

Talking to Young Children About Gender

You may think young children are too little to talk about gender, but they get messages about gender from the day they are born! Children are taught gender ideas and expectations of their family, school, culture and faith community all the time; it is so pervasive that most of us don't even notice it.

That's why it is important to determine what we want the children in our lives to understand about gender and to make time to talk about gender with them. You may be nervous about talking with young kids about gender, but gender doesn't need to be a difficult, serious topic. We want to teach kids that their experience of gender can be joyful--open to experimentation and play. We want to create space for them to explore and see what feels right for them.



This is a great opportunity for you to learn about your child's gender and let them know they are supported no matter what! Here are a few key concepts about gender that you may want to touch on:

- Everyone's gender is unique to them. How you see yourself and how you want to express your gender is personal - there is not just one way to be.
- Things, like toys and clothes, don't have genders -- people have genders.
- You can't tell a person's gender just by looking at them.
- Your body doesn't determine your gender.

Some general tips:

- Be proactive about talking about gender; you don't need to wait for your child to bring it up or for an incident to arise.
- Ask questions--this is a great way to hear the ideas kids already have about gender.
- Talk about yourself, or things you encounter related to gender, so that children can express their thoughts without having to talk about themselves.
- When you see media depicting gender, ask questions that encourage critical thinking: "Why is the mom the one making dinner and serving it?" "Who is strong in that show?" "Who is kind?"
- Read and talk about books that address gender.
- Be conscious about how you praise kids. Girls are often praised for their clothes or hairstyle, or for being sweet or kind, while boys are often praised for being big, or tough or independent. If you hear this type of praise coming from other adults, think about joining in with other types 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?
- Mix up gender language when reading stories to your kids.
- For most kids, experimenting with gender will be just that--exploration and play. For some kids, though, it may feel more intense. If your child is insistent about their gender in ways that are outside of societal norms, they may be telling you something. Visit genderspectrum.org for more information.

Below are some situations that often come up with young kids around gender, with some ideas about how you might use the opportunity to explore gender with your child. Of course, these are just a few options. Finding what feels right for you is important -- you'll find your way with some practice. Just remember to have fun!

Is that person a boy or a girl?

- Well, we don't know just by looking at someone what their gender is. If we want to know, we would need to ask them. Is there a reason you're interested, or just curious?
- I don't know - some people feel like they are either a boy, or a girl, and there are also kids who feel like they're both a boy and a girl, or they don't really feel like either one. Have you ever met anyone who feels that way? If someone asked you what your gender is, what would you say?



Is red a boy color or a girl color?

- Do you think there are colors just for boys, and colors just for girls? Maybe colors are just colors- and everyone gets to like whatever colors they find beautiful!
- I think the world is filled with so many beautiful colors and that we all get to enjoy them. How sad it would be to think that someone couldn't like a color because of their gender!

Boys can't wear dresses!

- There are lots of different types of clothes. Kids should get to wear what feels right to them and makes them feel good.
- Sometimes I get confused about this too. Did you know that people used to say girls couldn't wear pants? That sounds silly now, but that's what people used to think. I think clothes are just clothes and each of us gets to decide what we like and don't like.



Girls can't play football!

- Do you think it is fair if someone is told they have to do something, or can't do something, because of their gender? I think kids can have any interest they want to have.
- When I was growing up, sometimes people made fun of me because I was a boy who liked to bake; do you have any interests like that- something that others say you can't do, or be interested in, because of your gender?

Ella isn't a real girl.

- Tell me what you think makes someone a real girl, or a real boy. Do you think we get to decide gender for others, or do each of us get to decide our gender for ourselves?
- Ella knows her gender better than we do. If she says she's a girl, then I think she's a girl.