

El Camino

Sex, Gender, and Identity

In our society, people's sex and gender are assigned at birth based on their external genitalia. These assignments influence how people are organized and treated in different settings, including schools, doctor's offices, and families. People are also taught different expectations and behaviors based on their assigned gender. Sex and gender are often discussed as binary—male/boy and female/girl—but they are more diverse and complex than those two categories.

Sex assigned at birth

Sex refers to a combination of physical traits like genitalia, hormone levels, and chromosomes. **Sex assigned at birth** refers to how most people are assigned a male or female sex (and a gender) at birth by a healthcare provider based on external genitalia.¹ Around 1.7% of people are **intersex**, meaning that they are born with physical traits that don't fit neatly into "male" and "female" categories.²

Gender

Gender refers to the behaviors, norms, characteristics, and roles that are associated with being a man, a woman, or another gender. What it means to be a woman in 2022 in Los Angeles is different from what it meant to be a woman in 1850 in Mexico City, which is different from what it meant to be a woman in 1375 in Cairo. All these different places, times, and people have their own ideas of what womanhood means, as well as what behaviors, norms, characteristics, and roles are associated with being a woman.

Gender identity

Gender identity is an internal sense of self that helps people situate themselves in a world with different expectations for people by gender.³ There are many different genders and ways that people see and relate to their gender. Some people know that their gender identity is the same (cisgender) or different (transgender) from their assigned gender early on in life. Other people take more time to figure out their gender identity. Understanding and labeling one's gender does not have a timeline, and there is no right or wrong time to do so.

Social and physical transition

Social transition involves the process of someone changing their pronouns, name, and/or gender expression to reflect their gender identity. People may start by socially transitioning because it helps them explore their gender and figure out what parts of gender expression they like.⁴ **Physical transition** is another way people affirm their

gender and involves medical procedures and hormone therapies that alter someone's body in a way that affirms their gender identity.⁵ Affirming one's gender can include some, all, or none of these kinds of transition.

Gender expression

Gender expression refers to how people share their gender identity through behavior and physical appearance, such as makeup, clothing, mannerisms, and voice. A person's name and pronouns are also an important part of their gender expression. Gender identity does not determine gender expression, and people of any gender can present themselves however they want.⁶ Others should not make assumptions about someone's gender or sexual identity based on their gender presentation.

People may feel discomfort around commonly gendered body parts like their chest or genitalia. Practices like tucking and binding are non-permanent options to change the way those body parts look in clothes and ease their ease distress.⁷ **Tucking** involves flattening the space between someone's legs by moving the penis and testicles. **Binding** is something people do to compress their chest to create the appearance of a flat chest. Some people see tucking and binding as daily components of their gender expression, and other people only use them sometimes.^{8,9}

Masculinity and femininity

The terms **masculinity** and **femininity** are used to describe the ways in which people's behaviors, roles, and characteristics can be associated with masculinity/men or femininity/women without necessarily assigning them those labels. For example, someone may say that a boy who paints his nails is feminine even though he is a boy. Masculinity and femininity are often positioned as a binary; however, a person can and often does express masculinity and femininity at the same time. For example, someone can wear lipstick and a tuxedo or work in construction and enjoy taking ballet classes. Like gender, masculinity and femininity are personally defined and are constantly changing.

Additional resources

- [Understanding your own gender identity](#): interactive activities and community resources to help youth think about their gender identity and gender expression and how they could share it with others
- [Gender Triangle Education Guide](#): educational tool to understand the different components of gender identity
- [Gender Identity](#): short videos on different aspects of gender identity
- [I Think I Might be Transgender](#): pamphlet written by transgender youth about navigating gender identity

- **[Binding Resources](#)**: collection of online guides to binding, resources for where to find binders and tape, and FAQs
- **[Safer Tucking](#)**: guide to tucking for gender expansive youth

¹ Bates, N., Chin, M., & Becker, T. (Eds.). (2022). *Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation*. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26424>

² Patterson, C. J., Sepúlveda, M.-J., & White, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQI+ Populations*. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25877>

³ Gender Spectrum. (n.d.). *Understanding gender*. <https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources>

⁴ Pullen Sansfaçon, A., Medico, D., Suerich-Gulick, F., & Temple Newhook, J. (2020). “I knew that I wasn’t cis, I knew that, but I didn’t know exactly”: Gender identity development, expression and affirmation in youth who access gender affirming medical care. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21(3), 307-320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2020.1756551>

⁵ Tordoff, D. M., Wanta, J. W., Collin, A., Stepney, C., Inwards-Breland, D. J., & Ahrens, K. (2022). Mental health outcomes in transgender and nonbinary youths receiving gender-affirming care. *JAMA Network Open*, 5(2), e220978-e220978. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.0978>

⁶ Gender Spectrum. (n.d.). *Understanding Gender*. <https://genderspectrum.org/articles/understanding-gender>

⁷ Coleman, E., Radix, A. E., Bouman, W.P., Brown, G.R., de Vries, A. L. C., Deutsch, M. B., Ettner, R., Fraser, L., Goodman, M., Green, J., Hancock, A. B., Johnson, T. W., Karasic, D. H., Knudson, G. A., Leibowitz, S. F., Meyer-Bahlburg, H. F.L., Monstrey, S. J., Motmans, J., Nahata, L., ... Arcelus, J. (2022). Standards of care for the health of transgender and gender diverse people, version 8. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 23(Suppl. 1), S1-S259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2100644>

⁸ Julian, J. M., Salvetti, B., Held, J. I., Murray, P. M., Lara-Rojas, L., & Olson-Kennedy, J. (2021). The impact of chest binding in transgender and gender diverse youth and young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(6), 1129-1134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.09.029>

⁹ Malik, M., Cooney, E. E., Breville, J. M., & Poteat, T. (2022). Tucking practices and attributed health effects in transfeminine individuals. *Transgender Health*. 9(1), 92-97. <https://doi.org/10.1089/trgh.2022.0064>