

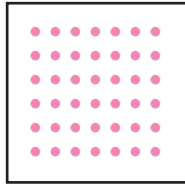
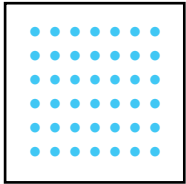
# EARLY CHILDHOOD GENDER 101

Western models of gender have evolved significantly over the last 50 years, from gender boxes to the genderbread person to gender expansiveness

## THEN

### GENDER BOXES

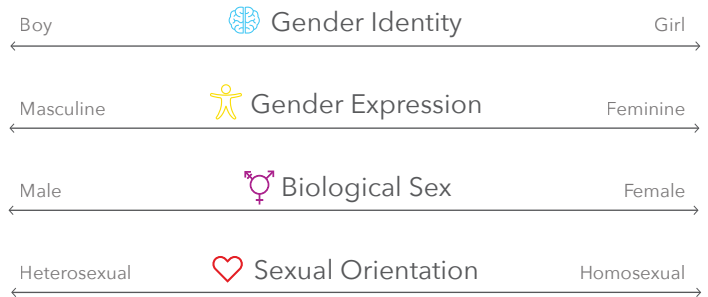
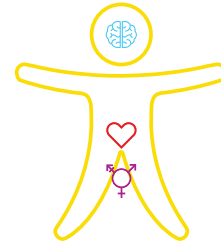
Gender as Binary, Fixed, Assigned, Dictating Sexual Orientation, & Unrelated to Other Identities<sup>1</sup>



- Boy
- Referred to as "he"
- Has penis and testicles
- Has more testosterone
- Is attracted to girls
- Doesn't cry
- Plays with trucks
- Likes roughhousing
- Girl
- Referred to as "she"
- Has vulva
- Has more estrogen & progesterone
- Is attracted to boys
- Feelings! Tears!
- Plays with dolls
- Wears dresses

### GENDERBREAD PERSON

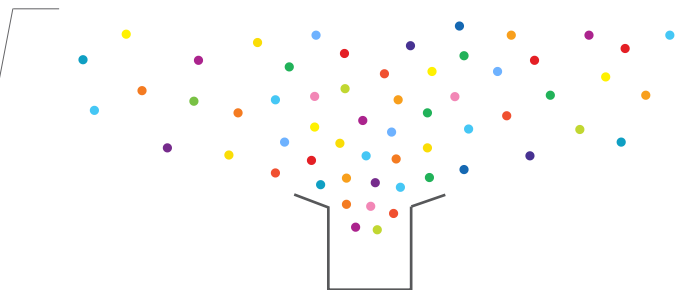
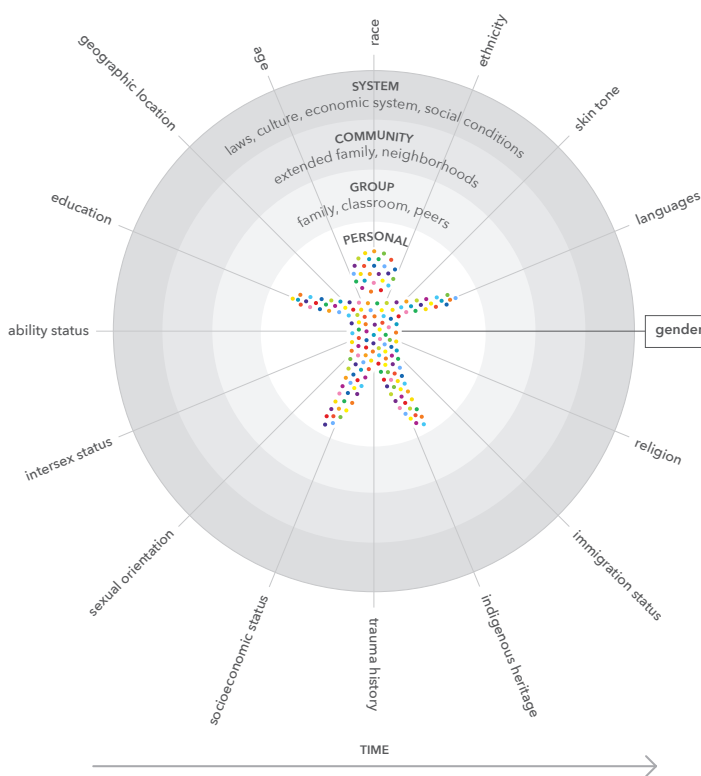
Gender as Binary-Based, Fixed, Individually-Determined, Separate from Sexual Orientation, & Unrelated to Other Identities<sup>2</sup>



## NOW

### GENDER EXPANSIVENESS

Gender as Complex, Dynamic, Individually-Determined, Separate from Sexual Orientation, & Related to Other Identities (Intersectional)<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>



- I identify as \_\_\_\_\_
- My identity is fluid/fixed
- My pronouns are \_\_\_\_\_
- Words that make me feel good about my body are \_\_\_\_\_
- I like to wear \_\_\_\_\_
- My favorite toys and games are \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

### **Gender Attribution**

Gender attribution is the process by which an observer decides what gender they believe a child to be based on behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, etc.<sup>7</sup>

### **Gender Expression**

The ways in which children externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, etc.

### **Gender Identity**

The gender that children feel themselves to be, which most become conscious of between 18 and 30 months old.<sup>8</sup> Some develop a gender identity that matches their legal designation (i.e. *cisgender*) and some develop a gender identity that is different from their legal designation. As they grow up and live authentically in their gender identities, some will choose new names and/or pronouns, some will choose to take hormones or have surgery, and some will choose not to do any of those things. Gender identity may be fixed or change over time and/or across contexts (i.e. *fluid*).

### **Intersectionality**

Our various advantaged and disadvantaged aspects of identity (race, ethnicity, gender, ability, age, class, sexual orientation, etc.) do not act independently of one another, or in a simple additive way. Rather, they interrelate to create specific experiences of privilege and oppression that are not reducible to one or another identity.<sup>4</sup>

### **Legal Designation**

Infants in the U.S. are given a legal designation, usually male or female, at the time of their birth (also referred to as sex/gender assigned at birth). In most cases, this designation is based on a cursory visual inspection of primary sex characteristics. A few countries and states, including California, allow for a third option in the case of *intersex* babies (i.e. those born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical, binary notions of female or male bodies). The process of changing a person's legal designation to match their identity varies from state to state and country to country. In some places it is not possible for a person to ever change their legal designation.

### **Anatomy and Physiology**

All children have body parts (anatomy) as well as chromosomes, hormones, and genes influencing how their bodies will grow and function (physiology). By talking about anatomy and physiology, instead of "sex" or "sex characteristics" that are traditionally split along binary gender lines, we can learn more about our similarities and differences and how to celebrate all bodies.

### **Sexual Orientation**

Sexual orientation and gender are separate, though related parts of overall identity. Gender is personal (how one sees themselves), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (which people one is physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to).

### **Transgender (adj.)**

An identity claimed by some children whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on their legal designation at birth.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD

# GENDER EXPANSIVENESS

Supporting gender health and wellbeing for all children starts by creating safe spaces for them to identify and express their authentic gender selves

**Gender expansive** (also *gender creative, gender diverse, gender variant, or gender nonconforming\**) children explore, identify and/or express their gender in ways that challenge cultural norms and expand our binary understanding of gender (see Then: Gender Boxes). Gender expansive is an umbrella label that can be ascribed to children and includes those who identify as transgender.

Some children do not identify with being either male or female, some identify as a blend of both, while others identify with a gender but don't always express or embody it in culturally expected ways. Gender may be fixed or change over time and/or across cultural contexts.

Gender is one of many categories that are socially constructed to sort people and establish advantages and exclusions (see: Intersectionality).

**The American Psychological Association does not consider transgender and gender expansive identities to be pathologies, but rather normal variations of human experience.**<sup>9</sup> Nine percent of LGBT youth in the US identify outside of the gender binary, a third of whom identify as transgender.<sup>10</sup> An increasing number of gender expansive children are socially transitioning, or presenting as their gender identity in everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

**All existing research on young children's experiences and ideas of gender is based on traditional notions of gender as a binary and fixed category. There is a significant need for research that recognizes contemporary understandings of gender (see Now: Gender Expansiveness).**

Studies show the majority of very young children who express gender expansive behavior will, by adulthood, identify with their legal designation at birth.<sup>12</sup> These studies also highlight that many children, as young as toddlers, already know that their gender identities do not align with their legal designation and persist in their transgender or gender expansive identities through adolescence and often into adulthood.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of adult identities, children who challenge gender norms and expectations are known to experience bullying, isolation, shame, and disempowerment. A new mindset is needed to support gender health and wellbeing for all children in both research and practice.

## HOW CAN WE SUPPORT CHILDREN'S GENDER HEALTH?

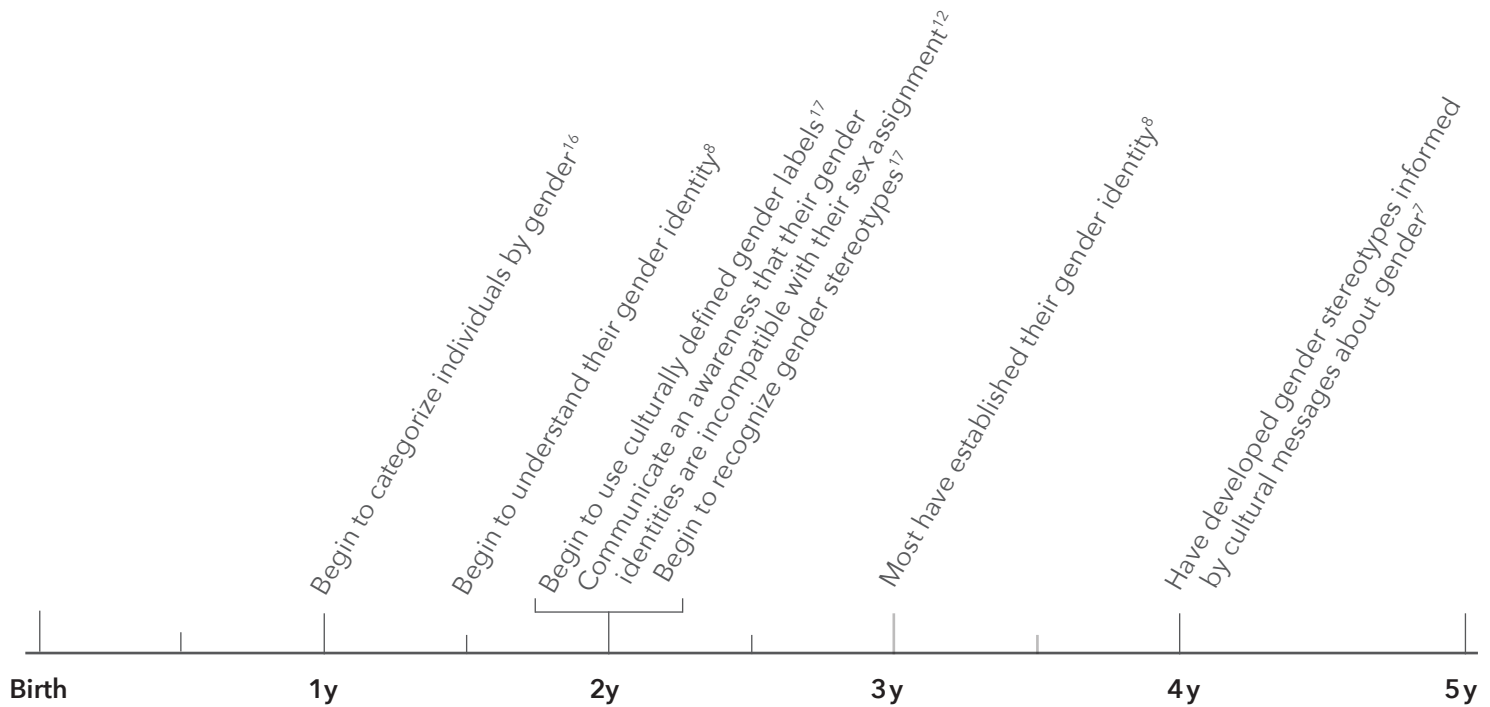
Although families, educators, and other significant adults in young children's lives have no control over children's gender identities, they have extensive influence over children's health and social-emotional wellbeing by communicating to them messages of being either respected and affirmed or shamed and rejected.<sup>3</sup> Gender expansive children have better mental health when adults support them in expressing their authentic gender identities.<sup>13</sup>

Gender inclusive early childhood programs start with educators rejecting beliefs that associate gender expansiveness with pathology or deficit and embracing an expansive view of gender for all people including children.<sup>3</sup> All children benefit from early learning environments that celebrate and normalize difference through information, images, and relationships that highlight human diversity, including gender diversity.<sup>14, 15</sup> Gender expansive children need to experience the same level of respect, acceptance, safety, and belonging as children whose behavior does not challenge gender norms.<sup>14</sup> **They need brave advocates who will challenge their own binary thinking while striving to make all early childhood programs gender inclusive by having policies and practices that recognize *all* gender identities in the children and families they serve.**<sup>14</sup>

\*Some see "gender nonconforming" as a pathologizing identity label.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT GENDER EXPANSIVENESS WITH VERY YOUNG CHILDREN?

From their first year of life, children are forming foundational understandings of gender in themselves and the world.



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Note: Killerman's Genderbread Person draws from sources created by Cristina González, Vanessa Prell, Jack Rivas, and Jarrod Schwartz and Bruce Lawson.
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