

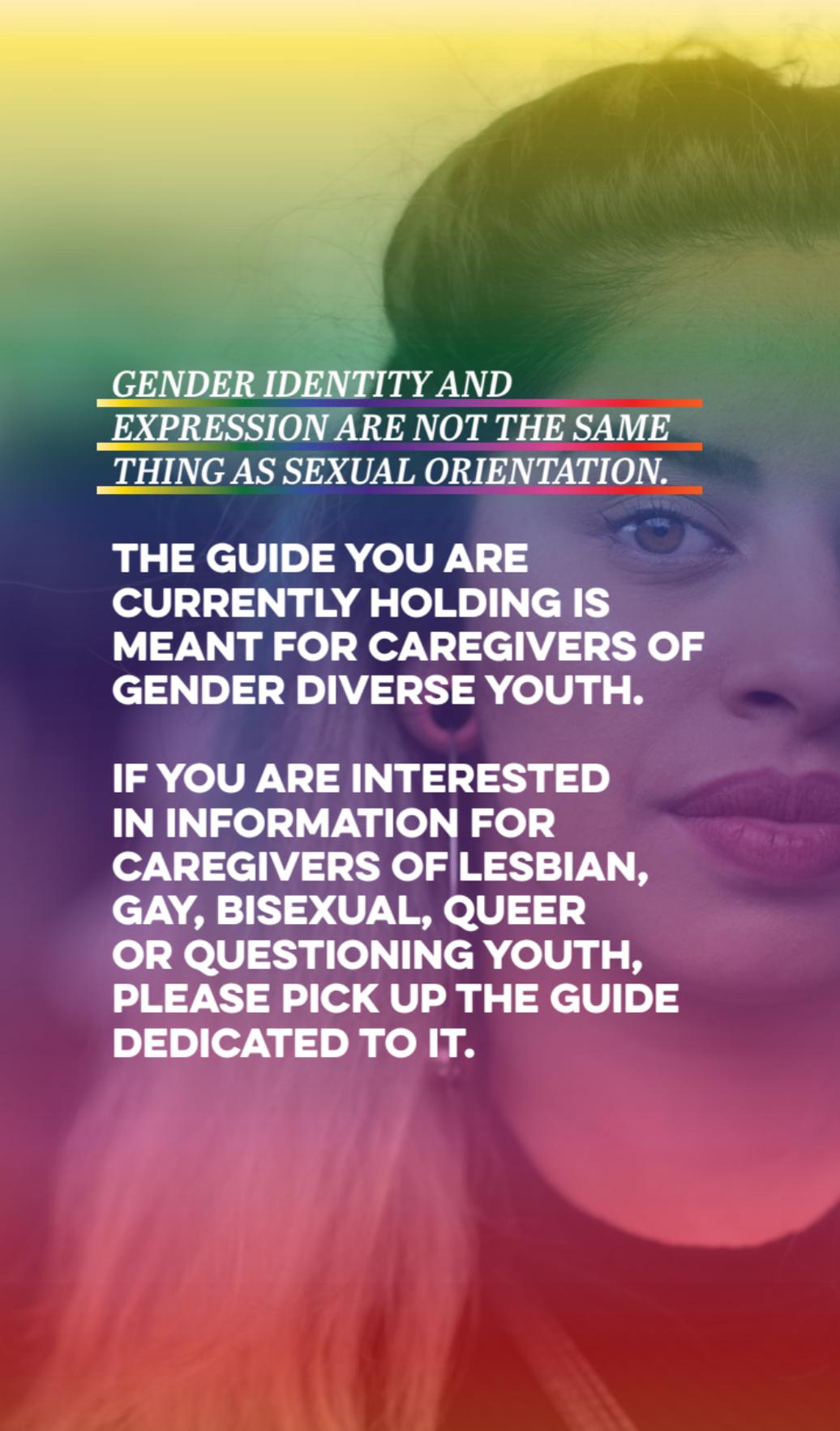


HAPPY AND HEALTHY:
**A CAREGIVERS’
GUIDE FOR**

GENDER DIVERSE

CHILDREN AND

YOUTH



*GENDER IDENTITY AND
EXPRESSION ARE NOT THE SAME
THING AS SEXUAL ORIENTATION.*

**THE GUIDE YOU ARE
CURRENTLY HOLDING IS
MEANT FOR CAREGIVERS OF
GENDER DIVERSE YOUTH.**

**IF YOU ARE INTERESTED
IN INFORMATION FOR
CAREGIVERS OF LESBIAN,
GAY, BISEXUAL, QUEER
OR QUESTIONING YOUTH,
PLEASE PICK UP THE GUIDE
DEDICATED TO IT.**

WHAT DOES “GENDER” MEAN, ANYWAY?

Gender is more complex than most of us have been taught. Gender is made up of three parts:

BODY:

our body, our experiences of our own body, how society genders bodies, and how others interact with us based on our body.

IDENTITY:

our deeply held, internal sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither; who we internally know ourselves to be.

EXPRESSION:

how we present our gender in the world and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Gender expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses those roles to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

When the three facets of gender are in line, children continue to identify in the same way they are identified at birth and by society. These children are assigned male or female at birth, and continue to identify later as boys and girls (this is cisgender). For other children, however, these three facets of gender align differently.

These young people are gender diverse, which includes transgender children.

Not all children fit neatly into a male or female gender identity. For some children, the sense of being “both,” “neither,” or fluid best describes their reality. It is increasingly clear that experiences of gender are not strictly binary (e.g., either male or female); rather, gender identity comprises a multidimensional spectrum of experiences. Terms such as genderfluid and genderqueer (defined later) convey a broad, flexible range of gender expression, with interests and behaviors that are not limited by restrictive boundaries of stereotypical expectations of girls or boys.

These are all normal variations in the human experience. Cisgender and gender diverse children alike often struggle to conform to gendered expectations such as dress and interests. Nothing is “wrong” when a child searches to define identity and expression. A child’s gender is not what others tell them it is, but who they know themselves to be.

WHAT DO ALL THESE WORDS MEAN?

AGENDER: a term used by some people who identify as having no gender or being without any gender identity.

GENDER DIVERSE: an experience of gender, behavior or gender expression that is different than what society traditionally expects of a boy or a girl.

GENDER DYSPHORIA: the distress a person experiences as a result of the mismatch between the sex they were assigned at birth and their gender identity. It's also an internal conflict that someone experiences when having to survive in a world where we're socialized to only accept cisgender binaries.

GENDER EXPRESSION: how people demonstrate their gender to others through the way they dress, wear their hair, talk, walk, behave, and other ways.

GENDER IDENTITY: the sense a person has of being male, female, both, neither, or anything in between. A person's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

GENDERFLUID: a term used by some people to describe a flexible experience of gender identity rather than a static experience. Youth who identify as genderfluid may fluctuate between genders or express multiple genders at the same time.

GENDERQUEER: a term used by some people who identify as being between and/or other than male or female. They may feel they are neither, a little bit of both, or may simply

feel restricted by gender labels. It can also be synonymous with or fall under the umbrella of nonbinary.

NONBINARY: a term used by some people to describe a gender identity that does not fit within the concept of a male/female gender binary.

TRANSGENDER: an umbrella term used by some people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

***IT IS IMPORTANT TO DISTINGUISH
BETWEEN GENDER IDENTITY AND
EXPRESSION, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION.***

SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

an enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction (or a combination of these) to a person or people of a different gender, the same gender, more than one gender, or none.

***EVERYONE HAS A SEXUAL ORIENTATION
AND A GENDER IDENTITY.***

On average, children generally have a firm understanding of their gender identity between the ages of 3 and 5 and their sexual orientation around age 10, although everyone's experience is different. There is no "normal" time for every person to understand these things about themselves.

YOUR CHILD'S WELLBEING IS IN YOUR HANDS

As a caregiver, we know that you want your child to be healthy, safe and happy. Luckily, there are many things that you can do toward this goal by providing support, acceptance, information, protection and guidance.

While you cannot control all aspects of the outside world, family environments of affirmation and love play a crucial role in helping gender diverse children lead healthy, happy and safe lives.



Research shows that families and caregivers have a major impact on their LGBT children's risk and wellbeing. Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of research on gender diverse children and youth, but here's what we do know: compared with LGBT young people who were not at all or only rejected a little by their parents and caregivers because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, highly rejected LGBT young people were:

MORE THAN 8 TIMES AS LIKELY TO HAVE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

NEARLY 6 TIMES AS LIKELY TO REPORT HIGH LEVELS OF DEPRESSION

MORE THAN 3 TIMES AS LIKELY TO USE ILLEGAL DRUGS

MORE THAN 3 TIMES AS LIKELY TO BE AT HIGH RISK FOR HIV AND SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES.

HELPFUL BEHAVIORS

Some of the easiest things you can do are things you are probably already doing:

TELL

your child how much you love them.

TELL

your child that you will support who they are.

SHARE

affection with your child in whatever way works best for your family.

LISTEN

to your child with an open mind and open heart.

BUT IT'S ALSO IMPORTANT TO:

ENSURE

that your child is getting the most inclusive healthcare by seeing practitioners who understand gender diversity.

TALK

to your child about being gender diverse directly and respectfully. **Do not make assumptions.**

GET

correct information about gender diversity.

GET

help for your child when needed – find out who are the right physicians, therapist, social

workers, and community resources for your child.

GIVE

your child books and magazines that explore gender diversity in a positive and age appropriate way.

LET

your child participate in age appropriate activities that support their gender identity, *take them* to activities and organizations.

ASK

family members and friends to act respectfully and lovingly toward your child, and *stop* them from saying anything harmful to your child.

STAND UP

for your child when they are treated badly for being gender diverse.

TALK

with the leaders of your faith community about supporting your child.

CONNECT

your child with adults who share their gender identity and who can be a positive role model.

WELCOME

your child's LGBTQ friends into your home.

LET

your child wear their preferred clothing and hairstyles, and do the activities that express who they are.

BELIEVE

that your child can have a happy life as a gender diverse adult. To a large extent, it is up to you.

CHILDREN'S POSITIVE RESPONSES TO AFFIRMATION

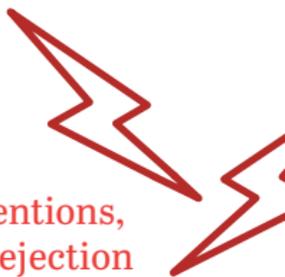
Children who are supported by their families are more likely to:

- Feel good about themselves
- Feel happy about their lives
- Have close relationships with their families
- Stay away from drugs
- Protect themselves from sexually-transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS
- Believe that they will have a good life and be happy adults
- Believe that they can someday have meaningful relationships or a family of their own

HURTFUL BEHAVIORS

Sometimes, even with the best of intentions, caregivers' behaviors communicate rejection instead of acceptance. You may recognize some of the behaviors below as something you may have done in the past. Some caregivers have engaged in these behaviors at one time or another. Try to have compassion toward yourself. What is important is to commit to communicating your love and support for your child from this point forward. We can only start from where we are.

- Pressuring your child to conform to traditional gender roles by limiting their choices in toys or activities
- Pressuring your child to appear more feminine or masculine than they would like, for example by making them wear certain clothes, hairstyles, or make-up
- Expressing shame or embarrassment because of who your child is
- Trying to change your child's gender identity or gender expression
- Telling your child to hide or lie about their gender identity
- Telling your child that it is their fault that they are being treated badly because of their gender identity



- Telling your child that God will punish them for their gender identity
- Not allowing your child to participate in family activities and gatherings (weddings, dinners, reunions)
- Not letting your child get information about being gender diverse or about gender diverse activities, not letting your child communicate with other gender diverse people
- Calling your child names because of their gender identity and expression
- Being withdrawn and not affectionate with your child (avoiding hugging and kissing)
- Using physical punishment such as, slapping, punching, kicking, denying food or water because of their LGBQ identity.

CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO HARMFUL BEHAVIORS

LGBQ children who are **NOT SUPPORTED** by their parents or caregivers are more likely to:

- Struggle at school
- Feel isolated, alone, sad and scared
- Not believe that they will have a good life and be a happy adult
- Not believe that they can someday have a meaningful relationships if they want to
- Use drugs
- Have unprotected sex and get a sexually transmitted disease like HIV/AIDS
- Attempt, and even complete, suicide



HERE ARE THE FACTS

NO OUTSIDE INFLUENCES CAUSED YOUR YOUTH'S GENDER IDENTITY.

Gender identity is the result of complex genetic, biological and environmental factors. Gender diverse people come from families of all religious, political, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Trauma does not make your youth gender diverse.

GENDER DIVERSE YOUTH ARE NOT MORE LIKELY THAN OTHER YOUTH TO BE MENTALLY ILL OR DANGEROUS.

Gender diverse people are not more likely than gender-conforming people to molest or otherwise pose a threat to children. And although it is true that people who are gender diverse experience higher rates of anxiety, depression and related behaviors (including alcohol and drug abuse) than the general population, studies show that this is a result of the stress of being gender diverse in an often-hostile environment, rather than a factor of a person's gender identity itself.

YOUR YOUTH'S GENDER IDENTITY CANNOT BE CHANGED.

Medical and psychological experts agree that attempting to change someone's gender identity does not work and often causes harm.

MANY RELIGIOUS GROUPS EMBRACE GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE.

Some people fear that they will have to choose between their faith and supporting their youth's gender identity—but this is not always the case. Many religious communities welcome gender diverse youth, adults and their families. It may be important to know that there are other options if your family does not feel welcome or comfortable at your place of worship.

IT MAY OR MAY NOT BE JUST A PHASE.

For some children, expressing gender diversity may not be a final/permanent expression of their identity. Only time will tell. We suggest using the concept of insistence, consistence and persistence to help determine if a child is enduringly gender diverse or transgender. At some point, nearly all children will behave in ways associated with different genders – this is typical. In gender diverse children, look for an ongoing, repetitive, and relatively stable sense of identity that is different from their gender assigned at birth, and not simply part of play.

WHAT ABOUT...

MY FEELINGS?

Feelings of embarrassment, denial, anger, fear, doubt, grief and worry are normal, as are feelings of acceptance, understanding, support, pride and joy. Many caregivers feel a combination of positive and negative feelings. This is a hard road for caregivers, and even though we may not have chosen this for our child or ourselves, it is our road to navigate. You are not alone in your feelings or in your experience of raising a gender diverse child. It can be very helpful and comforting to seek support from other caregivers or from a mental health professional.

OTHER CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY?

Because of society's discomfort with gender diversity, we may unconsciously bond with our cisgender children more than our gender diverse child. By doing this, we may inadvertently place siblings in a position of choosing loyalties to us or to their gender diverse sibling. Alternately, we may focus on the exceptional needs of a gender diverse child, overlooking the sibling as a result. One strategy to avoid the division between gender diverse kids and their siblings is to make sure we discuss gender as it relates to all people. This not only avoids treating your gender

diverse child as if they are the “problem,” but helps support siblings in their experiences as well.

EXTENDED FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND THE COMMUNITY?

It can be nerve-wracking and scary for your child or youth to share their gender identity with others. Children and youth should be in charge of with whom and in what circumstances they want their information shared. One strategy is to help your child call or write a letter to family and/or friends if having the conversation in person is too scary. This may help your child to feel more secure, safe, and comfortable. You can assist your child by telling family and friends that you are fully supportive of your child.

RESOURCES

LOCAL

ALLEGHENY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES (DHS)

<http://allegHENYcounty.us/Human-Services/Resources/LGBTQ.aspx>

DREAMS OF HOPE

www.dreamsofhope.org/

PARENTS AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS (PFLAG) PITTSBURGH

www.pflagpgh.org (412-833-4556)

PERSAD CENTER

www.persadcenter.org

THE PITTSBURGH EQUALITY CENTER (FORMERLY GLCC)

www.pghequalitycenter.org/

PROJECT SILK

<https://chscorp.org/project-silk>

RESOURCES

NATIONAL

FAMILY ACCEPTANCE PROJECT

<https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>

GENDER SPECTRUM

www.genderspectrum.org

TRANSYOUTH FAMILY ALLIES

www.imatyfa.org

TRANS YOUTH EQUALITY

www.transyouthequality.org/for-parents/

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