



## Are You Worried About Your Child's Gender Expression?

**Many parents struggle with understanding their child's experience of gender, especially when it is different than they had expected.**

While some kids are content to dress in the clothing and participate in the activities typically associated with their gender, others express themselves in ways that the adults around them can find surprising or confusing.

Some boys love dresses, some girls insist on short hair with a hatred of the colour pink, and others say that they are or want to be another gender.

These children are sometimes called *gender independent*. Other terms are *gender variant*, *gender non-conforming*, *gender creative*, *transgender*, and for some Aboriginal children, *two spirit*.

When a child expresses their gender in non-traditional ways, people can sometimes blame the parents or suggest that the child is mentally ill.

However, being gender independent is not a problem and is not caused by something parents do or do not do. It is also not something that children do on purpose to defy their parents. Gender diversity exists across all cultures and is normal and healthy.



## **Caring For Yourself, Caring For Your Child**

Going against the grain in a world that discourages diversity is never easy. Parenting a gender independent child can raise difficult feelings.

Parents worry about what other people will think and how their child will fit into their cultural or faith community. Many feel shame or grief because their child is different than they had expected, and many parents worry that their child will be bullied.

In some families, there may be anger and serious conflict over a child's gender independent behaviours. It is very important to seek help if there is a threat of abuse.

The most important thing parents do is to find support. It can be helpful to talk with parents who have had a similar experience, or with a non-judgmental counsellor.

There are also helpful books and videos available and the organizations at the bottom of this pamphlet can help to locate these resources. If the advice of a helping professional does not feel right, do not be afraid to look elsewhere.

Every child's identity is important to them, and every child needs to know that their caregivers love them unconditionally. The more support that parents can find for themselves, the better they can provide support for this child.

Talking to others can help you understand what you need and listening to your child can help you understand what they need for you.

## **Looking to The Future**

Like all children, there is no way to know who a gender independent child will be as an adult. They may grow up to be a lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual. Some may identify as gender-fluid, or in between genders. Some may become more gender-typical over time. Others may come to identify as transgender and may want to transition to a new gender role. All of these paths are healthy. Though most children will not transition, some parents may find it helpful to get more information about this option. No matter who they grow up to be, gender independent children can be happy and healthy with the support of their caregivers.

## **Safety Concerns**

All parents want to protect their children from harm. Safety concerns are real and you may need to find safe ways for your child to express themselves. Some families first try this in the home or on a family vacation. Including children in safety decisions can give them tools to communicate and help keep them feel safer. Ultimately, parents cannot prevent their child from facing challenges, but they can show them love and acceptance, which helps them to feel good about

who they are.

## **The Importance of Parental Support**

In recent years, research has given us new information about the importance of parental support for young people who grow up to be sexual or gender minorities. For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) youth who are accepted by their families are healthier, have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed or attempt suicide.<sup>1</sup>

In an Ontario study, transgender youth who had strong parental support for their gender identity were more likely to report good mental health and self-esteem, and more likely to report that they had an adequate place to live.<sup>2</sup>

### **Key Points**

- Many parents struggle to understand and accept a child who expresses gender in non-traditional ways.
- Being gender independent is normal and healthy and is not caused by parents. It is not something that children do for attention or to defy their parents.
- The most important thing parents can do is to find support for themselves and their child. You might look for help from parents with similar experiences, or from a non-judgmental counsellor.
- Parents' concerns about safety are real. The organizations listed in this article can help your family strategize to stay safe.
- We cannot predict who a child will grow up to be but listening to what children tell us about their gender can help us understand what they need from us right now.
  - No matter what, your child can be healthy and happy with your support.

### **Resources:**

*To locate supportive health and social service providers in Newfoundland and Labrador see:*

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, C., Russell, S., Huebner, D., Diaz, R. & Sanchez, J. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of the LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(4), 205-213.

<sup>2</sup> Travers, R., Bauer, G., Pyne, J., Bradley, K., Gale, L., Papadimitriou, M. (2012). Impacts of Strong Parental Support for Trans Youth: A Report Prepared for Children's Aid Society of Toronto and Delisle Youth Services. *Trans PULSE*. <http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Impacts-of-Strong-Parental-Support-for-Trans-Youth-vFINAL.pdf>

**PFLAG St. John's**  
<https://pflagcanada.ca/pflag-chapters/newfoundland-labrador/>  
1 888 530 6777 ext 575

**Trans Support NL**  
[www.facebook.com/tsnl.umbrella](http://www.facebook.com/tsnl.umbrella)

**Planned Parenthood NL Sexual Health Center**  
[www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com](http://www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com)  
709 579 1009

**Parents of Trans and Gender Diverse Kids – NL**  
[www.facebook.com/parentsoftranskidsnl](http://www.facebook.com/parentsoftranskidsnl)

## **Sexual Health Questions? We have Answers!**

If you need someone to talk to about your options, or if you need more information, we are available to help.

**Location:**

47 St. Clare Avenue, St. John's, NL, A1C 2J9

**Hours:**

Monday: 9am - 4:30pm  
Tuesday: 9am - 4:30pm  
Wednesday: 12pm - 4:30pm  
Thursday: 12pm – 6:00pm  
Friday: 9am - 4:30pm

**Phone:**

709-579-1009  
Toll Free 1-877-NO MYTHS  
(1-877-666-9847)

**Website:**

[www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com](http://www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com)

**Email:**

[pp.nlshc@gmail.com](mailto:pp.nlshc@gmail.com)

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### **Other Resources:**

Mental Health Crisis Line  
1-888-737-4668

Sexual Assault and Crisis Line

747-7757

1-800-726-2743