

Safe and Caring is a centre of excellence that fosters effective networks and partnerships to improve the quality of life for all Alberta children and youth.

## SAFE AND CARING SCHOOLS FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Students who experience discrimination, whether it is based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity or culture, have a legal right to be safe and protected in schools. Transgender students, or those who are labelled as such, are among the most at-risk group in schools.

The following two stories reflect the personal experiences of two transgender students as they navigate multiple and conflicting societal messages about gender and come to understand who they are.

### MAYA'S STORY

When I was growing up I played with plush toys and a Cabbage Patch doll, thought it was the best thing ever to get my nails painted and I could accessorize Barbie better than anyone else. I hated bugs (except for butterflies), thought boys were stupid and my two strongest role models were my grandmother and Cybersix on Teletoon. When I got older though, I was told that these behaviours were for the most part unacceptable ... because I was a boy.

Fast forward through years of being harassed, assaulted, excluded and generally hurt. I played with girls until I was told boys weren't allowed to play with them and then I sat in a corner and played alone. I was put on suicide watch in junior high. In high school I discovered why I was different—that I was a girl trapped in a boy's body. I was nearly killed when I tried to express it and the student counsellor told me I deserved it and had better act like a boy or I'd be expelled. I was told I could never be myself in my home and that nobody would ever love "someone like you."

Fast forward a few more years. Now I have goals, support and a number of satisfying relationships. I chose to fight against what people said and be who I am inside—no matter the cost. Thanks to the support of a number of amazing adults, a few choice family members and a few dear friends that I will go to hell and back for, I can just be me. It feels so much better. It was worth that pain for these moments of peace, even if my change isn't complete yet. And I will die before I ever go back to being the person I was.

*Maya, Male-to-Female transperson, 21, 2011*



## MASON'S STORY

The earliest memories I have of myself are perfect contentment. Simply existing. Simply being. As a child, I would juxtapose my personal image to men I admired and only then did I feel tinges of misery. Shame for being a boy in a female body came swiftly. I recall teachers, priests, relatives and neighbours chastising me for personality traits they deemed inappropriate. Although a heavy guilt fell on me, it could not overpower a feeling of victory in being who I was. I would retreat into my imagination where I was a boy—a hero—and I was free to bask in my triumph as king.

As a youth, I continued to explore my gender identity. Discerning comments and disapproval from authority figures declared me undeserving of happiness. So I started presenting as my biological sex. I did belong and I was deserving of happiness, but I was not happy.

When I denied my true identity, I denied my self-worth. It closed me off from the desires, dreams and goals I gave up when I chose to belong instead of to be. I remembered when I would play and since have dusted off my crown. I no longer hide in the shadows of expectation, but bask in the light of my personal truth.

I will continue my life path of courage and strength with confidence and resiliency. I want the world to go beyond the gender binary and see each other as human beings: all equal and all deserving of our love, understanding and happiness.

*Mason, Female-to-Male transperson, 22, 2011*

## IMPORTANCE OF GENDER

In most societies, the birth of a baby is considered one of the most important milestones in a family. Have you noticed that the first question friends and relatives ask new parents is, “is the baby a girl or a boy?” Immediately we assign this child their place within the male/female binary and all of the often stereotypical expectations and associations that go with those characterizations. What will the baby’s name be? What colour should the sleepers be? What colour will the baby’s room be? What will he or she be when they grow up?

Why is knowing a baby’s gender the most critical piece of information about this new person? Subtle and not so subtle ways of relating to the child reflect western society’s conventions regarding what it means to be male or female. For example, the toys we select, the clothing we chose and the verbalizations we make often reflect our own conceptions of appropriate gender behaviour.

In fact, it is often assumed that one role of communities is to help children learn to fit into their expected gender roles and that in failing to do so the child will be the subject of ridicule, hostility and even ostracism.

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As a teacher, how often do we think about the ambiguities inherent in our conceptions of gender? How often do we question gendered teaching practices? How do we respond when boys display feminine dispositions and girls demonstrate masculine traits? It is important to note that gender is a continuum (not an “either or”). While most transgender individuals feel like they are in the wrong body, or do not wish to belong to one gender or the other, some may simply be comfortable being a more feminine boy or a more masculine girl and that is perfectly okay too.

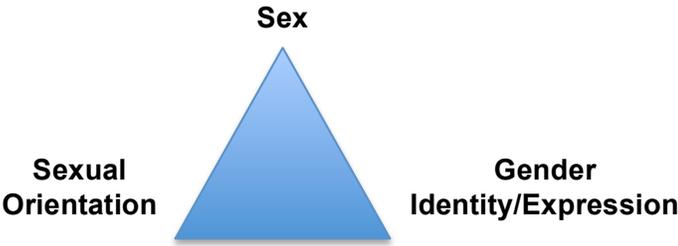
How do we come to better understand the lives of transgender students? How does transphobia play out in schools? What can teachers do to accommodate and support transgender students? How can schools make the learning environment inclusive to all? Consider the stories of transgender people like Mason and Maya whose gender identities differ from the gender assigned to them at birth.

Educators need to explore new ways to help students like them feel safe in expressing their gender identities. Just as important as addressing racism, sexism and homophobia, transphobia must be considered in building welcoming, safe, caring and respectful environments.

## DESCRIBING OUR IDENTITIES—SEX, SEXUALITY AND GENDER

The following definitions give us a starting point for deep and respectful conversations about issues related to the lives of transgender individuals. Note that the terms are not meant to be rigid classifications. Just as our own personal identities are constantly evolving and changing, so too are the words we use to describe sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. The terms do not represent an exhaustive list and are fluid and changeable depending on personal, cultural and geographical contexts. Many factors influence how people identify themselves and how they define others. The words we use when we are describing others may or may not be the same as the words transgender people use to describe themselves. Transgender individuals will use a variety of words, create new terms to describe themselves (e.g., gender blender, gender smoothie, assigned F at birth, etc.) or choose not to use labels at all.

Sex, sexual orientation and gender identify and expression are inter-related, as illustrated in the design below.



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## Gender Identity and Gender Expression

**Gender Identity:** A person's internal sense of being male, female, both or neither.

**Gender Expression:** How people present their own sense of gender to society. Your gender identity is what you know yourself to be and your gender expression is how you present or show your gender to the world and how your gender is understood by the world.

**Transgender:** Literally means “beyond gender.” Transgender and trans-identified are umbrella terms to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions. A transgender or trans-identified individual is a person whose gender identity, outward appearance or gender expression transcend culturally defined categories of gender.

**Gender Variant/Diverse:** An umbrella term to refer to individuals whose gender expressions differ from what is considered normative for their assigned sex in a given culture.

**Gender Incongruence/Gender Dysphoria:** A persistent feeling of dissonance between one's internal sense of gender (gender identity) and anatomical or assigned sex, which oftentimes causes stress and discomfort. These terms are commonly used by medical professionals.

**Transsexual:** An individual whose internal sense of gender does not align with their body's anatomical sex (e.g., a person experiencing gender incongruence or gender dysphoria). The term transsexual is used predominantly by medical professionals, however some individuals chose to self-identify themselves as transsexual. Transsexual individuals typically pursue surgery and hormone treatments to align their gender identity with their body's sex, although it is important to recognize that some individuals will not pursue such treatments.

**Genderqueer (ambigender):** A label for individuals whose gender identity is fluid and falls outside the dominant male/female gender binary. Genderqueer individuals often reject this binary completely and may choose not to undergo hormone therapy, surgery or designate male or female pronouns for themselves. Some trans-identified or genderqueer individuals may choose to use gender-neutral pronouns such as hir or ze.

**Two-Spirit:** Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as Two-Spirit rather than as bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender. Two-Spirit implies the embodiment of both masculine and feminine spiritual qualities within the same body. Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures Two-Spirited persons were respected leaders and medicine people. Two-Spirited persons were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both female and male perspectives.

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## Sex

**Sex:** Refers to a person's chromosomes, hormones and genitals and is anatomically determined. Typically, the terms male and female are used to describe our sex and these are usually assigned at birth based on the appearance of the external genitalia. For most people, gender identity or expression is consistent with their assigned sex. For transgender individuals, gender identity or expression differs from their assigned sex.

**Female and male:** Labels that refer to two anatomical sex categories within western culture. Intersex is the third category.

**Intersex:** A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that may include physical characteristics of both sexes or doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. (Transgender individuals' gender identities may not conform to the female or male anatomies they are born with and they may therefore experience issues/tensions surrounding their gender identity. Intersex individuals, on the other hand, experience issues surrounding their atypical physical anatomy as opposed to their gender identity). Intersex individuals rarely identify themselves as transgender or transsexual and instead typically identify as male or female or neither.

## Sexual Orientation

**Sexual Orientation:** The term used to describe an individual's sexual, psychological and emotional feelings of attraction and affiliation towards another person. Lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual and asexual describe sexual orientations more specifically. Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity. Transgender individuals may be straight, gay, bisexual or even asexual.

## Related Terms

**Transitioning:** Affirming one's gender. For instance, transgender individuals may choose to undergo surgery or have their name changed to affirm their true gender identity. Often after transgender individuals affirm their gender, they self identify as their affirmed gender (e.g., male or female) as opposed to "transgender."

**Presenting:** When individuals "dress," "act" and "present" themselves to others in ways that are true to whom they are and that align with their internal sense of gender identity.

**Closet:** Hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity from others in the workplace, at school, at home and/or with friends.

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**Outing:** The public disclosure of another person’s sexual orientation or gender identity without that person’s permission or knowledge. Outing is very disrespectful and is potentially dangerous to the outed person.

**Coming out:** (1) The process through which lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people acknowledge and express their sexual and gender identities and integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives, (2) the act of disclosure to others, as in, “I just came out to my parents.” Coming out is a complex, selective and ongoing process.

## WHAT IS TRANSPHOBIA?

Like homophobia, racism and sexism, transphobia plays out in discriminatory acts directed toward a relatively powerless minority. Because gender is one of the most firmly entrenched norms in western society, reactions to those who do not conform to the traditional notion of what is female or male can be harsh and judgmental.

According to a 2008 survey on homophobia in Canadian Schools:

- 95 per cent of transgender students felt unsafe at school.
- 90 per cent of transgender students reported being verbally harassed because of their gender expression.
- 50 per cent reported that staff never intervened when homophobic or transphobic comments were made.

Acts of discrimination directed at transgender individuals and/or those who are perceived as such are based on ignorance, prejudice and stereotyping.

In schools, subtle gestures, exclusion, reprimands, taunting, teasing, gossiping, stealing property, fighting and even death threats and hate crimes can and do occur. Just like all other forms of bullying, transphobia needs to be addressed in both proactive and reactive ways by school staff.

## MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

### 1. We don’t have transgender students in our school.

For school staff, it is important to avoid making assumptions that all students fit into traditional gender binaries. While the incidence of gender variant or transgender students may be low, their right to accommodation and inclusion in school is as important as any minority student. Don’t wait until you have confirmation of a transgendered student to create supportive policies and a welcoming environment.

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You may already have transgendered students but do not know it yet. They simply may not be “out” because they perceive the environment to be unsafe and unwelcoming. Although schools may think that they have no transgender people to worry about, that is statistically unlikely. In any school of 1,000 pupils there are likely to be six who will experience transgenderism throughout their lives. There are likely to be others who have a transgender parent or close relative. Among pre-pubertal pupils, there are likely to be 60 in 1,000 who will experience atypical sexual orientation that may be difficult to distinguish from atypical gender identity. There is likely to be one transgender person in 170 members of staff.

## **2. This is such a rare condition, why would we bother thinking about such exceptional situations?**

In the past, transgendered individuals were less likely to come out mainly because of lack of acceptance and harassment. Recently, an increasing number of students are experiencing gender variance and expressing themselves as early as pre-school.

Only 20 per cent of gender variant children will become transgendered adults. Research estimates one in 500 children is significantly gender variant or transgender. The majority are gender variant (gender non-conforming), not transgendered. For example, they may want to dress in the other gender’s clothing, play with toys or refuse to wear bathing suits.

## **3. We know what causes people to be transgender.**

Research indicates, “There’s something different about their wiring. But we really don’t know what makes a person transgender any more than we know what makes a person gay or lesbian.” There is no firm research that indicates why some people are transgendered, however current theory suggests that exposure to prenatal hormones is a possible cause. Others speculate that it may be a pre-natal hormonal influence or possibly environmental factors that combine to influence the brain’s development. Researchers go on to say that it is widely accepted that the condition is biological, not social.

## **4. People chose to be transgendered.**

Individuals do not chose to feel like a boy or a girl, they just do. Being transgendered is not a choice. Typically, it cannot be changed by therapies designed to make a person “match” their outward gender rather than the one that they feel inside.

## **5. When girls behave like boys and boys like girls, it is just a phase.**

Some people behave in atypical gender behaviour at periods in their lives. This does not mean they are transgender. For people who are transgendered, the feeling of difference begins at a very early age and doesn’t dissipate.

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Just as those who identify as female or male can rarely point to a moment in time when they said, “Hey, I’m a girl” or, “I’m a boy,” so to this is the case for transgendered children.

## 6. Transgender people are gay or lesbian.

Sexual orientation (attractions) and gender identity, although related, are not the same thing. A transgender woman may be attracted to women or men and the same is true for a transgender man. Transgender people may be gay, lesbian or bisexual or they may be straight. One’s inner identity not their outward anatomy drives attractions. For example, some people might see a transgender woman as a man, the woman may know that she was always a woman and be in a committed lesbian relationship having never seen herself as a straight man.

## 7. All transgender people want to have surgery to change their gender.

Transgender people have to make decisions about how much they want their bodies to conform to the typical patterns of male/female. Some will want to alter their bodies with hormones and surgeries while others will not.

## 8. Wouldn’t we be doing transgender students a favour by helping them to conform?

It is preferable for children to be able to express themselves as who they believe themselves to be. Devastating effects can occur when shame and punishment are used to pressure a child into conformity. It is not uncommon for transgender students to harm themselves or even commit suicide. Rather than expecting the child to change, it is important that schools change to accept, accommodate and include transgender students.

When we think of gender as a fluid continuum, we are less likely to think of trans identification as a dysfunctional mental condition, rather a rich expression of identity.

## CHALLENGES TRANSGENDER STUDENTS FACE IN SCHOOL

Transgender students face unique challenges. Their school documentation seldom provides options for alternative choices regarding gender designations. One major issue is the use of washrooms and locker rooms. In fact, some transgender students may not even use the washroom all day long.

Transgender students may be extremely uncomfortable in swimming classes, at dances and during other gendered activities. Some have been made to feel uncomfortable for wearing clothing styles deemed inappropriate. A few have been upset when adults in the school have outed them without permission.

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## WHEN STUDENTS CHOOSE TO TRANSITION

There are a growing number of students who are choosing to transition (or affirm their gender) while in school. This may mean that they will be adopting clothing, hairstyles and mannerisms that match their inner identity.

Some may even be undergoing hormone therapies or surgeries. While it is not uncommon for people to think of transitioning as a radical surgery designed to alter the genitalia, this is in fact only a tiny fraction of a series of changes that must occur for the individual to present in their affirmed gender.

The transition process takes several years and requires support at every stage. It is important to remember that the family, friends and schoolmates also go through the transitioning process as they learn to relate to the individual in their affirmed gender.

To support students going through the transitioning process, teachers, school counsellors and school administrators will need to be supportive, help other students understand and build inclusive environments. The resources listed at the end of this booklet can provide some starting points.

## WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

### Educate Yourself

- Learn as much as you can about the unique needs of transgender students.
- Find people around you who are knowledgeable about the subject and talk to them.
- Challenge your own assumptions by putting yourself in the shoes of a transgender individual.
- Be open to making mistakes and learning from them—as long as you are coming from a place of respect and willingness to learn, asking questions is perfectly acceptable.
- Educators can learn from transgender students if they are willing and open to do so. Transgender students may have suggestions for how teachers can create safe and caring environments.
- Immediately stop any transphobic comments and behaviour. If these events are not addressed, students will learn that the verbal and physical harassment of transgender students is acceptable behaviour condoned by educators.

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## Examine gendered language and teaching practices

- Consider to what extent your teaching practices are gendered. For example, do you group students by gender; are your choir, health and physical education classes segregated by gender?; do you require students to dress in gender conforming attire?; do you have gender specific expectations, language and rewards for girls that are different for boys? Instead of basing groups on gender, use criteria such as ability or interest, or randomize groupings.
- Address your learners using “class,” “students,” or “grade 7’s” instead of “boys and girls.”
- Ask all students their preferred names and pronouns and use them even if they seem incongruent to you. Remember practice makes perfect—don’t be too hard on yourself if you don’t remember every time.

## Address Transphobia

- Be on the alert for any form of transphobic bullying behaviour and treat it seriously.

## Maintain student confidentiality unless you perceive possible harm

- Refer cases that require expertise to professionals.

## Reassure the student that they have a right to a safe and caring learning environment

- Help determine an action plan to deal with peers.
- Monitor the situation continuously.
- Offer a range of support contacts.
- Establish whether the student’s family is supportive.

## WHAT SCHOOL COUNSELLORS CAN DO

- Listen carefully to the concerns of students who express gender variance.
- Do not try to talk them out of affirming their identity or make them feel ashamed of who they are.
- Work with school staff to help them respond appropriately.
- If needed, recommend the student to experts for support.
- Know about available community resources, such as Camp fYrefly. Camp fYrefly is Canada’s largest national leadership retreat for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, Two-Spirited, intersexed, queer, questioning and allied youth. The camp is designed to help youth develop the leadership skills and personal resiliency necessary for them to become agents for positive change in their schools, families and communities. (<http://www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca/>).

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## If a student is “outed”

- Listen to the student’s feelings; they may be feeling anger, embarrassment and fear, along with a variety of other emotions.
- Reassure the student that they have a right to a safe and caring education.
- Help determine an action plan to deal with peers.
- Monitor the situation continuously.
- Offer a range of support contacts.
- Establish whether the student’s family is supportive.

## WHAT THE SCHOOL CAN DO

- For school communities to meet the unique needs of transgender students, the whole school community needs to be supportive, accommodating, protective and accepting.
- Support all staff in learning about transgender children and make professional development opportunities and supporting resources available.
- Advocate for bullying prevention policies that specifically address gender identity and transphobia.
- Ensure that there are trained counsellors available for students who require immediate interventions, parental assistance and/or personal counselling.
- Connect with the local police department to have contacts available should they be necessary.
- Establish a protocol for responses when a student comes out, is outed or experiences bullying.
- Work with the school librarian to ensure that appropriate information is readily available.
- In terms of washroom and change room use, the primary aim is for transgender students to feel comfortable using their preferred washroom or change room (e.g., the female washroom for a female-identified transgender student). Establish a private space to change if so desired by the student, along with single-use or private bathrooms as needed.
- Critique school forms and documents and delete the female/male categories if they are not necessary. If they are deemed necessary, include “other” in addition to female and male.
- Help all students and parents understand the need for acceptance of difference. Hold information sessions to increase knowledge and awareness for students, staff and parents.
- Establish a trans-inclusive Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

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## RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Alberta Teachers' Association: <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/> (go to Professional Development then [Diversity, Equity, and Human Rights](#))

*Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity: Recommended Fiction and Nonfiction Resources for K-12 Schools*, available through Edmonton Public Schools and Edmonton Public Library

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN):  
<http://www.glsen.org/>

Thinkb4youspeak: <http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com/>

Egale Canada: <http://egale.ca/>

The Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services: <http://www.ismss.ualberta.ca/>

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG Canada)  
<http://www.pflagcanada.ca/en/index.html>

Fact Sheet: Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth in School: <http://srlp.org/resources/fact-sheet-transgender-gender-nonconforming-youth-school/>

ATA Workshop Series

“Building Safe and Caring Classrooms, Schools and Communities for LGBT Students.”

Contact the Alberta Teachers' Association Professional Development program area ([PD@ata.ab.ca](mailto:PD@ata.ab.ca))

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