

Understanding Gender Identity

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Key concepts, terminology, and perspectives for learners

1. What Is Gender Identity?

Aspect	Description
Definition	An individual's internal sense of being male, female, a blend of both, neither, or another gender. It is how a person <i>experiences</i> gender, not necessarily how they appear or are assigned at birth.
Distinction from Sex	Sex refers to biological attributes (chromosomes, hormones, anatomy). <i>Gender identity</i> is psychological and social. The two can align (cisgender) or differ (transgender, non?binary, etc.).
Stability & Fluidity	For many people gender identity is stable over time, but for others it can evolve. Recognizing fluidity respects personal development and cultural variations.

2. Core Terminology

Term	Meaning	Example
Cisgender	Gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth.	A person assigned female at birth who identifies as a woman.
Transgender	Gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth.	A person assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman.
Non?Binary	Gender identity falls outside the traditional male/female categories.	Identifies as gender?queer, agender, bigender, etc.
Genderqueer / Genderfluid	Flexible or changing gender identity; may shift over time or context.	Someone who feels more masculine on some days and more feminine on others.
Agender	Absence of gender; does not identify with any gender.	A person who describes themselves as "genderless."

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Term	Meaning	Example
Two?Spirit	Indigenous North American term for a person who embodies both masculine and feminine spirits.	Specific to cultural traditions; not interchangeable with “non?binary.”
Gender Dysphoria	Distress that may arise when a person’s gender identity does not align with societal expectations or physical characteristics.	May lead someone to seek social, medical, or legal transition.
Transition	Process of aligning external presentation, legal documents, and/or body with gender identity. Includes social (name/pronouns), medical (hormones, surgery), and legal steps.	
Pronouns	Words used to refer to someone in the third person (e.g., he/him, she/her, they/them, ze/zir).	Asking “What pronouns do you use?” shows respect.

3. Development of Gender Identity

1. Early Childhood (0?5 years)

- Children become aware of gender categories and may label themselves.
- Most develop a gender identity by age 3–4, though the *expression* can be fluid.

2. Middle Childhood (6?12 years)

- Understanding of gender roles deepens; peer influence grows.
- Some children begin to question or explore beyond binary categories.

3. Adolescence (13?19 years)

- Identity formation intensifies; puberty can trigger dysphoria for trans youth.
- Increased likelihood of seeking social transition (name, pronouns, clothing).

4. Adulthood

- Gender identity may remain stable or continue to evolve.
- Many adults pursue medical transition, legal changes, or advocacy work.

Note: Development is not linear; cultural, familial, and personal factors shape each trajectory.

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4. Biological, Psychological, and Social Influences

Dimension	Contributions
Biological	Genetics, prenatal hormone exposure, brain