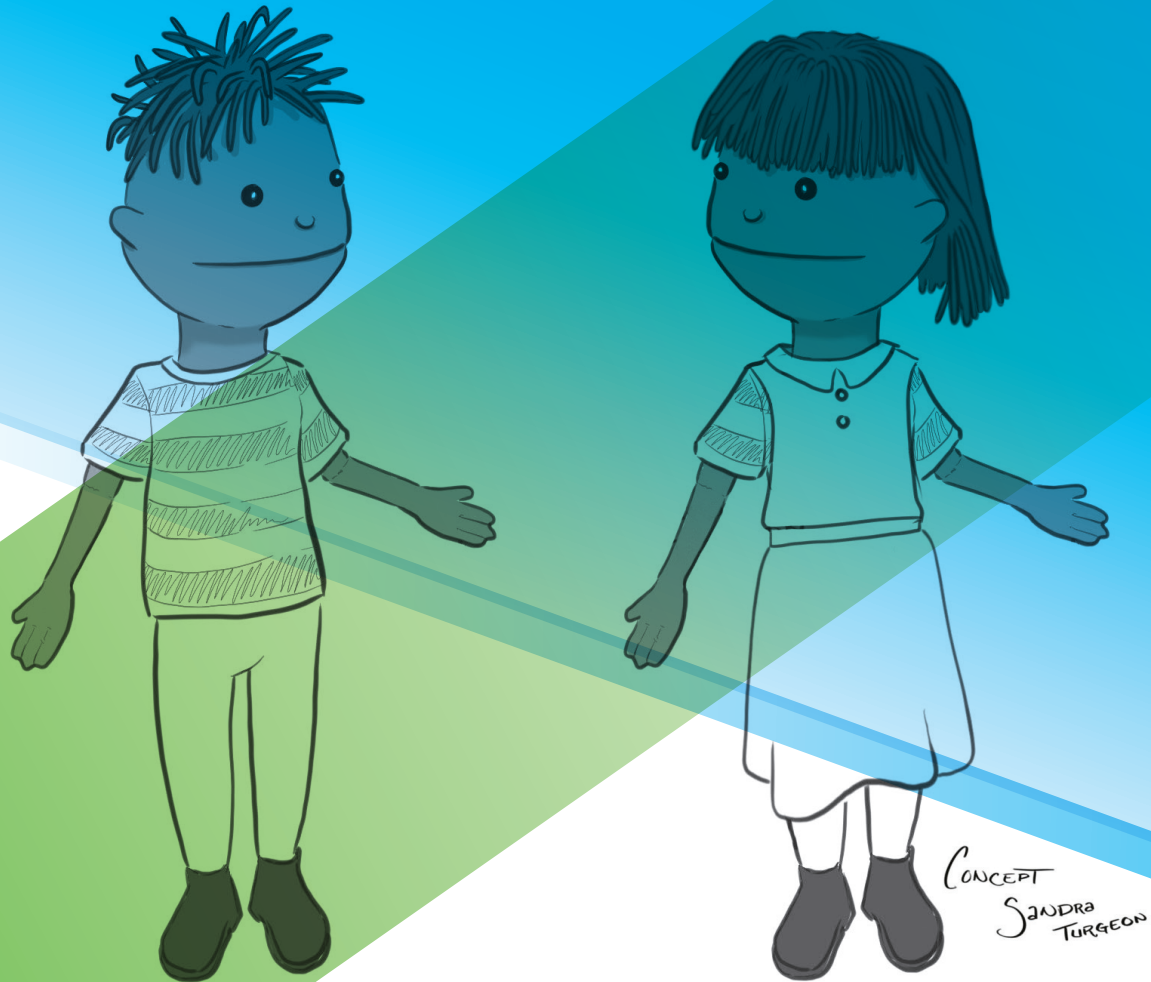


INFORM CHILDREN DURING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD  
PERIOD ON ISSUES RELATED TO **GENDER,**  
**GENDER IDENTITY AND**  
**GENDER EXPRESSION.**



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# INTRODUCTION

**This booklet is a tool for child care teachers and educators to support students better explore, understand and accept gender diversity, trans and non-binary gender identities and expressions. However, the booklet's content is not intended for making diagnoses. It provides helpful, general information on gender concepts and gender expression, how gender identity develops in children aged 2 to 7 years old, as well as sections on cognitive, emotional and social development related to gender identity and expression. This booklet is designed to provide support for discussion and games to address the questions of children and their peers about their gender identity and gender expression.**

While the term "sex" refers to biological aspects of femininity (e.g. vulva) and masculinity (e.g. penis), "gender" relates more to psychological and social aspects. Children assigned to the male sex usually develop a sense of belonging to the male gender at about age 2. They are likely to feel comfortable with most of the behaviours our society associates with the male gender. For example, playing with trucks and dressing as a boy. The same is true for most girls, who will be more inclined to choose activities or objects defined by society as being feminine. Some children's gender identity does not match their assigned birth sex. In fact, children may identify with the opposite gender, with both genders, or with neither of the binary genders (known as "non-binary," which means not belonging to any masculine or feminine binary category). Children may also explore one gender and then the other, which means that gender identity and exploration may be fluid and unique for each child. For example, a 3-year-old boy may, despite being aware of his assigned birth sex, show greater interest in objects or activities socially associated with girls. This does not necessarily mean that this child will claim to be a girl later on. However, this behaviour may crystallize, and once he is a teenager, then an adult, he may continue to identify with the female gender.

These differences can lead to many situations that require specific interventions. For example, a girl who sometimes dresses as a boy in front of her peer group, for whom gender stereotypes mean that blue is for boys, may lead to questions, teasing and even inappropriate behaviour.

During early childhood, gender identity and expression usually take place. It is therefore essential to provide children with support during this period, since the gender spectrum is increasingly perceived to be fluid and diverse. This document provides some helpful tips to properly inform children about gender-related issues and allow them to express their uniqueness while respecting each other.

## A FEW DEFINITIONS...

### Gender nonconformity / Gender variant:

Anyone whose gender identity, role or expression differs from the cultural norm usually associated with their assigned birth sex (Thériault and Vadnais, 2017).

### Transgender:

Anyone whose gender identity differs from their assigned birth sex (Thériault and Vadnais, 2017).

### Gender dysphoria:

Suffering or discomfort caused by the difference between a person's gender identity or expression and their assigned birth sex (Fisk, 1974; Thériault and Vadnais, 2017).

**Thériault and Vadnais (2017) suggest that it is normal for children to:**

- **Explore their sexuality and gender identity;**
- **Be interested in toys and games traditionally associated with the opposite gender;**
- **Play dress up in clothing traditionally associated with the opposite sex.**

According to a recent study, higher proportions of transgender children may have suicidal thoughts or exhibit self-injurious behaviour compared with other children (De Vries et al., Amsterdam, 2011). It is therefore important to provide supportive environment with access to accurate information and education devoted acceptance of gender diversity and bullying prevention of sexist, transphobic and homophobic behavior. Support and educate children who are questioning their gender (whether it be transient, fluid or permanent) in their quest for identity, without rushing them. This support needs to be tailored to each stage of their gender identity development.



# GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT STAGES ACCORDING TO KOHLBERG (1966):

- 1 > **Gender awareness:** 18-24 months
- 2 > **Gender identity:** 24 months-3 years
- 3 > **Gender stability:** 3-5 years
- 4 > **Gender constancy:** 5-6 years

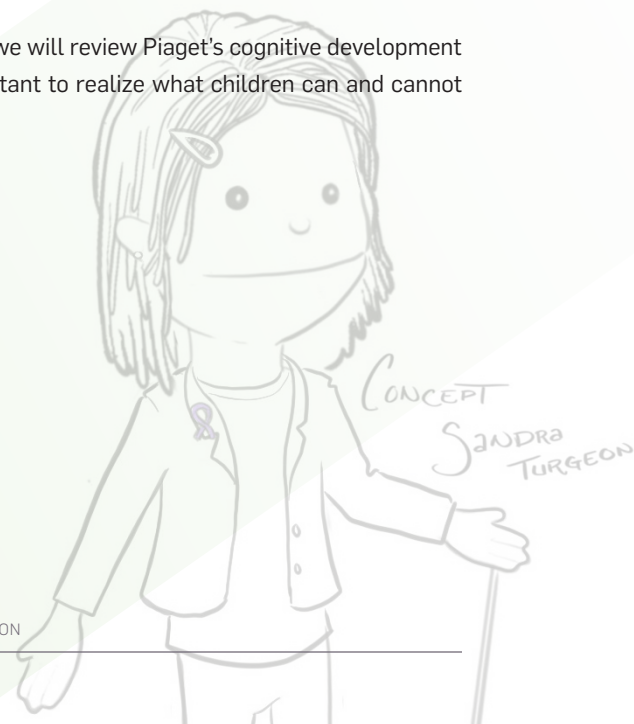
## Before gender awareness...

Self-concept is defined by the set of representations and perceptions of oneself. It answers the question: "Who am I?" Self-concept is often divided into two components, the "I" and the "Me". The "I" refers to the subjective self, whereas the "Me" refers to the objective self (Lewis, 1991). Development experts often refer to the objective self as the "I" or "I exist." This part of the child's self-concept, developed around 2 or 3 months, allows infants to understand that they are separate beings and distinct from other objects and people, which they can affect. For example, when a child touches a mobile, it moves. They therefore understand that they have an impact on their environment (Lewis, 1991). At this stage, children are not yet able to understand that they are a boy or a girl. They only understand that they are a separate entity.

## STAGE 1: GENDER AWARENESS

Objective self-awareness, which develops between 18 and 21 months, occurs when children understand that they are separate objects with specific characteristics. Children can therefore be placed into certain categories based on their sex, physical features or qualities and weaknesses (Lewis, 1991). Gender awareness develops during this period. Children understand that there is a male or female gender in most individuals. They are not able to identify with either gender.

To fully understand what your students are going through during this stage, we will review Piaget's cognitive development stages. To tailor various intervention based on this development, it is important to realize what children can and cannot understand.



## Cognitive development (Piaget)

Up to 2 years old, children are at the sensorimotor stage. According to cognitivist theory, children discover the world through their body and five senses. They do not yet have a logical understanding of these aspects. As we have seen, gender awareness is taking shape. Children understand that there are two categories of binary genders: masculine and feminine. However, they are not able to identify with either of them; their cognitive development is limited.

At this stage, children go through what is known as an “egocentric” phase in cognitive terms. They are not able to put themselves in others’ shoes or understand their viewpoints. Children believe that others think and feel like themselves. It is therefore too early to talk about empathy or putting themselves in others’ shoes.

### Practical advice:

At this stage, it is not necessary to address the concept of gender with the child for educational purposes, as several authors suggest that the concept of gender is not well understood (Martin and Ruble, 2010). If a child shows an interest in gendered objects or situations, this is not because of their gendered aspect. For example, if a one-year-old prefers a pink ball rather than a blue ball, this is in no way related to the fact that blue is more associated with boys and pink with girls. Before two years old, your students have only acquired what experts call gender awareness. They understand that there is mostly a masculine and a feminine gender, without identifying with either of them.





## STAGE 2: GENDER IDENTITY

From the age of 3, your students may identify with their assigned birth sex, male or female, boy or girl (Fagot and Leinbach, 1993). Gender identity takes place during this period. Although children usually begin to identify with the gender that matches their assigned birth sex and develop an interest in objects and characteristics socially associated with this gender, children may identify with a gender that differs from their assigned birth sex, or with aspects of both male and female identities or simply neither (which is called non-binary, an identity that is outside the binary of masculine and feminine). Two-year-old children know that they are a boy or a girl, but unlike the previous stage of gender awareness, they also know that certain objects and characteristics are more associated with the masculine and feminine gender. For example, a 2-year-old girl knows she is a girl; she also knows that girls usually have long hair in our society, but she may consciously prefer to have short hair.

Although developmental psychology researchers have agreed for decades on the precise stages of identity development and gender expression, it is important to realize that many experts increasingly view gender, gender identity and gender expression as a continuum, rather than specific, rigid categories. For example, although most children identify with a gender at the gender identity stage, some children may not identify with a specific gender. For example, they may sometimes feel like a boy and sometimes like a girl. This identity may or may not change over time. Gender identity and expression are increasingly associated with the concept of “gender fluidity,” which may be expressed in many different forms specific to each child and which may change over time.

### Cognitive development (Piaget)

During this stage, children use simple logic. They are able to classify objects, understand others' viewpoints and, most importantly, they are able to use symbols. As seen earlier, children can understand that some objects are associated with female or male stereotypes. Gender identity may therefore be quite important to the child. They are also able to understand that others may have emotions and thoughts that are different from their own.

Gender stereotypes also develop during this period. Gender stereotypes are generalizations about characteristics associated with gender. For example, moms are better at making curls in their hair and dads are better at fixing things. Between 3 and 4 years old, children can assign various jobs, activities and games to each sex. Then, around age 5, they may associate personality traits with each gender. For example, little girls cry and boys are daredevils.

Gender stereotyping rules also develop during this period. For example, studies have shown that after showing 4-year-olds a role play, they said that it was OK for the story's male protagonist to cry. When 6-year-old children were asked the same question, they said that the story's character could not cry because he was a boy. Although they play a role in helping children understand the complex world around them by means of categories, gender stereotyping rules may lead to situations in which children who do not comply these rules will be singled out.

In fact, due to the need to categorize and expose children (e.g. television shows, their siblings' behaviour, observation of their parents, etc.), children store a huge amount of information about gender roles. At this age, they may be more rigid about how a girl should act or dress versus a boy. In cognitive terms, it may also be difficult for children to understand exceptions. For example, boys prefer blue, but Antoine's favourite colour is mauve.

### **Practical advice:**

As we have seen, at this stage, children may consciously adopt behaviour that is associated with the opposite sex or both sexes. This does not necessarily mean that this behaviour will continue or that it will remain the same throughout their life. It is therefore important to help children with questions about their gender identity or expression. For example: "Rita, why do you like having short hair?" "How do you feel?" and "What do you need?" In the form of group questions, this helps children understand the development of everyone's gender identity and expression in a non-threatening way. Also, by speaking openly about their gender identity or expression, children will understand that this is not a negative or taboo subject and that they can talk about it.

Due to their ability to use symbols, it may be helpful to do gender-related activities using tools, such as a puppet. This can encourage questions and discussions about gender. Children are now able to understand others' viewpoints. It can thus be very helpful to carry out such activities to make children aware of their peers' own gender identity development. For example, "You are a boy and you like blue. Martin is also a boy, but he likes red." These guided activities can be used not only to help children better understand gender development, but also to foster the development of empathy and thereby reduce inappropriate behaviour.



## STAGE 3: GENDER STABILITY

According to the experts, at this stage, your students understand that an individual's sex is a characteristic that will remain stable over time (Kohlberg, 1966, and Slaby and Frey, 1975). They can answer questions such as: "When you were little, were you a baby girl or a baby boy?" Or "When you grow up, will you be a mom or a dad?" At this stage, children may be uncomfortable with these questions. Even if they know that they are a boy or a girl physically and are aware of behaviours associated with one or the other, they may desire to become a teenager or an adult of the opposite sex. If they do not identify with any of the categories or if they feel comfortable in a combination of both, they may be non-binary, which is a gender identity that differs from the so-called "binary" genders of man and woman.

It may be difficult for children to accept that their gender does not change. For example, at this point, a little girl who wants to have a penis later on understands that it will probably not happen. At this stage, your students have not yet acquired the last stage of gender identity development, gender constancy.

This means that the physical appearance of others often determines their gender or gender expression. For example, a person with a beard is a man because he has a beard, which may be incorrect. This person may not identify with men or women. For example, an individual may identify as not having a binary gender. They are therefore identified as "non-binary."

With respect to developmental theories, children are still at the simple logic stage in cognitive terms.

### Practical advice:

Children will definitely have questions about gender differences during this period. They may also begin to identify with a gender on a permanent basis and adopt stereotypical behaviour (e.g. walk, clothing worn, etc.).

Your child may also decide to adopt behaviour associated with the opposite gender of their assigned birth sex (e.g. a girl only wants to dress with clothes traditionally associated with boys). Children of this age pay special attention to their genitals and may show interest or ask many questions about changes in their bodies during puberty. It is important to encourage children to move beyond rigid gender stereotypes in order to develop an understanding of what gender identity is: fluid and unique to each person. For example, an activity can have the theme "Each of us is unique" or "We are all different," in which the children express how they feel. These activities can help children develop empathy for their peers. In doing so, we teach them to put themselves in others' shoes, even if they adopt behaviours that defy gender stereotypes.

By speaking openly about their gender identity, children will understand that this is not a negative or taboo subject and that they can talk about it.



## STAGE 4: GENDER CONSTANCY

The last stage of gender development is gender constancy, which develops between 5 and 6 years old. It is only at this stage that your students understand that regardless of physical appearance, gender is permanent (Dafflon Novelle, 2006). Although children develop gender stereotypes as young as 3 years old (e.g. moms cook, dads take out the garbage), only after the development of gender constancy do children have a more complete understanding of the concept of gender. As we have seen earlier, children will usually develop a gender concept that matches their assigned birth sex. Nevertheless, your students may identify with a gender concept that is the opposite of their assigned birth sex and this identity may persist beyond the gender concept stage. According to many studies, 25-30% of high school students define themselves as androgynous or bigender (Boldizar, 1991), that is, they identify themselves as feminine AND masculine. There are more and more gender studies and the idea that children may identify with the opposite gender of their assigned birth sex, both genders (androgynous) or neither of the two binary genders (non-binary) is now defined by the term "transgender." An individual who identifies as having no binary gender (male or female) may be identified as non-binary. Some people's gender identity constantly changes in relation to their assigned birth sex. A fluid person may feel feminine, masculine, non-binary or bigender.

### Practical advice:

Important: Even if your 6- or 7-year-old students identify with the opposite gender, this does not mean that they will be transgender. Therefore, a supportive approach with questions and information is recommended. Throughout their early childhood, your students will go through periods in which they will seek confidence, autonomy and then pride (Erikson, 1980). In order not to undermine these various goals, it is important not to rush your students in their quest for identity. Your role is to be a guide, answer their questions and support their autonomy to develop a sense of self.

During periods of gender questioning, some children may be inclined to feel curious about their peers' bodies, for example, wanting to check if another child has a penis. It is important to always encourage the importance of respect for others based on the principles of personal boundaries: "It's Marc's body, not yours."

## DOs

- Ask and answer questions in structured workshops
- Create contexts that encourage children's questions
- Encourage the freedom to choose and confidently assert themselves
- Guide children using games
- Encourage and promote acceptance
- Remind children that they are always loved and appreciated
- Encourage and promote the possibility of being different and unique
- Learn respectful vocabulary (e.g. "unique")
- Use educational strategies to develop empathy
- Positive reinforcement when children respect the desired gender in their words and actions (e.g. "You respected Miguel's choice. Good for you!")

## DON'Ts

- Let children fend for themselves when faced with others' questions
- Encourage gender discussions that are not structured
- Ignore teasing or inappropriate comments and behaviour: you must always intervene!
- Ignore negative attitudes about gender or questions
- Discourage, shame or ridicule
- Use negative socialization methods (punish, ignore, minimize) versus strategies for understanding
- Question children about their choices in front of a group without having asked them beforehand
- Impose binary gender-based activities and impose rigid gender role stereotyping

**This booklet does not present the full spectrum of gender and gender expression, as certain concepts are still being studied. Above all, it is recommended to use it selectively to promote children's optimal development.**

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