skin Deep" (grades 3-5): <https://www.glsen.org/article/beauty-skin-deep-grades-3-5>
- **Ready, Set, Respect!** Developed in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This kit provides a set of tools that will help you prepare to teach about respect and includes lesson plans that can help you seize teachable moments. The lessons focus on name-calling, bullying and bias, LGBT-inclusive family diversity and gender roles and diversity and are designed to be used as either standalone lessons or as part of a school-wide anti-bias or bullying prevention program. <https://www.glsen.org/readysetrepect>
- GenderSpectrum: <https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources/education-2/>
- National Association of School Psychologists on gender inclusive schools (includes the District and School Transgender and Gender Diverse Readiness Assessment Form & "Supporting LGBTQ Youth During Troubled Times"): <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/diversity/lgbtq-youth/gender-inclusive-schools-fags>
- Welcoming Schools: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/>

