AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

STUDENTS EXPLORING GENDER IDENTITY

*This information is designed to help teachers respond to students who may need support. It is **not** intended to be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals. Additionally, it is important to consider the context of the situation, individual differences, and cultural and linguistic factors.*

Teachers play an important role in establishing and maintaining healthy environments for students to learn and grow. As leaders and guides in setting and maintaining the culture of their classrooms and school communities, teachers are critical in establishing welcoming, respectful, and safe environments, explaining expectations for student interactions, and modeling inclusive language, which continues to evolve over time.

WHAT IS GENDER IDENTITY?

- **Gender Identity** is an individual's sense of their own gender (e.g., as a male, female, transgender, nonbinary).

- **Gender Expression** is how an individual presents their gender to others through physical appearance and behavior—this may include, but is not limited to, dress, voice, or movement.

- **Gender Diverse** is a term that addresses the spectrum of gender identities and expressions, including but not limited to:

  » Transgender—a person whose identity differs from the sex and gender assigned to them at birth.

  » Non-binary—a person who does not identify exclusively as a male and female. A non-binary person may identify as being both male and female, or not a part of either of these categories.

- **Cisgender** refers to a person whose identity does not differ from the sex and gender assigned to them at birth.

HOW MIGHT GENDER DIVERSITY IMPACT THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

- 80% of transgender adults report knowing they were "different" as early as elementary school. 96% report realizing they were transgender before adulthood.

- On average, gender diverse individuals were 15 years old before they had the vocabulary to understand and communicate their gender identity.

- Gender diverse students often report feeling unsafe at school, avoiding gender specific spaces (e.g., restrooms), and experiencing harassment at school.

- Gender diverse students indicate that they rarely report discriminatory incidents, and those who do feel unprotected.

- Students experiencing gender-related stressors at school are more likely be absent, have lower GPAs, report higher levels of depression, engage in substance use and risky behaviors, and be at an elevated risk for both self-harm and suicide.

- Some students may live in their affirmed gender identity with peers at school, but not at home, or vice versa.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

DO	DON'T
Model gender inclusive language and behavior.	Categorize students by binary gender (e.g., line up by boys/girls).
Implement policies for non-discrimination and anti-harassment for gender diverse students.	Wait for issues to arise before addressing harassment and discrimination against gender diverse students.
Maintain an open mind that gender identity is complex and each student's identity is unique.	Attempt to categorize students or draw conclusions about other qualities based on their gender expression.
Respect students' stories and allow them to inform people (peers, teachers, parents) in their own time and in their own way.	Share information about gender identity without students' permission. In particular, be aware that in a virtual learning environment (VLE) some students may have other people in the same learning space who are not aware of their gender identity.
Recognize that, depending on home situations, in a virtual learning environment (VLE), some youth may feel limited in their ability to express their gender identity.	Assume that students are equally comfortable expressing their gender identity at home and at school (whether in person or in VLE).
Be aware of your own biases or assumptions that might send mixed messages to students.	Assume students should behave or express their gender identities in certain ways.
In the VLE, use your pronouns in your email signature and on your video screen. This communicates to students that you don't make assumptions about pronouns and gender identity based on appearance alone, and that they can report the pronouns that they use.	Require that every student use their preferred pronouns in their email or on screen, as they may not be ready to share these yet.
Invite students to change the name on their video screen to reflect the name that they would like to use during your class.	Require that they use the name with which they are registered for school.

REFER STUDENTS TO FURTHER HELP IF NEEDED.

- Review your school policy for seeking student supports.
- Contact your school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other personnel.

LINKS TO RESOURCES:

Understanding Gender Diversity
- The Genderbread Person (genderbread.org)
- Understanding and Supporting Gender Diversity (bit.ly/supporting-gender-diversity)

Creating Safe Schools for Gender Diverse Students
- The Respect Online Course (on.apa.org/respect-online-course)
- The Trevor Project (thetrevorproject.org)

Guidance for Policy Development

- How to Make Your School Safer for LGBTQ Students (bit.ly/2VGzIq1)

- Schools in Transition (bit.ly/schools-in-transition)

- Model School District Policy on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students (bit.ly/3qltxpk)

Related Mental Health Primers

Stress, Bullying, Social Anxiety/Social Withdrawal, Low Self-Compassion or Low Perceptions of Competence

LOCAL RESOURCES: