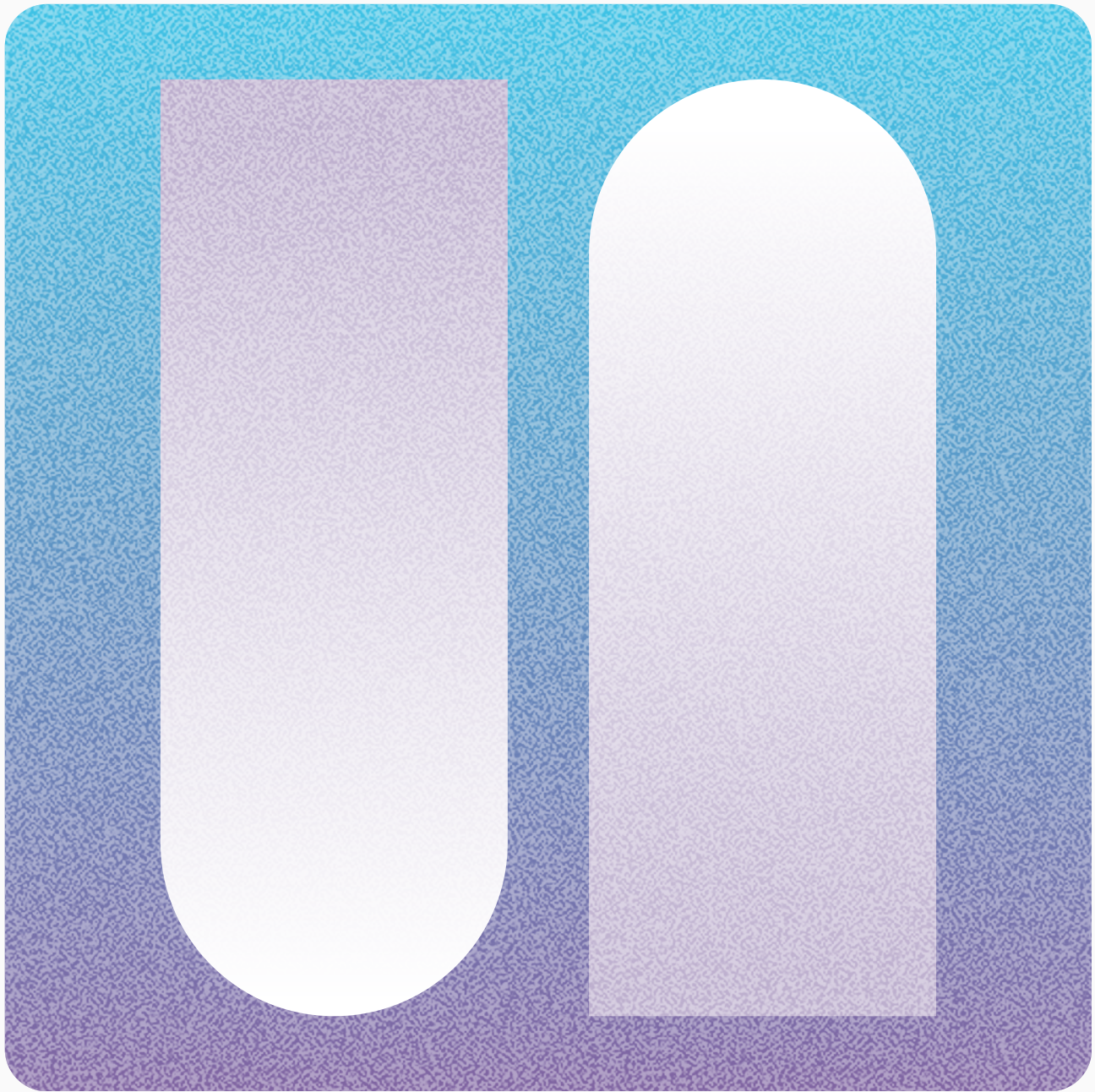


EMPOWERING PROVIDERS SERIES

Affirming Youth Through Social & Legal Transition



Policy Wise
for Children & Families

Acknowledgments

Territorial Acknowledgment

PolicyWise respectfully acknowledges that we are located on Treaty Six and Treaty Seven territories and the Métis homeland – the travelling route and the gathering place for many Indigenous Peoples. This includes the Nehiyaw, Denesų́łiné, Nakota Sioux, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Siksikaitsitapi, comprised of the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani First Nations, the Tsuut’ina First Nation, and the Îyârhe Nakoda, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations. We also acknowledge the Métis and Inuit who have lived on and cared for these lands. We recognize this land as an act of reconciliation and express our gratitude to those whose territory we reside on or are visiting.

Youth and Caregiver Acknowledgment

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the youth and caregivers who generously shared their experiences navigating the joys and challenges of gender transition in Alberta. To the caregivers, we thank you for your invaluable insights into your pivotal role as supportive and affirming adults in the lives of your youth. Your perspectives have enriched this guide. They highlight the profound impact of love, resilience, and advocacy. To the youth, we are deeply grateful for the candid glimpse into your lives through the artwork you created. It has shaped and brought life to this guide. Thank you for your courage, creativity, and willingness to share your journey with us.

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We sincerely thank the thought leaders and service providers who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences with us about supporting gender-diverse youth and their caregivers. We are deeply inspired by the important work you are doing on the frontlines to support youth across Alberta. Your expertise and dedication helped shape these guides, and your contributions are invaluable. We are grateful for your ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and affirming future.

This guide was created by PolicyWise for Children & Families

[PolicyWise for Children & Families](#) is a non-profit that works to improve policies and practices to benefit well-being. We partner with many diverse groups—like gender-diverse youth and their caregivers—to help create a better future for children, youth, families, and communities. Our skilled team focuses on evaluation, data management, implementation, and knowledge mobilization across Alberta and Canada. We created this guide in December 2024 as a part of our Empowering Providers [series](#). For more information, please contact us at info@policywise.com.

Introduction



Helpful terminology is highlighted in blue and defined in pop-outs throughout the guide.

Gender Transition

The process of discovering and affirming one's gender identity.¹ This can, but does not always, include medical transition, like taking hormones or having surgeries.

Gender transition is the process of changing one's gender. The journey of gender transition includes many parts, such as social, legal, and medical changes.

It can be hard for families of Two Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse (2S/T/GD) youth to navigate the available information and services. PolicyWise has created a [series](#) of guides to support service providers as they help youth and their caregivers in Alberta. Service providers can direct caregivers to the services and information linked in these guides or provide them with the guides themselves.

This guide covers social transition, like changing names and pronouns, and legal transition, like updating identity documents. It includes research, legal information, and experiences of caregivers of 2S/T/GD youth. While this guide offers helpful information and tools, keep in mind that each family is unique, and not all resources will apply to everyone. Because laws and services change, seeking current information from local organizations or legal experts is important. This guide isn't a substitute for professional legal or medical advice, but it gives service providers knowledge and tools to support 2S/T/GD youth and their caregivers.

The Gender Identity Journey

Each young person's journey to understanding and expressing their gender is unique. Different parts of their **gender identity** can emerge at different times. **Gender expression** can include how a person looks, their clothes, haircut, name, pronouns, and anything else that shows their gender to the world.³

The [Pride Centre of Edmonton](#) uses a spectrum, like in the graphic below, to help youth and their caregivers think about this process. On this spectrum, a young person can move from exploring different parts of their gender identity to affirming or committing to them.

Exploring

Affirming

Committing

Exploring is when youth begin to question their gender identity and experiment with their gender expression. *Affirming* is when youth start expressing and embracing their gender identity, often looking for validation and support from others without taking permanent steps. *Committing* is a deeper level of affirmation, where youth take concrete actions, such as medical or legal steps, to align their gender expression with their identity in a stable way.

Different parts of youths' identities may be in different stages. For example, a youth might be at a commitment phase with their name but still exploring their clothes and hair.

It's normal for youth and their caregivers to be at different stages, knowledge levels, and comfort when thinking about gender identity and transition.⁴ This difference may be a source of conflict in families. Service providers can help youth and their caregivers understand each others' perspectives.

Gender Identity

Someone's inner sense of being a man, a woman, both, or neither.¹

Gender Expression

A person's physical characteristics, behaviours, and presentation that signals their gender to others.¹

"...I've always been very fearful for our kid, but I think [my child's transition has] been really beautiful... His dad sent me a happy birthday for the first time in four years after no contact.

I think that the more we normalize [being gender-diverse] in our family, it just gets a little bit easier. My dad has said he doesn't get it, but he doesn't have to..."

- Caregiver of a 2S/T/GD youth

Gender-Affirming Care

Social Transition

Social transition is when a person changes how they show their gender to the world. This might include changing their name, pronouns, clothing, and hairstyle. Society shapes gender, and how a person presents themselves helps others understand their gender.³

Social transition isn't required to be a 2S/T/GD person. Some 2S/T/GD young people choose not to socially transition. A young person's background, cultural beliefs, race, religion, interests, age, and other factors can affect their choice to socially transition. There's no single way to do it, and deciding when and how to transition is a personal choice.^{3,5}

Some 2S/T/GD youth know exactly what they want to change when they start socially transitioning, while others figure it out as they go. Even if a young person has a clear idea now, they might change their mind later. Exploring gender through social transition is normal. If a young person isn't sure about a name, set of pronouns, or clothing style, they can try different options. It's common for people to try out several names, pronouns, and styles before finding what feels right.³

Gender expression and identity aren't fixed, and they can evolve. Depending on their situation, youth can choose who to involve in their exploration and how they want to test out different options. For example, they might use a new name and pronouns with a friend for a few days or try it out in all areas of their life for a longer time. Even if their current choice doesn't work out, exploring different options helps youth find what makes them most comfortable. Social transition is about finding what works best for each person at the moment.

"...a lot of our kids came out being like, 'I am trans,' and we were like, 'Amazing! Yes!' And then [over time] they simmered down a little, and they were like, 'I am trans, but I'm more vibey with it. It's more non-binary, it's more chill.'

But I think that's part of what is the beauty of people being more chill [about gender]... the kids can explore and no one should be locked into anything when you're 14 years old. So you're gonna try different things."

- Caregiver of a 2S/T/GD youth



For some young people, **gender dysphoria** or **euphoria** can guide their social transition. They might feel uncomfortable with one way of presenting themselves and joyful with another. Sometimes these feelings are clear, but other times they can be mixed or change depending on the situation. Looking at role models in 2S/T/GD communities, family, friends, or media can provide helpful examples of different gender expressions youth can explore.³ Young people can also find inspiration in fictional characters, fashion magazines, or social media.

There are many ways for a young person to socially transition. Below are some different aspects of gender expression that can be a part of a young person's social transition:

- **Names.** A low-stakes way for youth to explore is to try out a new name at a coffee shop. When a youth hears their potential name called out when their order is ready, they can gauge their internal reaction to it.⁶
- **Pronouns,** for example, he/him/his, she/her/hers, or they/them/theirs, or **neopronouns**, like xe/xem/xyr or ze/hir/hirs. Some people prefer using a mix of pronouns, like she/they, or different pronouns on different days. For more information on understanding pronouns and how to use them, Egale offers a [Pronoun Usage Guide](#).

The Alberta Legislature has passed [Bill 27](#), impacting 2S/T/GD youth at school.⁷ Starting Fall 2025, 2S/T/GD students under 16 require parental consent to change the name or pronouns they use at school, both on their records and in conversations with school staff. Schools are required to notify parents if 2S/T/GD students 16 years and over request to be addressed by a different name or pronouns at school. For more information, check out this [brief](#) from Egale.

Gender Dysphoria

Feelings of discomfort about one's body or assigned gender.¹ Gender dysphoria is also a mental health diagnosis that is defined as a "sense of discomfort in one's body and with one's own gender identity."² (p.512)

Gender Euphoria

The feeling of comfort or joy that accompanies being able to present as and be recognized in one's gender.¹

Pronouns

Words that can be used in place of a noun or a person's name.¹ In English, some pronouns are associated with a particular gender identity, such as him, her, he, and she, while others are gender neutral, like they, it, hir, ze, and zim.

Neopronouns

Pronouns that are not traditionally used in English.¹ Neopronouns are often gender-neutral, like xe/xym or ze/zim.

- **Gendered labels**, like woman/man, girl/boy, sister/brother/sibling, mother/father/parent, daughter/son/child, **non-binary**, **genderqueer**, or **Two Spirit**.
- **Behaviour**, through changing demeanour or participating in certain activities. For example, a youth might change their body language to align with their gender identity. They could change the gendered bathroom they use, participate in sports and recreation activities aligned with their gender identity, or seek out activities that affirm their gender, like taking a makeup class.
- **Voice**, through learning to change their voice pitch and speech patterns. Youth can access **voice therapy** to help align their voice with their gender identity. To learn more about voice therapy, visit the [Trans Care BC website](#). [Alberta Health Services](#), [Skipping Stone](#), and private providers offer voice therapy. There are also many gender-diverse voice training creators on YouTube.
- **Gendered milestones**, such as learning how to shave or doing makeup, getting ear piercings, or buying undergarments and other gendered clothing.
- **Gendered religious and cultural milestones**, such as Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, Quinceañeras, Confirmation, and Indigenous ceremonies. For more information on how faith organizations can be supportive and inclusive, check out the Affirming Faith [workbook](#) from Egale, or the websites of [Rainbow Faith and Freedom](#) and [Affirming Connections](#).

Non-binary

People, words, and things that don't fit in the gender binary.¹ Non-binary people may see themselves as not fitting into the gender binary, fitting in both categories of male and female, or may oppose the idea of the binary entirely.

Genderqueer

A personal identity of someone who defines their gender outside the gender binary, often connecting their gender to an overarching queer identity.¹

Two Spirit

An umbrella term that describes Indigenous people with many culturally specific gender roles, identities, and expressions.¹ Those who identify as Two Spirit may embody both masculine and feminine spirits and characteristics.

Voice Therapy

When people work with a speech-language pathologist or voice coach to modify their voice and communication patterns to better align with their gender identity.¹

hair too long
is overstimulating
and I hate how
others
perceive
it.

shaved it,
dyed it, shaved it
again

doesn't feel
like my
skin

- **Appearance**, like clothing, makeup, hair, **binding** breast forms, hip or butt padding, **tucking**, or **packing**. The Dress Code Project has a [directory](#) of gender-affirming hair stylists across Alberta. The Pride Centre of Edmonton offers a [directory](#) of gender-affirming personal care services. Get REAL offers information about binding and general tips, including their [Bind Safe](#) and [General Tips on Binding](#) resources. [Trans Care BC](#) has more information on binding, packing, tucking, and padding. Some 2SLGBTQIA+ community organizations, like [Skipping Stone](#), [Pride Centre of Edmonton](#), and [Pride YMM](#), offer free or low-cost access to gender gear like binders, gaffs, breast forms, and packers.

Binding

Using special clothing, like a binder or body-safe tape, to flatten the chest.¹

Tucking

Arranging the penis and testicles to minimize a bulge in clothing.¹ People often tuck using body-safe tape or special underwear, such as a **gaff** or tucking panties.

Gaff

A type of tight underwear that helps keep the penis tucked between the legs.

Packing

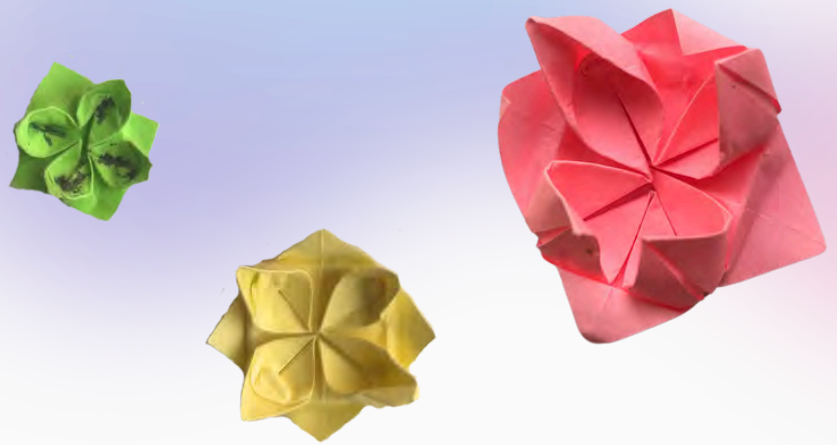
Putting things in the pants to create the outward appearance of a penis and testicles.¹ This look can be achieved with a pair of socks or with prosthetics (packers) made of silicone or other materials.

"I remember having a conversation with [my child] when they were three about [how] they didn't like the same things that other little girls did. And I said, 'That's okay, kiddo. I don't either.' And I guess in reflection... what does that even mean about my own gender?"

And then it forces us to have conversations with our kids about things that I don't know that I would otherwise, you know that idea of... if [older generations] had an opportunity to explore our identities in adolescence more freely and supportively, maybe we would have more gender diversity than we do. I don't think it's that there's more gender-diverse kids now than there was before. I think they were always there."

- Caregiver of a 2S/T/GD youth

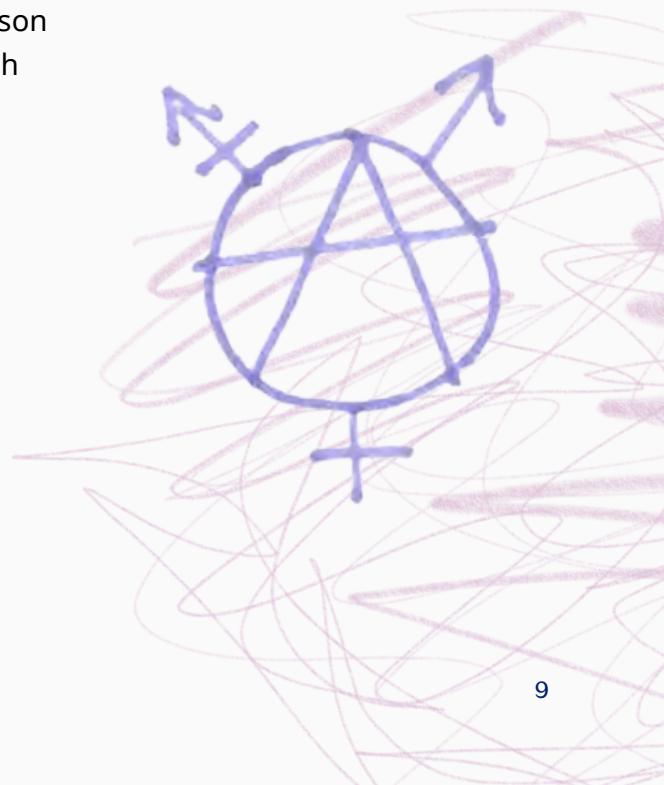
Soon after I came out when I was 13 my now sibling and parent shaved my head before queer prom and in that moment I thought "oh this is what gender euphoria feels like"



Legal Transition

Legal transition is when a 2S/T/GD person updates their official documents to match their gender identity. This can include changing their name or gender marker on documents like birth certificates, social insurance cards, health cards, driver's licenses, and passports.⁸

In Alberta, people can choose from three gender markers: M (male), F (female), or X (non-binary).⁹ Skipping Stone offers a detailed [guide](#) on name and gender marker changes for people of all ages, including minors. BearPaw Media and Education has a step-by-step [guide](#) on how to change the gender markers for people over the age of 18. With parental support, a young person can also update other documents, like school records, to match their new name and gender identity.



Before changing government IDs, families may want to consider the wider impact of the change. For example, having an X gender marker on a driver's license or passport could indicate that a youth is gender-diverse to others, such as police or customs officials, which may feel uncomfortable for youth. Some countries may not accept passports with X gender markers.¹⁰ More information about travelling internationally as a 2SLGBTQIA+ person is available on the Government of Canada [website](#). Human Dignity Trust maintains a [map](#) of countries where 2SLGBTQIA+ people are criminalized.

Legal transition can be complicated and involves many steps. Caregivers may be frustrated with the administrative burden.¹¹ Changing multiple documents can also be expensive. A young person may have different names or gender markers on various IDs while going through the legal transition process. Rural or remote areas might have limited access to services that can make these changes, such as [registries](#) or [Service Canada](#) offices. ID clinics offered by [Skipping Stone](#) or [Student Legal Services of Edmonton](#) can help families navigate these challenges and reduce barriers.



Empowering Affirming Adults

Service providers play an important role in supporting caregivers to be affirming of the 2S/T/GD youth in their lives.¹² Having access to accurate, high-quality information about transition can make a big difference for caregivers of 2S/T/GD youth.^{12,13} Resources like Egale’s Affirming Adults [guide](#), Central Toronto Youth Services’ Families in TRANSition [resource guide](#), or Outright Vermont’s Handling With Care [toolkit](#) can help caregivers learn more about how to be supportive. A [report](#) from MacEwan University shares the experiences of trans and non-binary youth in Alberta. It is a helpful tool for service providers and caregivers to learn what supports youth might need.

Social transition can have positive mental health impacts for 2S/T/GD youth. Studies show that social and legal transition can help alleviate depression among 2S/T/GD youth, bringing their mental health more in line with that of their **cisgender** peers,^{14,15} and reducing suicide ideation and attempts.¹⁶ For more information about how service providers and caregivers can support the mental health of 2S/T/GD youth, check out the Supporting Mental Health While Transitioning [guide](#) in our Empowering Providers [series](#).

Caregivers may find social transition challenging, feeling grief over their child’s birth name, pronouns, or the kind of relationship they hoped to have with their child.^{4,11,13} Youth may be eager to start socially transitioning soon after coming out, while their caregivers may need more time to process this change.⁴

Cisgender

A person whose gender identity matches their birth-assigned sex.¹



Outside of the home, caregivers may experience stress or receive support as they advocate for their child. Supportive schools can help families access services and provide many opportunities for youth to affirm their gender.¹⁸ Unsupportive schools may respond to a youth's transition with uncertainty, hostility, or refusal to affirm a youth's social transition.

Teachers, administrators, and other school staff may not have knowledge about gender diversity or be aware of human rights legislation or school board policies about gender inclusion.¹¹ The SAFER Project has [resources](#) about how teachers can be allies for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Western University has developed a [toolkit](#) for administrators who want to foster gender-affirming schools. Service providers can direct caregivers to resources that help them advocate with schools and can mediate conversations between caregivers and school staff. Egale offers a [resource](#) for caregivers to help advocate for 2S/T/GD youth at school.

Gender and Sexual orientation Alliances (or Gay-Straight Alliances, GSAs) create safe spaces in schools for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and allies to connect with each other.¹⁹ Under the *Education Act*, Alberta schools are required to create GSAs if students request them. For more information about GSAs, check out the Government of Alberta [website](#). The Alberta Teachers' Association also offers a [resource](#) for educators about how to establish a GSA at their school.

Ways caregivers may delay their youth's social transition:¹⁶

Dismissal: Caregivers may not realize their youth is trans and dismiss their gender identity as something not real or a phase they will outgrow.

Misinformation: Caregivers may receive incorrect information or negative advice from friends, family, or their community. This might come from misunderstandings about the trans experience or concerns about difficulties and safety.

Discomfort with uncertainty: Some caregivers may want to be sure of their youth's gender identity and its stability before fully supporting it.

Conditional support: Caregivers may only offer support if their youth meets certain conditions, such as repeatedly asking to be called by their new name or proving their commitment to their gender identity.

'Watchful waiting': Caregivers may be advised to support their youth's gender expression without fully affirming their identity, which can lead to their youth feeling unhappy and unsupported. For example, when a caregiver uses their youth's chosen name at home but insists on their old name in public, at school, or with relatives.

Extended families can provide love and support to 2S/T/GD youth and their caregivers, or they can be a source of pain if they are unaccepting of a youth's social transition.²⁰ Caregivers may disclose their child's transition in a direct, explicit way or gradually as their youth's gender unfolds.¹⁸ They may choose not to share with certain extended family members. Disclosing to family can be an impactful way caregivers advocate for 2S/T/GD youth, especially when they make the difficult decision to distance from or end a relationship with an unsupportive family member. Service providers can support caregivers of 2S/T/GD youth by asking about their extended families, helping them decide how to share their child's gender, and preparing them for the possibility of negative reactions.

Interacting with the community can provide support to youth and their families, gender affirmation, and a sense of belonging.¹⁸ Community interactions can also create opportunities to learn how to respond to challenging situations, like correcting names and pronouns or addressing misinformation about gender diversity. Service providers can give parents strategies for engaging in challenging conversations in their communities and support them to seek out affirming community groups.

The Alberta Legislature has passed [Bill 29](#), changing how 2S/T/GD people can participate in sports.²¹ Schools, post-secondary institutions, and provincial sports leagues will be required to establish policies and practices to determine athletes' eligibility according to gender, barring **transfeminine** youth from participating in girls' sports. Leagues will also be required to report any complaints about athletes' eligibility and requests for or the creation of mix-gender sports leagues to the Minister of Tourism and Sport. For more information about the potential impacts of Bill 29, check out this [brief](#) from Egale.

"I think there's something interesting about how we're supporting [our youth], but then also having to be like, 'okay, but the rest of the world is not going to be in this place.' So, how do I encourage you to be everything you want to be without making you feel unsafe?"

- Caregiver of 2S/T/GD youth

"[My youth] decided [they were] non-binary, because then they could wake up one day and be one [gender] and then wake up another day and be the other. So, the rule in our house is you are who you are today, and that's just it. And if today, that's what we're doing, then it's today, that's what we're doing. I remember the first time we went to a Subway [restaurant], and we got a him pronoun. My [child] literally cried on the floor [with euphoria]."

- Caregiver of a 2S/T/GD youth

Transfeminine

People who transition from a more masculine gender presentation to a more feminine one.¹ It most commonly refers to people assigned male at birth but can also include some intersex people.

Some other concrete actions service providers can take to support caregivers of 2S/T/GD youth are:

- Building their capacity to work through stresses as a family unit rather than individually, express love and care regularly, and communicate openly even in times of conflict.²²
- Supporting them to connect with their youth in similar ways as before their social transition.²³
- Encouraging caregivers to be open-minded, use active listening, and ask youth questions about their gender and experiences to show youth they're a safe person to talk to. Knowing they have supportive adults in their lives can help 2S/T/GD youth deal with external challenges like discrimination or feeling misunderstood.²⁴
- Providing caregivers with information about using pronouns and gender-inclusive language, such as Egale's Pronoun Usage [guide](#).
- Taking note of questions that caregivers have about 2S/T/GD experiences and pointing them to resources and organizations where they can learn more. For example, [Interligne](#) and [Brite Line](#) are support lines providing information about gender and sexual diversity. [Skipping Stone](#) and the [Centre for Sexuality](#) have learning programs for caregivers of 2S/T/GD youth.

"Pronouns [are] a nightmare. It's a nightmare. I find myself constantly correcting other people because it matters to [my child]. If there's that awkward moment, and there has been awkward moments where I don't want to say anything because I don't want to get into it, but my discomfort is not like theirs. It's everything for them. So, I do it, I do it all the time. It's uncomfortable, and now I've done it so much that it's not uncomfortable anymore. It's just a quick correction."

- Caregiver of a 2S/T/GD youth



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