

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Canadian Schools Part 2: Creating Safe and Welcoming Spaces for Gender Diverse Students, Families, and Staff

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Embracing diversity by making it safe for students, staff and families of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions to be themselves is an essential component of creating welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments.

Key understandings:

- A person's sex is the legal identifier assigned at birth, depending on whether they were born with male or female genitalia. .
- Gender, on the other hand, is related to the social and cultural expectations pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity.
- Gender identity is an internal, deeply held sense of one's gender.
- For about one per cent of the population, sex and gender do not match—that is, the child's gender does not match the sex assigned at birth.
- Most people have a gender identity of a man or woman (or boy or girl) but for some people, their gender identity is more fluid and does not fit neatly into one of those two choices.
- Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were born with.
- Sexual orientation describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person.
- People who identify as transgender, like all people, may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- Gender expression is the external manifestation of gender, expressed through such things as name, clothing, hairstyle, behaviour, voice, and body characteristics. Society labels these cues as masculine and feminine, although this can change over time and vary by culture.
- Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not visible to others.
- Research identifies that individuals can experience a number of negative mental health effects from hiding their identity and not having supportive social networks.
- While there have always been transgender people, transgender children and youth today are more likely to have the language to express how they feel—and are more likely to feel safe in expressing themselves.

Key understandings (cont.):

- Typically, people who are transgender seek to make their gender expression align with their gender identity, rather than the sex they were assigned with at birth.
- It's important for students who identify as transgender have a safe environment at school, with supportive school staff, and accepting and supportive peers.
- When we have discussions about gender diversity, we need to be aware of how our values, beliefs and assumptions can influence or affect our work.
- All students need to feel safe, accepted and valued, and we need to ensure that our own prejudices or attitudes do not interfere with creating these conditions.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- Does your school have a strategy in place to ensure that each and every student feels they have a trusted adult they could go to? If not, how could you make this happen?
- Are there practices in your school that might be unwelcoming or disrespectful to students, staff or families with *-diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions*? If there are, how could this be changed?
- Consider the Emerson quote that ended this presentation: *"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."* How could this quote be used to deepen both students' and school staff's understanding and respect of difference and diversity?

For more information:

- The Alberta Government [infographic on supporting the LGBTQ community](#).
- Alberta Human Services' information on [LGBTQ supports](#).
- Alberta Education's [Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions](#).