

# Understanding LGBTQI+ Inclusion in Early Childhood Education

For ECE Teachers

## What does it mean to talk about LGBTQI+ Issues in early childhood?

### **We are talking about families**

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Families can have one parent, two parents, or more, and parents can be of any gender. Some families have guardians, foster parents, grandparents, nannies, aunties and other adults who live with children, care for children and pick them up from school. Using inclusive language for “grown-ups” includes all kinds of family diversity.

### **We are talking about all the different ways you can be a boy, a girl, and a person**

There are more than two kinds of bodies and more than two ways to feel in those bodies.

### **We are challenging stereotypes that hurt all kids**

By using gender-inclusive language for people in the world and in books, rather than assigning a binary gender, we stop associating certain actions, interests, colors, clothes etc. with a certain gender. We stop reinforcing the idea that only one gender can wear dresses, build with blocks, or play with baby dolls. We make room for all the ways kids can be, and all the kinds of people in kids’ lives.

### **Gender-inclusive language includes**

- words like “grown-up,” “person,” and “child” rather than “man,” “woman,” “boy,” and “girl”
- words like firefighter, police officer, and mail carrier rather than fireman, policeman, mailman
- pronouns like they, them and theirs when talking about a person whose gender we don’t know
- pronouns like they, them, and theirs, and neopronouns like ze, zir, and zirs, for people who have told us they want to be referred to that way

### **We are modeling open communication and asking questions**

- Using children’s play, observations of the world, and questions about gender and families to expand on concepts
- Like with any other topic, we aren’t “forcing” a conversation on kids too young to have it, but rather noticing where the topic is already coming up and supporting kids to make sense of it in an age-appropriate way

On the following pages you’ll find information on the importance of LGBTQI+ inclusion in ECE, terminology for discussing LGBTQI+ inclusion, frequently asked questions, and scenarios and teaching moments that may come up. For even more, check out the resource list at <https://tinyurl.com/kjamipj4>.

## Why this matters – The Importance of LGBTQI+ Competence in ECE

*“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”*

*— Adrienne Rich, American poet*

### **Gender is one of the most fundamental parts of individual identity.**

- People don't simply choose their gender identity - it is a deeply-felt characteristic of a person.
- Gender identity is so much a part of ourselves that an attack on someone's gender identity feels like an attack on oneself as a person.
- Gender identity is not just an LGBTQI+ concept. People who are heterosexual (straight) and cisgender (not trans) also have a gender identity.

### **Students, teachers and families should go to school without fear of harassment, including anti-LGBTQ and gender-based bullying**

- Anti-LGBTQI words and behaviors need to be understood as bullying and harassment. Unfortunately, we know that anti-LGBTQ bullying is still very common.
- Bullying and harassment affect students' mental health. Providing an inclusive environment supports kids' resilience and reduces depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.
- Teachers who are LGBTQI+ may not feel safe being “out” at work. When teachers have to leave part of their identity at the door, they may also leave part of their creativity, energy, and talent. When any teacher can't bring their whole self to the classroom, the whole school misses out.

### **All students need to understand the world around them**

- Our communities include diverse families and people of many genders and sexual orientations.
- LGBTQI+ families come in all shapes and sizes, religions, ethnicities and races.

### **Respect and compassion are at the heart of LGBTQI+ inclusion**

- By helping children understand each other's identities and families, we foster mutual respect.
- People tend to fear what they don't understand. Avoiding the topic of LGBTQI+ people does not make kids less interested in it, but it does make them more confused.
- Including LGBTQI+ kids and families makes a more inclusive environment for everyone. It's not about valuing LGBTQI+ families more than others; it's about valuing all families for all their similarities and differences.

## How do we talk about LGBTQI+ Inclusion? – Definitions

### What do all the letters in “LGBTQI+” stand for and what do they mean?

All these words have evolved over time and may mean different things to different people. Here are some general definitions to start with:

- **Lesbian** refers to women who are sexually and/or romantically attracted to other women.
- **Gay** has traditionally referred to men who are sexually and/or romantically attracted to other men. Now “gay” is often used by people of many genders who are attracted to people of their same gender.
- **Bisexual** means that someone is attracted to more than one gender of people. This can mean that someone is attracted to both men and women, but not necessarily. And of course, someone who is attracted to both men and women is not automatically attracted to *all* men and women - it just means that they could *potentially* be attracted to a person of either of those genders.
- **Transgender** means that a person’s gender identity **does not** correspond to the gender they were assumed to be at birth based on their body.
- **Queer** is an expansive identity that, at a basic level, means “not straight.” Like all gender and sexuality categories, queer means as many different things as there are people who identify as queer. Because it is sometimes used as a slur, it’s important to ask people whether queer is a word they use for themselves, and not assume that anyone who’s not straight automatically identifies as queer.
- **Intersex** people are born with different combinations of biological sex characteristics, i.e., different combinations of X and Y chromosomes, hormone levels, and genitals, that make their bodies not easily categorized as simply male or simply female.
- **+** The “+” in LGBTQI+ acknowledges that categories and labels can only do so much to encompass the expansive and unique ways that every person experiences their sexuality and gender. There are many more ways to describe identities beyond those represented in the acronym.

### What are sex and gender?

- **Sex** refers to chromosomes, internal and external sex organs, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics. Bodies have many combinations of sex characteristics. There are more than just “boy” bodies and “girl” bodies. Helpful terms for inclusive language about sex:
  - Rather than saying a general category of bodies (such as boy or girl bodies, male or female bodies), say the specific characteristic you mean: bodies with uteruses, bodies with penises, bodies with vulvas, people who can get pregnant, etc.
  - Use “some” and “many.” Example: Many mommies have uteruses. Some daddies have uteruses.
- **Gender** is one’s understanding of oneself in relation to concepts like man, woman, trans, genderqueer, and many others. Gender is how you feel like a girl, boy, both, or neither.

### What is the gender binary?

- The **gender binary** is the pervasive assumption that there are only two kinds of people, men and women, and that these gender categories are biological, unchangeable, and have inherent characteristics. The binary isn't "just" an idea; it influences our material world in many ways like our language, bathrooms, health care system, and marketing of foods, toys, and clothes..

### What does cisgender mean?

- **Cisgender** means that your gender identity *does* correspond to the gender you were assumed to be at birth based on your biological sex. In other words, cisgender means "not transgender." For example: someone who was born with XX chromosomes and a vulva who identifies as a woman is a cisgender woman.

### Other good terms to know:

- **Gender-nonconforming (GNC)** is an expansive term that refers to anyone who does not adhere to traditional gender identities and/or roles. Gender- nonconforming and trans are different but overlapping categories. For example, a cisgender woman who expresses herself through masculinity might identify or be described as gender-nonconforming. And children who may or may not be trans, but who are playing with their gender expression and their interests, could be described as gender nonconforming - such as a child assigned as male at birth, who expresses that he feels like he's a boy, and loves to play pretend that he's a princess and wear dresses or paint his nails. To avoid the potential stigma of the word nonconforming, some people instead describe children who are exploring their own genders as **gender creative** or **gender expansive**.
- **Heteronormativity** is the pervasive set of assumptions that a) everyone is a man or a woman, b) everyone is heterosexual i.e., sexually and romantically attracted to their "opposite" gender, and c) men and women act and interact with one another in specific ways inherent to their gender. Like the gender binary, heteronormativity is not "just" a set of ideas; heteronormativity also describes how these assumptions are built into organizations and culture and influences every aspect of our lives.

## Gender Inclusion in Action: Frequently Asked Questions

### **What might you say if a parent asks you why their child(ren) has to learn about LGBTQI+ inclusion and/or questions whether or not these topics are “appropriate” for young children?**

- Children are receiving messages about gender and what it means to be a “boy” or a “girl” from media, books, pictures, family and peers. Many of these messages present two stereotyped and limiting ways of being. Talking with children about gender in an honest and inclusive way benefits all children.
- Assure parents that you’re providing age-appropriate information to help their child(ren) understand their own body, expect respect from the people around them, and respect and celebrate their diverse peers.
- Like with any other topic, we aren’t “forcing” a conversation on kids too young to have it, but rather noticing where the topic is already coming up and supporting kids to make sense of it all.

### **What might you say if a parent tells you they’re upset their child(ren) is learning about “pronouns”?**

- Ask questions to find out what they think is going on, and what they’re upset about. People have many misconceptions, some of them encouraged by dishonest media coverage and anti-LGBTQ+ activists. Finding out the specific nature of their concern can make it much easier to address.
- Remind them that everyone has pronouns (even them) and affirm that you’re working to create an inclusive and celebratory school community for them, their child(ren), and every other family.

### **What might you say if a parent is worried that you are encouraging their child(ren) to be LGBTQ+?**

- Ask questions to find out what they think is going on, and what they’re upset about. People have many misconceptions, some of them encouraged by dishonest media coverage and anti-LGBTQ+ activists. Finding out the specific nature of their concern can make it much easier to address.
- According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity.”
- Although some children’s and adults’ gender identities (and sexual orientations) may shift over time, these identities do not change based on outside pressure.
- We are teaching children to respect everyone in our diverse communities - including people like them and people not like them.

### **What might you say if a student tells you they’re exploring their gender identity, pronouns, and/or a new name?**

- Thank them for trusting you. Affirm that they are the expert on their own gender and identity.
- Ask clarifying questions like:
  - Is this information you need me to keep to myself right now? Do other people in the school know, and do you want them to know?
  - Is this information your parents know? What name/pronouns do you want me to be using when I talk to your parents?

- Offer support like:
  - Would you like me to call you different pronouns sometimes, so you can hear them and see what feels best?
  - Would you like me to use that new name for you when we talk one-on-one? What about when we're in a group or in front of other students?
  - Direct them to books/media that celebrate young people exploring their gender identities and that feature trans youth being supported by the adults around them. See the resource list at <https://tinyurl.com/kjamj4>.)

**What might you say if a student asks questions about what makes someone a “boy” or a “girl”?**

- Ask questions to find out why they're asking. Sometimes it's because someone has made a potentially hurtful comment like, “only girls play house,” or “you don't act like a girl.”
- Someone is a boy if they feel like a boy, and someone is a girl if they feel like a girl. Both boys and girls can do all kinds of activities and have all kinds of personalities and likes/dislikes.
- Let them know that “boy” and “girl” aren't the only possibilities; sometimes someone can feel like both a boy and a girl, or like neither one, or something else.
- When students ask or talk about genitals and other body parts, respond in a gender neutral way. Use phrases like “people with penises” or “people with vulvas.” Use qualifiers like “many” and “some.” For example: Most girls have a vulva. Some boys have a vulva. Most people who have a vulva grow up to be a girl and a woman, and some grow up to be another gender.

**What might you say if a colleague misgenders or uses the wrong pronouns for a student?**

- Ask yourself, do you know if the student is open about their gender identity/their pronouns widely in school?
  - If yes, correct your colleague. Remind them of the student's gender and pronouns, and if needed remind them of the importance of respecting students' identities and pronouns.
  - If no, or if you're not sure, check in with that student later to ask them what they would like you to do. Follow up with your colleague appropriately. Always protect your students and defer to them in matters of their own identity.
- Offer resources where they can learn more about why it's important to use and respect young people's gender identities and pronouns. See the resource list at <https://tinyurl.com/kjamj4>.

**What might you say if a colleague reinforces assumptions about normative family structures, or makes a comment that implies assumptions about parents'/guardians' genders and/or sexualities (e.g. “everyone has a mommy and a daddy”)?**

- Remind them that your school's families come in all shapes, sizes, configurations, and identities, and that you want to provide a welcoming and supportive community for all your students and their families, as well as for one another as colleagues.
- Remind them not to make assumptions about your students or their families.
- Give suggestions of inclusive language they can use in the future (see p. 1).
- Ask how you can support them to learn more and build inclusive habits. Offer resources where they can learn more. See the resource list at <https://tinyurl.com/kjamj4>.

## Gender Inclusion in Action: Teaching Moments

*This question came from a student teacher in a public pre-k classroom in Western MA:*

*“There is a student [Child A] in my class who has a name that seems like a boy’s name and dresses in typical girl clothes. I don’t know what their gender or sex is? Another child [Child B] was asking ‘are you a boy or a girl?’ The child [A] didn’t answer and I didn’t know what to say.”*

### **Possible Response:**

*“Child B, are you curious about how Child A feels today? Are you asking if they feel like a boy, a girl, both, or like a kid or a person? This kind of feeling is called gender and you are right, it’s not something that we can know without asking. Child A might not want to talk about their gender and that is okay too. If you want to get to know them better, what are other things you could ask? You could ask them how old they are or what they like to play with or if they have any pets or siblings at home?”*

### **Key points to remember**

- Gender is not something we can know by looking! We can only know someone’s gender if they share it with us.
- Just because a name sounds like a “boy’s” name or a “girls” name doesn’t mean that the child identifies with that gender.
- Just because a child likes to dress very “feminine” doesn’t mean they feel like a girl.
  - Boys can feel like boys and like to wear dresses
  - Children can feel like both a boy and a girl, or neither a boy nor a girl, or just a person, and like to wear dresses
- Some children talk about their gender identity and feelings all the time (e.g. I feel like a girl, I feel like a boy; I feel like both, etc). Some children don’t have the words yet, or just don’t want to talk about it. Both are okay.

### **Some other teaching moments that come up frequently in ECE:**

*“Are you a boy or a girl?” or “There are 3 boys and 2 girls at this table.”*

**Response:** *“How do you know? Did you ask them today how they feel? (Reinforce the idea that gender is something we can’t know by looking and which each person decides for themselves.) “They could feel like a boy, a girl, a person or both.”*

*“But I want to be the mom! Teacher, I am the mom so they have to be the dad.”*

**Response:** Why can't there be two or three moms? Some families have more than one mom or more than one dad. Some families have other kinds of parents or caregivers besides moms and dads. (Use examples from story books or real life.)