

Gender Identity

What Is Considered Typical?

Gender identity is an important developmental process that occurs between the ages of 2 and 4. This is when children figure out whether they are a boy or girl. During this time, many children (though not all) “try on” different roles. Such experimenting is normal, healthy behavior.

What Strategies Support Healthy Gender Identity?

Allowing your child to dress up and pretend to be the other gender is perfectly acceptable. Parents sometimes are troubled that their little girl wants to be a daddy or insists on being a boy, or that their little boy wants to be a mommy or insists on being a girl.

Children may also have cross-gender interests. For example, a little boy may enjoy things that his mother and sisters enjoy such as wearing jewelry or putting on nail polish; a little girl may pretend to shave her imaginary beard, want to wear pants all the time, and prefer to have boys as playmates. Many children also go through a stage of wishing to be both genders—for example, a little boy may want to have baby “just like mommy” and little girls may think they will grow a beard “just like daddy.”

All of this is typical, healthy behavior. Children who explore and experiment in this way do not develop a dislike of their own gender, but are in the very important process of developing their own gender identity.

Are There Times to Be Concerned?

There are some behaviors that are cause for concern. Such behaviors include persistent discomfort with one’s assigned sex. In boys this may be a strong belief that their penis or testes are disgusting or strong hope that they will disappear. Girls may refuse to go potty in a sitting position. Other behaviors to be concerned about include a child’s insistence that they are the opposite sex, a strong and persistent preference for cross-sex roles in make-believe play—for example, boys insisting on being the princess, girls insisting on being the prince, and an intense desire to participate in the games and/or pastimes of the opposite sex.

Although a gender identity disorder is very rare, if you have concerns, seek advice or information from your child’s doctor or from a mental health professional.

What Gets in the Way of Gender Identity?

Some parents grow concerned when their son wants to wear his sister’s tutu or wants to be the mommy when playing house.

Or they become upset when their daughter will only play with trucks and race cars or refuses to wear a dress.

Responding to these behaviors by discouraging, embarrassing, or shaming a child can be harmful to a child’s gender development.

Share in your child’s interests and answer any questions they have about the differences between boys and girls.

