

SOGIE Development Across the Lifespan

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression

Everyone has a sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). A person's SOGIE may emerge differently at different times of life. People understand and express their SOGIEs differently according to their environment, culture, and other aspects of their identity. This document provides a brief synthesis of patterns of SOGIE development across the human lifespan. Sections focus on one of four categories: sex,¹ gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation. For definitions of common SOGIE terms, see the SOGIE Term Desk Aid.

Sex

e.g., female, male, intersex

Even before birth, medical professionals may assign a sex (male/female/intersex) to a baby according to a combination of factors including chromosomes and hormone levels. At birth, medical professionals will designate a baby's sex on the baby's birth certificate, almost always based on the baby's external genitalia.

Adult sex development begins during puberty. Many adults believe that they should begin to discuss puberty with youth at the age of 13, but for many youth this will be too late. So that youth are not caught off-guard when changes occur, youth may need to be prepared earlier, at around 9 or 10 years of age, or as early as 7 if showing signs of puberty.²

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to persons of the same and/or different sex or gender. **A person does not need to have had sexual experience to have a sexual orientation.** People's certainty about their sexual orientation—whether straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, lesbian, queer, or something else—increases with age, suggesting “an unfolding sexual identity during adolescence.”³

Sexual orientation
e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, straight, queer, questioning, pansexual

Sexual behaviors do not equal sexual orientation. For example, youth who self-report as lesbian may still occasionally have sex with males, and youth who self-report as gay may have sex with females.⁴ Some youth know and feel comfortable with their sexual orientation from a young age, and other youth are questioning. The American Psychological Association affirms that “same-sex sexual and romantic attractions, feelings and behaviors are normal and positive variations of human sexuality regardless of sexual orientation.”⁵ Some children and youth will grow up to not experience sexual attraction, identifying as *asexual*. Other youth are described as being “*questioning*” about their sexual orientation.⁶

Early development of gender identity, the internal sense of oneself as gendered, emerges between age 2 and 3 years old. Around age 2, children become conscious of some physical differences between boys and girls. By age 3, most children are easily able to label themselves as a boy or a girl (given that most people in American society tend to operate under the assumption of a gender binary), and differentiate between toys typically played with by boys and those typically used by girls. For example, a 3-year-old girl may gravitate toward dolls and playing house *because* dolls and playing house are associated with girls. By age 4, most children have a stable sense of themselves as a girl, boy, neither, or in between. By age 6, most children spend the majority of their playtime with members of their same gender identity when allowed by their peers.⁷

Gender identity
e.g., girl, boy, cisgender,
transgender, gender queer,
woman, man

Cisgender and transgender are two words to describe the relationship between a person's sex and gender identity. Most children are *cisgender*, meaning they have a gender identity that corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth. For example, a child indicated "male" (sex) on his birth certificate who considers himself a boy (gender identity). Some children have a gender identity that is different from that which corresponds to their sex assigned at birth. Among these children, some may identify with a different gender, no gender, or somewhere in between. Persistent gender identity emerges between ages 4 and 6. Children who are *gender non-conforming* in early childhood may grow up to be *transgender* or (*gender*) *queer* adults, others will not. **There is no evidence-based way to predict with certainty how a child will identify later in life.**⁸

Not all transgender youth experience gender dysphoria (clinically significant distress associated with gender identity that requires medical attention) but some do. Medical professionals evaluate individuals with gender dysphoria on a case-by-case basis, with expert medical judgment required for both reaching a diagnosis and determining a course for treatment. The treatment for gender dysphoria usually involves some combination of hormone therapy, sex reassignment surgery, and/or real life experience (living for a period of time in accordance with one's gender identity).⁹

Transgender children and youth should be treated with the same care and respect as any other child or youth. Family acceptance and affirmation of gender identity—regardless of whether or not, or to what extent, a person chooses to transition—is crucial to the safety and well-being of transgender people.

Preferred names and pronouns. A person (child, youth, or adult) may identify with a different name than they were given at birth. A person may also identify with pronouns such as "she/her," "he/him," "they/their," and "ze/zir," among others. Service providers help people feel safe and respected when they use the person's preferred name and pronoun. Using preferred names and *gender pronouns* is important for children and youth developing their gender identities. Adults, too, may understand their gender identities differently over time. Adults who come out as transgender and/or gender non-conforming should be treated with dignity and respect.

Gender expression

e.g., feminine, masculine, androgynous, gender neutral, gender non-conforming

Gender expression is the external appearance of a person's gender to others. The only way to know someone's gender identity or sexual orientation is if they tell you. Gender expression, on the other hand, is how a person displays themselves to other people. At

every stage of life development, *gender roles* and *gender stereotypes* place expectations upon people of how they should act, think, look, dress, sound, and feel. A person's gender expression may conform or not conform to these roles and stereotypes.

Learning gender roles occurs at around 4 years old, when children can distinguish between "things that boys do" and "things that girls do."¹⁰ Girls and boys generally exhibit different patterns of gender-role behavior in the form of toy preferences, play patterns, social roles, gestures, speech, grooming, dress, and whether aggression is expressed physically or through social strategies.¹¹ When a child or youth's interests and abilities are different from what society expects, they may be subjected to discrimination and bullying.

No one expresses exclusively masculine or feminine traits. Children and youth need exposure to a wide range of gender expressions for healthy development. Children can be exposed to different gender expressions through books and media showing people in diverse gender roles (stay-at-home dads, working moms, male nurses, female police officers, etc.), a wide range of toys (dolls, toy vehicles, action figures, blocks, etc.), and positive role models of different gender expressions and identities.

Common words to describe gender expression include: *feminine*, *masculine*, and *androgynous* (a combination of masculine and feminine), and *gender neutral* (without reference to femininity, masculinity, or androgyny).

What is considered **socially acceptable gender expression changes over time.** For example, if society deems pink a feminine color, a 5-year-old girl who only wears pink dresses will be considered *gender conforming* in the way she presents herself through dress. A 5-year-old boy who wears pink dresses, however, may be considered *gender non-conforming*. A person's gender expression changes over the course of a lifetime: a 5-year-old girl may choose to express her gender wearing pink dresses but choose to avoid wearing pink as a teenager.¹² Adults, too, can express their gender in different ways throughout their life. For example, a man in his twenties may choose to wear eyeliner and may not choose to wear makeup by the time he is in his fifties.

¹ "Sex," or assigned sex at birth, is related to but not directly a part of the SOGIE acronym. See the *SOGIE Terms Desk Aid* for more information.

² Biro, F.M., "Pubertal Assessment Method and Baseline Characteristics in a Mixed Longitudinal Study of Girls," *American Academy of Pediatrics*. August 9, 2010.

³ Adelson, S., "Practice Parameter on Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Sexual Orientation, Gender Nonconformity, and Gender Discordance in Children and Adolescents," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. Vol. 51, 9, 2012. Retrieved from www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S089085671200500X.

⁴ Institute of Medicine Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities: *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011.

⁵ American Psychological Association, Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, 2009. Retrieved from www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf.

⁶ Children and youth especially may also be questioning about their gender identity and gender expression. Birkett M, Espelage DL, Koenig B., "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Questioning Students in Schools: The Moderating Effects of Homophobic Bullying and School Climate on Negative Outcomes," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2009.

⁷ Adelson, S., 2012.

⁸ Robert Garofalo, MD, MPH, *Understanding Gender Nonconformity in Childhood and Adolescence*, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago Gender and Sex Development Program, 2015.

Retrieved at www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/solgbt_webinar_transition_garofalo.pdf Also, Steensma et al., "Factors associated with desistence and persistence of childhood gender dysphoria: a quantitative follow-up study," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2013.

⁹ Lambda Legal. "FAQ on Access to Transition-Related Care," 2016. Retrieved from www.lambdalegal.org/know-your-rights/transgender/transition-related-care-faq.

¹⁰ American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015. Retrieved from www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx.

¹¹ Adelson, S., 2012.

¹² Contemporary society typically permits more freedom for girls and women to express themselves in masculine ways than it does for boys and men to express themselves in feminine ways.