



Parenting your child/young teen about homosexuality and transgender issues - parent support material

[Introduction – the search for identity is normal](#)

Puberty ushers in a stage of life where the search for identity, including sexual identity, is the key 'work' of the adolescent. It is naturally a stage of confusion and psychological upheaval but it does not automatically mean the child is questioning his or her gender or sexual orientation. It is a natural state of questioning 'who am I?' which leads to the establishment of a stable adult identity capable of achieving true intimacy within an adult relationship.

[Cultural pressures and expectations about same sex attraction and transgenderism -](#)

The actual percentage of people identifying as LGBT is much lower than community perception (for example a US Gallup poll in 2015 found that **3.8%** of Americans self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender compared to a belief by the general population that this is closer to 25%). The strong representation of LGBT concerns in the media has contributed to this skewed perception.

In recent years there has also been increased pressure on young teens to experiment sexually with both gay and straight partners. It tends to be promoted by popular culture as a way of finding out who you are. Psychologically speaking, this can have the opposite effect, causing identity confusion, depression and low self-esteem.

Some young people experience identity confusion as a result of past sexual abuse. They may need support to work through this experience and understand how it has impacted upon them.

Gender dysphoria - the condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological sex - is also currently in the forefront of popular discussion and media attention but again the prevalence of true gender dysphoria in children is very low. The 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) describes it as a relatively 'rare' or 'uncommon' diagnosis.

A paper published by the CSIRO, 'Epidemiology of gender dysphoria and transgender identity' (Kenneth

Zucker, 2017), states the prevalence of a self-reported transgender identity in children, adolescents and adults ranges from **0.5 to 1.3%**.

Given the above, it's therefore important not to give a blanket message to all children that gender fluidity and homosexuality are 'normal' in the **statistical** sense of the word. Both positions present a false picture of the likelihood that this is something they will have to deal with and could add unnecessary confusion or concern at this stage. **The vast majority of children will not struggle with these issues.**

Some children will identify as gender dysphoric and they need to be appropriately supported by parents, schools and medical professionals, but with due caution. Young people are surrounded by social messaging about gender fluidity which can play into this time of questioning and create doubt. 'Social contagion' has been identified as a factor in the rise in gender questioning. It is becoming clear that acting on a child's gender doubts too soon can lock them into something that they later regret, especially if hormone therapy or surgery is employed.

A 2008 study by Madeleine S. C. Wallein, at the VU University Medical Center in the Netherlands, reported that in a group of 77 young people, ages 5 to 12, who all had gender dysphoria at the start of the study, 70 percent of the boys and 36 percent of the girls were no longer gender dysphoric after an average of 10 years' follow-up. All in all, a 'softly softly' approach combined with plenty of support while they mature seems preferable.

Often we hear that gender dysphoric children need to be transitioned as soon as possible to prevent self-harm and suicide. The evidence is not clear that gender dysphoric children are more likely to commit suicide. More research is needed before a definitive link can be made.

'Suicide or transition: The only options for gender dysphoric kids?', by J. Michael Bailey, Ph.D and Ray Blanchard, Ph.D (<https://4thwavenow.wordpress.com/2017/09/08/suicide-or-transition-the-only-options-for-gender-dysphoric-kids/>) states:

"The idea that mental health problems—including suicidality—are caused by gender dysphoria rather than the other way around (i.e., mental health and personality issues cause a vulnerability to experience gender dysphoria) is currently popular and politically correct. It is, however, unproven and as likely to be false as true."

Your role as Parent

Some children and teens may genuinely have a sense of being 'different' and may struggle for years about their sexual orientation or gender. They can be fearful of acknowledging/voicing any doubts they may have about their sexuality and will often deny and suppress any differences they may feel. They can struggle with what they believe to be the expectations of their parents and will observe your viewpoint to gauge how safe it is to bring the issue up.

No matter what the issue, your role as a parent is to help the young teen achieve maturity and independence by providing healthy values, safe boundaries and appropriate expectations throughout childhood and adolescence. Your relationship with your child is pivotal and keeping the communication channels open is vital.

Your child may worry about your reaction if they raise a discussion with you about sexual issues so it's important to react in such a way that they don't feel judged. Parents need to reassure the child that everything is up for discussion and need to demonstrate their willingness to listen and remain calm. Parents need to look honestly at their own take on both these issues in order to be prepared should the child raise the topic of their own uncertainties.

If parents have specific moral or religious views on these issues you have the right to voice those. However, as with any other topic of potential conflict, it is important to -

- explain your views calmly and why you believe that (*helps your teen understand where you are coming from*)
- avoid going on the attack or using aggressive, unloving language (*helps your teen know you are not rejecting them for asking the question*)
- be honest in admitting your own confusion and uncertainty about what these issues mean for the individuals experiencing them (*helps your teen know it is ok 'not to know', ie: to be an 'honest seeker' in life*)
- listen to your teen's views and encourage them to explore the question from different angles (*helps your teen assess what they really know, think and believe*)
- be respectful of other people as people, even if you don't agree with their choices (*helps your teen learn to be respectful too*)

Whether or not you have a moral or religious view about homosexuality or transgenderism, your child/teenager needs certain things from you as their parent –

Reassurance It's natural for young teens to feel strongly attached to members of the same sex. This is a normal stage of development and is part of finding their identity in the peer group ('people who are like me') and also about learning to be close in a safe environment. Having close emotional ties to a friend or friends of the same sex does not mean you are gay. Just because there is a lot of talk about transgender issues, it doesn't mean most people are confused about their gender. The vast majority of people will not be confused about this aspect of who they are.

Encouragement to protect their health Delaying being sexually active is the healthiest course for all teenagers, whether or not they identify as being straight, gay or transgender. Physical, emotional and psychological health is compromised by early sexual activity and multiple partners. Taking the time to find out who you are and who you want in a partner before becoming sexually involved is a healthy message for all teens.

Encouragement to act in ways that are respectful Your child needs to know he/she is expected to treat others with kindness and respect no matter what the point of difference is. For example, here's one way a parent responded to her Year 3 child's questions about a classmate (names have been changed): 'Jack is feeling very confused and sad about who he is, which is really sad for him and his mum. His mum is trying to be supportive and to help him as best she can so she's let him wear the girls' uniform and change his name to Jess. This doesn't affect you, there's nothing you have to worry about. Your job is just to show kindness as you would to any other kid.'

Encouragement to seek support when they feel they aren't coping Certain personal skills and attitudes, plus the support of trusted adults, can help a young teen cope resiliently when life is difficult. The issue may be anything from loss of a family member, bullying, academic stress or concern about gender or sexual orientation. Whatever the concern, the young teen needs emotional support and acceptance from the trusted adults in their life, particularly if feeling unsafe, depressed or isolated. They need the skills of recognising their emotional state, placing negative events in context and taking action to tackle the source of the problem, including seeking support. Professional counselling may be indicated.

For a parent who is concerned about their teen's sexuality, it may be helpful to talk it through with a counsellor or therapist as it can be a difficult issue to deal with and the parent may question if 'they've gone wrong' somewhere. Feel free to contact Open Doors Counselling on 03 9870 7044 or info@opendoors.com.au