

Understanding Gender Identity

Gender is more complex than most of us have been taught. Gender is made up of 3 parts:

- gender biology (our bodies or biological sex – our sex at birth based on the appearance of genitals)
- gender expression (how we dress and act), and
- gender identity (how we feel inside)

Not all youth fit neatly into being male or female. For some, the sense of being “both” or “neither” best describes their reality. Sometimes they may identify more as male or more as female on different days; this is described as being gender fluid and is a normal variation of human gender. A person’s gender is not what others tell them, but it is how they feel and who they know themselves to be.



As a parent, you can be a great influence in your teen’s life, but you can’t change their true gender identity or expressions of their gender. However, you can help them to have a healthy, positive sense of themselves in relation to their gender. Some people are very young when they become aware of their gender identity – some as young as 3. It is important to not focus on your teen being male or female, but support them in exploring a wide variety of age appropriate interests and talents. Your teen may turn to you if they’re feeling worried, scared, or confused about their own gender identity. This may seem overwhelming as a parent, but it’s important to listen to your child with an open mind and open heart. You don’t have to have all the answers; together you can find more information and support. Understanding who they are can bring joy, relief, and peace of mind to everyone.

Your child’s gender identity is a gift, and like their intuition, creativity, and intellect, they are a part of the foundation that makes them who they are. For more information and support please visit the Alberta Health Services www.teachingsexualhealth.ca

Talk to Your Teen About Mental Health – Part 2

One of the most significant things for teenagers is to know that they can come and talk to someone if they are worried about their own or someone else’s mental health. Being open to talk about mental health, and showing you care means a lot. Here are tips that can help:

- Listening is more important than talking.
- Everyday conversation questions can help: “How was today?” or “What was the most challenging thing you did today?”
- Talking while going for a walk, doing the dishes or watching TV in natural times and places works well.
- Emotions are emotions, they are not right or wrong. Your teen may feel differently about things than you do. And you may not understand or agree with their feelings. That is okay.
- Acknowledge your teen’s feelings. For example: “I can see this is a really difficult time for you. You look upset. Tell me about it.” You don’t have to solve the problem; you can empathize and listen to your son or daughter’s feelings.
- Judgemental statements like: “Why on earth did you do that?” “Were you not thinking at all?” are likely to create a defensive reaction. It’s okay if you’re disappointed or upset. Try to name your feeling and ask your question without judgement: “I’m disappointed with your behaviour. Please tell me what happened.”
- Use non-judgemental statements and questions: “Tell me more about that.” “What are your thoughts?” “Tell me what happened?” “How do you feel about that?”

Adapted from resources available at: <http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>