

Gender identity & trans identification

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Introduction

Trans identification is becoming increasingly common in children. As a teacher, it can be hard to know how to respond when a child in your school or class begins to identify as transgender or non-binary.

In addition to needing guidance on what is best for the child, many teachers have been concerned about their own legal position if they seek to present viewpoints that run counter to the dominant cultural narrative. We hope this quick introduction will help you both think through the topic for yourself and understand what the law says.

The medical perspective

The NHS website ([nhs.uk/conditions/gender-dysphoria](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/gender-dysphoria)) states:

Gender dysphoria is a term that describes a sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity.

While many children feel drawn to clothes and activities more commonly associated with the opposite sex, and some feel discomfort with their physical sex characteristics, for most this doesn't raise any questions about their gender identity. Some children, however, have very strong feelings of unease around their gender identity. This discomfort and distress can be significant and for a small number of children it *can* get worse as they get older. For most, however (around 80% bit.ly/3LeziB4), it will desist after puberty, simply with support and 'watchful waiting'.

Over the past few years, there has been a large increase in the number of children presenting with gender dysphoria or questioning their gender identity. In particular, there has been a very significant increase in the number of teenage girls presenting as trans or non-binary. The reasons for this increase are not yet fully understood. Clusters are often observed within friendship groups in schools. Many young people also identify as bisexual or gay/lesbian before identifying as trans.

What does the Bible teach?

Our human identity

The creation account in the first two chapters in Genesis helps us understand our human identity. Every human being is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26). This means every human being has an innate dignity, worth and value, and therefore should be treated as such.

Alongside being made in the image of God, we are told humanity was created male and female (Gen 1:27). We are made by God and given the identity of either male or female by him. God said his creation of humans was 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). God's story of being made in his image, created male and female, is his good plan for humanity; therefore living according to his intention is the best way for human beings to live; this is the way that enables human beings to flourish.

The Bible is clear that God knows each individual deeply and intimately (Matthew 10:30), and that he forms and shapes each one of us (Psalm 139:13-16). Of course, all of us sometimes wish something about our bodies or our biology was different, and have to wrestle with feelings of disappointment with God. It is easy to see how people with no belief in God and no sense of his gift of our bodies would find it even harder when something doesn't feel right.

Care for the Vulnerable

Repeatedly throughout Scripture God speaks of a special care for those who are vulnerable in society (e.g. Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Psalms 146:9; Zechariah 7:10-11). As followers of Jesus Christ, we have a responsibility to care for the vulnerable, and young people struggling with their gender identity are often those who are most vulnerable and at greatest danger of experiencing harm.

Many people with gender dysphoria also experience a range of mental health problems (often preceding the gender dysphoria). People suffering from gender dysphoria are also more likely than the rest of the population to have autistic spectrum disorders or traits (bit.ly/3E7rVa2, bit.ly/47eOfwx). These other factors are too often overlooked or ignored when a child expresses dissatisfaction with their gender identity, meaning they don't get the treatment or support they need.

Influences on young people

Alongside the increase in young people questioning their gender identity, there are loud voices in our society and culture that appear to be encouraging and reinforcing their confusion.

Social media and online searches are quick to affirm a child's questioning of their gender identity, and even often push children towards seeing their gender as the source of their problems.

Materials in schools' PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) or RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) curricula and groups who come in to teach PSHE lessons often strongly promote gender diversity. Stories are emerging of students who feel fearful of expressing 'gender-critical' views in school, for fear of bullying or worse (bit.ly/3P8Ka5V). Teachers may often feel the same way.

And with the main teaching unions such as the NEU taking stridently progressive perspectives on the prevalence of transphobia and education about the 'oppression of gender and sexually diverse people' (bit.ly/3OQ10oG), it is easy for teachers to feel pressured into taking 'affirmative' approaches when gender dysphoric students disclose to them.

It is often claimed that not affirming a young person in their trans identification puts them at increased risk of suicidality or self-harm. This claim is not based on good evidence (bit.ly/3EaRzL9). However, it is widely recognised that mental health problems are a risk factor for suicidality and that mental health diagnoses are more common among trans-identifying teens (bit.ly/3KF2T4u). It is therefore important that young people who are experiencing mental health difficulties are well supported to address this separately and access help through the available channels.

Two perspectives on gender dysphoria

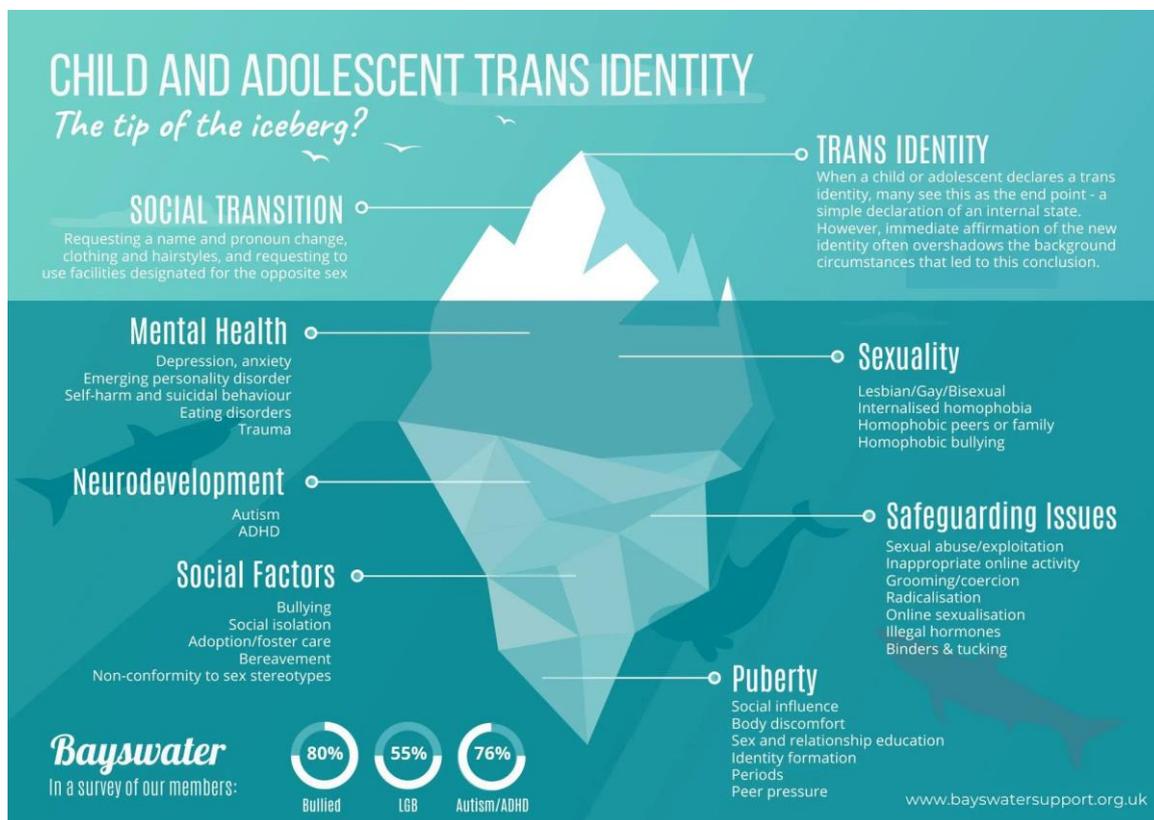
There is great debate about how to understand – and therefore how best to help – young people affected by gender incongruence. In general, there are two different perspectives.

The first of these is what a young person is most likely to be exposed to online and among peers, but the second is the perspective best supported by science and Scripture:

- Diversity perspective – This holds that internal feelings of gender reveal who we really are (gender identity theory). Young people should therefore be helped to embrace and live out their internal gender identity. Many schools and lobby groups will take this approach.
- Distress perspective – This notes that gender dysphoria/trans-identification may often be a result of other contributing factors (such as mental health, same-sex attraction, autism, trauma, gender stereotypes). 'Trans' has become the current common way for teenagers to explain some of the 'dis-ease' and distress they may experience. The best way to help such young people is therefore to explore the factors that may be contributing to their experience in an effort to help them without resorting to life-altering interventions.

The tip of the iceberg

The Bayswater support group have produced the following infographic illustrating how other factors can be at play when a child or adolescent presents with trans identity.



(Source: bayswatersupport.org.uk/iceberg)

What does the law/statutory guidance say?

Education professionals are still operating with insufficient direction. The promised guidelines for accommodating transgender students or those questioning their gender identity have not yet been issued. Therefore, the existing frameworks with some connection to the issue of students with gender incongruence – such as safeguarding guidance, or general RSE and PSHE guidance – are the only sources we have to draw on.

A good summary of the current legislation and guidance can be found here: [Equality-Law-and-Statutory-Schools-Guidance.pdf](#)

See the 'Tricky issues for teachers' section for more pointers.

Further resources:

Department for Education (DfE) guidance on teaching RSE and PSHE: [bit.ly/rse-guidance](#)

DfE statutory guidance for schools and colleges. *Keeping Children Safe in Education* [bit.ly/safe-in-education](#)

DfE statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* [bit.ly/SafeguardChildren](#)

Tricky issues for teachers

Many of the areas where teachers will interact with trans-identifying pupils will be to do with what is known as 'social transitioning'. This is where a child begins to live in line with their chosen gender identity in a variety of ways before or while undergoing medical treatment. Social transitioning is often seen as a harmless way for a child to explore their chosen gender identity in reversible ways. There are significant concerns, however, that immediately affirming a young person's gender identity and allowing social transition is not beneficial in the long term.

The interim report of the Cass Review states that '*it is important to view [social transitioning] as an active intervention because it may have significant effects on the child or young person in terms of their psychological functioning.*' ([bit.ly/47MnXLG](#))

As noted above, teachers are still awaiting specific Government guidance regarding the appropriate means of accommodating students identifying as transgender or those who are in the process of questioning their gender identity.

The following points are therefore not borne out of any government recommendation, but align with the guidance provided by Genspect, an international organisation advocating '*a non-medicalised approach to gender diversity*', which states that:

There is no quality long-term peer-reviewed evidence about the impact of social transition. As such, it is best practice for schools to apply caution when managing social transition within schools. ([bit.ly/45kiKQ5](#))

1) Names and pronouns

People often ask to be called by a different name, such as a nickname. Using a person's chosen name, therefore, is not normally problematic, but do check your school's policy on this, especially for children *changing* their name. Using a transgender child's 'preferred pronouns', however, can be seen as reinforcing their belief that they can be something other than their biological sex, and thus encouraging their social transition.

In normal conversations with students, avoiding pronouns is simple, and using their preferred name is often easier. For teachers, this is more challenging, as pronouns are commonly used in classrooms and meetings.

It would be wise to avoid repeatedly 'misgendering' students – especially if this is done with the intention of drawing attention to the act. As always, it is best to raise issues with your line manager if there is an unavoidable matter of conscience relating to names or pronouns.

2) Covert transitioning (without parents' knowledge)

It has become common for children to 'socially transition' in school, but to ask that teachers don't inform the child's parents/guardians. As evidence is mounting that social transition is a significant step and can often lead to more permanent interventions, such as puberty blockers and, later, hormone treatments, a note of caution is being urged.

When it comes to acting covertly, approach the topic of alternative names and pronouns with extreme care, and ensure that all normal safeguarding procedures are followed, i.e. not promising confidentiality and sharing pastoral and potential safeguarding information with the relevant safeguarding lead.

3) Transitioning with parental support

While many parents would be concerned if their child expressed a desire to change their gender, some are supportive of the idea. This poses a dilemma for the teacher who is concerned that social or medical transitioning might be harmful for the child, and caution is recommended.

We must be aware of the emotional pressure put on parents to support their child's transition. This may override their reservations about their child's ability to consent to drug treatments, breast binding and other aspects of transgender transition. A wise and compassionate teacher may be able to be very helpful by having a supportive discussion with parents about the situation. Teachers can ease parents' worries by prioritising learning and the child's well-being while handling the issue in a similar way to any other issue where we are concerned about the impact of parental choices on a child's health and wellbeing.

4) Gender-neutral toilets/changing rooms

Some schools are making this provision for pupils, but it is important to ensure that single-sex spaces are also available for those who prefer them. Children should not be made to share spaces with children of other sexes, nor should they be branded as transphobic for choosing to use single-sex spaces.

5) Sports

In the culture as a whole, concern is being raised about allowing transgender athletes to compete against people of the opposite natal sex. This applies especially to transwomen, given the greater upper body strength and other advantages inherent in natal males who have gone through any part of puberty. This concern extends to schools, too, with many suggesting that the interests of girls are best served by allowing them to compete only against others of their sex where males would have a physical advantage over females.

School policies that may present issues of conscience for the Christian teacher

Your school may have policies on any of the above that conflict with your conscience and your belief in what is best for the child. It is important that you discuss this with the head teacher and/or the safeguarding lead at your school.

Many teachers have found that if they approach the topic in a sensitive and collaborative way, they are able to find mutually acceptable ways of working within the school's guidelines. The Association of Christian Teachers (ACT – christian-teachers.org.uk) is available to support you in these discussions and can help you to find legal guidance if you are not able to reach a satisfactory agreement alone.

If you are asked to teach certain materials or give a certain perspective, consider how you can bring balance to the teaching and discussions, in consultation with your head teacher.

Please do not be scared by headlines suggesting that any hint of disagreement with the 'gender-affirmative' approach will inevitably result in the loss of your job. These occurrences are very rare and normally involve far more significant, long-term issues than a simple 'misgendering'. Approaching these young individuals, who reflect the image of God, with a spirit of compassionate grace, recognising their inherent dignity and lasting value, will significantly contribute to conveying divine grace to your students.

Top tips for supporting a trans-identifying student

Care – Our top priority is to care for our students. Help the young person to know that you respect and value them, however they identify, whatever they do, and whatever they reveal to you. Work to maintain the relationship as a safe place for them to be honest and to explore what they're feeling.

Listen – Listening goes hand in hand with caring. By prioritising listening we show that we value the young person as an individual. Listening also helps us to get a better understanding of the young person's experience and their own understanding of it.

Use common sense – Don't switch off your common sense. We may easily feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to engage with gender-related experiences that we forget to apply common sense. You are more equipped to help a young person in this situation than you think you are.

Keep gender in perspective – Gender can easily become all-consuming, both for the young person themselves and in your interaction with them. Remember that there is more to a young person than their experience of gender. Their experience isn't insignificant, and so we don't want to ignore it, but we also don't want it to take over. As teachers, we must also remember that our primary role is to educate, and support students with their learning.

Engage with parents/carers – Where possible (taking into account your school's safeguarding and confidentiality policies), engage with parents to understand how they are responding and how you can support the family. You may also be able to help them to better understand what their young person is experiencing and to understand and evaluate the various options available to them going forward, including the risks of various forms of transition. If they are Christians, you may want to point them to the CMF Quick Guide for parents (cmf.li/QuickGuides)

Suggested resources

Please note that we do not necessarily endorse everything in all of these resources:

Christian books and resources

Andrew Bunt, *People Not Pronouns: Reflections on Transgender Experience* (Grove Books, 2021)

Theology in the Raw podcast, by Preston Sprinkle. This is a helpful episode on pronouns and social transition: preston sprinkle.com/theology-in-the-raw/870-julie-maxwell

Living Out – resources on sexuality, gender and identity: livingout.org

Association of Christian Teachers – christian-teachers.org.uk

General books and resources

Stats For Gender – helpful summaries of research on gender-related questions: statsforgender.org

Gender Through a Wider Lens – a podcast exploring a wide range of gender-related topics and experiences: gender-a-wider-lens.captivate.fm

Transgender Trend – a secular organisation giving helpful analysis of trends, studies and legal cases: transgendertrend.com

Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: Teenage Girls and the Transgender Craze* (Regnery Publishing, 2020)