

ADVOCATING IN HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Many parents rely on the opinion of doctors and other professionals, yet in fact many health care providers have little knowledge or training on gender diversity. Unfortunately, some health care providers may still view gender independence as a mental health disorder, may not take your child's gender independence seriously, or see it as just a phase. You may need to be assertive to ensure your child receives respectful, appropriate, and informed care. It can be helpful to book a special appointment or write a letter to a new provider to share your needs in advance.

Some gender independent children may benefit from supportive counselling, while others may not need any mental health services. Try to find out how other families in your area access support. When families already have a supportive provider, they sometimes ask for a letter to help with other challenging situations, like talking to schools and travelling across borders. If you get advice from a professional that doesn't feel right, trust your feelings and get another opinion.



For information about gender transitions, visit [RainbowHealthOntario.ca](https://rainbowhealthontario.ca) to find our other brochures: *Gender Affirming Options for Gender Independent Children and Adolescents* and *Supporting Your Child's Gender Identity and Expression*.

TIPS ON BUILDING SELF-ADVOCACY IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Parents and caregivers can help young people become competent self-advocates by creating spaces where they feel comfortable practicing their self-advocacy skills and knowledge. Parents who consistently build trust with their children and share decision-making power will contribute to a child's development of effective self-advocacy skills. These are skills your child will need throughout their life.

For children, speaking up for themselves can be scary, especially when it involves adults and issues that can be as sensitive as gender identity and expression.

- Offer to listen to your child practice how they will say or ask for something.
- If they want feedback, you can provide constructive insights into what they did well and how they can improve.
- Ask children for their opinions and allow them to participate in "adult" conversations.
- Model for your child the language of needs by sharing with them your own when appropriate. For example, "I have had a long day and it's making it hard for me to focus on what you are telling me. I need to take a walk outside to get some fresh air and then we can come back to this conversation."
- If children find it difficult to say what they need, take it as an opportunity to reflect back to them what you see as their needs or ask clarifying questions to give them an opportunity to practice forming their ideas.
- You and your child can participate in local activities that support gender identity and expression.

OTHER RESOURCES

Family In Transition Guidebook – A Resource Guide for Families of Transgender Youth
ctys.org/wp-content/uploads/CTYS-FIT-Families-in-Transition-Guide-2nd-edition.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education
A Safe and Welcoming School Environment
edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/safeschools.html

Ontario Ministry of Education
– **Accepting Schools Act**
ontario.ca/laws/statute/s12005

Canadian Human Rights Commission
– **Gender Identity and Expression**
lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/LegislativeSummaries/421C16E

Ontario Human Rights Commission
Policy on preventing discrimination because of gender identity and gender expression
ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-because-gender-identity-and-gender-expression

Protection of Gender Identity and Expression Duty to Accommodate
ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-because-gender-identity-and-gender-expression/8-duty-accommodate

Supporting Your Gender Diverse Child—A Guide to Support Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers Who Advocate for Their Trans, Intersex, Two-Spirit, and Gender Diverse Children and Youth in the Ontario Education System
egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Supporting-Your-Gender-Diverse-Child-Resource-2017-Final.pdf



advocating for your gender independent child



INTRODUCTION

As a parent, you advocate for your child every day, helping to meet their needs, support their aspirations and keep them safe. If your child expresses their gender differently from how others expect (a gender independent child), parents might need extra support.

Research indicates that, on average, a child's gender identity is developed between the ages of three and five, but development may start as early as two years old. Unlike a person's sex assigned at birth, gender is part of one's innate sense of self. So, if a child is insistent and consistent in saying "I am a boy" or "I am a girl" or "I am both" or "I am neither," they are probably old enough to know the extent to which they feel this to be true. However, a person may choose whether to embrace and affirm their authentic self based on how safe and supportive their environment is to do so. No two experiences of gender identity development are alike. There are many factors that will affect a person's gender identity journey. Some children may know from a very early age. Others may not have the language or feel safe enough to express their feelings about gender until later in life.

Your child deserves to safely access services just like any other child. A person's gender identity and gender expression are protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code. This means that it is against the law to harass or discriminate against someone because of gender identity and gender expression. Anyone providing a service has a legal duty to accommodate the needs of people because of their gender identity and expression.

YOUR CHILD HAS THE RIGHT...

- To be free from discrimination and harassment
- To receive respectful health care
- To use the bathroom or change room they feel is most appropriate
- To dress in a way that feels right and safe for them
- To be spoken to with their chosen name and gender pronoun ("he", "she", "they" etc.)

However, advocacy may be needed to educate service providers and professionals to ensure that your child has equal access in school, programs, sports teams, clubs, summer camps, and other settings. While parents and caregivers are often the primary advocates, children and youth can learn to be strong self-advocates as well. Professionals can also be enlisted as advocates. They can write letters documenting what supports your child needs, attend school meetings, provide staff trainings, and help you prepare to advocate for your child.

YOUR WORRIES AND CONCERNS

In a world that doesn't always embrace difference, it's common for parents and caregivers of gender independent children to worry. You may have concerns about how others will react to your child, about bullying, inclusion in activities and access to appropriate bathrooms and change rooms. If your child also identifies as racialized, Indigenous and/or is living with a disability this can cause added concern and stress. Often, you may wish your child didn't have to struggle for acceptance at all and could just be a kid. It's normal for parents to feel uncertain about facing these challenges. Many parents find that getting support for themselves helps them to become better advocates for their children.

ADVOCATING FOR YOUR CHILD

No matter where you are in your journey with your child, at some point you might find yourself advocating on their behalf. Advocacy is about speaking up, knowing how to get information, knowing rights and responsibilities, listening and learning, and knowing how and who to reach out to when your child needs help.

Educate yourself about 2SLGBTQ rights and policies to better understand the protection of gender identity and expression. Reach out to allies and other supporters like parents who share your experience or support groups and services in your community.

Involve your child in making decisions about what would be helpful.

Consider factors such as what actions would be helpful, what information and how much of it should be disclosed; are you, your child and your family prepared for possible negative responses or consequences?



ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

It is the responsibility of schools and educators to provide a safe learning environment. Schools and school boards are required to have, implement, and monitor policies as outlined in the Education Act. These policies, at minimum, must include a Code of Conduct, a Bullying Prevention and Intervention Policy which also addresses cyber bullying, and an Equity and Inclusive Education Policy. Some school boards and schools may also have policies for accommodating and supporting trans and gender independent students.

Take a proactive approach. Before your child begins a new school, new grade, activity, or daycare (or begins a gender transition process at an existing school), it can help to have a meeting with the principal or vice-principal, teacher, or guidance counsellor. This is a chance to introduce yourself, share your expectations, and get a sense of how aware and prepared the school is to accommodate your child and provide a welcoming and safe environment. This also gives you an opportunity to identify any potential problems and collectively work out possible solutions, and to suggest helpful websites, books, training, and resources. You may consider bringing someone along for support. Knowledgeable and supportive principals and vice-principals, teachers and Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) leaders, guidance counsellors, school social workers, school board trustees, and equity and diversity officers can be valuable allies.

GSAs have become widespread in Ontario schools. GSAs promote welcoming, caring, respectful and safe schools for 2SLGBTQ students and their allies. All Ontario schools are required to permit students to form GSAs. Your child may consider joining a GSA to reduce their sense of isolation.