

Conceptualizing Gender Identity and Gender Nonconformity

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Case: “Shane” is a 16-year-old transgender male (assigned female at birth but identifies as male) who is admitted to the hospital for suicidal ideation. Even though he identifies as male, his electronic records refer to him as female. Staff also keep referring to him as “she” and address him by his birth certificate name (“Shauna”) despite his repeated requests to call him by his preferred name. They also feel that Shane is currently just going through a phase and insist on housing him with another female. Shane’s feelings of depression and isolation worsen as he continues to feel invalidated and misunderstood.

While gender nonconformity and transgender issues are not new topics, they have gathered increased attention over the past few years. The show *Transparent* (which depicts the gender transition of a retired college professor) has received critical acclaim, and Caitlyn Jenner has become a household name. NBC started a series titled *Transgender Youth* and LOGO has a web series titled *Beautiful as I Want to Be* (which pairs four transgender youths with mentors who help them affirm and realize their potential). Discussions on gender nonconformity are becoming the norm rather than the exception in youth circles. The expressions “gender fluid” and “gender queer” are much more common than we may think. The singular “they” is becoming an acceptable pronoun.¹ *The New York Times* has recently been using “Mx.” (pronounced “mix”) as a gender-neutral honorific. While “Mx.” may sound fringe to some of us, it was introduced back in 1977 and is currently included in Oxford dictionaries.² The goal of this article is to provide a brief overview on how we, as clinicians, can create a gender-sensitive environment for our patients.

Terminology

The first step in being able to work effectively with transgender youth is to understand the terminology that they use. The National Center for Transgender Equality, a leading advocacy organization founded by transgender activists, has a glossary that provides a good introduction

into some of the commonly used terms.³ According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) Practice Parameter, *gender identity* is an individual’s personal sense of self as male or female.⁴ It is usually established by the age of 3. While most people’s gender identity remains stable over their lifetime, it may change for others. The word *transgender* is used as an umbrella term to designate individuals whose gender identity, behavior, and/or expression is not congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth. Some people use the expression *trans** (with an asterisk) to be inclusive of all gender variant people. *Cisgender* is used to refer to people whose gender identity is congruent with the sex they were assigned at birth (also referred to as their natal sex). *Gender nonconforming* usually refers to individuals whose gender expression does not conform to cultural and societal expectations. Often, the terms *transgender*, *gender nonconforming*, and *gender variant* are used interchangeably.⁵ Another key point to keep in mind is that these words are adjectives, meaning that the expression “transgender people” is acceptable, but “transgenders” (as a noun) is offensive. *Gender binary* refers to our society’s tendency to define gender as two rigid categories of male and female. While the concept of a non-binary approach to gender may seem alien to some of us, some cultures have in fact a non-binary approach to gender. For example, Two Spirit people from First Nations and Native American cultures and the *hijras* in India are recognized as a third gender.

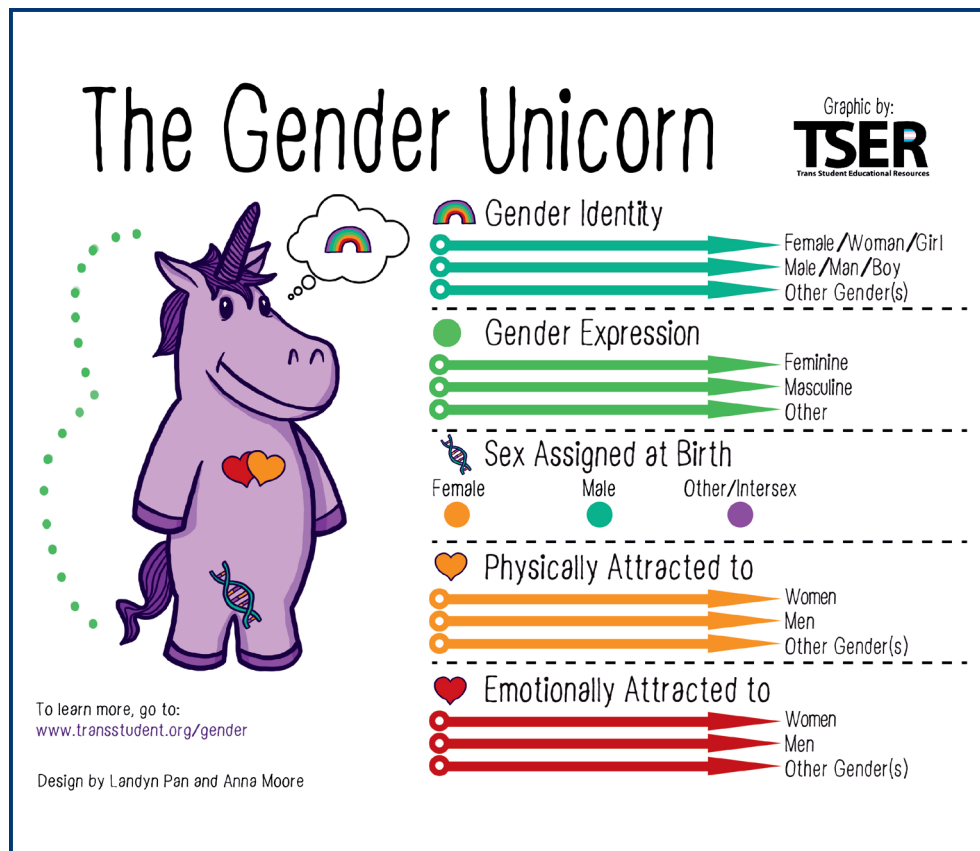


Figure 1: The Gender Unicorn (graphic by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore, courtesy of Trans Student Educational Resources).

The Need to Create a Safe Place for Gender Variant Youth

An invalidating and insensitive environment eventually inflicts emotional and psychological harm on gender nonconforming youth. The American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a policy statement that recommends providers be supportive and affirming towards gender variant youth. It also recommends using gender-neutral verbal histories and/or written questionnaires in their assessments.⁶

Genderbread Person and Gender Unicorn

The Genderbread Person was introduced in order to educate people about the complexities of gender and sexuality. It has been used in various settings, ranging from hospital staff training to schools. Its graphical design usually makes it easy for people to obtain a rough conceptualization of the distinctions between gender

identity (our own sense of our gender), sexual orientation (to whom we are sexually attracted), gender expression (how we dress, talk, act, etc.), and biological sex (the physical sexual characteristics we are born with). The first version of the Genderbread Person was more binary in its presentation (female ↔ male), while the 2.0 version

TABLE 1.

SOME PHRASES THAT ONE CAN USE:

- "How would you like to be called?"
- "How do you identify yourself?"
- "What is your preferred pronoun?"

SOME PHRASES NOT TO USE:

- "I couldn't tell you're actually a boy! You pass so well!"
- "I thought you were a *real* girl!"

was upgraded to take a non-binary approach. The newest version (referred to as v 3.3) makes a distinction between romantic and sexual attraction.⁷ While many people find it useful as a learning tool, some members of the transgender community do not feel comfortable with the term “biological sex” and prefer to use the term “sex assigned at birth” instead. The Genderbread Person graphic has also become the subject of controversy for another reason, namely the question of who originated the design and that person’s position as a voice for the gender nonconforming community. The Gender Unicorn (see Figure 1) was designed to reflect this. It also emphasizes the existence of genders other than male and female.⁸ As a healthcare provider, I find it useful to know about these graphical tools, as they are quite popular among adolescents.

Tips for Creating a Gender-Sensitive and Inclusive Environment

The Genderbread Person and Gender Unicorn are just two of many tools that adolescents use to express themselves in terms of their gender and sexuality. They can mark where they stand on the continuum for each of the categories. It should be noted that these are evolving concepts, and each individual’s experience is unique. Sometimes, just having the person draw their own sense of their gender and sexuality is more beneficial than any clinical tool. The most valuable thing that a child psychiatrist can do is to be nonjudgmental and willing to learn. Most of us are under the wrong impression that we should “know it all” and feel reluctant to step out of our comfort zone and acknowledge a lack of expertise. A simple request to “help me understand” goes a long way. Table 1 provides some phrases one can use in history taking.

In the case of Shane, the child psychiatrist on the team provided additional training and education to the staff on how to care for gender nonconforming youth and their families. She also referred Shane and his parents to their local PFLAG (formerly known as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) chapter, as well as other nonprofit organizations within the area.

Where to Learn More?

One of the best ways for clinicians to become educated about transgender issues is to attend annual transgender conferences. These events are great in that they provide a forum where people from different disciplines can exchange knowledge and ideas. One of the best attended is the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference (PTHC). In addition, below is a list of books and websites that are a good place to start. This list is not exhaustive.

Books:

- *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children* by Diane Ehrensaft
- *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Children* by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper
- *Helping Your Transgender Teen: A Guide for Parents* by Irwin Krieger
- *Jacob’s New Dress* by Sarah and Ian Hoffman
- *Beyond Magenta: A Transgender Teen Speaks Out* by Susan Kuklin
- *I Am Jazz* by Jessica Hertel (for ages 4 to 8)
- *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family* by Deckle Edge

Websites:

- web.mit.edu/trans
- www.genderspectrum.org – This website is intended to create a gender-sensitive environment for children and adolescents.
- www.wpath.org – This website is for the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. It has the Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People available for download.

Conclusion

Child and adolescent psychiatrists play a crucial role in creating a safe and inclusive environment for gender nonconforming youth.

Take Home Summary

As mental health professionals, it is essential for us to educate ourselves about transgender issues and build a safe environment for gender nonconforming youth. There are various resources available as educational tools for mental health professionals, parents, educators, and youth.

About the Author

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