Parental Acceptance of Gender Expression in Young Children

Parental acceptance of gender expression is an essential component of the parent-child relationship and has a lasting impact on all children's well-being. For children who are gender diverse, these supports can help protect against mental health risks and promote well-being. In fact, specific caregiver behaviors, including acceptance of gender expression and advocating for children when they are mistreated because of their gender identity, have been found to protect against depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal attempts.[1]

Home visitors are uniquely positioned to support family acceptance of children's gender expression. Home visiting, at its core, is dedicated to building strong parent-child bonds in all families. Acceptance of gender expression is key to forging and maintaining these bonds.

This resource is designed to help MIECHV awardees and their local implementing agencies (LIAs) better understand and support parental acceptance of gender expression in their young children. It includes information on gender and gender

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children up to kindergarten entry. Home visiting helps prevent child abuse and neglect, supports positive parenting, improves maternal and child health, and promotes child development and school readiness.

---

1   Ryan, C., et al. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 23*(4), 205–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x (PMID: 21073595. Retrieved from https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FAP_Family%20Acceptance_JCAPN.pdf)

Visit the MIECHV Program website to learn more!

development, strategies home visitors can use to support gender acceptance among parents and caregivers, and opportunities for awardees to support LIAs in this work. The appendix includes several resources for families, including a handout that home visitors can share with parents and caregivers.

Understanding Gender and Gender Development

Today, more and more people understand that gender is not binary. Gender experts explain that each child's gender is a unique combination of genetic (chromosomes XX, XY, or other), physical (penis and testicles; vagina, vulva, ovaries, and uterus; or ambiguous/intersex), and neurological (functional structures of the brain that vary by gender) factors. These factors interact with each child's external environment and culture, which inform the child's understanding of what gender means and how it is expressed. Some children experience alignment between their genetic, physical, neurological, and cultural signals of gender, but many do not.

The process of gender development typically progresses in stages. Children tend to become aware of the physical differences between boys and girls at around age two, and many are able to label themselves as either a boy or a girl by age three. While most children develop a sense of their gender identity by around age four, some children experience a fluid process toward gender identity and experiment with gender expression over the course of their childhood or even into adulthood. *(To learn more about gender development, check out [Healthy Gender Development and Young Children](#) from the National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement at Early Childhood National Centers.)*

Since gender development is a process that is unique to each child and there is a broad spectrum of gender expression, the role of adults in this process is to observe and listen to children and respond to their needs; it is not to enforce gender roles and expectations.

Key Terms

Gender expression: How a person externally displays their gender to others (e.g., through their behavior, clothing, demeanor, and hairstyle). Gender expression or presentation may be based on an internal sense of self or self-identification, or it may be based on cultural expectations and pressures related to assigned sex or gender. Gender expression is not the same as sexual orientation—that is, who someone falls in love with or is attracted to.

Gender diverse: An umbrella term to describe the range of descriptions or labels people apply when gender expression or identity does not conform to binary norms. Allows for a broader, more flexible range of gender expression and/or identity. Some examples of these descriptions or labels include *gender nonbinary, gender expansive, gender creative*, or *gender nonconforming*.

(Continued on next page)

How Parents and Caregivers Can Support Gender Expression at Home

The parent-child relationship is vital to a child's well-being and mental health. Children who have a loving bond and secure attachment with a parent or caregiver develop greater resilience, adaptability, and emotional regulation skills later in life. A key component of attachment is a child's confidence that their caregiver will meet their physical and emotional needs, including the need to feel loved and accepted.

Parents who reject or deny their child's gender expression or emerging sense of their own identity—who they are, what they like, and what interests them—cannot change their child's gender identity, but these responses can have negative impacts on their relationship with their child, and on their child's sense of attachment, security, and trust. Over time, this rejection can negatively impact a child's internal sense of who they are, can undermine their self-esteem, and may cause them to feel less worthy of love.

Parents and caregivers build strong bonds with their child when they support their child's gender expression. When parents or caregivers categorize a child's behavior, activities, and interests as appropriate for one gender or another, they give the child direct and indirect messages that there are right and wrong ways to express their gender. Rather than limit children to certain activities and behaviors based on gender-binary roles, parents can best support their children by allowing them freedom to explore gender expression without restrictions related to gender norms.

Home visitors can use the following strategies to help families support their young children's gender expression:

- Model active listening techniques and gender-inclusive language. For example, respond positively to all forms of gender expression in young children. Introduce yourself by sharing your name and personal pronouns.

- Encourage families to pay attention to what sparks their children's interest and let them know that they support

Key Terms *(Continued)*

Gender binary: A system that constructs gender according to two discrete and opposite categories: boy/man and girl/woman. The socially constructed idea that there are only two genders, that every person is one of those two genders, and that gender is fixed and biologically based.

Gender identity: The internal sense a person has of who they are. This is not fixed at birth, but rather develops over time and may be fluid. A person's gender identity may be male, female, somewhere in between, a combination of both, neither, or something else—and may change over the course of their development. Gender identity is not the same as sexual orientation.

Sex: An assignment made at birth (male, female, or intersex), usually based on anatomy but sometimes based on chromosomes and/or hormone levels.

them regardless of how they choose to play or what they choose to wear.

- Encourage families to provide their children with access to a wide range of toys (trucks, dolls, costumes) and experiences (pretend play, sports, building, dancing) regardless of the child's sex assigned at birth. Avoid categorizing toys as "girl toys" or "boy toys."

- Introduce families to children's books that depict gender diversity and parenting resources on supporting child gender expression (see Related Resources).

- Educate families on the negative mental health consequences for a child confronted with stigma, discrimination, or rejection related to their gender expression (whether from parents, caregivers, extended family, or peers). Provide families with information about the signs that may indicate that their child needs mental health support to protect them from stigma, rejection, or discrimination they experience because of treatment related to their gender expression (e.g., withdrawal, sudden changes in mood, prolonged or unprovoked anger or sadness).

- Empower families to stand up for their gender-diverse child and protect them from bullying and discrimination. Provide information on how to communicate with extended family and care providers about their child's gender expression. For example, they can tell their child's preschool teacher, "I support my child playing with dolls and trucks and playing dress up. Please don't punish them or tell them this is wrong."

- Share appropriate medical and mental health resources, as well as information about support groups for parents and caregivers of gender-diverse children (see Related Resources).

- Encourage families to attend cultural and community events with their children with LGBTQ-affirming groups.

- Share the *Tips for Parents and Caregivers* one-page handout (see Appendix 1).

Benefits of Family Acceptance

Research conducted by the Family Acceptance Project[2] has shown that the benefits of family acceptance of gender expression include the following:

- Higher self-esteem
- Better family relationships
- Lower likelihood of suffering from depression
- Lower likelihood of having substance abuse problems
- Three times lower likelihood of attempted suicide

---

2   Ryan, C., et al. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 23*(4), 205–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x (PMID: 21073595. Retrieved from https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FAP_Family%20Acceptance_JCAPN.pdf)

How Awardees Can Support Gender Expression in Young Children

To adequately support parental acceptance of gender expression in young children, it is important to distinguish between those supports and services that are gender-affirming and those that are not.

Gender-affirming care for young children refers to services—including medical, mental health, and nonmedical support—that are developmentally appropriate and focused on understanding and appreciating each child's unique gender experience.

Gender-affirming care is beneficial for all children and is grounded in the belief that all children need love and support. Research has also shown that gender-affirming care improves the mental health outcomes and overall well-being of children who are gender diverse. Awardees and LIAs can provide gender-affirming support to families in the following ways:

- **Provide access to information and resources.** Consider compiling gender-affirming resources, including but not limited to:

Recognizing and Reporting Abuse or Neglect

Gender-diverse children are frequently the targets of violence or harm—by other children, caregivers, or family members. This abuse may be overt (e.g., ridicule, name-calling, physical punishment for not conforming to gender-binary norms) or more subtle (e.g., denying a child the right to play, dress, and act as they would like; or neglecting a child because the caretaker perceives them as "different.")

It is important for home visitors to recognize and address the abuse and neglect that may result, either directly or indirectly, from rejection of a child's gender expression.
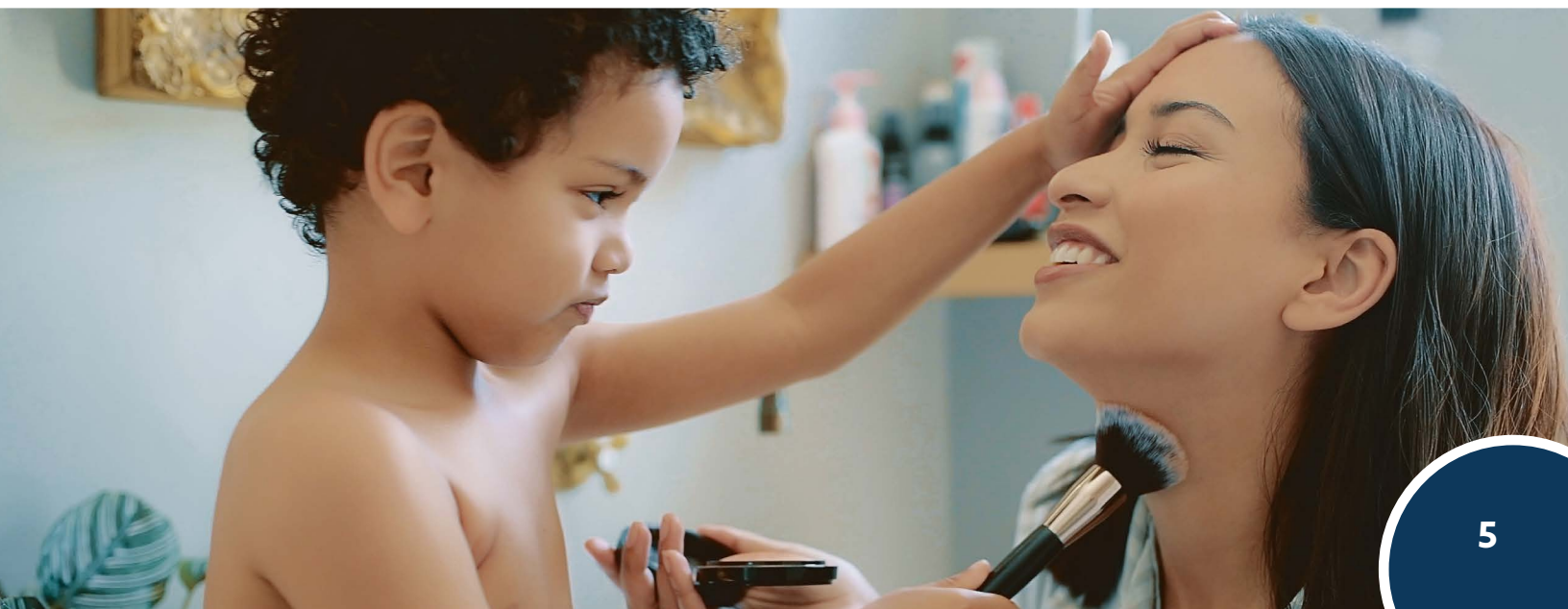
- Information on the importance of family acceptance and the relationship between family rejection and health risks for gender-diverse youth

- Resources for gender-inclusive children's books, parents' books, and family-friendly gender-inclusive media

- Contact information for gender-affirming pediatricians and mental health providers

- Information for gender-affirming parent support groups and resources

- Support for parents and caregivers who are engaging in rejecting behaviors with gender-diverse children (such as name-calling; ridicule; punishing them; or denying a child the ability to play, act, or dress in ways that feel comfortable for them)

- **Review data collection processes.** Some home visitors may need support or even practice around collecting data from participants on their gender identity and that of their child. Rather than making assumptions based on appearances, home visitors should follow the participant's lead. The MIECHV "Form 1 Toolkit" instructs that "responses regarding gender should reflect participant gender identity and should be based on participant self-report. Responses regarding index child gender should reflect gender identity based on caregiver or self-report." It also includes a category for "unknown/did not report" under the index child.

- **Assess the inclusivity of program materials.** The pictures and examples included in program materials reflect the priorities and values of an organization. Encourage LIAs to conduct an inventory of their program materials through a gender-affirming lens. Do photos reinforce stereotypes (e.g., girls wearing pink and playing with dolls)? Do the characters and situations depicted in

examples and stories reinforce societal stereotypes of masculinity or femininity? If yes, how could they be changed to be more gender affirming?

- **Provide workforce development opportunities.** These may include opportunities to practice using gender-affirming language; guidance on gender-affirming data collection processes; opportunities to understand implicit and explicit bias toward gender-diverse people; and workshops on how to engage in conversations with families about gender expression, help families advocate for their gender-diverse child, and identify signs that a child needs mental health support.

Related Resources

Resources for Families

- **Family Acceptance Project**

  Provides resources on gender diversity and family support, including a searchable map of gender clinics and parent support resources, access to training, as well as a national list of affirming cultural resources, faith-based resources, and multilingual evidence-based resources to increase family support.

- **Gender and Family Project**

  Empowers youth, families, and communities by providing gender-affirmative services, training, and research. Works directly with transgender and gender-expansive young people, their families, and their communities to offer a variety of programs and services aimed to build community, decrease isolation, and foster hope and resiliency.

- **Gender Diversity**

  Provides training and resources to support families, build community, increase societal awareness, and improve well-being for people of all gender identities and expressions.

- **Gender Spectrum**

  Access to parent support and discussion groups and a range of information about gender identity and diversity.

- **Trans Families**

  Includes a list of support groups for parents and caregivers, access to discussion groups and individual support, and a map of gender clinics.

Children's Books (Selected Examples)

- It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity by Theresa Thorn and illustrated by Noah Grigni

- Julián Is a Mermaid by Jessica Love

- Neither by Airlie Anderson

- When Aidan Became a Brother by Kyle Lukoff and illustrated by Kaylani Juanita

- Being You: A First Conversation About Gender by Megan Madison, Jessica Ralli, and Anne/Andy Passchier

- Pink, Blue, and You!: Questions for Kids About Gender Stereotypes by Elise Gravel and Mykaell Blais

- Pink Is for Boys by Robb Pearlman and Eda Kaban

- Except When They Don't by Laura Gehl and illustrated by Joshua Heinsz

- The Spectacular Suit by Kat Patrick and illustrated by Hayley Wells

- When Langston Dances by Kaija Langley and illustrated by Keith Mallett

Parenting Books (Selected Examples)

- The Gender Creative Child: Pathways for Nurturing and Supporting Children Who Live Outside Gender Boxes by Diane Ehrensaft

- The Conscious Parent's Guide to Gender Identity: A Mindful Approach to Embracing Your Child's Authentic Self by Darlene Tando

- Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children by Diane Ehrensaft, PhD

- The Gender Identity Guide for Parents: Compassionate Advice to Help Your Child Be Their Most Authentic Self by Tavi Hawn, LCSW

Related Articles from the American Academy of Pediatrics

- Parenting a Gender-Diverse Child: Hard Questions Answered

- Gender-Diverse and Transgender Children

- Gender Identity Development in Children

- Ensuring Comprehensive Care and Support for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children and Adolescents (AAP Policy Statement)

References

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2018, September). *Support resources for families of gender diverse youth*. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Support-Resources-for-Families-of-Gender-Diverse-Youth.aspx

Baum, J., et al. (n.d.). *Supporting and caring for our gender expansive youth: Lessons from the Human Right's Campaign's youth survey*. Gender Spectrum and Human Rights Campaign Foundation. https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/national-dinner/images/general/Gender-expansive-youth-report-final.pdf

Bright Horizons Family Solutions. (2020, October). *Gender identity in children*. https://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/gender-identity-early-childhood

Canadian Paediatric Society. (2021, March). *Gender identity*. https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behavior-and-development/gender-identity

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, November). *Communicating with your child*. https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/communication/index.html

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Supporting LGBTQ+ youth: A guide for foster parents*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/LGBTQyouth/

Ehrensaft, D. (2011). *Gender born, gender made: Raising healthy gender-nonconforming children*. The Experiment, LLC.

Ehrensaft, D. (2016). *The gender creative child: Pathways for nurturing and supporting children who live outside gender boxes*. The Experiment, LLC.

Gender Spectrum. (2019). *Language of gender*. https://genderspectrum.org/articles/language-of-gender

Gender Spectrum. (2019). *Understanding gender*. https://genderspectrum.org/articles/understanding-gender

James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. National Center for Transgender Equality. https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf

Matouk, K., & Wald, M. (2022, March). *Gender-affirming care saves lives*. Columbia University Department of Psychiatry. https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/news/gender-affirming-care-saves-lives

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (n.d.). *Identity and cultural dimensions: LGBTQI.*
https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/LGBTQI

National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. (n.d.). *Healthy gender development and young children: A guide for early childhood programs and professionals.* https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/healthy-gender-development.pdf

Psychology Today (n.d.). *Gender.* https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/gender

Rafferty, J. (2022, May). *Gender-diverse and transgender children.* American Academy of Pediatrics. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Diverse-Transgender-Children.aspx

Rafferty, J. (2022, May). *Gender identity development in children.* American Academy of Pediatrics. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx

Rafferty, J. (2022, May). *Parenting a gender-diverse child: Hard questions answered.* American Academy of Pediatrics. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Parenting-a-Gender-Diverse-Child-Hard-Questions-Answered.aspx

Rafferty, J. (2018). Ensuring comprehensive care and support for transgender and gender-diverse children and adolescents. *Pediatrics, 142*(4): e20182162. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2162

Ryan, C., et al. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 23*(4):205–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x (PMID: 21073595. Retrieved from https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FAP_Family%20Acceptance_JCAPN.pdf)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *A practitioner's resource guide: Helping families to support their LGBT children.* HHS Publication No. PEP14-LGBTKIDS. Rockville, MD. https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FamilySupportForLGBTChildrenGuidance.pdf

The Trevor Project. (2020). *2020 national survey on LGBTQ youth mental health.* https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020/?section=Research-Methodology

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of Population Affairs. (2022). *Gender-affirming care and young people.* https://opa.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/gender-affirming-care-young-people-march-2022.pdf

Winston, R., & Chicot, R. (2016). The importance of early bonding on the long-term mental health and resilience of children. *London Journal of Primary Care, 8*(1), 12–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/17571472.2015.1133012

Appendix 1. Tips for Parents and Caregivers

- Listen to your child and accept and love them as they are. Ask them questions about what they like and dislike and respect their answers. You may assume that your three-year-old daughter wants to play with dolls, but she might prefer to build with blocks.

- Encourage your child's self-expression. Let them choose the clothes they like to wear, how they want to style their hair, and their favorite colors. For example, if your daughter only likes to wear athletic shorts, don't pressure her to wear skirts and dresses.

- Support your child if they express gender-diverse behaviors and interests. If your son likes to play with dolls, let him pick out a doll at the dollar store and encourage him to play with this special new toy.

- Be your child's champion. A child who is gender diverse can be the target of bullies and ridicule. Protect your child from bullying, discrimination, and abuse, and stand up for your child if they are mistreated by others because of their gender expression and other personal characteristics.

- Communicate with your child's extended family and care providers about your child's gender expression, including name, pronouns, clothes, behavior, and play. For example, you can tell your child's preschool teacher, "I support my child playing with dolls and trucks and playing dress-up. Please don't punish them or tell them this is wrong."

- Do not allow the people who are around your child to make slurs or jokes based on gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Your child is listening and absorbing the messages that they hear around them.

- Look for opportunities to celebrate diversity in all forms. This lets your child know that your family welcomes and values all people.

- Watch for signs that may indicate a need for mental health support, such as withdrawal, sudden changes in mood, or prolonged unprovoked anger or sadness, and seek out gender-affirming mental health support.

- Seek out support groups to connect with parents and caregivers of gender-diverse children.