



# **DISCUSSING TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING IDENTITY AND ISSUES**

**Suggestions and Resources for K-12 Teachers**

## ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE

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## WHY SHOULD WE TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE AND ISSUES?

In order to provide a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students, it is important to discuss transgender and gender non-conforming identity and issues in schools and classrooms.

Bullying is an important issue in our nation's schools. Bullying and harassment of all kinds disproportionately impact LGBT students and in particular, gender non-conforming students in the younger grades and transgender students in the older grades. In the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) survey, [Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States](#), they report that elementary students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are more likely than others to say they are called names, made fun of or bullied in school (56% vs. 33%) and these students are less likely than other students to feel very safe at school (42% vs. 61%) and are more likely than others to report that they sometimes do not want to go to school because they feel unsafe or afraid there (35% vs. 15%). It is encouraging to know that most elementary teachers (84%) feel it is their obligation to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for their gender non-conforming students.

For older students who are transgender, GLSEN's [Harsh Realities: The Experiences of Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools](#) reports:

- **90%** of transgender students heard derogatory remarks (homophobic language and negative remarks about gender expression) sometimes, often or frequently in school
- **90%** of transgender students heard negative remarks about someone's gender; expression sometimes, often, or frequently in school;
- **89%** of transgender students are verbally harassed (called names or threatened) in school;
- **55%** of transgender students have been physically harassed (pushed or shoved) in school; and
- **almost half** of all transgender students have skipped a class or a day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

The good news is that the more opportunities transgender students have to discuss LGBT issues in school, the more likely they are to feel part of

**Elementary students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are more likely than others to say they are:**

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**42% vs. 61%** less likely to feel very safe at school.

**35% vs. 15%** likely to report that they sometimes do not want to go to school because they feel unsafe or afraid there.

*The development of a safe and supportive learning environment is a fundamental responsibility of any successful school.*

their school community, and transgender students who are “out” to most or all students and staff report a greater sense of belonging. It is interesting to note that most transgender students have talked with a teacher or a school-based mental health professional in the past year about LGBT-related issues.

This makes a strong case for the importance of discussing these issues in the classroom as well as preparing yourself for having one-on-one conversations with students. It is important on two levels: to build understanding and empathy among all the students about transgender identity and issues and to help transgender and gender non-conforming students feel more comfortable in school and develop positive self-esteem. Helping all students to be more knowledgeable, understanding and empathic serves all of us in creating safe, welcoming and more humane schools and communities.

Familiarizing yourself with and teaching about transgender issues may be initially difficult or uncomfortable. Therefore, we are providing the following resources, guidelines and ideas to help you navigate this process.

## **PREPARE FOR THE DISCUSSIONS**

If you are going to discuss LGBT issues—and specifically transgender identity—in your classroom, it is important you prepare yourself, your classroom, and the school administration and adult family members for those conversations.

### **Prepare Yourself**

Prepare yourself by learning about transgender identity and issues. Become familiar with the [terminology](#) and read background information about transgender people. Useful information is provided herein and in the “Resources on Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming related Issues” section.

### **Prepare Your Classroom**

Given the absence of this topic in the curriculum and the disproportionate rates of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment, it is important to educate students about transgender people and issues. When discussing any new or sensitive topic, however, there is the potential for some students to react in stereotypical or disrespectful ways. It is therefore critical that educators carefully review the lesson or topic at hand, assess students’ maturity and readiness to engage in the lesson prior to teaching and establish clear parameters with students that will ensure safe and constructive dialogue. (See “[Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)” and “[Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#)” for guidelines on building safe forums for discussing sensitive issues.)

In advance, make sure you have working agreements or “ground rules” about how you expect students to conduct themselves in the classroom. These should be established at the beginning of the year so if you have already done so, a refresher would be useful. In addition, share your expectations with students, which must include:

- Speak from their own experience
- Respect others

- Be open-minded
- Ask questions
- Respect confidentiality

Equally important is to reflect on and consider that you may have students in your classroom who are transgender and/or gender non-conforming—or whose parents are. Therefore, you will need to be sensitive to that and prepared. It is possible that if the student has not shared this previously, she or he may disclose it during the course of the lesson. That information should only come from the student directly. Be aware that young people do not always feel comfortable sharing this information with their family and friends so do not assume that everyone in the young person's life knows this aspect of their identity.

In addition, if you have students in your class who are transgender or gender non-conforming and are “out” (i.e. most people in their life are aware), talking about this may be received with a mixture of feelings including pride, embarrassment, annoyance, excitement or discomfort. Do not assume all transgender students want to discuss this in the classroom and be careful not to put a student in the position of being an “authority” on the subject. It would be helpful to talk with them in advance to assess their thoughts and feelings about bringing it up in your classroom.

In preparing for a discussion or lesson, consider whether the students in your class have the maturity to handle a conversation about these issues. The beginning of the year is probably not the best time because you do not know them well and classroom climate and trust have not yet been established. You may decide that they are not ready to speak in unsupervised small groups and a large group discussion is preferable or you may want to stick with reading and writing activities to begin.

### **Prepare Your School Administration and Adult Family Members**

Communicate with your school administration (dean, principal, assistant principal) and make sure they know in advance what you will be talking about and the materials you are using. Most states (although not all) allow teachers to discuss LGBT people and issues in their classes. However, a teacher who feels comfortable talking about gay or lesbian identity may not feel as comfortable discussing transgender identity. This is due, in part, to a lack of knowledge and experience. For the reasons discussed earlier, it is important not to leave out transgender people in our LGBT conversations.

In addition, communicate with parents/guardians as fully as you would on any “sensitive” topic. Seek guidance from your principal as to how to communicate and what details to include. Whether you are reading picture books that include a transgender character or teaching a specific lesson on transgender identity, you will avoid interference later if you connect and share with families up front.

# AGES AND STAGES: HOW TO TALK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ABOUT TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

## Create Gender Inclusive and Safe Environments

Beginning with the youngest students and continuing through high school, one of the best ways to create safe and welcoming classrooms is to diminish the focus on the gender binary and instead, create “gender inclusive schools and classrooms.” As [Gender Spectrum](#) states:

“Gender variance is a normal part of human expression; while many children fit easily and naturally into our culture’s binary gender options, others do not. Some students barely step outside of gender-related expectations, while others take giant leaps. Regardless of the degree, individuals who stray outside of typical boundaries frequently become targets for mistreatment and exclusion. In many schools, even the slightest inconsistency in one’s presentation from that which is considered “normal” for the child’s assigned gender can lead to severe harassment from peers and even adults. The third grade boy wearing a “Dora the Explorer” backpack, the middle school girl who prefers jeans and t-shirts, or the androgynous high school student all face potential teasing and social isolation for these seemingly innocent choices.”

Gender inclusive schools and classrooms support and welcome all children along this continuum and do not overemphasize the gender binary. Examples of this are:

- not having students line up as boys and girls or separating them by gender for certain activities
- displaying visual images reinforcing gender inclusion such as pictures of people who don’t fit gender norms
- providing the opportunity for every student to identify a preferred name or pronoun
- challenging gender stereotypes by looking for and talking with students about examples in the media that reinforce these stereotypes
- sharing personal anecdotes from your own life which reflect gender inclusiveness

These practices and attitudes are beneficial to all children, some of whom may be gender non-conforming or transgender and those who aren’t but do not fit neatly into gender stereotypes and norms. In addition to [Gender Spectrum](#), another useful resource in understanding gender-inclusive schools is the Human Rights Campaign’s (HRC) Welcoming Schools [Affirming Gender in Elementary School: Social Transitioning](#).

## Address the Issues in the Classroom

There are several ways to address transgender identity and issues in the classroom. The first is to respond to students’ questions as they arise. At the elementary level, these questions can include, “Can you change from a girl to a boy?” and “Why do some boys like to dress like princesses and wear pink all the time? As the students get older, they may ask what the words transgender and transsexual mean, why they are unable to identify a particular student’s gender or what is involved in “transitioning.” It is important for you to familiarize yourself with terminology and facts about transgender people so you can accurately respond to their questions.



The second approach is to raise the topic directly. With younger children, this could involve reading and discussing children's books that include a gender non-conforming or transgender character or storyline. Also in the elementary classroom, as you discuss different kinds of families, include a transgender parent. With middle and high school students, you can also raise the topic in the context of a fiction or non-fiction book, but there are additional ways to talk or teach a lesson about it as discussed below.

The third strategy is to integrate transgender identity and issues into your curriculum through the study of social history and in the context of discussions about bullying, civil rights and/or discrimination. If you are talking about LGBT identity and issues, include examples of people who are transgender.

The following are tips and resources by grade level for addressing the issues in the classroom:

### **Elementary School**

- Introduce the concept of gender roles and stereotypes and work with children to dispel those stereotypes. Some useful resources are: (1) [How Can I Prevent Gender Bias In Young Children?](#) (2) [Affirming Gender in Elementary School: Social Transitioning](#) (3) [Toys and Gender](#) (lesson), and (4) [When I Grow Up I Want To Be... Moving Beyond Gender Barriers in Our Lives](#) (curriculum).
- Ensure that your curriculum materials, books and images around your classroom are gender-inclusive.
- Respond to students' questions in a direct and age-appropriate way. For young students, explain what transgender means in simple terms. You might say that there are some people who feel inside that even though they were born with girl body parts, they have always known that they were really a boy and vice versa. This feeling often occurs at a very young age.
- Read children's books with gender non-conforming and transgender characters and storylines. Consider reading books from the list of children's books in the "Resources on Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Related Issues" section.
- Talk with students about bullying in general and gender-based bullying specifically. Read children's books about bullying. (See ADL's [Anti-Bias and Multicultural Books: Bullying and Name-Calling](#) and [Words That Heal: Using Children's Literature to Address Bullying](#).)

### **Middle School**

- Continue to respond to students questions in an age-appropriate way. Begin to introduce key words such as transgender, gender non-conforming, gender expression, etc. from the [terminology](#) list below.
- Talk with students about bullying and harassment in general as well as bullying based on gender expression or transgender identity. Work on ways to counteract this bullying. (See ADL's [Bullying/Cyberbullying Resources](#).)
- Offer students or as a class read young adult fiction and non-fiction stories and books with transgender characters or storylines. Consider Young Adult Library Services' [Trans\\* Titles for Young Adults](#).
- Integrate discussion about transgender identity and issues into conversations you have with students about the history of LGBT people and other lessons about discrimination, stereotypes and bias.
- Consider bringing in a guest speaker, who has experience presenting to students, who is transgender or a person who works in an organization that works with transgender people and issues.



## High School

- Continue to respond to students questions in an age-appropriate way. Expand students' vocabulary with related [terminology](#).
- Teach a lesson or unit on transgender identity and issues. (See ADL's *Current Events Classroom* lesson plan "[Transgender Identity and Issues](#)."
- Read stories and watch films about transgender teens that include their triumphs and challenges. Consider the Young Adult Library Services' [Trans\\* Titles for Young Adults](#) and The Trevor Project's [Books and Films for LGBTQ Young People](#).
- Talk with students about identity-based bullying especially for LGBT students and work with them on ways to respond to it in their school. See ADL's [Bullying/Cyberbullying Resources](#) and [Facing Bias and Bullying: Educational Responses](#) webinar.
- Study school and state policies that address the rights of transgender students (see "Legislation and School Guidelines/Policies to Make Schools Safe" section).
- Invite a guest speaker who is transgender, and has experience presenting to students, to talk with students in an assembly or class.
- Integrate discussion about transgender identity and issues into conversations you have with students about the history of LGBT people and other discussions about discrimination, stereotypes and bias. A useful resource is ADL's *Curriculum Connections* "[Unheard Voices: Stories of LGBT History](#)".

## DEALING WITH QUESTIONS

### OK and Not OK Questions

Encouraging students to ask questions is part and parcel of being a teacher. Whether they are learning something new or the topic is controversial or sensitive, addressing young people's questions is a good place to begin. However, when delving into the topic of transgender identity and issues, it is important to be sensitive to the students who are gender non-conforming and/or transgender. There are some questions that are okay to ask and others that are not. If you have a guest speaker who is transgender or a student in your class willing and interested in talking about it, set some ground rules up at the beginning as to what are "appropriate" questions. Remind your students not to ask transgender people about (1) their relationships, (2) their surgery status or (3) their transition process. These are deemed personal and not acceptable to ask. (See GLAAD's [Tips for Allies of Transgender People](#) for more information.)

### Religion

If students or adult family members ask questions about how to reconcile their religious beliefs with LGBT people and issues, keep in mind that the relationship between religion and LGBT identity can vary greatly across time, place and religious denomination. Students and/or parents/guardians may say that being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender contradicts what their religion teaches. It is not your job to argue or disagree with them about whether it is right or wrong. Everyone is entitled to their beliefs based on their religion and you are not necessarily aiming to change that point of view. However, it is important that students are respectful about what you are teaching and acknowledge that not everyone holds this point of view. The student's religious belief should not dominate the conversation or cause other students distress

and it is critical that the students abide by the classroom ground rules discussed earlier in “Prepare for the Discussions” section.

### **When You Don’t Know the Answer**

In general, remember that you do not need to have all the answers. You can prepare yourself with background information and strategies in talking with students about this, but students may ask questions that are too difficult for you to answer or for which you may not have answers. In a non-judgmental way, let students know this and express to them that you would like to work together to find resources and discover the answers to their questions. Or their questions can become research topics to investigate.

## **LEGISLATION AND SCHOOL GUIDELINES/POLICIES TO MAKE SCHOOLS SAFE FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS**

Increasingly, schools are working to protect transgender students from harassment and discrimination. In [Know Your Rights: Transgender People and the Law](#), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reports that California, Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and the District of Columbia have state laws and/or policies specifically protecting transgender students in public schools from harassment and/or discrimination. In 2013, [California](#) enacted the first comprehensive statewide law ([Assembly Bill 1266](#)) to protect transgender students’ right “to participate in sex-segregated programs, activities and facilities” based on their self-perception, regardless of their birth gender. In 2014, the New York City Public Schools instituted a set of comprehensive [Transgender Student Guidelines](#).

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights states that transgender students are protected from discrimination on the basis of Title IX, confirming that transgender students are, indeed, protected by the federal legislation’s prohibition discrimination on the basis of sex. They said, “Title IX’s sex discrimination prohibition extends to claims of discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity and OCR accepts such complaints for investigation.” For further clarification see *The Advocate* article “[U.S. Department of Education Extends Protections to Trans Students](#).”

The best and most comprehensive laws, policies and guidelines focus on three areas: (1) harassment and bullying of transgender and gender non-conforming students, (2) dealing with gender-segregated spaces in school such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and line formations, and (3) dealing with records and rules such as names/pronouns, official records, identification, privacy and dress codes.

Find out if your school, district or state has such a policy and if not, work to institute one. GLSEN and NCTE have published a [Model District Policy on Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students](#) that is useful to read.

## BEING AN ALLY TO TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Accepting and respecting transgender and gender non-conforming students is a critical part of being an ally. Creating a gender inclusive classroom as described above goes a long way to help all students feel more comfortable and safe. Responding to student's questions, teaching direct lessons and integrating transgender people and perspectives into other parts of your curriculum are also important steps. In working with individual transgender or gender non-conforming students, make sure you know their preferred name and pronoun. When in doubt, ask. If you have the time and interest, work with others in your school community to develop a transgender student policy and guidelines (see "Legislation and School Guidelines/Policies to Make Schools Safe"). Use the guidelines "How to Be An Ally to Transgender People" in "[Unheard Voices](#)." Another helpful resource is GLSEN's webinar [Supporting Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students](#).

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## TERMINOLOGY

It will be useful for you to become familiar with the following terms and begin to develop the vocabulary with your students, using only those terms appropriate for the age group you are teaching. (See also ADL's [Definitions Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#) for additional vocabulary.)

### **Bisexual**

A person who is emotionally, physically and/or romantically attracted to some people of more than one gender.

### **Cisgender**

A term for when someone's gender identity/expression matches the gender they were assigned at birth.

### **FTM/MTF**

FTM refers to a person who transitions from "female-to-male," meaning a person who was assigned female at birth but identifies and lives as a male. MTF refers to a person who transitions from "male-to-female," meaning a person who was assigned male at birth, but identifies and lives as a female.

### **Gay**

A person who is emotionally, physically and/or romantically attracted to some other people of the same gender. Can be used to refer to people of all genders, though it is used most commonly to refer to males. Some women and girls choose not to identify as gay, but as lesbian.

### **Gender**

The socially-defined "rules" and roles for men and women in a society. The attitudes, customs and values associated with gender are socially constructed; however, individuals develop their gender identities in two primary ways: through an innate sense of their own identity and through their life experiences and interactions with others. Dominant western society generally defines gender as a binary system—men and women—but many cultures define gender as more fluid and existing along a continuum.

### **Gender Binary**

The idea that sex and gender are two distinct, opposite and disconnected categories—male and female.

### **Gender Expression**

Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice and emphasizing, de-emphasizing or changing their bodies' characteristics. Gender expression is not an indicator of sexual orientation.

### **Gender Identity**

How an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Since gender identity is internal, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

### **Gender Non-Conforming**

A person who doesn't adhere to societal pressures to conform to gender norms and roles.

### **Intersex**

A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

**Lesbian**

A woman who is emotionally, physically and/or romantically attracted to some other women.

**Queer**

An umbrella term used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Some use as an alternative to “LGBT” in an effort to be more inclusive. Depending on the user, the term has either a derogatory or an affirming connotation, as many within the LGBT community have sought to reclaim the term that was once widely used in a negative way.

**Questioning**

Refers to people who are in the process of understanding and exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are often seeking information and support during this stage of their identity development.

**Sexual Orientation**

Determined by one’s emotional, physical and/or romantic attractions. Categories of sexual orientation include, but are not limited to: **gay**, **lesbian**, attracted to some members of the same gender; **bisexual**, attracted to some members of more than one gender; and **heterosexual**, attracted to some members of another gender.

**Trans\***

An umbrella term that refers to all of the identities within the gender identity spectrum.

**Transgender**

An umbrella term for people whose gender identify differs from the sex they were assigned at birth and/or whose gender expression do not match society’s expectations with regard to gender roles. The term may include identities such as: transsexual, gender queer, gender nonconforming, FTM, MTF, and gender-variant. Transgender people may or may not choose to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically.

**Transexual**

An older term for people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth who seek to transition from male to female or female to male. Many do not prefer this term because it is thought to sound overly clinical.

**Transition**

The process when a person begins living as the gender with which they identify rather than the gender they were assigned at birth, which often may include changing one’s first name and dressing and grooming differently. Transitioning may or may not also include medical and legal aspects, including taking hormones, having surgery or changing identity documents (e.g. driver’s license) to reflect one’s gender identity. Transitioning is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a period of time.

**Transphobia**

Fear or hatred of transgender people; transphobia is manifested in a number of ways, including violence, harassment, and discrimination.

**Two-Spirit**

A contemporary term that references historical multiple-gender traditions in many First Nations cultures. Many Native/First Nations people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or gender non-conforming identify as Two-Spirit; in many Nations, being Two-Spirit carries both great respect and additional commitments and responsibilities to one’s community.

## RESOURCES ON TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING RELATED ISSUES

### Curricula and Print Resources

- American Civil Liberties Union. "Know Your Rights: Transgender People and the Law." New York: ACLU, 2013.
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## Videos

*Becoming Me*. Deck. 28 min., In The Life. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxzKlPVceWg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxzKlPVceWg).

Eight families with transgender and gender non-conforming children ranging in ages from 5 to 25 share their stories. With the healthy development of their children at stake, parents must confront binary perceptions of gender, widespread transphobia and controversial parenting decisions.

*I'm Just Anneke*. 11 min. Media That Matters. [www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films/im\\_just\\_anneke](http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films/im_just_anneke).

The first film in a four-part series of short films called [The Youth and Gender Media Project](#), *I'm Just Anneke* was designed to educate school communities about transgender and gender nonconforming youth.

*Valentine Road*. 89 min. HBO. <http://glsen.org/valentineroad>.

An HBO documentary that tells the story in striking terms, of an eighth-grade student named Lawrence "Larry" King was on life support after being shot in the head by a classmate, Brandon McInerney, during their first period English class. Larry died two days later, on Valentine's Day.

## Online Resources

GLAAD

<http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>

Provides tips for allies of transgender people.

GLSEN

<http://glsen.org/article/educators-support-trans-and-gnc-students>

Site provides webinar series on Supporting Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students.

<http://glsen.customer.def6.com/webinars>

Site provides webinar on Gender Identity and Expression in the Classroom: The Experiences of Gender Nonconforming and Transgender Students in School.

Human Rights Campaign Welcoming Schools

[www.welcomingschools.org](http://www.welcomingschools.org)

Offers professional development tools, lessons and resources for many types of diversity found in our communities including LGBT families and people.

I AM: TransPeople Speak

[www.transpeoplespeak.org](http://www.transpeoplespeak.org)

Website serves as the space to empower individuals and their community by sharing their own transgender experiences.

Matt Kailey's Tranifesto

<http://tranifesto.com/transgender-faqs-and-info/trans-etiquette-for-non-trans-people/>

Provides trans etiquette information for non-trans people.

## Organizations

Anti-Defamation League (ADL)

[www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)

Family Acceptance Project

<http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

Gender Spectrum

[www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)

Human Rights Campaign

[www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)

Lambda Legal

[www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)

National Center for Transgender Equality

<http://transequality.org>

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

[www.thetaskforce.org](http://www.thetaskforce.org)

Trans Youth Equality Foundation

[www.transyouthequality.org](http://www.transyouthequality.org)

TransYouth Family Allies

[www.imatyfa.org](http://www.imatyfa.org)

The Trevor Project

[www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)