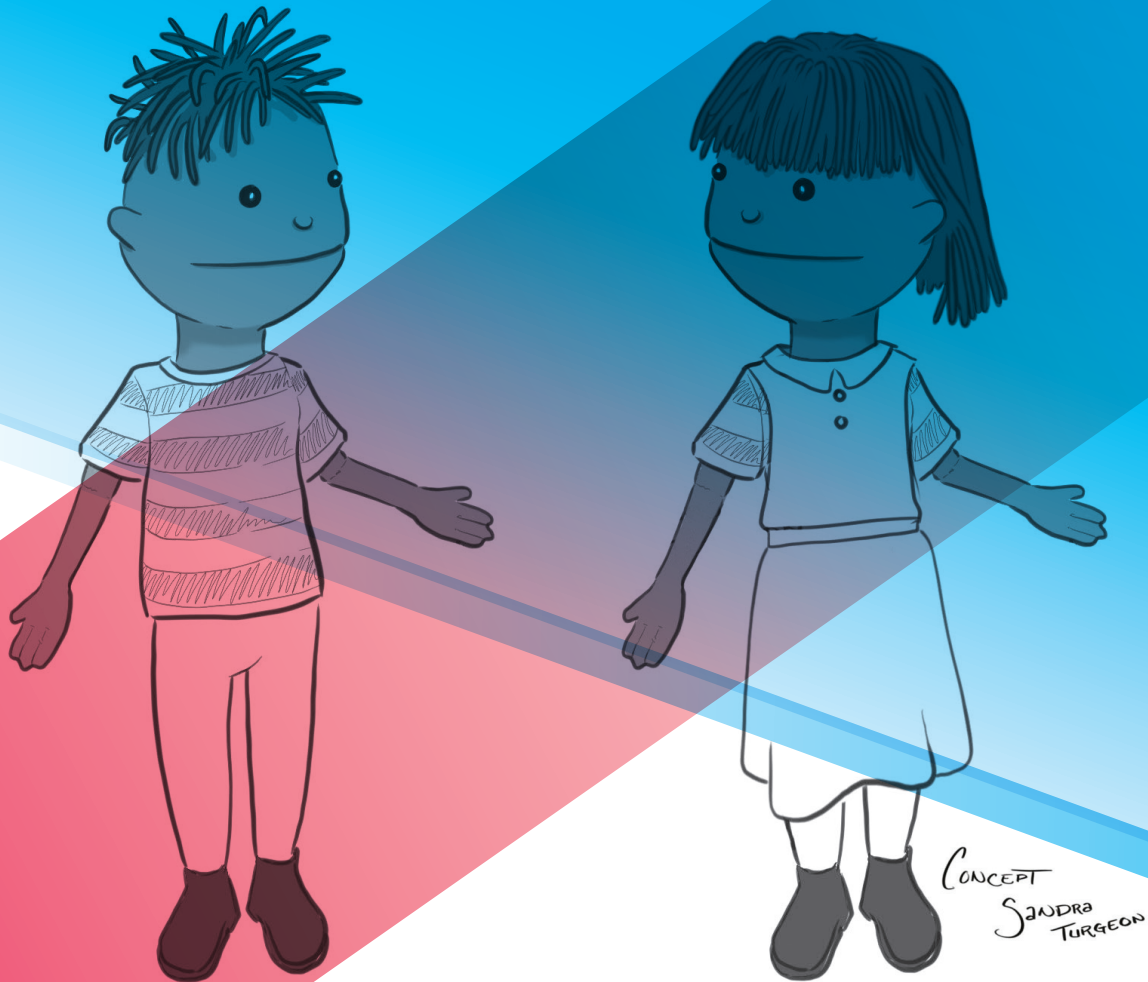


SUPPORTING STUDENT'S AWARENESS DURING EARLY
CHILDHOOD TO EXPLORE, UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT
GENDER DIVERSITY, GENDER IDENTITY
AND **GENDER EXPRESSION**



CONCEPT
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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 children's questions 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 at birth 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 at the same time, or with neither of these two binary genders (known as "non-binary," which means not belonging to any masculine or feminine binary category).

They are considered to be non-binary. 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. Similarly, a 5-year-old girl may want to keep her hair long, but dress with clothes socially and culturally associated with the male gender. Gender identity and gender expression are increasingly perceived to be fluid and changing.

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

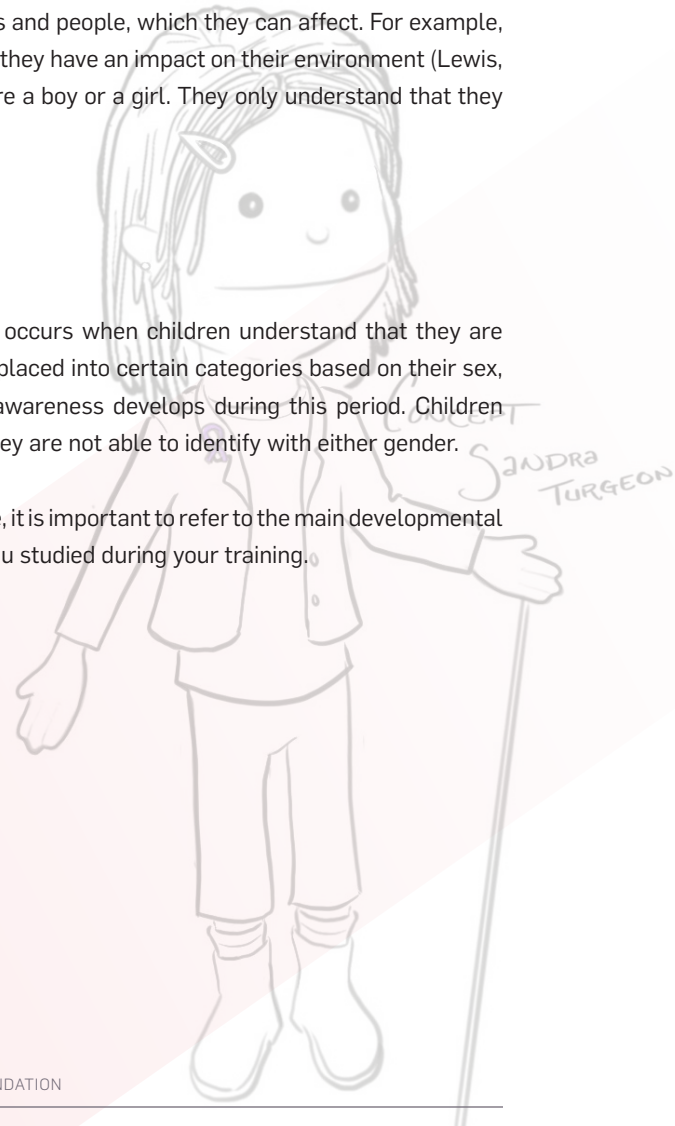
Before gender awareness...

As you have probably learned at university, 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 beings 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, it is important to refer to the main developmental theories (social-emotional, psycho-sexual and cognitive theories) that you studied during your training.



Social-emotional development (Erikson)

From 1 to 3 years old, children have passed the stage of developing a sense of confidence. They are now seeking autonomy. Their environment will also lead them to develop certain autonomy or feelings resembling shame or doubt. The development of gender identity may provide an opportunity for children to try new things that allow them to be more independent, such as choosing clothes, activities or colours.

Psycho-sexual development (Papalia, Olds and Feldman, 2010)

Children between 2 and 4 years old are at the anal stage. They seek control, particularly of their body. Some call this period the “no” phase. Children of this age are often inclined to respond negatively. Seeking autonomy and control, children try to take their place. In short, children want to control certain aspects of their identity.

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.

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, young children have only acquired what experts call gender awareness. They understand that there is a masculine and a feminine gender, without identifying with either of them.

To support their quest for autonomy and need for control, it is important to give children as many choices as possible. That way, if a child chooses a certain crayon colour, whether or not it is socially associated with their assigned birth sex, the important thing is to respect the fact that the child has made a choice. Supporting autonomy consists in helping children achieve optimal development, without doing it for them.

STAGE 2: GENDER IDENTITY

From the age of 3, your students may identify with a sex, 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 boys AND girls, or simply neither (which is called non-binary, an identity that is outside the binary norms 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.

With respect to developmental theories, children are still at the anal stage in sexual-emotional terms and at the quest for autonomy stage in social-emotional terms.

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 understand that some objects are associated with female or male stereotypes. Gender identity may therefore be quite important to the child.



Practical advice:

As we have seen, at this stage, your students may consciously adopt behaviour that is considered to belong to the opposite sex. 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 your students with questions about their gender identity or expression. For example: "Why do you like having short hair?" "How do you feel?" and "What do you need?" In the form of questions, this helps children with their gender development 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 promote discussion 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 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, your students 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 assigned birth sex and gender do not match. For example, at this point, a little girl who wants to have a penis understands that it will probably not happen naturally. At this stage, your students have not yet acquired the last stage of gender identity development, gender constancy. To them, 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.

With respect to developmental theories, children are still at the simple logic stage in cognitive terms. On the other hand, they are now entering the phallic stage in sexual-emotional terms and their quest for initiative is beginning in social-emotional terms.

Social-emotional development (Erikson, 1980a)

According to Erikson, from 3 to 6 years old, children seek to take more and more initiatives. They want to do things by themselves. The goal is to provide students with an environment in which opportunities to take initiatives are not only present, but also reinforced. It is important that they focus on the initiative and not develop a sense of guilt. At this stage, simple criticism may make the child feel guilty; they may feel inadequate or feel they have disappointed the adult. These concepts can be particularly important when we focus on the child's gender identity development.



Psycho-sexual development (Papalia, Olds and Feldman, 2010)

Children between 3 and 6 years old are now at the phallic stage. They are interested in their genitals and may, at this age, go through a phase of curiosity, but also exhibitionism and carelessness. They may ask various questions about genitals. This period is sometimes crucial to understanding the child's gender development, as the concept of gender and assigned birth sex can be introduced in response to questions.

Practical advice:

Your students 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.). Children of this age pay special attention to their genitals and may show interest or ask many questions about their bodies.

During this period, it is important to listen to and guide your students without being confrontational. Mostly importantly, they should understand that questions about gender and their sexuality can be approached with confidence. That it's OK to talk about it. It is also important to pay attention to your non-verbal cues (e.g. gestures, facial expressions). It is important not to hurt your students, consciously or unconsciously, or to give them the impression that they have disappointed you. Listen and ask questions. If they ask you for an opinion, be honest. For example, if you do not like a girl to cut her hair and she asks you the question, you can say, "I prefer long hair, but it's your choice and well-being that matter." Otherwise, "I like short hair. It suits you." It is important to let children take initiative and explore. Even if a child makes certain choices that displease adults or other children concerning his or her gender expression (e.g. pants or dress), it is important to reinforce the fact that a choice or an action (e.g. dressing alone) is useful for the child's development and sense of initiative. This prevents the child from feeling guilty.

If a child makes a choice that goes against social norms related to their gender identity (e.g. a boy who wants to wear a pink tank top), the adult's reaction may be surprise, annoyance or laughter. Such a reaction may make the child feel guilty. Therefore, as an adult, attention must be paid to any reaction, however well-intentioned, that may affect the child's initiative.

Finally, during this period, it may be appropriate to do a gender workshop to illustrate physical differences and explore the many similarities, including lifestyle and ability to succeed at school by properly participating in classes. In this sense, being at the genital stage is the result of children's interest in the genitals. Realizing that these questions will eventually be raised, instead of trying to wing it in the classroom or being taken off-guard, an activity can be planned in advance.

STAGE 4: GENDER CONSTANCY

This last stage of gender development develops between 5 and 6 years old. Your students understand that regardless of physical appearance, gender is permanent (Dafflon Novelle, 2006). Although children develop behaviours and thoughts related to gender stereotypes as young as 3 years old (e.g. moms cook, dads take out the garbage), only beginning at this stage do children have a more complete understanding of their gender identity. As we have seen earlier, children will usually develop a gender concept that matches their assigned birth sex. In fact, they will think that everyone, boy or girl, experiences the same thing as themselves. Nevertheless, your students may identify with a gender that is the opposite of their assigned birth sex and this identity may persist beyond the gender concept stage. This is an opportunity to raise others' awareness about this difference.

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.

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 and advocate respect for others based on the principles of personal boundaries: "It's Marc's body, not yours."



DOs

- Ask and answer questions
- Give children the freedom to choose
- Guide children using games
- Promote gender diversity and acceptance
- Appreciate differences
- Encourage children to explore
- Remind children that they are always loved and appreciated

DON'Ts

- Punish children for their gender-related activities and desires
- Impose gender-based activities
- Ignore negative attitudes towards gender or questions
- Discourage, shame or ridicule
- Insist that they be like everyone else
- 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 to promote children's optimal development.

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