



**National Resource Center for
Permanency and Family Connections**
at the Hunter College School of Social Work


A Service of the Children's Bureau

Facilitating Discussion of Transgender Issues & Supporting Emergence of Transgender Identity in Adolescence

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Facilitating Discussion of Transgender Issues

- Gender concerns may not always be obvious; techniques to facilitate discussion of transgender/gender variant issues should be used with all adolescents.
- The clinician should emphasize a non-judgmental attitude, discuss confidentiality, and actively demonstrate transgender awareness and sensitivity.
- It is important to promote awareness of transgender/gender variant issues and help give adolescents language with which to talk about their concerns. This includes creating a trans-affirming environment, which may include having trans-affirming reading materials and posters in the waiting room and office.
- All paperwork should be inclusive and avoid reinforcing the gender binary. Youth should have the opportunity to self-identify in terms of gender. Social workers should use the youth's preferred name and gender pronoun.
- A brief screening question about gender concerns should be incorporated into the intake process for all youth (not just for those who appear to be gender variant). A short normalizing statement should be used, followed by a simple question that can be answered without directly declaring transgender identity. For example: "Many people struggle with gender. Is this an issue for you?"

Supporting Emergence of Transgender Identity in Adolescence

- For both questioning adolescents and those who already have a strong sense of self, the emphasis is on self-understanding, rather than reaching a preset goal. The adolescent should not be pressured to try a form of gender expression they are uncomfortable with, but rather encouraged to try experimenting as a way of deciding who they are and what feels right.
- Adolescents who are in early stages of questioning their gender orientation should be encouraged to explore identity without making decisions about transition or sex reassignment.
- Experimentation with fluidity of gender identification and expression is encouraged if the adolescent has a generally stable core sense of self. If there are concerns about fragmentation of identity or if the process of experimentation seems to be increasing distress, referral should be made to an advanced mental health clinician with experience in treatment of coexisting gender concerns and mental illness. However, it is important to remember that identity exploration is typical in adolescence, and distress may be a “normal” response to societal oppression or negative reactions by family or peers, and these are not necessarily a signs of mental illness.
- Adolescents who have already made a decision to pursue sex reassignment should not be dissuaded, but should be made aware of diverse possibilities for gender identity and expression (including but not limited to sex reassignment).
- For the adolescent who has a clear and consistent sense of self, the next step in identity development is the identification of strategies to reconcile differences between identity and daily life. Whatever options are considered, there should be thought as to how changes will realistically be integrated into daily life, and what reactions there might be by others.
- The adolescent considering disclosure should be supported in thinking about the likely reactions of the people they tell, and possible resources to help facilitate understanding and adjustment. When there are concerns about possible violence or eviction from the home, a crisis/safety plan should be included as part of the preparation for disclosure. Role-playing the disclosure with a skilled clinician can be a very useful strategy in this process. Child welfare professionals should explore how they can support the youth in this process and, if applicable, ensure that any out-of-home placement is safe and affirming.