

A Word About Words...

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with gender. However, the vocabulary of gender continues to evolve and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. Nonetheless, here are some working definitions and examples of frequently used (and misused) terms.

Biological/Anatomical Sex. The physical structure of one's reproductive organs that is used to assign sex at birth. Biological sex includes chromosomes (XX for assigned females; XY for assigned males); hormones (estrogen/progesterone for assigned females, testosterone for assigned males); and internal and external genitalia (vulva, clitoris, vagina for assigned females, penis and testicles for assigned males). Given the potential variation in all of these, biological sex must be seen as a spectrum or range of possibilities rather than a binary set of two options (see "Intersex").

Gender Identity. One's innermost concept of self as male or female or both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different than the sex assigned at birth. Individuals become conscious of this between the ages 18 months and 3 years. Most people develop a gender identity that matches their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex. Some of these individuals choose to socially, hormonally and/or surgically change their physical appearance to more fully match their gender identity.

Gender Expression. Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, and other forms of presentation. Gender expression also works the other way as people assign gender to others based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other gendered characteristics. Sometimes, transgender people seek to match their physical expression with their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex. Gender expression should not be viewed as an indication of sexual orientation.

Gender Role. This is the set of roles, activities, expectations and behaviors assigned to females and males by society. Our culture recognizes two basic gender roles: Masculine (having the qualities attributed to males) and feminine (having the qualities attributed to females). People who step out of their socially assigned gender roles are sometimes referred to as transgender. Other cultures have three or more gender roles.

Transgender. Sometimes used as an umbrella to describe anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms. More narrowly defined, it refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned birth gender. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation (attraction to people of a specific gender.) Therefore, transgender people may additionally identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, etc.

Sexual Orientation. Term that refers to being romantically or sexually attracted to people of a specific gender. Our sexual orientation and our gender identity are separate, distinct parts of our overall identity. Although a child may not yet be aware of their sexual orientation, they usually have a strong sense of their gender identity.

Genderqueer. This term represents a blurring of the lines around gender identity and sexual orientation. Genderqueer individuals typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation. This term is typically assigned an adult identifier and not used in reference to pre-adolescent children.

Gender Normative/Cisgender. Refers to people whose sex assignment at birth corresponds to their gender identity and expression (*Cis-* from Latin meaning "on the same side [as]" or "on this side [of]").

Gender nonconforming/Gender variant. Refers to individuals whose behaviors and/or interests fall outside what is considered typical for their assigned sex at birth. Someone who identifies as "gender nonconforming" is not necessarily transgender. While their expression of gender may fall outside of those considered typical for their assigned birth gender, they may identify as that gender nonetheless. Some distinguish between these two terms by how an individual is perceived. That is, a "gender nonconforming" individual may have their atypical expression experienced by others either neutrally or even positively. "Gender variant" might be used to identify an individual whose gender expression is viewed negatively by others.

Cross Gender. Used to describe children who have adopted attributes that transgress the usual socially assigned gender roles or expectation, or who do not identify as either of the two sexes as currently defined.

Gender Fluidity: Gender fluidity conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender expression, with interests and behaviors that may change, even from day to day. Gender fluid children do not feel confined by restrictive boundaries of stereotypical expectations of girls or boys. In other words, a child may feel they are a girl some days and a boy on others, or a combination, or possibly feel that neither term describes them accurately.

DSD/Intersex: Disorders/Differences of Sexual Development. About 1% of children are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female as defined by the medical establishment in our society. In most cases, these children are at no medical risk, but most are assigned a biological sex (male or female) by their doctors and/or families.

FtM (Female to Male)/Affirmed male/transboy. A child or adult who was born anatomically female but has a male gender identity.

MtF (Male to Female)/Affirmed female/transgirl. A child or adult who was born anatomically male but has a female gender identity.

Gender. A socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender characteristics can change over time and are different between cultures. Gender is often used synonymously with sex, but this is inaccurate because sex refers to physical/biological characteristics and gender refers to social and emotional attributes.

Transition: The process by which a transgender individual strives to have physical presentation more closely align with identity. Transition can occur in three ways: *social transition* through non-permanent changes in clothing, hairstyle, name and/or pronouns; *medical transition* through the use of medicines such as hormone "blockers" or cross hormones to promote gender-based body changes; and/or *surgical transition* in which an individual's body is modified through the addition or removal of gender-related physical traits.

Transsexuals. Individuals who do not identify with their birth-assigned genders and physically alter their bodies surgically and/or hormonally. This physical transition is a complicated, multi-step process that may take years and may include, but is not limited to, sex reassignment surgery.

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