

The basics of sex, gender and how gender dysphoria develops.

Gender dysphoria describes the struggle of identifying with a certain gender but having a different biological sex. Someone with gender dysphoria might feel that they were born in the wrong body.⁷

The most foundational meaning of the word sex is about reproductive roles. There are two sexes, male and female. Being male or female starts right at conception based on the DNA, or chromosomes, someone has. Males have an X and a Y chromosome, while females have two X chromosomes. “Female” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the large reproductive cell. “Male” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the small reproductive cell.²⁷

Gender is defined differently by different people. Many people use the word gender to describe how someone feels about whether they’re a man or a woman. Others use the word gender in mostly the same way they use the word sex. Gender identity refers to how someone thinks and feels about what gender they are. Since babies don’t know anything about being male or female, no one is born with a gender identity, and it can change as a person grows up. Gender identity is based upon emotions which is why it can change over time.

There are two main ways that gender dysphoria develops:

- The first category has been around for most of known human history but is very rare. This one affects more boys than girls and starts in early childhood. Until recently, these children didn’t usually get to live as the opposite sex, and many came to accept their biological sex during or after puberty.^{26,36}
- Most children and teens struggling with their gender identity today fall into a different category. This new type has been observed since the 1990s but has skyrocketed in the past 10 years. Now, huge numbers of older children and teens are suddenly coming out as trans or nonbinary. More girls than boys are affected with this type of gender dysphoria, and trans identity is more common within friend groups of other trans kids.^{16,22}

One factor in preteen and teenage trans identity may be social pressure.^{9,13} Everyone knows that friends and media can influence this age group, so social circles probably influence gender identity.

Traumatic childhood experiences can be a factor in developing gender identity struggles. This includes sexual abuse, other abuse or neglect, loss of a parent, parental mental illness or substance abuse, and other things.²³ Up to 67% of minors with gender dysphoria have experienced some form of abuse or neglect. Many youth, especially in the second category of gender dysphoria, have additional mental health concerns that may be a factor in their gender dysphoria.^{6,8,11,15,17} Close to 40% of children and young people with gender identity struggles also have depression, anxiety, or both. Most mental health issues precede the onset of gender dysphoria.²⁸

Neurodiversity is another possible factor for developing gender dysphoria. Neurodiversity isn’t a mental illness. It happens when someone’s brain operates differently. This includes conditions like autism, also known as ASD, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, also known as ADHD.^{3,10,14,19,23,25}

Finally, medical conditions may also be a factor in gender dysphoria. One condition is PCOS, which can cause high testosterone levels and other hormone imbalances. These women often gain weight and grow more facial and body hair. You can probably see why a teenage girl with this condition may be more inclined to question their gender.

Another group of medical conditions that may be a factor in gender dysphoria is disorders or differences of sex development. They are very rare. One of them, called congenital adrenal hyperplasia, can cause females to have abnormally high levels of testosterone, similar to PCOS.^{3,4,18} Finding out the specific condition that may be contributing to an adolescent's gender dysphoria may help them understand and accept their unique body.⁵

As you can see, there can be a lot of factors in gender dysphoria. Whatever you're thinking about these factors in your child's life, try not to blame yourself. And don't blame your child either. You're in the right place to find help.

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