

What is Gender?

Gender is about three things:

1. our bodies (***gender biology***)
 2. how we dress and act (***gender expression***), and
 3. how we feel inside (***gender identity***).
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Gender Biology

- When a baby is born, they are assigned a gender based on their bodies (usually based on their private parts). This is called your ***assigned gender*** and usually goes on your birth certificate.
- For most people, it is very clear what kind of body someone has, but sometimes it is not quite as clear. Some people are born with bodies that have different combinations inside or outside. The term for this is “intersex,” which means “between the sexes.” Being intersex is not common, but it is a natural form of variation; it shows us that people come in lots of shapes and sizes! There are not just “boy bodies” or “girl bodies.”

Gender Expression

- ***Gender expression*** is the way we show our gender to the world. It can also be how the others think we should act because of our gender (like boys shouldn’t cry or girls are always gentle).
- When we walk into a room, we often look at the gender expression of other people – what people are wearing, or their hair, or other things about them – to tell who is a boy and who is a girl (or who might be both or neither). Certain types of expression are sometimes more common for one gender or the other. What is important to remember is that being more common does not make it “the only way” or “the right way.” It may be a pattern, but it is not a rule!
- While it may be more common for girls to wear or like or do some things, it is not because they are girls. They are just things they like. If a girl does or likes or wears something that boys more commonly do or like or wear, does that make the girl suddenly a boy? Of course not! And the same for boys who do things that girls more commonly do or like or wear. In fact, there are no “boy” things or “girl” things: toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes.
- The way we show our gender is all about what makes us feel comfortable and good. There is not one boy way or one girl way. These can often change, and can be different from culture to culture. What many boys like to do today might be something girls also like tomorrow. What many girls like to wear today might be something boys also want to wear tomorrow.

Gender Identity

- Another part of our gender is the way we feel on the inside, in our hearts and minds. This is called **gender identity**.
- Most people have a gender identity that is the same as what the doctors said you were in the hospital (your *assigned gender*).
- Sometimes, people feel differently on the inside. While everyone around them says they are one thing, they feel like something else. Perhaps they feel a little bit like a boy AND a girl. Maybe the person feels like a boy even though everyone else thinks the person is a girl. Kids can be boys, girls, both, or neither.
- How people feel on the inside about their gender is very personal. Some people like to share how they feel, but others don't. It's best not to talk or ask about someone's gender unless they bring it up themselves. 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 you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?
- Who you are is not about what others tell you, but something you determine for yourself. No one gets to tell another person how they feel on the inside.

How These Three Parts of Gender Fit Together

- For many people these three parts "line up," that is, their body, how they present gender, and how they feel all are the same.
- Sometimes people may have one kind of body, but like lots of different things, and still feel like the gender they are assigned...this might be a girl who likes things people think boys usually like, or a boy who likes things girls usually like.
- Sometimes, someone might be assigned one gender when they are born, but feel on the inside that they are another gender. The word that is often used for this is **transgender**.
- And of course, pretty much any combination is possible. This is all very complex. But it is a lot more interesting to have so much variety! It can also be really confusing because we are taught that there are only two possibilities—boy or girl. In fact, the possibilities are endless.

Gender is Different than Sexual Orientation

- A lot of people confuse gender and sexual orientation, but they are different.
- Sexual orientation is about who someone is attracted to (i.e. whether you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.)
- Gender is about who someone *is*.

So Don't Forget...

- Gender is not just about our bodies. It also includes the way we express ourselves and how we feel in our hearts and our minds.
 - There are lots of different genders.
 - No one gets to tell another person how they feel on the inside.
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Mapping My Gender

Use the lines below to map your own gender. Then answer the questions that follow.



(fold here if you wish to keep your answers private)

1. Was mapping your own gender difficult or easy? What made it so? _____

2. What are some ways that this model helps us to understand gender better? _____

3. What are some of the ways that this model is still not enough to really understand gender? _____

4. Has your gender profile changed over time? In what ways? _____

5. What is your comfort level with your own gender? What about the gender of others?

6. What does the "Gender Spectrum" mean to you? _____
