

Talking with Young Kids about Gender

Many adults feel nervous talking about gender with kids. They worry that they won't say the right thing or maybe they don't know what to say at all. Here are a few key concepts about gender, some language you might use, and some conversation starters/tips you may want to try with the kids in your life. These are just some ideas and are certainly not the only ways to talk about gender with kids. Be proactive in your conversations by bringing up topics about gender; **don't** wait for your child to bring it up or for an experience or incident to talk about. Practice (by yourself or with other adults) talking about gender without bias, embarrassment, or judgment. When ready, invite your child into the discussion. We hope this will inspire you to find words and activities that feel right for you and that will spark conversation!

Concept: Gender is personal and there is not just one way to be.

Possible language:

- Is there only one way to be a boy or girl? Does everyone think of themselves as either a boy, or a girl? Can boys and girls like the same things? Do all boys like the same things? Do all girls like the same things?
- Kids can do or be or like or want anything because they are individuals with hopes and likes and dreams. This is not **because** of their gender. It is because they are people.
- If you do know a person's gender, don't assume you know the things they like to do or wear, or play with.

Conversation starters/Tips:

- Provide "counter narratives" to stereotypical stories or examples that reinforce the gender binary. Give examples of kids they know, such as boys who like sparkly things, girls who like to play with trucks. Try to use yourself and other well-loved family members as examples (e.g. *When I was a little girl, people told me I shouldn't wear red and black because they weren't "girl" colors, even though they were my favorite colors*).
- Read a book that addresses gender with your child and discuss it. You can find a book that you think your child might like in our [Annotated Bibliography of Children's Books about Gender Diversity](#).
- If you hear a child say something related to gender, ask them more about it and help them figure out where the messages are coming from; use it as a teachable moment.
- Watch TV shows and advertisements and discuss: 1) How gender roles are portrayed; and 2) what messages are being sent. Is the mom always making cookies or dinner with the daughter and serving the boys? Are only boys playing with trucks or cars? Who is being portrayed as strong? How is the meaning of strength being conveyed?

- When someone says something gender-biased (e.g. *He is all boy! Look at all the energy he has!*), take the opportunity to mention counter examples (e.g. *One of the girls he plays with has even more energy than he does!*).

Concept: Things don't have genders; people have genders.

Possible language:

- There aren't boy things and girl things. Instead, toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes.
- There are lots of different types of clothes. Kids get to wear what feels right to them and makes them feel good.
- Who gets to decide that some things are only for boys and some things are only for girls? How do you feel when you like something, or want to play with something, and someone says you can't because it's only for boys/girls?
- These ideas can be confusing. We get messages that some things are for boys and some things are for girls. But people who say these things just don't understand that people have genders, things do not. Each of us gets to decide what we like and don't like. We just can't be unkind to others about the things they like.

Conversation starters/Tips:

- Ask what your child thinks of as "boy" things or "girl" things, and then ask why. See if there are things they like which are assigned to the opposite gender and talk about how it would feel to be told they can't wear those things or do those things.
- Question and explore your own biases. For example, how do you feel about boys with long hair? Girls who want to shop in the boy's department for clothes? Girls playing football or boys wearing makeup or fingernail polish? What messages about gender expression are you giving your child?

Concept: Only you know your gender. You can't tell a person's gender by looking at them.

Possible language:

- No one gets to tell another person who they are. You know yourself better than anyone else does and only you get to decide your gender- and what it means to you.
- Who you are is not about what others tell you, but something you determine for yourself (even when you get messages that say otherwise).
- Some people think they can tell a person's gender by looking at them, but that is not always true. Think of all the wonderful things about yourself that no one else knows about by just looking at you!

- Gender expression is about showing the world who you are. There may be some patterns we notice, but these are not rules. More girls might wear dresses than boys, but does that mean all girls wear dresses? Or that boys can't wear dresses?

Conversation starters/Tips:

- When you or your child refers to someone else as male or female (i.e. “*see that man over there,*” or “*I like that girl's necklace*”), ask whether you can be really sure that you know the person's gender. Introduce the idea that when we notice someone's gender, we are often making assumptions based on patterns of gender expression. Sometimes, these patterns don't hold.
- Mix up gender language when reading stories to your kids. For example, if the story is about a “boy” animal, mix it up and make the lion a girl. Consider adopting this strategy for the people in a story too. Mixing up gender language and behavior expectations is creative and then you don't have to read a story the same way every time!
- When introducing yourself, consider sharing your gender pronouns: “*My name is Jessica and I use the pronouns 'she/her/hers.*” Try asking the adults around you what, if any, pronoun they would like you to use.

Concept: Your body doesn't determine your gender.

Possible language:

- Gender is a lot more than our bodies. It is also about how we show other people who we are (maybe our clothes, or our hair, etc.) and who we know we are inside.
- Some people think gender is only about your body, but really gender is about who you know yourself to be.
- When a baby is born the grown-ups look at its body and say “It's a girl” or “It's a boy” but they may not be right. We only know what a person's gender is when they are old enough to tell us.

Conversation starters/Tips:

- Talk about what it would feel like if one day you woke up in a different body. Would you be the same person? Would it change what you want to wear and like to do?
- Don't rely on or expect transgender, non-binary or other gender-expansive people to take the lead on discussing gender identity. Be an ally by bringing up issues that celebrate gender diversity.

Concept: There are more than two genders.

Possible language:

- Each one of us has a gender. Kids can be boys, girls, both, neither, or something else—isn't that great? Everyone gets to describe their gender in their own words.
- There have been examples of more than two genders in many cultures, and many religions, all over the world and throughout time.
- History is full of examples of gender diversity!

Conversation starters/Tips:

- Speak (in private, of course) of specific people in your child's environment who express gender differently, or who may have a gender other than male or female. Explore what your child thinks about it and share **your** thoughts and feelings about it.
- Introduce the notion of "boy, girl, both, neither, or something else" as a regular way to talk about people.

Concept: We need to be respectful of everyone, no matter what their gender is.

Possible language:

- No one likes to be pointed out by other kids. Does it feel good when you think someone is talking about you? How do you think it would feel if people were talking about your gender?
- How do you think you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?

Conversation starters/Tips:

- Ask your child to think of a time they were teased for being different. How did it feel?
- Share a story about when you were teased about something and how it made you feel.
- Explore the names we use to describe other people (i.e. Tomboy, Girlie, etc.). For some, those names are very hurtful. Respectfully talk with people about other ways they might want to be described.