

A photograph of two young boys walking away from the camera on a stone path in a lush garden. The boy on the left is wearing a blue and white striped t-shirt and light-colored shorts. The boy on the right is wearing a light grey polo shirt and dark shorts. They are holding hands. The path is surrounded by various green plants and flowers, including pink roses on the right. In the background, there is a dark wooden lattice fence.

Creating Affirming Homes

DANE COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES

title page

Welcome!



We're so glad you are interested in being a foster parent! Caring for children is one of the most meaningful things we can do. It is also one of the hardest. Parenting has many surprises. No two children are alike, and just as our children are on a journey of discovery, we, too, are learning about ourselves as parents.

So much about caring for a young person will surprise you, delight you, and challenge you. All parents struggle to some degree with the ways our children turn out different from our expectations.

In this series, we hope to prepare future foster parents for some of the developmental processes all children go through as they make sense of their gender identity and sexuality. While these two parts of self are not linked, they are areas in which we've all been taught to feel discomfort with differences.



This first volume of *Creating Affirming Homes* covers how gender and sexuality are important for figuring out how and where we fit in the community, a critical developmental milestone of childhood. Section one will cover some terminology for understanding gender that may be new to you. Section two will explore the ages and stages of gender identity development. Section three will provide a number of ways to create a healing and nourishing home supportive of a secure attachment between you and your foster child. This is particularly important for foster parents because, on top of navigating all the typical challenges of growing up, foster children are also working to integrate and heal the trauma of being removed from their family of origin.

Making sure your home is welcoming and affirming to all the different ways children understand themselves is the best strategy for creating the safety necessary to heal from the wounds of separation. This includes welcoming a child's racial identity, ethnicity, disability, religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Children with nontraditional gender identities or expressions, and those who find the direction of their attraction to others is not purely heterosexual, are over-represented in the foster care system. This means that as a foster parent, there is a good chance you will have the honor of creating a space of love and support for the young people who receive it least frequently out in the world. If this feels overwhelming- you're not alone! Feeling unprepared is the hallmark of parenting. In this booklet, you will find resources for you, too.

In the subsequent volumes, we will explore strategies for supporting children who affirm a nontraditional gender identity or sexual orientation in a society that punishes nonconformity. In the second volume, we will discuss how adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for all young people and explore some evidence-based parenting moves associated with happy young people and moves that increase the risk of depression, drug use, and suicidality.



2

This series' third and final volume will cover resources for advocating for your foster children as they move through childhood and into adulthood.

The ultimate goal of this series is to help you understand how to prepare for and show up for your foster kiddo and yourself when parenthood takes some unexpected twists and turns.



Section 1:
New words
& ideas



Understanding every child's gender journey begins with understanding how bodies grow.

Everything that grows grows in its own way.

Although most of us have been taught the human body grows one of two ways, the truth is much more complicated. Yes, some bodies can carry babies and others cannot, but our reproductive capacities are not as tied to our body shapes as we've been told. Yet, the myth that women look one way and men look another has caused so much unnecessary distress and pain.

Who feels completely at ease with their body? Who among us has never compared their body parts to an idea of "normal" and feared they fell short? Few people are pleased with the shape or size of their breasts, vulva, or penis.

Some people have little mammary tissue, and others have a lot. Some people's testicles are very symmetrical; some people's are not. Most mothers grow facial hair, but some fathers never do. Some of our body parts are so far from the norm, it is impossible to pronounce as male or female on sight.

We didn't talk about or share it before now because the people with these variations were shamed into silence, hid their bodies, and sometimes had their bodies changed without permission.

We now know that variation in how our bodies develop is normal, present in every species, and rarely requires intervention to live a happy, healthy, and pleasurable life. More importantly, we're learning how past interventions caused much more harm than they ever prevented.

To promote healthy gender development in children, it helps to understand how bodies develop, our long-held assumptions about what is normal, how these assumptions relate to gender identity, and how identity forms in each person's mind. Let's start with some terms used to describe these ideas.

Sex, Biological Sex, and Sex Assigned at Birth

Sex refers to a person's anatomy and physical attributes, such as external sex organs, sex chromosomes, and internal reproductive structures.

For most people, the anatomical indicators of sex develop in a way typically understood as male or female. However, sometimes testes have not descended, or the tissue that forms into either a penis or a clitoris is not clearly either. Sometimes the urethral opening is not at the tip of the penis but below it, like in a vulva. The variations go on and on.

When this happens in societies that believe you are either male or female (we call this a **binary** when only two options are allowable), doctors will declare the person intersex.

Intersex is an umbrella term for differences in sex traits or reproductive anatomy that result in bodies that don't neatly fit into binary options. Some intersex features are noticed at birth. Others don't show up until puberty or later in life.



Think of the sex spectrum like the color spectrum

“There’s no question that in nature, there are different wavelengths that translate into colors most of us see as red, blue, orange, and yellow. But the decision to distinguish between orange and red-orange is made only when we need it—like when we ask for a particular paint color. Sometimes, social necessity leads us to make color distinctions that otherwise would seem incorrect or irrational, as, for instance, when we call certain people “black” or “white” when they’re not especially black or white as we would otherwise use the terms.

In the same way, nature presents us with sex anatomy spectrums. Breasts, penises, clitorises, scrotums, labia, and gonads vary in size, shape, and morphology. So-called “sex” chromosomes can vary quite a bit, too. But in human cultures, sex categories get simplified into male, female, and sometimes intersex.

Nature doesn’t decide where the category of “male” ends and the category of “intersex” begins or where the category of “intersex” ends and the category of “female” begins. Humans decide. Humans (today, typically doctors) decide how small a penis has to be or how unusual a combination of parts has to be before it counts as intersex.”

-former Intersex Society of North America

Intersex variations occur in all species, including in **1-2 out of every 100** human births!*

[*isna.org/faq/frequency](https://isna.org/faq/frequency)

There are many different ways someone can be intersex. See Appendix A for more detail on the development of intersex variation, and click on the video below to hear about what it is like to be intersex:



<https://youtu.be/cAUDKEI4QKI?si=3cRv2jlxw5XmllH9>

In the past three decades, more than 25 genes have been identified that were once believed to be associated solely with male or female biology but exhibit more complex, nonbinary variations.

Intersex conditions are increasingly being recognized as naturally occurring variations of human physiology. Following years of organizing by intersex activists, momentum is growing to end what was once a standard practice of “gender-normalizing surgery” performed on intersex infants with ambiguous genitalia.

In 2013, the United Nations condemned this unnecessary surgery on infants, putting it in the same category as involuntary sterilization, unethical experimentation, or reparative therapy when enforced or administered without the free and informed consent of the person receiving the surgery.

These natural variations in human development have been systematically hidden in binary societies. Doctors have pushed families to consent to surgery on their infants, children are subjected to hormonal treatments and continued surgery, and families have been shamed into silence through the myth that being intersex is abnormal.



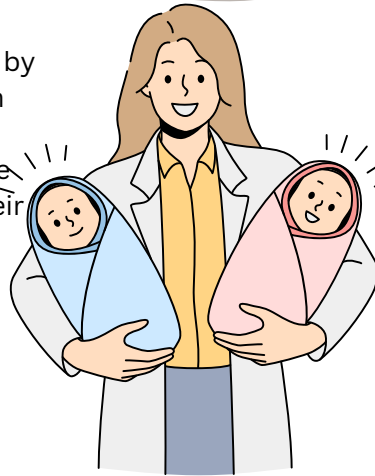
Since it is common for people not to fit neatly into two categories (as in 1-2 in every 100 births), all around the world, you can find cultures with names and roles for folks that don't fit into or feel like one particular sex. In North America, some tribal nations refer to these folks as two-spirited. This is a title that can be given and chosen. Other genders worldwide include Third Gender, Hijra, Kathoey, Fa'afafine, Latinx or Latine, Muxe, or Waria.

Each body grows in its own way.

Having only two options (biological male or biological female) does not describe how our biology can develop or whether we can reproduce.



Some people are easily labeled by their genitalia at birth and learn only later that their internal anatomy does not align with the expectations set in place by their birth certificate.



Yet, the sex indicated on our paperwork at birth sets the course of options for us for the rest of our lives. And, it is very hard to change if and when it turns out to be incorrect.

By using the phrase “assigned male at birth” or “assigned female at birth,” we acknowledge our gender categories are not bound to some predestined, easily identifiable biological sequence of development but instead that someone (often a doctor) is deciding for someone else.

Since our biology doesn't always fall into male/female categories, and we don't get to weigh in on the decision at birth, it is more accurate to describe our legal sex as assigned at birth.

Why not just say, “biological sex?”



If you have a child who's intersex, the best thing you can do is support them and love them for who they are. It's also a good idea to find some support from other parents with children who are intersex and make sure your child has opportunities to connect with other children who are intersex. An excellent place to start is [InterACT](#)

Okay, so what's the difference between **Sex** & **Gender**?

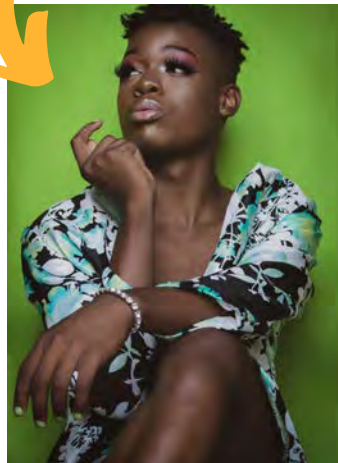
Sex is the idea that people can be grouped by biological & physical characteristics associated with reproduction. As we've discussed, our differences are too varied to break us into two discrete groups.

Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, and ways of dressing that a given society or culture considers normal for people based on reproductive capacities.

Assigned Sex refers to what was put on your birth certificate and serves as shorthand for how your culture expects you to act based on your body.

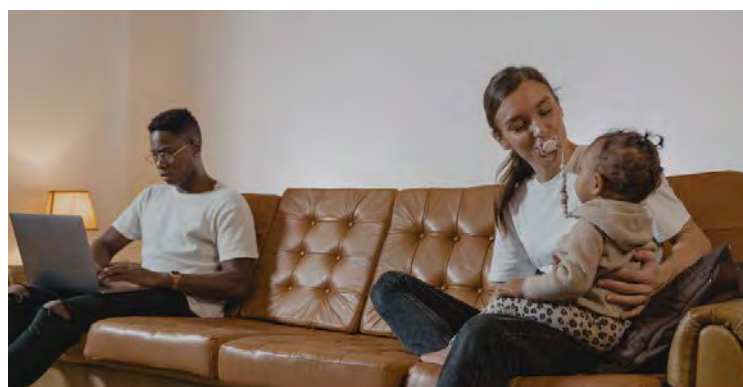


Gender Identity is your internal truth about which gender category describes you and is not limited to two proscribed choices.



Gender Expression is how you use your body to show the world your gender through your appearance and actions.

Gender Roles are the activities, interests, and behaviors a society attaches to a gender category. Sometimes, we don't realize we hold them.... until somebody violates them, and it seems "wrong."



CISGENDER, TRANSGENDER, & GENDER-EXPANSIVE.

Words for navigating a binary culture.

The *cis* and *trans* prefixes come from Latin; you may recognize them from chemistry. *Trans* means “across” or “over,” whereas *cis* means “the same side.”

Many people feel that they’re either male or female. Some people feel neither male nor female and choose other labels such as genderqueer, gender variant, gender diverse, gender fluid, or non-binary.

Some people’s assigned sex and gender identity are pretty much the same or in line with each other. These people are called **cisgender**.

Cisgender is an important word because it names the dominant experience rather than simply seeing it as the default. Individuals whose biological sex and gender identity “match” rarely think about the alignment of biology and identity because they have the privilege of being considered normal by society.

Transgender describes people who feel mislabeled by their sex assignment at birth (i.e., assigned sex is female, but gender identity is male). For these individuals, there is a disconnect between how others perceive them based on outside physical characteristics and their internal sense of themselves. Note: “trans” is acceptable, but never “tranny.”

Non-binary is a term for people who don’t feel represented by male/female options. A trans person may also identify as non-binary. Non-binary is one example of a gender-expansive identity.

Gender-expansive is another term for people who don’t feel adequately described by the gender binary. These individuals may identify as both male and female or neither, or they may feel at home with their assigned sex but not with the expectations surrounding it.



TNG Is a popular acronym to refer to folks who are not cisgender. It stands for Transgender, Non-binary, or Gender-expansive.

Gender
Expansive

Transgender

More likely to be distressed by unwanted body parts, or need some sort of physical change to feel comfortable in their body

While all transgender children are gender-expansive, **Not all gender-expansive children are transgender.**

What does sexual orientation have to do with gender?



Sexual orientation refers to how we claim the direction of our attraction. If we are sexually attracted exclusively to the same gender in a sex binary, this is considered homosexual, with the most commonly used terms being **Lesbian** or **Gay**. If we are solely attracted to the opposite gender in a sex binary, this is considered **heterosexual** or straight. If we are attracted to both gender categories, this is considered **bisexual**. If we do not experience sexual attraction, we may be described as **asexual** or **ace**.



If we don't want to define our sexual or romantic attractions within the sex binary, we may choose words like **queer**, **pansexual**, **demisexual**, **same-gender loving**, and more.

Some TNG folks identify as heterosexual, some as queer, and others asexual.

Although many gender minorities are also sexual minorities, not all are. Many people think that if a person's gender expression is nontraditional, their sexual orientation and gender identity must be, too. Similarly, many sexual minorities are very comfortable within the sexual binary and are frequently told, "You don't look gay!"

LGBQ+

is an acronym to refer to an ever-evolving list of sexual-minority identities. It stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning and more. The order of identities and which ones are listed in the acronym vs the plus sign reflect power structures in the U.S.

SOGIE are connected, but not dependent on one another



SOGIE stands for:

Sexual **O**rientation

The direction of your attraction to people (or the lack thereof)



Gender **I**dentify

Who you know yourself to be



Expression

How you show the world who you are

Contrary to popular opinion, our sense of self and interest in one another is rarely 100% solely feminine or masculine. Rather, research suggests that most people affirm a number of both “masculine” and “feminine” traits and attractions. However, the balance of each tends to be as unique as each person. See Appendix B.

The Gender Unicorn (below) was created by [Trans Student Educational Resources](#) to help us understand that these aspects of our identity don’t exist on bipolar spectrums but that most of us possess different degrees of masculine and feminine (and androgynous) qualities and attractions.

THE GENDER UNICORN

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) are independent, yet most assume that if they know how a person identifies in one area, they know how they will identify in other areas.

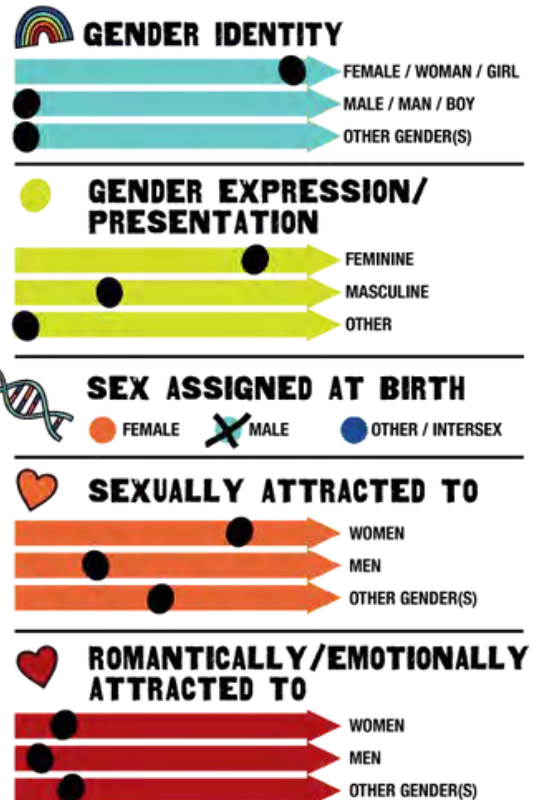


image: adapted: by 216teens, a website for families in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

Why are people of diverse SOGIE described as one group?

While getting grouped together keeps the confusion about how these parts of ourselves are not dependent upon one another, there are three good reasons for referring to LGBTQ+ and TNG folks as one group.

1

All are mistreated for violating the gender binary and its focus on reproduction. So they rally together to be heard.

2

Because of this stigma, there is limited data. Many surveys don't dare ask about variations in sexual orientation or gender. Putting everyone in one group allows statisticians to make comparisons between LGBTQ+ and TNG folks and those who are not.

3

Similar environmental changes would improve the well-being of people that fall into either group.

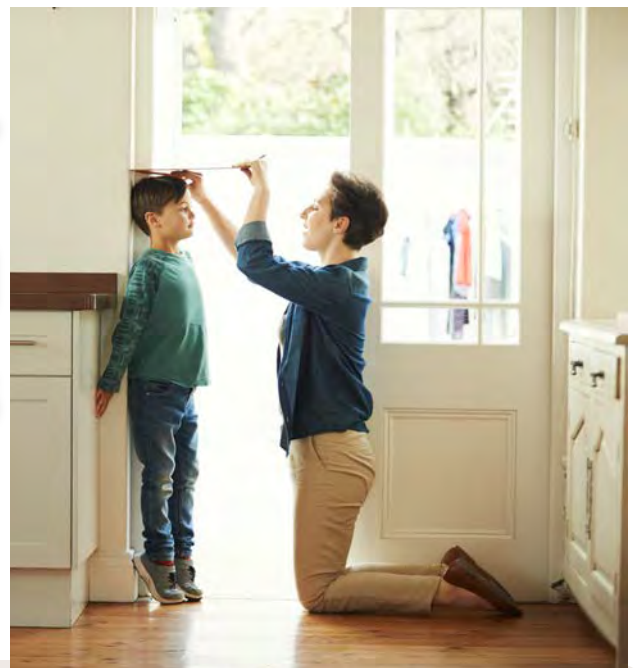




Section 2:
**How gender identity
develops**

Gender understanding matures with us

As our bodies grow and change our ability to understand and describe our self-understandings grow and change, too



“By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity.”

American Academy of Pediatrics

In neurotypical early childhood, we understand we are unique from our caretakers around age 2. At this time, we make our initial bids/demands for setting our own agenda for the day. The onset of a sudden, strong announcement of a conflicting opinion is known to many as the terrible twos.

As language expands, so does the ability to sort things into categories. Through this sorting process, we begin to understand the sex assigned to us at birth and whether or not it corresponds to our internal sense of being a boy, girl, neither, or something else.

However, with age, we grasp greater nuances about ourselves and gain new words to describe what kind of girl or boy we are or if we've never felt like we fit in either category.

When our internal sense of self does not match who others tell us we are, it is confusing and upsetting. Since exposure to language that gives a name to the diversity of gender typically comes later in life, many TNG people don't express (or even understand) their gender identity until they are teens or adults.



Early & Middle Childhood

As our brains grow and develop, the desire for the world to be more predictable and to know where one fits in it intensifies. This is likely why peer pressure to conform is the most intense in neurotypical middle childhood.

For cisgender children with traditional interests and self-expression, immersion in gender-specific spaces can bring a sense of ease.

Not fitting in is physically painful for children who have realized their own expansiveness. The work of managing that pain without significant adult support places children with diverse SOGIE at a higher risk of struggling academically and emotionally.

Those who don't feel entirely welcome in gender-specific spaces have four choices. (1) They can suppress their differences and emphasize their sameness to satisfy the need to belong. (2) They can ask for help finding welcoming spaces. (3) They can go through steps to transition to another gender to fit into a space that feels like home. Or (4) They can withdraw from the world and self-isolate.

While each option has risks, suppression, and withdrawal create abiding fears of one's truth being known and can result in feeling alone in a room full of people.

In later childhood/early neurotypical adolescence, we either find our people and feel the joy of being known by a community or suffer in isolation.

Much like around age 2, adolescence is known for the turbulent process through which we sense our truth and explore how we differ from others.

Most of us spend time exploring us/them, thinking to make sense of the world. "I'm the sort of person who.... Would never hurt an animal..." vs. "...is a fantastic hunter." Some teens view their own family as the "other" from which they define themselves, and others pick differences in identities to satisfy the need to differentiate.

Because of this pressure to conform and harassment when you do not, gender-expansive youth without sufficient adult support are at a much higher risk of self-harm and suicide than their gender-conforming, cisgender peers.



Adolescence



The increased interest in romantic relationships and sex during adolescence heightens the focus on one's SOGIE.

We are figuring out what sort of a member of a gender category we are and typically explore that by fixating on what we are not. For example, "I'm not a girly girl," or "I just love makeup!"

Sometimes, morals or religious beliefs are attached to these choices, further complicating this developmental process. Now, in addition to figuring out who you are to yourself, you worry about where you belong in this life and the next.


You'll notice each new generation of teens create their own words to describe "in" or "out" groups based upon similar types of appearance (e.g., emo or goth), interests (e.g., sporty or nerds), music, and sexuality. There is a plus at the end of LGBTQ+ for this reason. Every generation the list grows.

Importantly, during high school, children have greater independence and so find themselves in increasingly risky situations, which they need the skills and trusted adult guidance to navigate safely.

It is for this time of life we need to build secure and trusting relationships with our children. How we greet their unique selves in early childhood lays the foundation for later trust or abiding distrust.

See Appendix E for a summary of gender across childhood.





**Section 3:
How we
teach kids
about
gender**

Kids learn about gender through objects



Children pick up on their culture's gender expectations by picking up patterns in the world around them.

Societal expectations of gender expression are reinforced in almost every area of life, including toys, colors, clothes, games, and jokes about people who don't fit into the norms.

It begins with the style of clothes and toys gifted at birth. It intensifies when we treat children differently based upon their assigned sex: comforting boys less frequently when they cry, greeting little girls with compliments on their appearance, but not so with boys, etc.



All children's play is communication, and the toys we provide to children are vocabularies.

Baby dolls & kitchens are a vocabulary of nurturing. Superheroes and action figures are a vocabulary of power. Train sets are a vocabulary of problem-solving, and so on. Giving children only certain toys limits their vocabulary and expectations for acceptable interests and self-expression.

- Helen Hargreaves.



Kids learn about gender from our expectations and humor

In binary societies, expectations for gender roles and expression are governed by the belief that bodies were created to either carry babies or protect babies. Under this assumption, things associated with nurturing life are considered feminine, and things related to ending life are considered masculine.

While there may be patterns of expression more common for one gender than another, these patterns are not biologically governed rules. See appendix B for more detail on gender roles.

For example, cisgender girls and women are assumed to want to be mothers, have some innate capacity for caretaking & put everyone else first.



Conversely, cisgender boys and men are expected to be physically aggressive with little interest in their appearance and possess few needs for intimacy that is not sexual.



However, we know that an interest in caretaking is innately human, as is the desire to be seen and known in all our messy and cute ways.

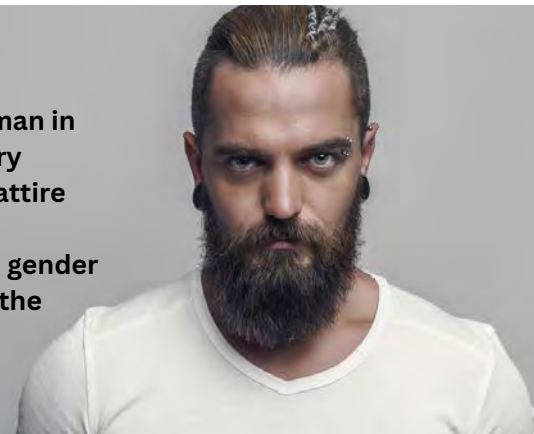
When one doesn't strictly adhere to societal norms of "masculine" or "feminine" in their gender expression—or their gender expression does not coincide with their assigned gender — we are considered gender nonconforming or gender creative.

Since this is something we just made up, the **expectations differ across cultures and change within the same cultures over time.**

For example, in the 17th century, it was considered very masculine for wealthy, European white men to wear skirts, sport long hair or wigs, and wear visible makeup.



Today, any cisgender man in 17th-century masculine attire would be considered gender creative in the U.S.



Our word choices and story plots set the range of expectations and possibilities



Modifying a title with female declares the norm to be male

Phrases like “girl boss” or “girl scientist” diminish an adult’s accomplishment and communicate that it is considered unnatural for a woman to hold such a position.

Look for the stories under the stories

TV shows, movies, commercials, and other forms of popular culture often portray gender traditionally. For example, boys are shown as strong and adventurous, while girls are typically portrayed as pretty and passive or deferring to the boys around them. Meanwhile, gender-creative folks don’t exist in most mediums.

Be curious. How often do girls solve the mystery or save the day? How frequently do people of different sizes, shapes, colors, and genders headline the adventure or love story?



The website Critical Media has a broad selection of examples of how we are taught gender in commercials and TV shows: <https://criticalmediaproject.org/playlists/gender/>

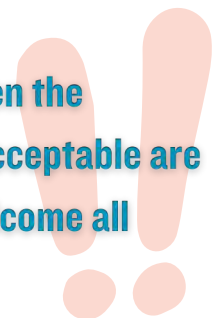
At age 5, children don’t differentiate between boys and girls in expectations of ‘really, really smart.’

But by age 6, girls were prepared to lump more boys into the ‘really, really smart’ category and steer themselves away from games intended for the ‘really, really smart.’ ”

If we don’t proactively teach different messages to children about gender, they will simply absorb the messages out there – and we all lose out.*

Gender socialization is NOT BAD: it helps us understand and navigate the world.

It becomes a problem when the expectations of what is acceptable are not flexible enough to welcome all people.





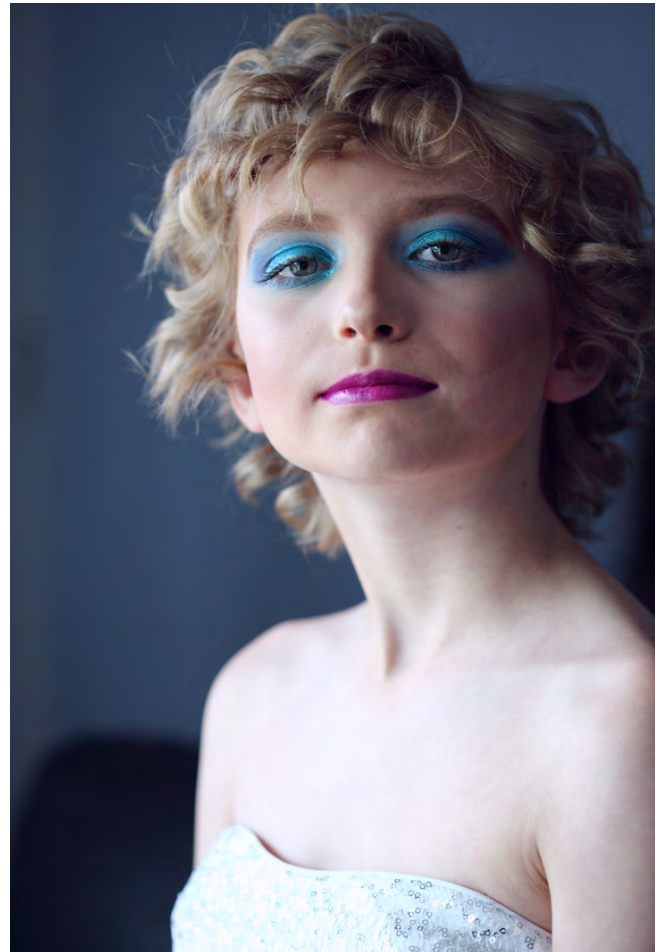
Kids learn about gender from how we (over)react to their play

Play is a language of learning as well as creativity. While verbal and/or sign language vocabulary is building, we lack the words to process our world, and so we process through our play. It is quite common for children to “try on” different aspects of gender through their play, clothing, or toys.

At some time or another, children may be interested in or need to process something they see adults in their lives doing. Interest in dressing up, pretend cooking, getting dirty, or staying clean have nothing to do with our genitalia or innate sense of gender. Remember, the idea that only kiddos born with uteruses want to caretake and only those born without them want to be physically active or aggressive is a myth.

Doing things considered unusual for your gender doesn't mean you are unaware of expected gender roles; it just means you are not yet fearful of living outside of them.

Even longer-term play preferences are normal and nothing to stress about. Think of a boy who prefers dolls and dress-up play or a girl who wears short hair and refuses skirts. These children, who are non-typical in their gender expression, were once labeled “tomboys” or “sissies” – and adults sometimes presumed they'd grow up to be gay or lesbian. Today, we know that how we play or dress is not a reliable indicator of current or future gender identity or sexual orientation in adulthood.



If a child announces that they are “now a dog/astronaut/boy” to you....

Instead of telling them they are being silly, just greet them as they are and ask them about their day. This shows the child you take them seriously and won't dismiss them in the future.



So what does it mean when “cross-gender” play persists?

For most kids, experimenting with gender options will be just that--exploration and play. This experimentation is typically brief and often situational, such as with certain friends or in specific settings. But when such behaviors continue or raise concerns for the adults around the child, experts frequently encourage families to assess the degree to which the child’s atypical gender is “insistent, consistent, and persistent.”

If your child is insistent, consistent and persistent about their gender in ways outside of societal norms, they may be telling you something.

Most gender-expansive children will not persist in this feeling of being in the wrong body and shift to language that names feeling at odds with the expectations the world places upon men and women. Some present themselves exclusively as a boy or girl, with names, pronouns, and appearances all typical for that gender. Some switch their gender expression to match how they feel that day. Others “mix and match” traits, such as using their original pronouns while changing their dress. This may indicate that the child is most comfortable in a gender-creative space, at least for now.

Transgender children are a subset of gender-expansive kids. and are more likely to express a persistent desire to be rid of their genitals or wish they’d been “born in a different body.” They might say, “I am...” rather than “I wish I were...”

Like all children, transgender boys and girls don’t always conform to gender stereotypes. For instance, a transgender girl may prefer to wear her hair short, and a transgender boy may maintain a love of sparkles and pink.



Ok, but how common is it for a kiddo to be a member of the LGBTNGQ+ community?

LGBTNGQ+ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Nonbinary, Gender Expansive, Queer or Questioning +

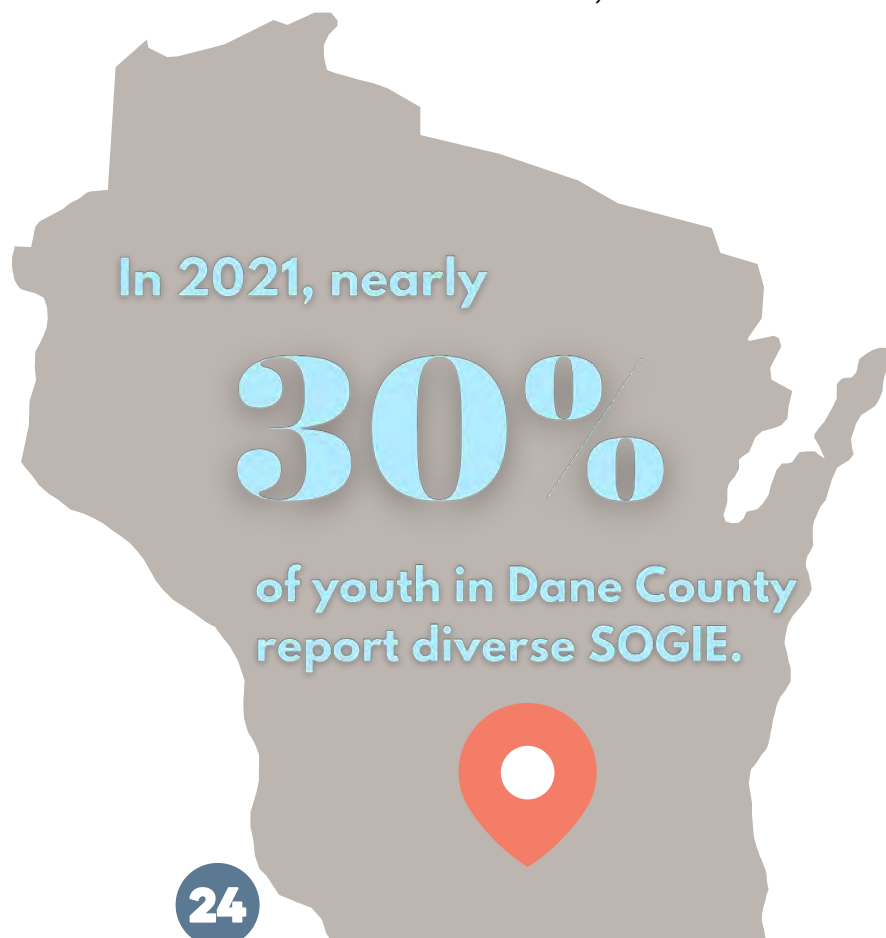
Even though we know sexual orientation is entirely independent of sex, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE), many people incorrectly believe they are connected. This may be because affirming nontraditional self-understandings in multiple identities is common.

No one knows why this is. Some suggest this variation is everywhere, but the stigma against owning it makes folks suppress it. As a result, there is less risk in being honest about the many ways in which your truth breaks from tradition because your family can't disown you twice, right?

As more and more places begin to collect data on SOGIE, we are seeing an uptick in the percentages of young people who report diverse SOGIE. This uptick supports the theory that variation in SOGIE is more common than we once thought and that people are becoming more truthful about it as they become less afraid of rejection.

For example, early population-level surveys of SOGIE estimated that anywhere between 5-10% of the general population experienced non-heterosexual sexual attraction, while only 2% identified as transgender.

However,



Section 4: Creating a Gender-Expansive Affirming Home



All children in care need a safe place to process their grief, freedom to express who they are, and structure to support them in becoming responsible, healthy adults.

Creating a welcoming and affirming foster home for LGBTNGQ+ youth is not that different from creating a safe and supportive home for any youth.





Caregivers often fear that others may try to hurt their LGBTQ+ or TNG children.

This fear can make us hesitate to support LGBTQ+ or TNG children for fear of their safety. Love for the child is why caregivers try to discourage or change a child's expansive gender expression, LGBTQ+, or TNG identity.

But discouraging someone's authentic expression of self, encouraging them to change themselves to fit in, or refusing to allow a person to find others like themselves is harmful. Because caregivers see these behaviors as loving or caring for a child, they are often surprised and shocked to learn that their child experienced these behaviors as rejection or abuse.

The most important way caregivers or families can help an LGB or TNG child is by offering love and connection without conditions.

Every child needs to know that the adults in their life have their back and that they do NOT need to do anything to earn their love. Such knowledge solidifies an abiding of self-worth and is the MOST effective way to prevent a child from internalizing the message that they are defective or shouldn't expect to be treated with dignity and admiration.

This last section will provide guidance, tips, and best practices for cultivating a home that builds that sense that their life is treasured, no matter what they do with it, that they are enough, and that they are loved beyond measure.



But their identity keeps changing!

Sometimes, a child's gender expression, or what they say about their gender, seems to be in flux. Same for sexuality. The child may express their gender differently at school than home, have markedly masculine or feminine traits, or role-play as a girl one day and a boy the next.

Children may come up with their own explanations, like being "a boy who likes girl things," "both a boy and a girl," or a "rainbow kid." Some children will always feel "in between" genders and may grow up to identify as non-binary, not exclusively male or female.

Because we are provided with limited language for gender and sexuality, it may take some time to discover or create the language that best communicates these internal experiences. This does not mean their gender has changed, but rather that the words for it are shifting.

Sometimes kids are just afraid to share their truth with YOU.

In multiple studies, LGBTQ+ youth reported being aware of their sexual orientation during elementary school but waited to disclose it until middle or high school.

There's no downside to trusting a child knows who they are.

Some young people don't question their assigned gender or presumed heterosexuality until adolescence. **The fact that it wasn't persistent or insistent since age two doesn't make it less real.**

Similarly, changing their mind doesn't negate their need for support TODAY. Make sure the child has what they need to feel at home in their body based on what they are experiencing each day. If the child isn't distressed, your role is to affirm their gender expression: reassuring them that they don't need to worry about "boy clothes" or "girl things," you'll love them however they express themselves and whoever they grow up to be.

If the child is experiencing distress about the mismatch between their internal sense of self and how others interact with them, seek help. Find a gender-affirming specialist to help you navigate this distress so it doesn't become a toxic stressor. Your Dane County social worker is here to help you with this.

Remember, gender identity and sexual orientation are inherent aspects of a person's make-up. Individuals do not choose their gender or sexuality, nor can they be made to change it.

Prove to your foster child they can trust you not to sweat the small stuff and they'll come to you with big stuff.



A trusting relationship with a caring adult is one of the most significant protective factors. Young people confident they have a loving adult in their corner are less likely than those without to self-harm, struggle in school, or abuse substances.

We teach each other how honest we can be based on our reactions to disappointment. Our ability to remain calm, predictable, and kind when a child breaks the rules or behaves poorly shapes the child's sense of self as inherently lovable.

These micro-moments lay the ground of security and stability for when the stakes are much higher in adolescence.

Make your home a place where possibility is acknowledged and welcome



Model inclusive language as you navigate your world.

Use gender-neutral language if you haven't asked a person their pronouns. Ask a child about their friends rather than "girlfriends."

When corralling young people rather than calling out "ladies and gentlemen," consider something neutral or fun like "friends!" or "They-dies and Gentlethems!"

Ask the children you are meeting about their adults or parents instead of assuming they have a mom and a dad.

Discuss stories about gender as you encounter them to encourage perspective-taking.

While watching shows and reading books with young people, you'll have plenty of opportunities to show your young person that you don't expect everyone to be the same way.

Provide language to name all the unspoken messages under the patterns in plots. Messages like girls are not natural leaders, boys are not natural nurturers, black people are dangerous, Jewish people are cheap, etc.

If you hear slurs or stereotypes repeated in your home, ask your young person what they meant and explain what you heard. Then, offer alternatives.

INSTEAD OF..

Sister/Brother

Daughter/Son

Niece/Nephew

Granddaughter/
Grandson

TRY...

Sibling

Child, Kid, Kiddo,
Oldest/Youngest

Nibling, my sister's child

Grandchild/Grandkid

Be curious, *"I wonder why all the female characters are wearing heels. It seems impractical for this activity!"*

Share your thoughts

"It bothers me that all the shows we watch keep having only white boys solve the mystery- in my life, many different types of people know what to do."

Ask your kiddo what they think and listen to the answer.

"I wonder why people keep writing it this one way. What do you think?"



Talk about gender & sexuality together

Key ideas to hit

- Everyone's gender is unique. There are many ways to be a girl/boy/person
- Gender rules are made up and optional.
- Most girls have vulvas, but not all do. Most boys have penises, but not all do.
- There have always been gender-diverse people in the world.
- You can't tell a person's gender just by looking at them.
- Each person is the expert on themselves- no one else but you knows your truth, and it is always a gift when you share it with others.
- There aren't boy or girl toys; there are just toys!
- Families come in all sorts of ways.
- Many women want to marry men, but not all.
- Many people don't care about the gender of their partner- but not all.
- Love is love, and I love you no matter what!

Ask open-ended questions and gauge how your young person thinks and feels.

Let their responses to your questions guide the conversation. Make sure you're talking positively about all the diversity in our communities and world.

Lead with love.


Caregivers may hold religious, cultural, or moral beliefs that challenge conversations around identity. Our role as caregiver is not necessarily to agree with our kids but to provide them with love.

Be ready to learn and to get it wrong.

The way teens today describe gender identity and sexuality differs significantly from previous generations. Expect your young person to say things you don't understand. Respond with, 'I don't know what that means. Can you help explain that to me?' or 'How can I support you?' Sometimes kids just need to know there is a safe place to discuss this."

Reflect on and share your gender journey.

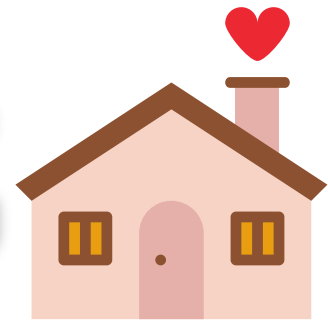
This could be facilitated by printing multiple copies of the gender unicorn and filling them out together. (See Appendix E).



Gender is a normal part of growing up; don't wait for an incident to talk about it. The conversations need not be serious or complex.

Figuring out who we are and sharing that discovery with loved ones should be joyful!

More ideas for creating an explicitly gender-affirming home include:



Be intentional about how you praise kids.

Girls are often praised for their appearance or being sweet or kind, while boys are praised for being big, tough, or independent. If you hear this praise from other adults, consider joining in with different kinds of praise.

Question and explore your own biases.

For example, how do you feel about boys who wear nail polish and girls who want to shop in the boy's department for clothes? What messages about gender expression were you given as a child?

Stock up on materials that affirm various interests and strengths for people across races, physical ability, immigration status, and SOGIE. [Children's books](#), games, or coloring books showing men and women in non-stereotypical and diverse gender roles (stay-at-home dads, working moms, male nurses, and female police officers, for example). Home-themed toys like dolls and cookware are great gifts for all children to process their world through play, regardless of their genitals. See Appendix F for a booklist.

Mix up gender language when reading stories to your kids. Before they can read, you don't need to find gender-creative books- switch around the pronouns you use in the books you have around, and BOOM! Gender-expansive characters are everywhere!

Don't push them into the same-sex activities.

It's more than okay if your child only wants to play with members of their gender or is interested in sports and other activities associated with their gender. Giving them a chance to decide shows that you are open to their response- even if it is unexpected.

Acknowledge that the world isn't fair and people who don't fit in are often hurt but focus on all the helpers. Point out LGBTQ+ or TNG celebrities and role models of various races and ability levels who have fought against unfairness and continue to inspire us today.

Support your young person's efforts at self-expression and their appearance without hesitation. Confidence spooks easily but sticks around when praised for effort and creativity. Engage in conversations with them about their clothing choices, jewelry, hairstyle, friends, and room decorations. Don't mock them or make light of their choices to soothe your discomfort. Support and encourage their self-expression.

Let youth in your care know you will listen and talk about anything. Say it. You may think they already know it. Say it again.

See Appendix D for age-appropriate suggestions for [Creating an affirming environment that shows your child you'll accept them](#).

What to do if your foster child comes out as gender diverse or LGBTQ+?

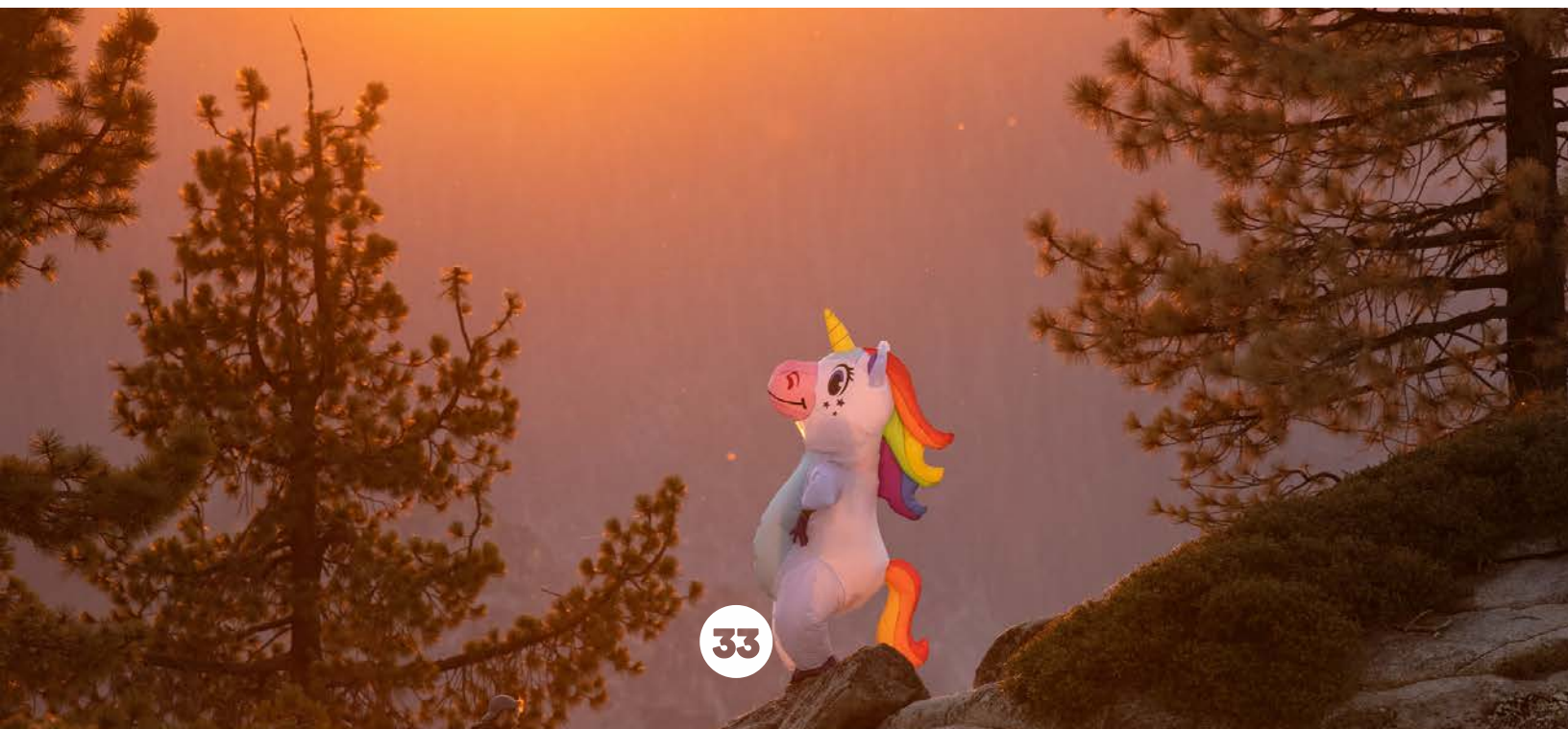
Youth in care may have difficulty trusting adults (many with good reason), so you may not know their true gender identity or sexual orientation until they have spent time in your home and have grown to trust you.

Avoid making assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation. Any steps you take to make your home welcoming and affirming to LGBTQ+ or TNG youth will benefit all children and youth in your care—both by giving LGBTNGQ+ youth the freedom to express themselves and by helping heterosexual and cisgender youth learn to respect and embrace diversity.

As children and youth grow to trust their foster families, many will eventually share their feelings about gender identity or sexuality more openly. The more you can do to provide an authentically safe space for the youth, the earlier they could potentially feel comfortable being out.

At the time of disclosure, show your support in the following ways:

- **Respond with warmth and appreciation**, such as "Thank you for telling me. How can I support you? Would you like others to know?"
- **Ask how they prefer to be addressed.** Use the name and pronouns (such as he, she, or they) they want to go by.
- **Respect their privacy.** Allow them to decide when to come out and to whom. Only share with your young person's express permission.
- **Avoid double standards:** Allow them to discuss feelings of attraction and engage in age-appropriate romantic relationships, just as you would for youth who do not identify as TNG or LGBTQ+.
- **Ask about their safety.** Both at school and at home.



Coming out takes courage. While it can come as a shock or throw you for a loop, remember it is also an invitation to get to know your young person's authentic self. Below are parenting moves you can make in response that will either serve to strengthen or weaken your relationship with your young person.

Parenting moves associated with a secure and stable relationship

- With the child's permission, talk to family and community members ahead of time to save your child the stress of coming out repeatedly.
- Invite and welcome their LGBTQ+ friends or partners at family get-togethers.
- Connect them with LGBTNGQ+ organizations, resources, and events.
- Consider seeking an LGBTNGQ+ adult role model for them, if possible.
- Educate yourself on LGBTNGQ+ issues through reading books, watching films, conducting research on the internet, and/or attending workshops.
- Stand up for them when they are mistreated or disrespected.
- Inquire about their safety.
- Get permission before telling anyone.
- Use their pronouns or new name choices.
- Tell them you are proud of them.
- Tell them you love them no matter what.

"When my daughter was little, I spent so much time fussing over how she looked. I should have been concerned about how she felt. The school helped us find a counselor, and that's when we found out how hopeless she felt. I wanted to make sure others didn't reject her, but instead, I was the one who was rejecting her. I'm so grateful I could change things before it was too late."

**Brianna, mother of
12-year old transgender youth**

Parenting moves associated with really poor outcomes for the child and the parent/child relationships

- Telling your child that it is "just a phase."
- Trying to change your child's identity.
- Refusing to talk with your child about it.
- Blaming your child's friends for causing your child to be this way.
- Ignoring their request to use a different name and/or pronouns.
- Preventing your child from participating in LGBTNGQ+ groups or events.
- Telling your child god won't love them or will punish them.
- Telling others ("outing") your child without their permission.
- Hitting, slapping, or physically hurting the child.
- Excluding LGBT youth from family events and activities.
- Blocking access to LGBT friends, events, and resources.
- Blaming the child when they are discriminated against.
- Pressuring the child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine.
- Telling the child that God will punish them.
- Telling the child you are ashamed of them or how they look or act will shame the family.
- Making the child keep their LGBTNGQ+ identity a secret from the family and not letting them talk about their identity with others

When disclosing their gender-diverse identity or sexual orientation, some kids might expect immediate acceptance and understanding.

However, many loved ones move through a process that begins with discomfort and ends with acceptance or even affirmation.

One model suggests the process resembles the stages of grief: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance.

Just as gender-diverse children do best when their feelings are explored and validated, **some caregivers may need their own emotional support. They may also have many questions along their child's journey.**

It's ok to freak out inside.



**Just don't lead with fear.
Lead with your love and
gratitude for their trust.**

When a child “comes out” the following feelings are common:

- Fear or guilt that something you did or that you may have “caused” this difference in the child.
- Shame or embarrassment about how others will judge you or the child.
- Concern that the child will be put in physical danger.
- Sadness that the child will not have the future you envisioned.

As a caregiver, you may experience a sense of judgment from yourself and others about your parenting. Whether worrying about your standing in your neighborhood, a faith community, or elsewhere, this fear can prevent you from supporting your child the way they need support. These feelings are expected.

It is common for caregivers to have gender-based expectations for their young person and to want to protect them from criticism and exclusion. Instead of pushing young people to conform to these pressures and limit themselves, you can play an important role in modeling what it looks like to accept things we may not understand and advocate for safe spaces for everyone.


For example, if your young person doesn't excel in sports or is interested in them, there will still be many other opportunities and areas in which they can thrive. Regardless of gender identity, each child has their own strengths that may not always conform to expectations, but they will still be a source of current and future success.

Feeling uncertain and possibly even ambiguous about your young person's situation is also normal. You may feel as though you want AN ANSWER. It will be important to develop a level of comfort with not knowing what this all means and to avoid pushing the child toward giving you definite answers in any direction. This might be difficult, but it can also be quite liberating, especially if you can let go of the need to respond to the concerns of those around you and instead simply focus on your young person's needs.


It takes courage to share a part of ourselves that many perceive as wrong, sinful, or simply unique. It takes guts to be ourselves in this world. When a child is celebrated for doing so, it nourishes a foundation of seeing one truest self as worthy of love and dignity; for some, it is lifesaving.

If you want to keep your young person safe in the long run, keep your heart open now

THE IMPACTS OF ACCEPTING MOVES



Child feels loved for who they really are and not who they think we want them to be




Child receives confirmation that all of who they are is lovable


Trust that you can be relied upon as a source of support is deepened



Current and future relationship preserved



Child more capable of managing a hateful world without hating themselves



Impacts of Discouraging Moves



Child feels rejected



Child receives confirmation of the fear they are inherently unwanted



Child no longer trusts you are a resource for support



Current and future parent/child relationship uncertain



Child more likely to act out, skip, or struggle in school



Child more likely to take risks, harm self, or end their life



Some suggestions to make sure you are not your young person's biggest bully

- Acknowledge that youth in your care may be LGBTQ+ – don't assume all are cisgender or heterosexual.
- Become familiar with naming your own gender journey.
- Confront your anxieties so that you're not making fear-based decisions.
- Meet other youth and adults who are LGBTQ+ or TNG
- Educate yourself on LGBTQ+ issues through reading books, watching films, researching on the internet, and attending workshops.
- Understand that being LGBTQ+ isn't a "choice" or something a young person can change.
- Remember that youth in care should never be subjected to "conversion" or "reparative" therapies to change their SOGIE.
- Know that your acceptance or rejection affects the health and well-being of the LGBTQ+ youth in your care.
- Recognize there's more to an individual than just one's SOGIE.
- Avoid making assumptions about a young person based on their SOGIE.
- Don't assume that every struggle faced by LGBTQ+ youth is the result of this aspect of their identity. Most of their struggles result from the lack of support from their caretakers and peers.
- **Practice setting limits calmly with compassion and love so that the child is confident you won't have a scary reaction when they need support with things you may not love** (see appendix F for age-specific recommendations for this)
- **Accept and love your young person as they are.** Try to understand what they are feeling and experiencing. Despite disagreements, they need your support and validation to develop into healthy teens and adults.

Summary



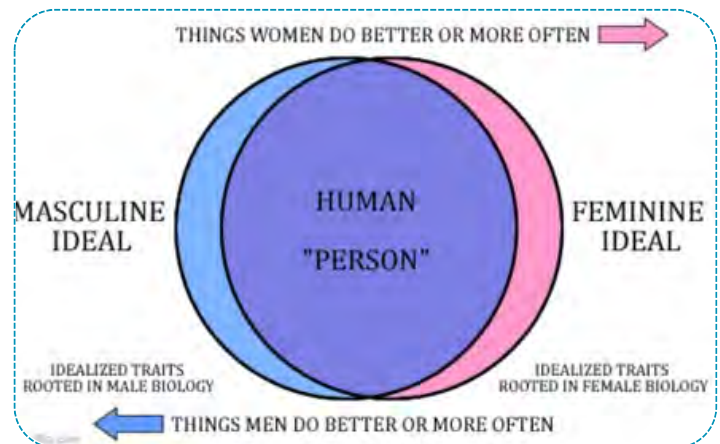
Making sure your home instills a sense of safety and predictability is one of the biggest gifts you can give a foster child as they make sense of wounds of separation. Taking steps to welcome and affirm a child's racial identity, ethnicity, disability, religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation shows the young person they can trust you with their precious selves.

In this first volume of a 3-part series, we've covered how misconceptions about human development and gender can make it hard to create an affirming home.

Remember, teaching a child about gender is not a bad thing. Gender is an idea that helps us to sort all the information in the world. It gets us into trouble when we overestimate exactly how reliable of an indicator it is of people's interests or behaviors. It's a tool of harm when it's used to justify disallowing people to follow their joy. Since everything that grows grows in its own way, how our bodies are shaped and what they can do does not inform what we like or who we like.

Knowing that gender is made-up rather than predestined helps us to understand that expressing one's gender outside of the commonly understood norms of male and female is perfectly healthy and normal. This gender diversity is a part of human expression, documented across cultures, faith traditions, recorded history, and around the globe.

Every caregiver wonders if they are doing the right thing. While no one knows what the "right" thing is in every situation, we do have some solid evidence regarding what is harmful.



Discouraging self-discovery and exploration of gender and sexuality is one of those things we can say with certainty is the wrong thing for caregivers to do. Rather than protect children from the harsh world, it makes the home another place where foster kids are one their own.

We all have an innate desire to know ourselves, be known by others, and be unconditionally accepted for who we are. Because of this, the gender binary hurts everyone, but the less you fit into it, the more frequently other people who believe in it will hurt you.

In the next two volumes, we will dive deeper into what happens for foster children during adolescence, contending with tensions in one's faith community, and how advocating for LGBTNGQ+ foster children to be their authentic selves is the best way to ensure they hold onto their delight in being alive. Most importantly, it's the only reliable way to foster a secure relationship with you, which will continue to protect them from harm for the rest of their lives.





**Section Five:
Appendices**

Resources used to create this booklet

Some of the information contained in this guide has been copied and/or adapted from the following sources:

Affirm.Me resources

<https://hhs.cuyahogacounty.us/programs/detail/affirm-me>

The Family Acceptance Project

<https://lgbtqfamilyacceptance.org/>

Gender Spectrum

- Gender Spectrum offers information and training for families, educators, professionals, and organizations, helping them by creating gender-sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens.
<https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources>

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation Transgender Children and Youth webpage

- **Nonbinary, Gender-Fluid & Gender Expansive Youth FAQ for Parents and Guardians.** Washington, D.C.: The Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

InterACT.org The Intersex Society of North America closed its doors and stopped updating their website in 2008. ISNA's work is continued by [interACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth](#).

National SOGIE Center:

<https://sogiecenter.org/> A collaborative led by [Innovations Institute](#) at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work and is comprised of many organizations that work to improve the lives of children and youth with diverse SOGIE involved in systems of care.

PFLAG International

- Barz, E., & Owen, L. (2019). *Our Trans Loved Ones: Questions and Answers for Parents, Families, and Friends of People Who Are Transgender and Gender Expansive.* PFLAG National. Retrieved from [PFLAG.org](https://pflag.org)

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Supporting LGBTQ+ youth: A guide for foster parents.* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/LGBTQyouth/>

Ryan, C. (2009). *Helping Families Support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children.* Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.

Ryan, C. *Supportive families, healthy children: Helping families with lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender children.* San Francisco, CA: Family Acceptance Project, Marian Wright Edelman Institute, San Francisco State University, 2009.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *A Practitioner's Resource Guide: Helping Families to Support Their LGBT Children.* HHS Publication No. PEP14-LGBTKIDS. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

Planned Parenthood

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex>

Learning for Justice

<https://www.learningforjustice.org>

Perry, J.R. & Green, E.R. (2017). *Safe & Respected: Policy, Best Practices & Guidance for Serving Transgender, Gender Expansive, and Non-Binary Children and Youth Involved in the Child Welfare, Detention, and Juvenile Justice Systems.* New York City, NY: New York City's Administration for Children's Services. Retrieved from: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/lgbtq/SAFEAndRespectedUpdate061417.pdf>

Healthy Children.org

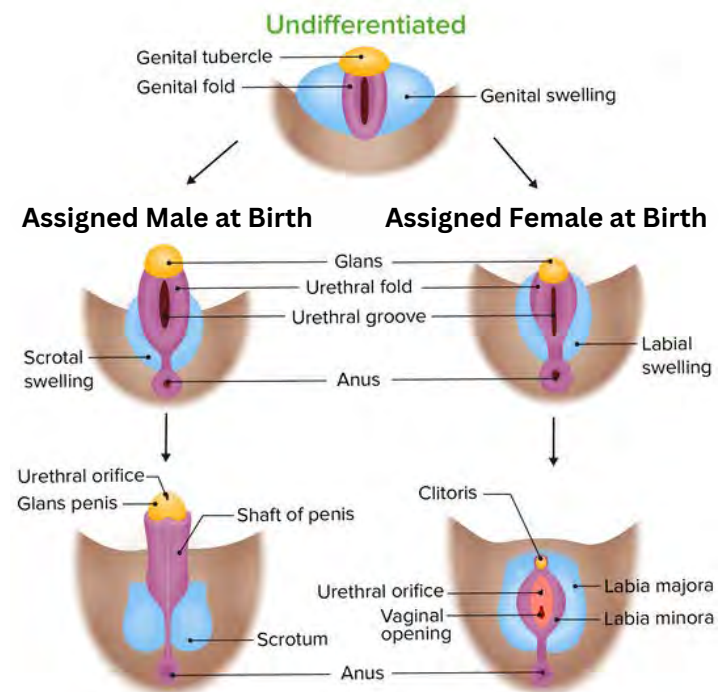
- [National SOGIE Center](#)
- [HRC All Children All Families](#)
- [Trevor Project](#)
- [Achieving Permanency for LGBTQ+ youth \(Kinnect\)](#)
- [Gender Spectrum](#)
- [Youth Acceptance Project](#)

Appendix A. Intersex Development

Being intersex is a naturally occurring variation in humans, and it isn't a medical problem – therefore, medical interventions (like surgeries or hormone therapy) on children usually aren't medically necessary. Being intersex is also more common than most people realize. It's hard to know how many people are intersex, but estimates suggest that about 1-2 in 100 people born in the U.S. are intersex.

The factors related to the sex we are assigned at birth – meaning, put on our birth certificates and all subsequent legal paperwork from there on- begin as early as fertilization.

- Each sperm has either an X or a Y chromosome in it. All eggs have an X chromosome.
- When sperm fertilizes an egg, its X or Y chromosome combines with the X chromosome of the egg.
- A person with XX chromosomes typically has female sex and reproductive organs and is therefore typically assigned biologically female.
- A person with XY chromosomes typically has male sex and reproductive organs and is therefore typically assigned biologically male.
- Other arrangements of chromosomes, hormones, and body parts can happen, which results in someone being intersex.
- There are many different ways someone can be intersex. Some intersex people have genitals or internal sex organs that fall outside the male/female categories, such as those with both ovarian and testicular tissues. Other intersex people have combinations of chromosomes different from XY (typically associated with males) and XX (typically associated with females), like XXY.



The same tissues make vulvas and penises. This means that the genitalia of all fetuses look the same from conception to week 7, then develop along different lines under the influence of hormones. If the fetus has an unusual level of certain hormones or an unusually high or low ability to respond to them, then an in-between genital appearance can result.

The left side of the diagram above shows how the same tissue develops into what we think of as male-type, while the right side shows how tissue develops into what we think of as female-type. If a child has in-between genitals or has genitals typical to one sex and internal organs typical to the other, that is because something happened prenatally to make their development happen along a less common sex development pathway.

Text adapted from:

Image adapted from: Lecturio.com:

<https://www.lecturio.com/concepts/sex-determination/>



Table of Intersex Variations

from InterACT: <https://interactadvocates.org/faq/>

Medical Term	Chromosomes	External	Internal	Puberty
Complete Androgen Insensitivity	XY	Vulva, clitoris	Testes, no uterus, sometimes partial vagina, or complete vagina	If testes are left alone, body goes through puberty via converting testosterone into estrogen
Partial Androgen Insensitivity	XY	Vulva and visibly large clitoris, or other differences	Testes, no uterus, varies	If testes are left alone, body has varying levels of response to testosterone
Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia	XX	Vulva (labia may be fused), often visibly large clitoris	Ovaries, uterus, sometimes partial vagina or complete vagina	May be early, higher testosterone can lead to features such as facial hair, changed fat distribution
Swyer's	XY	Vulva, clitoris	Streak gonads, uterus, sometimes partial vagina or complete vagina	No puberty because streak gonads do not produce any hormones
Klinefelter's	XXY	Penis, small testicles	May have low sperm count	Low T may cause breast development or other atypical features, may be very tall
Hypospadias	Varies by cause (often XY)	Penis (with urethral opening somewhere other than tip) and testicles; or small penis (with urethra near base or perineum) and open labioscrotal folds; or other differences		Varies by cause (often typical testosterone puberty)

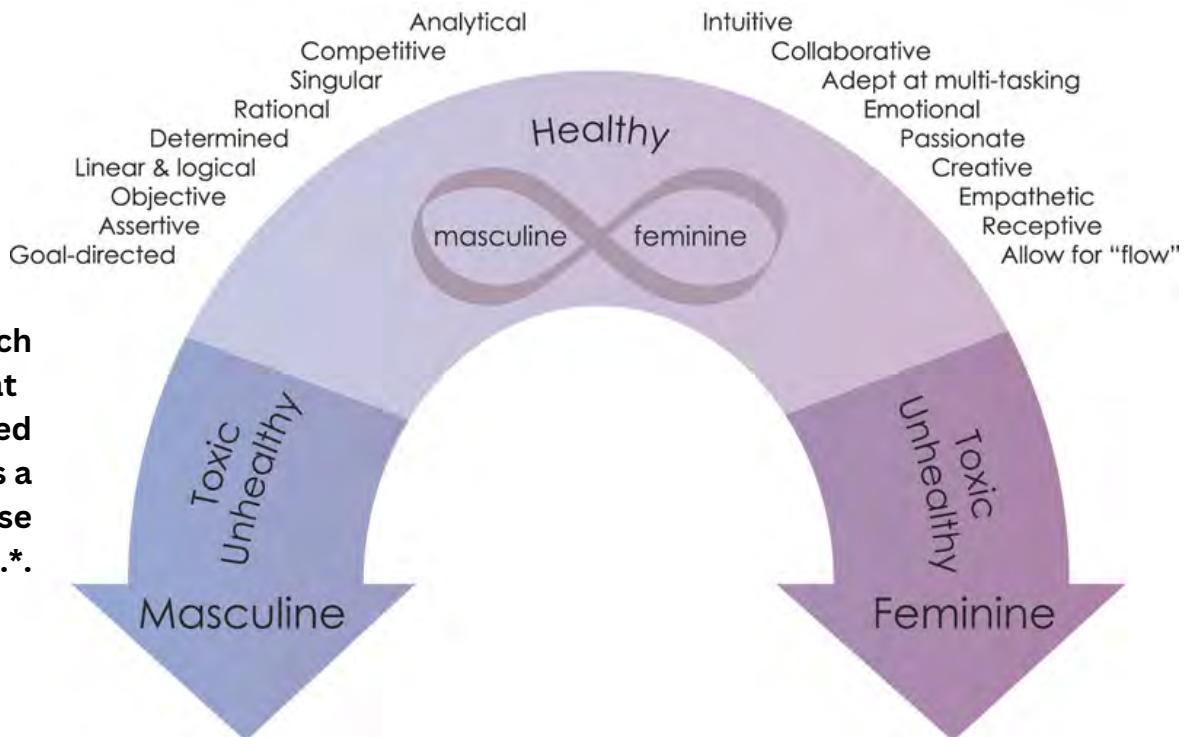
Appendix B. Gender Roles & Stereotypes

Traditional Gender Stereotypes.

<u>Feminine.</u>	<u>Masculine.</u>
<i>Not aggressive.</i>	<i>Aggressive.</i>
<i>Dependent.</i>	<i>Independent.</i>
<i>Easily influenced.</i>	<i>Not easily influenced.</i>
<i>Submissive.</i>	<i>Dominant.</i>
<i>Passive.</i>	<i>Active.</i>
<i>Home-oriented.</i>	<i>Worldly.</i>
<i>Easily hurt emotionally.</i>	<i>Not easily hurt emotionally.</i>
<i>Indecisive.</i>	<i>Decisive.</i>
<i>Talkative.</i>	<i>Not at all talkative.</i>
<i>Gentle.</i>	<i>Tough.</i>
<i>Sensitive to other's feelings.</i>	<i>Less sensitive to other's feelings.</i>
<i>Very desirous of security.</i>	<i>Not very desirous of security.</i>
<i>Cries a lot.</i>	<i>Rarely cries.</i>
<i>Emotional.</i>	<i>Logical.</i>
<i>Verbal.</i>	<i>Analytical.</i>
<i>Kind.</i>	<i>Cruel.</i>
<i>Tactful.</i>	<i>Blunt.</i>
<i>Nurturing.</i>	<i>Not nurturing.</i>

A gender role, also known as a sex role, is a social role encompassing a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for a person based on that person's assigned sex.

image source: <https://qph.fs.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-7993445933f73ffdc9c086c9a1290a88>



Research demonstrates that a well-rounded person has a balance of these traits.*.

*Auster, C. J., & Ohm, S. C. (2000). Masculinity and femininity in contemporary American society: A reevaluation using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory. *Sex roles*, 43, 499-528.

Appendix C. Booklist for stocking up a gender-affirming house

Madison Public Library Librarians keep several updated booklists

Check out this link to find a list of books you can borrow from a library if you live in Madison- or ask to borrow from WorldCat and have them delivered to your library.

<https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/reading-and-viewing/book-lists/transgender-non-binary-and-gender-expansive-characters>

Appendix D. The Developmental Gender Journey

The information below offers a condensed overview of childhood and adolescent development basics and includes the stages where gender identity and gender expression first emerge.

Early Childhood (2 years - 6 years)

Physical Development

- Ability to use body.
- Motor skills improve.
- Brain grows to 90% of its weight.

Cognitive Development

- Increased memory
- Basic vocabulary and grammar
- Increased knowledge about physical laws and properties of objects
- Learning the “rules” of the world, like gender norms
- Focus is on categorizing things, and thinking can be quite rigid, for example, “Girls have long hair and boys have short hair,” even when family members don’t adhere to these rules.

Social/Emotional Milestones

- Increased abilities to regulate thoughts and actions.
- Emergence of gender and ethnic identities
- Concepts of gender role behaviors

Gender Journey Foundations

- Children label their own gender between ages 2-3.5 (“I feel like a boy,” “I am a girl,” etc.)
- Gender-segregated play emerges in pre-school.
- Children learn “gender-role stability” (“girls grow up to be women,” “boys grow up to be men”) between ages 3.5-4.5

Middle Childhood (6 years - 12 years)

Physical Development

- Body strength increases
- Sex differences in motor skills occur.
- Mid-growth spurts begin.

Cognitive Development

- Capacity to sort and classify matures.
- Increased memory and attention.
- Efficiency in storing and retrieving information.
- Interested in learning about more abstract patterns- like social rules, who made them, and why.

Social/Emotional Milestones

- Emergence of peer social structure & social comparison.
- Moral behavior regulated by social relationships.
- Better at making friends.
- The motivation to fit in is strong; being seen as “different” is experienced as a physically and emotionally painful threat.

Gender Journey Foundations

- Toys are a vocabulary of the world so giving children many options allow them to explore and share their interests and feelings.
- Gender-typed behaviors increase.
- Youth begin identifying gender based on self-identification and feel pressure to conform.
- Puberty & the emergence of secondary sex characteristics begin and can create an extremely traumatic experience for TNG youth.
- Gender-specific activities in school are more prominent.

Best Practice: Trust that the young person knows themselves best. Always meet a TNG young person where they are at, respect how they identify, and always validate their internal sense of gender, however they describe it. That is okay. Just support them with who they say they are.

Practice to Avoid: Don’t make comparisons to other children or pressure the young person to be different or consistent in their self-expression. Don’t mock their appearance or suggest they are simply being “silly.”

Adolescence (12 years - 24 years)

Physical Development

- Rapid height and weight increase
- Hormone influx stimulates the functioning of reproductive organs.
- Change in brain regions associated with impulse control and decision-making.

Cognitive Development

- Local reasoning
- Ability to think abstractly, higher-level problem-solving skills.
- Can use reasoning to make moral judgments.

Social/Emotional Milestones

- Thinking more about “right” and “wrong.”
- More self-conscious, especially regarding physical appearance.
- Influenced more by friends.

Gender Journey Foundations

- Gender-typed behaviors increase.
- Puberty & the emergence of secondary sex characteristics continue and can create an extremely traumatic experience for TNG youth.
- Physical appearance assumes paramount importance to fit in the “norm” of the “in” group.



Best Practice: Youth in foster care are eligible to receive gender-affirming clothing like binders and health care related to their gender presentation. Do your best to validate a TNG young person during this development period and connect them with TNG knowledgeable & affirming professionals who can offer support that will respect, affirm, and meet their individual needs. Understand that all TNG young people will socially transition to some degree by sharing that they use a name, pronoun, or gender that differs from what they were assigned at birth.


Practice to Avoid: Provide every young TNG person with their options. Do not attempt to dissuade or withhold options related to a TNG young person’s legal or medical transition should they wish to pursue either.

Appendix B was adapted from:

Perry, J.R. & Green, E.R. (2017). *Safe & Respected: Policy, Best Practices & Guidance for Serving Transgender, Gender Expansive, and Non-Binary Children and Youth Involved in the Child Welfare, Detention, and Juvenile Justice Systems*. New York City, NY: New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services. Retrieved from: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/lgbtq/SAFEAndRespectedUpdate061417.pdf>

Appendix E. Gender Unicorn Worksheet


THE GENDER UNICORN

GENDER IDENTITY 

FEMALE / WOMAN / GIRL
 MALE / MAN / BOY
 OTHER GENDER(S)

GENDER EXPRESSION / PRESENTATION

FEMININE
 MASCULINE
 OTHER

SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH 

FEMALE MALE OTHER / INTERSEX

SEXUALLY ATTRACTED TO

WOMEN
 MEN
 OTHER GENDER(S)

ROMANTICALLY / EMOTIONALLY ATTRACTED TO

WOMEN
 MEN
 OTHER GENDER(S)

From: 216teens a website for youth in Cuyahoga, Oh: <https://216teens.org/lgbtq/sex-and-gender/>

Appendix F.

Developmentally specific suggestions for creating an affirming home



On the following pages you will find age-specific suggestions regarding the below topics:

1

Creating an affirming environment that shows your child you'll accept them

2

Demonstrating a welcoming heart through adult behavior.

3

Language choices that build an understanding of the world characterized by a trusting relationship with our bodies and with each other

4

Growing secure attachments by setting limits calmly with love, compassion, and mutual appreciation



