



# Parenting Trans and Nonbinary Youth

## EXTENSION

June 2022

**Douglas Knutson**

Assistant Professor, Counseling and Counseling Psychology

**El Kallo**

Master's Student, Counseling and Counseling Psychology

**Laura Hubbs-Tait**

Regents Professor, Human Development and Family Science

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets  
are also available on our website at:  
**[extension.okstate.edu](http://extension.okstate.edu)**

### A Guide for Parents

Trans and nonbinary people identify with a gender that is different from the sex that was recorded on their birth certificate. If you are the parent or friend of a trans or nonbinary person, this guide can help you think through ways to make your home or other space a more welcoming and healthy place for people with diverse genders.

### Common Terms

People use a lot of labels to describe their gender. Here is a short list of common terms. Please note that these words can mean different things to different people.

- Trans and nonbinary are used as umbrella terms to describe when a person's gender identity is different from the sex that went on their birth certificate.
- Gender identity is a core sense of who a person is and it is tied to their sense of self.
- Sex assigned at birth is the gender (male/female) that goes on a person's birth certificate.
- Gender expression is the gendered way a person behaves, dresses, and/or interacts with others.
- A trans boy is a boy who was assigned a female sex at birth and a trans girl is a girl who was assigned a male sex at birth.
- A nonbinary person may identify with multiple genders, no gender, or different genders at different times (gender fluid).

### Try to Understand

- Teenagers describe their gender identities in a lot of different ways. One of the best ways to support a teenager is to stay open to learning about their experiences.
- Let your teenager know, up front, that you love them unconditionally. Building trust is important.
- Ask genuine questions when your teenager is ready, but avoid interrogating. Self-educate as much as possible.
- Be willing to question any assumptions or biases that you currently hold.
- Remember that your teenager may not have all of the answers. They may be figuring things out themselves. Research shows that providing an affirming environment for them helps their mental health.
- Note that a person may have a gender identity ("girl") that does not always match a gender expression ("tomboy").

### Practice Affirmation

Gender affirmation is recommended by all major health organizations. Affirming behaviors show your teenager that they are accepted, supported, and loved no matter what.

- When your teenager tells you something about their identity, take it at face value rather than questioning it.
- If your teenager shares their new pronouns (he/him instead of she/her – or uses "they/them/theirs" pronouns) and/or new name with you, start using them. Practice their new name and pronouns to avoid mistakes.
- When you use the wrong pronouns or name, apologize and move on so you don't bring the attention to yourself.
- Remember to support your teenager as a whole person. Other identities and experiences like their sexual orientation, race, or a disability can shape the way they are accepted or rejected by others.
- Stick up for your teenager when they experience rejection. Research shows that social support (e.g., family acceptance, friendships) helps their mental health.

### Take Care of Yourself

- Parenting a trans or nonbinary teenager can be very stressful for parents. If you are worried, confused, or frustrated, you are not alone.
- Recognize and accept any feelings of sadness, loss, or confusion you are experiencing. These feelings are completely valid. Seek support around these feelings from other supportive adults in your life rather than expressing them to your child.
- Look for other people who can understand and/or support you. There are many online support groups.
- To build empathy for your teenager, reflect on how others have belittled you for your gender identity or gender-related behaviors (called you "girly" or "tomboy").
- Forgive yourself when you make mistakes. If the mistakes are repeated often, get an accountability buddy to help you learn and grow.

Skill	Scenario	Possible Dialogue
Creating an affirming environment at home.	Your teenager tells you one of their friends started identifying as nonbinary.	<p>You: "That's a brave thing to do in our small community. I bet they need support."</p> <p>Teenager: "Yeah, they've only told me so far."</p> <p>You: Well, I hope you know they would be accepted in our home. They can come over anytime.</p>
Expressing curiosity without interrogating.	Your teenager uses a new word or concept.	<p>Teenager: "I'm feeling really dysphoric today."</p> <p>You: "If you feel up to it, would you share what it is like to feel dysphoric?"</p> <p>Teenager: "Yeah, it is really depressing. Maybe I can talk about it more when I don't feel so bad."</p> <p>You: "Great, I'm here to listen any time."</p>
Questioning one's own biases and assumptions.	Your teenager talks about her nonbinary friend.	<p>You: "What are your friend's preferred pronouns?"</p> <p>Teenager: "They're not preferred, they just are."</p> <p>You: "I guess I'm confused. Your friend has pronouns they prefer, right?"</p> <p>Teenager: "No, they just have pronouns. Saying they pick or prefer their pronouns means they have a choice about their identity, but they don't."</p> <p>You: "I get it, yeah, I guess I don't have preferred pronouns either. I just know what fits for me."</p>
Correcting mistakes without making a big deal.	Your teenager uses they/them pronouns, but you accidentally refer to them as "he."	<p>You: "I don't think he wants to go."</p> <p>Teenager: "You mean they."</p> <p>You: "Yes, I'm sorry. I don't think they want to go."</p>
Providing support against bullying and rejection.	Your teenager comes home and tells you her teacher said transgender people are sick.	<p>You: "How can I support you? I could talk with your teacher."</p> <p>Teenager: "Not many people at school know about me. I think talking to that teacher would make things worse because then everyone would know."</p> <p>You: "I understand why you don't want me to intervene and I respect your wishes. I am here to support you and I want you to be able to be proud of who you are. It goes without saying that your teacher is wrong."</p> <p>Teenager: "Thanks, I'll let you know if it things get worse in class."</p>
Recognizing and accepting feelings.	You discuss your teenager with your friend.	<p>You: "I love _____ so much and I really want him to be happy. It is just that I had such big plans for him and now everything feels like it has changed. I am grieving the future that will never be, even while I'm trying to be supportive and understanding. It is so hard."</p>
Exploring gender identity and expression.	You want to build empathy for your teenager by thinking about your own experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I wonder when I first realized my own gender identity...</li> <li>- When a friend called me 'such a girl' or 'a tomboy,' I felt...</li> <li>- I am not the typical man/woman when I...</li> <li>- I have not been rejected because of my gender identity, but I have definitely been treated differently because of...</li> </ul>

## Current Research Findings

Being trans or nonbinary in a rural area can be very hard for teenagers. When teenagers in Oklahoma experience high levels of distress they tend to act in self-destructive ways (Knutson et al., 2021). Family support is the best antidote to distress, suicidality, and self-harm (Milton & Knutson, 2021). Loving and accepting trans and nonbinary teenagers saves lives.

## Additional Readings

Knutson, D., Walinsky, D., & Koch, J. M. (2019). Gender diversity in non-urban settings. In A. Carlozzi & K. Choate (Eds.), *Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Persons and Their Families: Best Practices for Mental Health Professionals*. Oxford, England: Taylor and Francis.

## Acknowledgements

Anneliese Singh, PhD, LPC, Professor and Associate Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity/Chief Diversity Officer, School of Social Work, Tulane University (external reviewer)

Em Matsuno, PhD, Assistant Professor, Counseling and Counseling Psychology, Arizona State University (external reviewer)

Loren Marshall, Master's Student, Counseling and Counseling Psychology, Oklahoma State University (research assistance)

## References and Resources

- Austin, A., Craig, S. L., D'Souza, S., & McInroy, L. B. (2020). Suicidality among transgender youth: Elucidating the role of interpersonal risk factors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520915554>
- American Psychological Association. (2015). *Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people*. <http://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf>
- Knutson, D., Jacobs, S. C., Hakman, M., & Milton, D. C. (2021). Profiles of distress and self-harm among LGBTQ+ transitional youth in a rural state. *Journal of Rural Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rmh0000168>
- Milton, D. C., & Knutson, D. (2021). Family of origin, not chosen family, predicts psychological health in a LGBTQ+ sample. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000531>
- Matsuno, E., Webb, A., Hashtpari, H., Budge, S., Krishnan, M., & Basam, K. (2021). *The Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity nonbinary fact sheet*. <https://apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/nonbinary-fact-sheet.pdf>
- Singh, A. (2018). *The queer and transgender resilience workbook: Skills for navigating sexual orientation and gender expression*. <https://newharbinger.com/9781626259461/the-queer-and-transgender-resilience-workbook>
- van Bergen, D. D., Wilson, B. D. M., Russell, S. T., Gordon, A. G., & Rothblum, E. D. (2021). Parental responses to coming out by lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, or two-spirited people across three age cohorts. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12731>

Oklahoma State University, as an equal opportunity employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination and affirmative action. Oklahoma State University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all individuals and does not discriminate based on race, religion, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity/ expression, disability, or veteran status with regard to employment, educational programs and activities, and/or admissions. For more information, visit <https://eeo.okstate.edu>.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 40 cents per copy. 06/2022 KG.