



What to do when your child tells you they are gender diverse

Having a child question their gender can be a challenging experience. It's okay to feel out of your depth and to take the time to find information and support so that you feel more confident.

It can take a lot of courage for children to speak up about their feelings around their gender identity. Many worry how their parents might react. When a child is questioning or exploring their gender identity, the most important thing to recognise is that they are looking for a safe person to share the information with. They need you, more than ever, to be a safe person available to them for support, understanding and comfort.

A good way to respond is to thank them for sharing and let them know you love them and will be there for them. If you've already reacted in a way that felt unsupportive, it's never too late to tell them that you appreciate them trusting you with the information and that you will try to learn more about it. Ask them what they need from you. This is an ongoing process of learning and an ongoing discussion.

For some parents, learning your child is exploring their gender can be shocking, scary, overwhelming, confronting and isolating. Or it may make perfect sense to you. You may feel all these things at once and not know what to do next. And you are not alone, recent [research](#) indicates that 3.2% of Australian Year 8 students identify as gender diverse.

We hope the tips in this information sheet help you manage and make sense of your feelings in the early stages of finding out. We have produced this information from evidence-based research. The quotes in this information sheet come from participants in our own research studies. Our information sheet on How to support and affirm your gender diverse child also offers practical guidance on how to support your child.

Listen

If your child approaches you about their gender, listen with an open mind. Focus on what they're saying, and let them finish their sentences before responding. Withhold judgement or criticism and avoid arguing or trying to change their mind. Listening actively like this can help them feel comfortable to discuss sensitive things with you in the future.



Assure them that everything will be okay

After coming out to you, your child may feel vulnerable. Assure them that you love them, and that you are there to help them. Let them know that they can still have a full, happy life as a gender diverse person even if the journey there may be rocky at times.

Finding a way to say genuinely, “This is a lot for me to take in right now, but I know we can get through this together. I love you” is a great place to start. (Mother of female, 16)

Reflect on the parenting values you instil in your child as they grow up. Often, thoughts you’ve expressed in the past like, “I’ll always love you no matter what”, “You are perfect just the way you are”, “Always be yourself”, remind you of the kind of parent you want to be right now.

Ask questions

Be curious about your child’s hopes and needs without overwhelming them with a barrage of questions. Ask questions gently and supportively and absorb their responses. Repeat back what they’ve said and ask “have I got that right?”. Ask how they want to identify, and what they need from you. They may not be able or comfortable to answer everything; let them know that’s okay. Young gender diverse people highly value emotional support that’s specific to their gender identity.

Find good quality information and support

You might feel you’re losing your son or daughter. You might feel rejected if they want to start using a name other than the one you carefully chose for them at birth. You may also fear for their future, and worry that your dreams for them are no longer possible. These are all common concerns. Your child might be scared too, of rejection, and how your relationship and their life may change.

■ *A lot of parents in the support groups I facilitate have very valid concerns, “Is my kid going to live a normal life?” and “Are they going to be able to get a job and fall in love?” They feel that has all been taken away, when that is not necessarily the case. The way I try and explain it to parents is, “You can’t control what happens outside of your house, but you can give them a soft place to land at the end of the day”. If they know they have a supportive home, then at least they know they have somewhere to escape to.” (Mother of non-binary male, 22)*



Parents have said that hesitation in accepting their child's identity in many cases arose from a lack of understanding, for example, confusing gender diversity with sexuality. Access to good-quality information, peer support, and knowing that being gender diverse is not a choice or a phase, have all been shown to ease parents' fears and improve their ability to accept and affirm their gender diverse children. You may want to contact some of these family support organisations for help.

With strong family acceptance, and some extra planning here and there, it's possible for young gender diverse people to complete their education, build successful careers, enjoy meaningful friendships, find love and start families.

■ *“He has challenged me on my beliefs and perceptions to a level that no one has ever challenged me and that (even though difficult) has been great. I now see trans in a completely different way and I appreciate diversity so much more. I am so grateful for all he has taught me on acceptance and unconditional love. He is the brightest, most wonderful little being and having him in my life has expanded every area of my life. I could not imagine life without him exactly the way he is.” (Mother of male, 5)*

Taking the time to increase your knowledge takes the pressure off your child from having to educate you and shows that you want to support them. There is a lot of misinformation around, so look for evidence-based information in books, websites, social media groups and support groups, from professional organisations and trusted charities. You can find good-quality resources, supportive organisations and research summaries on our site.

Manage your own reactions and process negative feelings away from your child

When children first come out as gender diverse, their parents usually experience intense emotions. This can be linked to a lack of awareness of gender diversity, and fear for the child's future and wellbeing. For some parents, these emotions can initially cause rejection, denial, or dismissal of their child's identity.

■ *I feel acceptance becomes easier with education/knowledge. I would never say that I have not accepted rather it was more confusion as an initial reaction. And a lack of knowledge – info led to perhaps shock and fear – of the unknown. (Mother of a male, 16)*

■ *If I had more knowledge and understanding at the start, I may not have gone through the denial process, I would have probably reacted differently. (Mother of male, 19)*

In time, most parents become aware of the negative impacts of these reactions, and they become supportive. But often, parents only become aware of the effect of being unsupportive once their child's mental health has reached a crisis point.

“ Most of my memory from around that time I just blanked out because of the stress that I was experiencing from mum's reaction. Those first months had a huge impact on my mental health.

(Male, 19)

You may need time to process negative feelings about the news. Early conversations about gender can be confronting, and big emotions can overwhelm your ability to stay grounded. If you notice your feelings becoming heightened, ask for some time out, and continue the conversation at another time. It is also really important to process your feelings away from your child. If you need to talk about how you are feeling then finding someone like a supportive friend, another parent of a gender diverse child or a counsellor to talk to can be really useful. Our [Peer Support for Parents](#) section may be useful for finding support.

Be open to challenging your beliefs and values

Truly accepting your child's gender diversity may go against everything you've learned at school, in your own family, within society or your faith.

“ *Having a trans child shakes you to the core of your being. The earth underneath you has changed. It makes you question yourself, your values and your beliefs. Ultimately, I believe it will make me a much stronger, better person and my relationship with my child will be deeper and more meaningful.*

(Mother of a non-binary child, 23)

There may be a lot to unpack from what you've been taught about gender and gender norms. Similarly, we usually don't grow up learning about gender diversity so it's naturally uncomfortable for many parents and involves a big learning curve. Our information sheet [Understanding gender and gender identity](#) is a great place to start. We've also created a [Glossary of Terms](#) on common terminology related to gender diversity.

Let your child set the pace

Your child may seem way ahead of you, wanting to change things like their name, pronouns and appearance much faster than you're ready for. It's likely they've been working things through on their own or with friends for a long time before now, but can't wait any longer to tell you how they feel. For this reason, it's important to help them set the pace to implement the changes they need for their own wellbeing, even if you're still getting your head around it all.

- “ Once we said “Well, that's the real thing and that's okay,” we got dragged along a hundred miles an hour. She wanted a dress at school the next day and I just about had a heart attack. And they do drag you along, kicking and screaming a little bit. By the time they tell you, they've done the research, they are so far ahead of you, they want it done it yesterday. **(Mother of female, 12)**

The following things can also be useful to keep in mind:

Your child isn't sick or wrong

Gender diversity is a normal aspect of human diversity. However, gender diverse people can experience marginalisation, stigma, rejection and discrimination at home, work, in public, and in education settings, leading to serious impacts on mental health. We know much of this can be negated if the child has strong family support.

It's not a choice or likely to be a phase

It's important to realise that being gender diverse is not a choice, but an essential part of a person's identity; an innate part of who they are. Just as a person's sexuality is inherent, so is a person's gender. Likewise, it's usually not a phase, or something they're doing to be popular or different.

- “ *What helped was my love for my child, and my understanding that this was not a choice for him but a reality that he had lived with for all his conscious life.* **(Mother of a male,19)**
- “ Do you think that they would choose this, do you think that they would willingly put themselves through hell on earth to exist as a member of a minority group with all the stigmatisation and discrimination they will experience throughout their life? **(Mother of non-binary child, 16)**



Denial can play a significant role in parents' unwillingness to support their child's gender. Denial can happen due to a lack of understanding about gender diversity. Parents often consider it 'just a phase they'll grow out of' or disregard their child's experience believing they aren't old enough to understand their experience.

“ I started looking into things online, scoping out, “Is he too young to do this?”. We kept saying to him, “we are looking into it,” but we just sat on it for two years. By seven, he was absolutely miserable. **(Mother of male, 11)**

These perceptions usually shift as parents acquire more knowledge about gender diversity, and start to see that their child appears to be happier and healthier when their gender identity is supported.

Your child can be happy and healthy

Statistics about trans children's poor mental health can be frightening, but research clearly shows that strong family support is one of the strongest protective factors against challenges like depression and suicidality.

The safest option is to support and affirm a child's gender identity for as long as they need you to. When given the space to live their identity authentically, research shows gender diverse children become happier and mental health challenges decrease.

In fact, when a child's gender is affirmed, parents often begin to notice positive changes in their child's mood, behaviour and confidence. Studies have identified these changes as a pivotal turning point in many parents' ability to support their child's transition.

“ Watching my daughter transform from an anxious, fearful child who didn't want to attend school to a happy, out-going kid who's volunteering for leadership roles at school has been the most life-affirming experience I've ever had. **(Mother of a female, 10)**

“ We started “she/her” and she was so much happier. In the previous six months, she was screaming at the top of her lungs all the time, had aggressive outbursts that dropped away so much. She stopped screaming, she just became really happy as a girl. She made friends, she just slotted in with all the girls and they all just accepted her. **(Mother of female, 4)**

“ She got changed into her new clothes and slopped on the couch. She was just relaxed. Her whole position had changed, that for me, really helped solidify, “Yes, I understand 'cause I'm seeing it in you, you're light on your feet again. **(Mother of female, 17)**

Some young people feel their coming out provided parents with an explanation for their long-term mental health difficulties.

“ No-one understood what was wrong with me, I had a lot of depression, anxiety, suicidality, all sorts. When I came out as trans, I think it was an answer for her and she started researching to understand and support. (Male, 23)

Your support is critical

If immediately adjusting to your child's gender identity is difficult, keep reassuring them (and yourself) that you will find your way to accepting them. Starting with small changes – like making an effort to use their new pronouns or allowing them to wear what they like at home – can significantly improve child wellbeing.

Respecting their name and pronouns can be very powerful

Your child may like to start using a new name or pronouns. Using these when you speak to them, refer to them, or introduce them to others will help your child feel validated and respected. It's one of the most profound ways to demonstrate your efforts to accept them. Slipping up is common, especially at first. If it happens, simply apologise quickly, and keep on practising. It will get easier with time.

Good quality resources for your child are helpful

It can be good to seek out good-quality information together, as well as allowing them time in private to browse. It's important to tell them that misinformation and transphobic information is abundant online and to tread carefully and take a break if things get overwhelming. Young people often use the internet and other technologies to link in with social support. This can help them find affirming spaces that are hard to find offline with benefits for their wellbeing and mental health. So it's important to provide your child with access to the internet in a space where they can have some privacy. Always check in regularly about what they are accessing online regardless of the topic to make sure they are safe.