

Supporting trans and gender-questioning students

This guide aims to look at first steps in supporting gender-variant or questioning students in the educational environment and point to resources that may be useful to school and college staff in achieving this.

In the last few years there has been much work done raising awareness and increasing the visibility of transgender issues.

The term transgender, or more commonly now trans, is an umbrella term used to describe a person whose gender identity is not the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans also includes non-binary people who do not fall into the binary categories of man/woman or male/female. Non-binary people may feel they are not exclusively male or female, and may embody elements of both.

Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. A trans person can be gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian or any other sexual orientation. You cannot tell if a person is trans just by looking at them; trans people do not look a certain way or come from any one background.

As trans people become more visible in society, the number of young people feeling confident and able to seek help with their gender identity issues is increasing.

The word 'transition' describes the steps a trans person may take to live in the gender with which they identify. Every person's transition is unique and will involve different things. There's a lot of focus on medical transitions, but not all trans people want or can access hormone therapy and surgeries. Someone's transition may involve purely social aspects, such as telling friends, family and colleagues; dressing differently; and changing names, pronouns and official documents. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to transition. With more young people exploring their gender identity, the need for knowledge, experience and guidance in schools and colleges is crucial for education staff to be able to adequately support students.

Creating a trans-inclusive school/college: why wait?

Trans people should not have to ask to be included. There are steps schools and colleges can take to create a more trans-friendly environment that will send a message of acknowledgement, respect and acceptance to all students.

Whole-school/college approach

- Do not assume you do not have any trans students. Many trans students are not out, and, because of a lack of knowledge of trans issues, students may not have the language to explain their feelings or identity.
- Make sure the issue of trans-readiness is discussed in a staff meeting and that every staff member feels supported if they want to ask questions and increase their knowledge.
- Acknowledge that there will be trans people within the school/college community as students, parents, carers, staff and governors.
- Ensure trans issues and transphobia are included within the school/college policy framework alongside LGB equality and sex equality.
- Use the curriculum and activities such as assemblies to challenge stereotypes based on gender and gender identity.
- Celebrate LGBT History Month, Transgender Awareness Week and Transgender Day of Remembrance.

In class

- Do not use boy-girl seating. This increases stereotypes about gender and girls and boys, and it could cause distress for trans students and non-binary students.

- Don't split into boy-girl teams for sports or quizzes.
- Keep up-to-date seating plans and registers for cover staff with preferred pronouns* and names. Keep up-to-date seating plans and registers for cover staff with pronouns* and names.

* A student may choose to use different pronouns that are associated with their gender identity. For example, him/her/they.

How do I respond when first approached by a pupil and/or their family asking for help with gender identity issues?

The first thing to do is enter into a conversation with the young person and, only with their permission, with their family, in order to work through the questions below. Please keep in mind when talking with a young trans person or their family that it is important to 'listen' and not lead the conversation, to keep an open mind and to not say things that could appear to minimise or dismiss how they are feeling.

It is really important that the young person's gender identity is respected. Let the young person express how they identify or need to express their gender in a conversation or in any other way they find comfortable. Care must be taken to find out what their needs are and how they want to proceed. Every young trans person is different.

The parents/carers are also likely to need support so that they can work out how best to support their child and determine what pronouns, clothes and support might be most appropriate.

Things to discuss with the young person and their family initially may include the following:

- Ask them simply 'how can we best help you'?
- Have they spoken to anyone else about their feelings or gender identity?
- How do they wish to express their gender identity?
- Which name and which pronouns do they wish to be known by/called at school/college? (NB, this might differ from those used at home, if this is what the young person wants at that time.)

If they are looking to find medical help with their transition, then their GP is the first port of call. The GP should at least be able to refer the young person to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) so the young person or their family can have their questions answered.

Local LGBT+ or specific trans-focused youth groups are an excellent place to find local peer support for the young person and for families.

If continuing conversations with the pupil and family show that the pupil is intending to transition in school/college, then putting together an action plan is a good next step.

When putting together any transition plan, it cannot be overstated that it must be led by the needs of the pupil and the family, and the young person will have many good and practical ideas about what they would find helpful.

What is your advice on planning and timing transition?

In some cases, the school/college and young person's family have adopted the approach of sending a letter out to the families of students or holding an assembly to let them know of this young person's transition and a bit of basic information about trans issues. This should only be done if the young person and their family are comfortable with this idea. It is not a preferred option overall as it will immediately out the young person as trans, even when used as a means to increase awareness of trans issues.

Transitioning mid-term may produce certain challenges. There may be an increased chance of bullying and of increased stress on the young person's mental health. It may also be challenging in terms of continuity of records and administration when the person starts using a new name (if they choose to).

Transitioning at the beginning of a new term or year is sometimes preferred as it gives breathing space for the pupil in the holiday break. Also, if they wish to come out publicly, it allows others to ask questions and begin to understand how the young person is feeling and how they identify. It also allows adequate time for records or admin to be brought in line, so there should be no confusion when the pupil starts back with a possible new name.

Changing schools/colleges or transitioning when moving from primary to secondary or from secondary to further education can also be a popular choice, as it gives the young person more chance of a positive new start at school or college. Probably the only people who may know about the person's previous identity will be other young people knew them in their previous education environment.

What is the best way of managing sensitive information?

With a young person going through transition it is so important to support them and how they wish to express their gender identity.

It is crucial that schools and colleges provide maximum confidentiality in supporting trans students. Trans students may choose to apply for a gender recognition certificate once they reach the age of 18; it would be a criminal offence for someone who has been told that someone is trans in the course of their professional role to disclose this information without the consent of the student. In all other cases, the wishes of the pupil or student in respect of disclosure should be respected. Schools and colleges should ensure they discuss with students, and where necessary with their parents or carers, when it will be necessary to disclose trans children's legal names, for example when registering for exams and for medical record purposes.

Correct pronouns and new names must always be used out of respect, support and safety. If incorrect pronouns or an old name are used, it can sometimes lead to outing that person as trans within a school or college, which can then lead to bullying and discrimination.

Even when discussing the pupil between staff, the student's correct and current name (the one they wish to be addressed by) must be used at all times and their gender identity issues should not come into conversation unless it is relevant. If a conversation needs to take place where the pupil's gender identity does need to be discussed, then it should be done so in a location that is private and confidential. It only takes one overheard conversation to start a chain of events that can have a detrimental effect on a young person's transition and early life.

What about the question of toilets and changing rooms?

This is the most commonly asked question regarding trans people. It may be presumptuous, but it is likely that you have thought at least once 'Where's the bit about toilets, about changing rooms, and what uniform they wear?' Well, the reason this hasn't been mentioned so far is that it is quite far down in the list of things you need to worry about. It is something that is very straightforward.

Ask the young person what would make them most comfortable. If what they want is realistic and possible, then go with it.

Not all young trans people will immediately want to use the facilities that correspond with their gender identity. They may wish to use another facility separate from others because of anxiety issues connected with gender dysphoria¹. For this reason, and because some students may identify as non-binary or neither male or female, there should always be gender-neutral changing and toilet facilities available. It is not necessary to make all toilet facilities gender neutral however, because some students will prefer single-sex toilets.

The only thing regarding changing rooms that may cause a problem is if the only changing rooms available are open and do not have cubicles. This is due to issues about gender dysphoria mentioned above, and reactions from other students. In this case, the pupil can be offered alternative changing facilities. The young person should not in any case be told that they must use the changing rooms that correspond with the gender they were assigned at birth.

As regards uniform, a list of the school or college requirements covering clothes, shoes and hair, will suffice. There is no need to refer to gender. A gender-neutral uniform policy allows all students to present themselves in a way that makes them comfortable and confident to access school/college life.

What are the legal obligations on schools/colleges?

Not only is there a moral obligation to support young trans and gender-questioning students in education, but there is a legal one too. The Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination of anyone with a protected characteristic. The protected characteristic of gender reassignment covers trans people.

To be protected from gender reassignment discrimination, you do not need to have undergone any specific treatment or surgery. This is because changing your physiological or other gender attributes can be an entirely personal process rather than a medical one. You can be at any stage or part of a stage in the transition process – from proposing to reassign your gender to undergoing a process to reassign your gender or having completed it

This means that students who want to use a new name, wear new clothes or ask for a new pronoun to be used are protected under the law, regardless of whether they have, or want to have, any medical treatment.

1 Definition of gender dysphoria - the condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological sex. (Oxford Dictionary)

Schools and colleges must also consider gender reassignment when looking at their responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty. This duty asks schools/colleges to proactively promote equality by thinking about their practice and changing it.

Building a whole-school/college ethos that is positive and inclusive

It is helpful to consider how your school/college is using the curriculum to develop positive attitudes to girls, boys and gender, but also to break down fixed stereotypes about gender.

Where can I find out more?

This is a short guide to the priorities and basic first responses in supporting a young trans or gender-questioning person in a school or college environment. Hopefully this information will help you to respond to the needs of a trans or gender-questioning child with professional confidence.

There are many more excellent resources available, from lesson plans that educate about transgender issues, to complete and very detailed school and college guidance documents put together by local authorities working in partnership with voluntary LGBT+ organisations. Listed below are some of the current resources available.

Breaking the Mould: challenging gender stereotypes

The NUT worked for two years with five primary schools to consider how 'traditional' gender stereotypes could be challenged in nursery and primary classrooms.

<https://www.teachers.org.uk/equality/equality-matters/breaking-mould>

Gendered Intelligence

Gendered Intelligence is a not-for-profit community interest company established in 2008.

It works predominantly with the trans community and those who impact on trans lives; it particularly specialises in supporting young trans people aged eight to 25.

It delivers trans youth programmes, support for parents and carers, professional development and trans awareness training for all sectors, and educational workshops for schools, colleges, universities and other educational settings.

www.genderedintelligence.co.uk

Mermaids

Mermaids is passionate about supporting children, young people, and their

families to achieve a happier life in the face of great adversity. It works to raise awareness about gender issues among professionals and the general public. It campaigns for the recognition of

Breaking down narrow and limiting stereotypes about girls and boys helps every child and widens the life experiences and ambitions of both girls and boys.

It is important to differentiate between pupils who are trans, or questioning their identity, and children and young people who do not conform to stereotypes about gender.

There are also a number of voluntary organisations with experience that can provide schools and colleges with training and advice.

gender dysphoria in young people and lobbies for improvements in professional services.

www.mermaidsuk.org.uk

Trans Inclusion Schools Toolkit

The Trans Inclusion Schools Toolkit from Brighton and Hove City Council and the Allsorts Youth Project is one of the best and most comprehensive guidance documents available in the UK.

<http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/assets/media/Trans-Inclusion-Schools-Toolkit.pdf>

The Genderbread Person

The great Genderbread Person graphic is perfect for explaining the difference between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex and sexuality.

www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/assets/media/Genderbread-Person-3.3-HI-RES.pdf

Wipe Out Transphobia

Wipe Out Transphobia operates the largest gender identity based social media page on the internet to promote awareness and education on trans issues. It also provides training and policy advice on trans inclusion to public, private and other third sector organisations.

www.wipeouttransphobia.com
www.facebook.com/wipeouttransphobia