# Gender 101

Gender vocabulary

To put it simply, I feel like a girl trapped in a boy's body, and I've felt that way ever since I was four. I never knew there was a word for that feeling, nor was it possible for a boy to become a girl, so I never told anyone and I just continued to do traditionally "boyish" things to try to fit in. When I was 14, I learned what transgender meant and cried of happiness. After ten years of confusion I finally understood who I was. (Alcorn, 2014)

One of the first steps early childhood teachers can take to create gender justice is to learn some shared vocabulary. Language is a powerful tool in understanding the world and ourselves, and early childhood is when both language and identity development are in overdrive. If children don't see themselves in the words they are given, they may make up words to reflect their identities, or they may struggle to understand where they fit in the world without words to describe their experiences.

These terms and their definitions will help you discuss gender accurately and openly with children, families, and your colleagues. As you review all this new vocabulary, you might worry that you won't remember all these terms or that you might make a mistake and say the wrong thing. These fears are normal! Most people share these worries when they are just learning about gender diversity. Try to be forgiving with yourself as you learn. You will make some mistakes and that is okay. The important thing is that you are taking the initiative to learn about gender. Everything you learn will help you become more aware, more responsive, and more inclusive for the young children in your care.
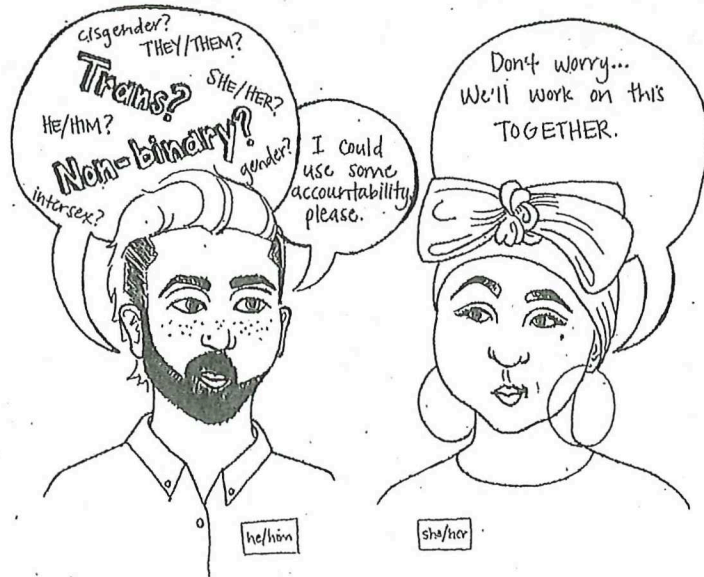
Talking about gender vocabulary: Learning to use gender vocabulary helps teachers discuss gender accurately and openly with children, families, and other adults. Credit line: Jonathan Julian.

We have put a lot of thought and care into choosing language that is empowering and promotes justice for young children and which is embraced by much of the TGE community. That said, we want to acknowledge that language is always evolving, and very quickly in this field. Also, language and labels can be highly personal. Not all terms are embraced by all gender expansive individuals (including "gender expansive"!). Some phrases that we use as umbrella terms other folks might define more narrowly, and vice versa. We recommend keeping an open mind as language evolves, and seeking terms that feel empowering to the children you work with in your communities. All children and adults should have agency over the language used to describe them.

The following are terms we believe will give all early childhood teachers a solid foundation to start talking about gender diversity.

Gender binary

This is the idea that there are only two genders—male and female—and that these neatly correspond to a person's anatomy and physiology

and determine their personal preferences, styles, behavior, roles, and capabilities. It is important to note that this binary is not neutral. Within the context of a patriarchal culture, all things male and masculine are valued over all things female and feminine. While binary gender paints itself as natural and universal, like any cultural norm it is specific to a time and place. Many people are surprised to learn that one hundred years ago in the United States, pink was considered a boy's color and blue was for girls! While binary gender is the dominant gender concept among many cultures throughout the world, it is not universal.

Teachers may describe the gender binary to children by saying:

- "Some people think that there are only two genders and you can't choose. But we know that there are many genders!"

- "Some people say that girls have to be a certain way and boys have to be a certain way. These people might not know about other genders. They are still learning."

Many cultures acknowledge three or more genders

While Western society has held a binary view of gender and anatomy for quite some time, many cultures across the world and throughout history have acknowledged three or more genders. Every society has a version of male/masculine and female/feminine, but the other gender identities and roles in various cultures differ greatly. Some are highly regarded as spiritually unique individuals in their cultures, while others are shunned and treated as second-class citizens. These categories have arisen from the recognition of both anatomical variety and social variety when individuals do not fit neatly into the cultural expectations of male/masculine or female/feminine.

One of the most well-known third genders are the **hijras**[4] of the Indian subcontinent, who have legal recognition in some countries but not always equal rights under the law. Most hijras are assigned male at birth. While many of the indigenous cultures of this region once held hijras as an important cultural group with traditional roles in religion, British colonial influence put a social stigma on hijras, marking them as "immoral and corrupt" in the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act.[5] To this day, many hijras live in poverty and face extreme discrimination. Similarly, in the pre-colonial history of Hawai'i, **Māhū** were notable priests and healers taking on the roles of goddesses in traditional hula dances and

other specific roles in society. **Māhū** were people with masculine and feminine traits, and considered to occupy a space "in the middle" or between kāne (male) and wāhine (female). They were highly revered until missionaries and colonizers brought stigma and discrimination. It is important to note that, in many regions of the world, Western cultural influences were what stigmatized or erased from view the indigenous gender groups.

Countless other cultures throughout history have had their own third (or more!) gender categories. From the many variations on **two-spirit** found in the different Indigenous tribes of the Americas to the **fa'afafine** of Polynesia, from the **burrnesha** (sworn virgins) of Albania, to **muxe** of Latin America, and from androgynos of old Israel to Japanese **X-gender**, we see that the gender binary is far from universal!

Anatomy (structure of body parts) and physiology (functions and relationship of body parts)

All children have body parts and structures such as genitals, chromosomes, hormones, and genes, influencing how their bodies will grow and function. In a binary gender system, everyone is assigned to one of two categories (male or female) based on a simple visual inspection of external genitalia at birth or from an ultrasound before birth. However, biology is much more varied than those two categories would have you believe. Many people's bodies do not conform to this binary system, and are pathologized by medical and social systems that rely on it (see our definition of intersex, below). Furthermore throughout history and cultures, the medical definitions of male and female have changed many times as human anatomy was further studied. A distinction that was once only about genitals grew to consider gonads, chromosomes, and individual hormone levels—with increasing complexity and diversity discovered at each new level. Professionals still disagree about where exactly to draw a single line in the sand (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). The reality is that having only two labels to describe all our different bodies is a cultural choice, and one that does not adequately reflect the beauty that is our natural diversity.

In many discussions of gender, people make a distinction between bodies and identities by using the terms sex and gender respectively. A child's initial medical designation might be referred to as sex, biological

sex, natal sex, or sex assigned at birth. Unfortunately, these terms are often used to overemphasize a false binary understanding of bodies and to minimize the importance and legitimacy of gender identity. An example is when someone refers to a transgender man as being "biologically female," and thus invalidating or minimizing his self-identification as male. It is important to use vocabulary that allows us to talk about bodies but also acknowledges biological diversity and respects the right of children and adults to determine their own authentic gender and name their own bodies ("I identify as male, and therefore my body is 'biologically male,' ovaries and all!"). We want to communicate that a person's body does not determine their gender—they do.

For these reasons, we use **anatomy and physiology** rather than sex to refer to bodies, and we consider **gender** to be a very large umbrella term that encompasses bodies, identities, and a lot more.

Young children might talk about their anatomy and physiology by saying:

- "My body has _____ [a penis, a vulva, a vagina, a scrotum]."

- "We all have _____ [genitals, a crotch, private parts, underwear parts]."

Teachers might talk about anatomy and physiology by saying:

- "We all have genitals, and each person's genitals look a little different from everyone else's. Vulvas, penises, and scrotums come in different sizes and shapes."

- "Many boys have penises, but some boys have vulvas and vaginas. Many girls have vulvas and vaginas, but some girls have penises."

- "Yes, you have what I would usually call a vulva. Do you use another word for it?"

- "Are you comfortable with me calling this a penis? Okay. Aim your penis into the toilet!"

Intersex

Intersex children are born with anatomy and physiology that do not fall easily into discrete binary medical categories of male or female whether due to ambiguous genitalia, chromosomal variations, hormone levels

or sensitivities, or other factors (http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency). Intersex people make up about 2% of the population – about the same percentage as left-handed people, and redheads.[6] This significant percentage of the population has largerly remained invisible due to social stigma. In many countries, including the U.S., intersex children have historically been forced into one medical box or the other at birth. For children born with visibly ambiguous genitalia, this might be done through unnecessary genital surgeries in infancy. While these surgeries may ease parents' worries about their children to have a "normal" life, they do so at the expense of inflicting "irreversible physical and psychological harm" throughout the child's life. Many medical communities are changing their practices based on recommendations from adult intersex activists and their allies.[7]

Think it's all about XX or XY? Think again!

Most people know the two most common variations of sex chromosomes: XX for females and XY for males. But did you know that there are other known variations that children and adults might have?

> X–Roughly 1 in 2,700 births (Turner syndrome)

> XXX–Roughly 1 in 1,000 births

> XXY–Roughly 1 in 500 designated male births (Klienfelter syndrome)

> XYY–Roughly 1 in 1,000 designated male births (Jacob's or XYY syndrome)

(Zayed, nd)

In total, around 1 in every 1,700 children born is neither XX nor XY.[8] Many of them won't know they are intersex until puberty, and some go their whole lives without knowing!

Legal designation

Following close on the heels of medical designations of male and female are the legal designations that go with them. In most countries, a doctor's simple inspection of an infant's (or fetus's) externally visible genitalia results in not just a binary medical label but a legal designation that has

a far-reaching impact on a person's life. In some places in the world, that legal designation determines whether a person can vote, own property, drive, or be granted any number of other government-regulated rights. The process of changing someone's legal designation after infancy varies state to state and country to country. There are some places where it is impossible to change one's legal designation from the one assigned at birth. Many transgender adults in the U.S. find themselves with a range of different legal gender designations between state-issued IDs, passports, birth certificates, medical records, and other documents based on whether changes are possible and accessible for each.

In this book, we use **legal designation** rather than sex when talking about the marker required for various types of paperwork. As discussed above, children's anatomy is not at all binary, but in most places legal designations still are. Using this term puts a degree of separation between a child who may not agree with their legal designation, and the designation itself. It also does better at capturing an individual's agency (or lack thereof) in being able to change their legal designation later in their lives if they wish. If someone wants to change their legal designation but can't (due to financial, legislative, or other barriers) the "problem" is structural or institutional, rather than being internal to that person. Not having access to a legal designation that matches one's identity is an example of structural and institutional oppression—where the gender binary is built into the legal system.

Teachers can talk about legal designation by saying:

- "Your paperwork says male, but only you know who you are."

- "When you were born, the doctors and other grown-ups guessed you were a girl, but you get to tell us if they were right or not."

Gender identity

This is one's deeply held sense of self as it relates to the world of gender. A person's gender identity is informed by the world around them—their culture, family, relationships, place in history, and more—but it is determined internally for each individual. Most children become conscious of their gender identity/ies between 18 and 30 months old (Halim, Bryant, & Zucker 2016). Some children develop a gender identity that matches their original legal designation (see cisgender) and some children develop a gender identity that is different from their original

legal designation (see transgender/trans). Gender identity may be fixed (staying the same throughout one's life) or it may be fluid (changing over time and/or across contexts).

Gender identities—choice vs. agency

There is some disagreement in gender expansive communities over the use of the word identity to refer to one's gender. In many contexts, a term that was originally meant to convey agency has been used by those who disagree with the breaking down of gender barriers to imply that TGE individuals are simply making a choice not to follow the path that is expected of them (e.g., "Sure, you identify as a girl, but you're really a boy"). This debate about choice is a familiar theme in discussions of sexual orientation as well. Activists and advocates for LGBQ rights have worked for years to dispel the myth that being gay or lesbian or otherwise not heterosexual is a choice. The same is true for gender—TGE individuals do not simply choose to feel the way they feel inside or to be a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth.

Many other aspects of these individuals' lives are choices. Children will choose whether or not they will tell you about how they feel inside. They will choose whether or not they will express their gender freely. These choices will be made based on how safe they perceive their environment to be.

When we use the term identity, we want to be clear that we are not implying that a child chooses to be a certain gender. We are granting each child agency over identifying or naming their own gender(s), rather than being forced to accept the labels and designations placed on them by others.

We respect and support the decision by many TGE individuals to abandon the word identity in favor of just saying gender. In the context of this book, we ask readers to see the word "identity" as an embodiment of agency.

Cisgender

This term refers to individuals whose gender identity is the same as their legal designation at birth. Most people can be described as cisgender men and women. The term was derived from the Latin

preposition *cis* meaning "on this side" (https://www.etymonline.com/word/cis-; https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cis). While this is a relatively new term, and a word that is unknown to many of the people it describes, its importance is often understated. In most societies, cisgender experiences are considered normal while everyone else is seen as other. By including the word cisgender in our vocabulary, it is possible to name this power dynamic and begin to disrupt the societal norms that lead TGE individuals to be marginalized (i.e., regarded as invisible, or seen as insignificant or as outliers). For example, without the prefix cis-, cismen are just men while transmen can never fully attain that label. Without the prefix cis-, cisgender people are often thought of as real or normal men and women, while transgender people are thought of as somehow less than real or as abnormal (they are pathologized). While cisgender people and experiences are more common, they are no more real or normal than transgender people and gender expansive experiences.

Young children might talk about cisgender identity by saying:

- "When I was born, the doctor thought I was a boy, and I think I'm a boy too."

- "When I was born, grown-ups guessed I was a girl and I'm still a girl."

Transgender or trans

These are individuals whose gender identity is different from their legal gender designation at birth in any way. We use these two terms interchangeably, but not everyone in TGE communities agrees that they are interchangeable. We use transgender and trans as umbrella terms to include individuals who identify outside the male/female gender binary, including people who identify as both male and female, as neither, or as any number of other genders. Some folks define one of the two terms more narrowly and the other as a broader umbrella, but we do not make that distinction.

TGE identities: teens and adults

It can be hard for people to envision genders outside the gender binary. Following are a few of the many terms that adolescent and

adult communities have embraced as identities, and some loose definitions of how they are used.

Gender fluid. Individuals who defy the norms of binary gender and either slide along a gender spectrum or weave their own intricate individual patterns of gender. The word "fluid" refers to the potential for individuals to move through and explore and/or identify with different genders day to day and throughout their lives.

Genderqueer. A term that represents a gender identity and a social movement among youth and adults who question and challenge traditional beliefs about gender. They are striving for new, more expansive, diverse, and inclusive understandings about gender that liberate individuals from the constraints of the gender binary.

Agender. Similar to genderqueer, individuals who identify as agender are breaking down traditional beliefs about gender as a binary. Gender individuals may identify as having a gender but not a specific gender or they may not identify with having a gender at all.

Nonbinary. While we are under the transgender/trans heading in this glossary, nonbinary is often considered more of a separate circle on the Venn diagram of gender, overlapping with transgender and trans (identities don't like being boxed in neatly!). Nonbinary identities are broadly defined as any identities that defy the social pressure to choose one and only one—male or female. Kylie identifies as male and female, but also includes gender educator and gender troublemaker as part of his identity! Nonbinary is sometimes called "**enby**" from the abbreviation, nb.

Trans woman/Trans man/Trans girl/Trans boy. These are often the labels used by transgender individuals who identify with one of the binary categories of male or female, but not with the one designated to them at birth. Some people condense the phrase into a single word (eg. transwoman, transman). For others, it is important to keep a space in the label—trans woman or trans man—to indicate that trans describes a kind of woman or man but that their femaleness/maleness is valid and unqualified in and of itself.

NOTE: One individual may have several identities and use many terms for themself!

TGE identities: young children

While some young children may use a term like nonbinary if they have heard it in their community, it is more common for children to come up with their own words or use more simple or concrete language. Here are a few examples of terms that children have organically used for themselves to describe genders outside of (or more inclusive than) simply girl or boy.

Boy-girl/Girl-boy. Meaning both boy and girl.

Everything. When young children become aware of multiple gender options, they sometimes opt for "all of the above"—intuitively grasping a concept that many adults struggle with.

Kid. "Why are you asking if I'm a boy or a girl? I'm just a kid!"; "We're all kids!"

Just call me by my name. Some children won't want to be called a boy or a girl: they'll say "Just call me Cienna!"

Gender smoothie. One of Ehrensaft's patients told her "You take everything about gender, throw it in a blender, press the button, and you've got me" (Ehrensaft, 2016b, p. 40).

Gender prius. A play on the hybrid car, this describes a child who considers themself half-boy and half-girl (Ehrensaft, 2016b, p. 36).

What terms have you heard children come up with to describe their genders? Would you hear those children differently now than you did in the past?
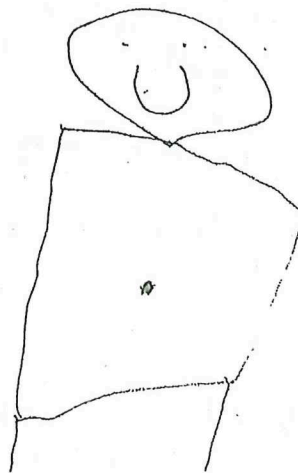
Hemin, Age 5

"In-betweener": In one preschool classroom, the children were working together at group time over several weeks to write a song-book about the classroom community. One child was inspired to create this illustration of an in-betweener for the song-book after a discussion about gender identity. Credit line: Tink Hemin.

Gender expression

These are the ways in which people externally communicate their gender to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice (pitch, intonation, volume), activities, or mannerisms and ways of moving that their culture associates with masculinity, femininity, or androgyny (a combination of or ambiguity between masculine and feminine). For example, in contemporary Western cultures, long hair, dresses, playing with dolls, and the color pink are often associated with femininity/femaleness whereas short hair, pants, rough-and-tumble play, and the color blue with masculinity/maleness.

A child's gender expression may or may not align with cultural norms and expectations based on either their legal designation or their gender identity. For example, a child who is designated male at birth but identifies as female may still express herself as a "tomboy" who likes to play in the dirt and has short hair. Many children will explore different gender expressions to see what feels right for them. As TGE children grow up and live authentically in their gender identities, some will choose

new names and/or pronouns, some will choose to take hormones or have surgery, and some will choose not to do any of those things as part of their gender expressions.

The clothes that parents and caregivers provide for their children, the haircuts they are given, and many other aspects of gender expression are often decided without much input from the children themselves. Some children are not allowed to express themselves in the ways they want to, and are instead forced into gender expressions that are not authentic.

Young children's gender expression is reflected in such statements as:

- "I like to wear _____."

- "My favorite toys and games are _____."

Young children might talk about TGE expression by saying:

- "I am a girl, but I like all the boy things."

- "I am a boy fairy princess."

Here is how eight-year-old Alex, a TGE child, described his gender expression in kindergarten:

> I felt a little embarrassed [to wear dresses]. I didn't wear dresses a lot because they [classmates] might laugh at me. Actually, it doesn't matter cause they didn't laugh at me... Just 'cause you wear a dress doesn't mean someone is able to be like, "Haha! You're wearing a pink dress. I'm not going to play with you"....Just because they have a certain gender...it doesn't mean you can't play. Because actually there's no such thing as girl colors and boy colors and girl clothes and boy clothes.

Pronouns

We use pronouns every day in almost every statement we make to refer to people. Familiar pronouns reinforce a gender binary (he/him and she/her). These pronouns are authentic for some people, but many transgender/gender expansive individuals use gender-neutral pronouns (singular they/them or alternative terms such as ze/hir or others). Referring to an individual, including a child, by the pronoun they identify with communicates an important message of respect: "I acknowledge and respect your authentic gender identity and welcome you being your

authentic gender self." Using accurate pronouns is a critically important action that teachers and adults can take to support TGE children.

Adults cannot determine what pronouns are most authentic to a child just by looking at them. The easiest way to find out is to create a culture where children are asked and invited to name their pronouns. Adults can model this practice by including their own pronouns when they introduce themselves to others. This communicates to children that they are safe and can be their authentic selves when they are in your program. This also teaches children that they have agency over the language that others use to talk about them. Young children may explore the use of different pronouns in their play, art, or throughout conversations with their peers and teachers. Learning to ask about individuals' pronouns can be difficult at first for adults, but with practice, it will become much easier. Young children can learn from their earliest years to ask about others' pronouns. By being intentional about respecting children's pronouns, early childhood teachers create a more just culture that respects and welcomes children of all genders.

Young children might use different pronouns as they explore their gender identities:

- "I want to be called 'he'."

- "I want to be called 'he' and 'she'!"

- "I'm a 'she' in this game."

- "I'm a boy today. Call me 'he'!"

- "I don't want to be called 'she' anymore. Can I be called 'he' again?"

- "I want to be called 'they'."

- "Just call me Cienna!"

Gender expansive(ness)

Gender expansive (also gender creative) refers to anyone who is exploring, expressing, and identifying their genders in ways that challenge cultural norms and expand our binary understanding of gender. Gender expansive is a broad umbrella term that includes children who (one day or already) identify as transgender people, as well as children who (one day or already) identify as cisgender people but whose gender expression is not confined to binary expectations of

their gender. Gender expansiveness, as a concept, allows children to push the boundaries of what we think we know about gender through creativity and imagination. Even the word "expansive" gives rise to an ever-growing number of possible combinations of identities, expressions, and bodies—making way for smoothies, priuses, boy-girls, girl-boys, in-betweeners, and every new gender that children have yet to declare (see box above). This is followed by the hope that the laws and institutions in which we must all live as gendered beings will grow and expand along with us.

Young children might talk about being gender expansive by saying:

- "I am a girl, but I like all the boy things."

- "This is a boy's dress."

- "Girls can have beards too, because my mom has a beard!"

Social transition

As some children explore their identities, expressions, and the language they want used to describe them (names, pronouns, etc.), they might let the adults in their lives know that they would like to change some of the aspects of their gender that were assigned to them by others. Of course, they must be given a loving and supportive environment, and agency over those decisions, before they are likely to express these needs openly. When a child wants the people around them to change how they interact with them—new name, pronouns, identity, etc.—we call the process of adopting those changes a social transition. Some children and families choose to move their child to a new school or program: to start fresh with new friends using their new name and pronouns right from the start. Other children might want to have a slow and subtle transition at school, by telling their closest friends first and then proceeding as they feel comfortable. Still others might want to shout it from the rooftops and celebrate with cake. We know one third grader who, with his mom's help, put together a PowerPoint presentation to teach the whole class about gender and his new name and pronouns! A social transition should follow the child's lead, and the child and family should be involved in every step and every decision. Nothing should be done without the child's consent and agency.

Assumptions vs. observations

One important theme to notice about the terms we are introducing is that they move us away from making assumptions about children and towards making observations together with children. For example, the term "sex" makes assumptions about a child's body, while talking about anatomy and physiology is based on what we observe about bodies. The terms and concepts we've presented about gender—identity, expression, pronouns, etc.—are grounded in observing and listening to the children themselves. Changing our language changes the way we think about gender and shifts agency from doctors, politicians, and other adults into the hands of the children whose lives are affected by these assumptions.

> *Well, some people guess what genders are but it's better if you just-maybe you should just ask if you're uncertain. The best way is to ask. -Angus, 6 years*

Gender attribution

This is the process by which an individual decides what gender they believe a child to be by making assumptions from their gender expression (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, voice) and visible aspects of their anatomy and physiology (e.g., body shape). Gender attribution is strongly influenced by cultural perspectives—as gender expressions and styles have varied greatly across cultures and throughout history. Some children experience strong feelings of hurt or shame when they experience gender attribution that does not match their gender identity. Others are not bothered. Unless we are conscious about our own assumptions and we create a culture where children are given agency to identify their own genders, we are likely to make incorrect attributions to some of the children in our programs.

Gender attribution in action: what does it look like?

Sara was legally designated female at birth. However, growing up, the gender attributed to Sara was frequently male (i.e., Sara was often assumed to be a boy). Sara was even pushed out of a girls' restroom in elementary school by another girl who thought she was a boy. When adults and children heard the name "Sara," they were often confused

as Sara is not a typical Western name for a boy in a US cultural context. Being seen as male was confusing, painful, and a source of shame for her growing up. In fact, more than one substitute teacher accused her of misbehaving or acting up when she raised her hand after hearing her name called for attendance. Their attribution of a male gender to Sara was so strong that even her own testimony ("Yes, my name is Sara") was not enough to change her teachers' minds that she must have been trying to play a joke on them. Now, as an adult, Sara identifies as both male and female, but the female piece of her identity was hard fought despite it being her legal designation.

Young children might talk about gender attribution by saying:

- "Sometimes people look at me and think I am _____ [a girl, a boy, don't know]."

- "Sometimes people call me _____."

Teachers might help young children reflect on gender attribution by saying:

- "When people say that, how do you feel?"

- "Why did you guess that person is a girl?"

Misgender

To misgender someone is to refer to them as a gender that is other than their gender identity. This often happens when an individual assumes a person's gender (gender attribution) based on their impression of them. Misgendering often comes in the form of using the wrong pronouns for a person. When misgendering happens as a mistake, it is fine to simply apologize and correct oneself without making it into a big deal. Intentional or malicious misgendering can be very hurtful and invalidating for a child.

Young children might talk about the experience of being misgendered by saying:

- "Everyone thinks I'm a girl because I have long hair, but I'm a boy. Boys can have long hair too!"

- "I'm a girl, but my teacher always calls me a boy and tells me that boys can't wear dresses."

- "I don't like it when people call me 'he.'"

Sexual orientation

This term is included here only because it is so often confused with gender. Sexual orientation and gender are not the same thing. Gender is personal (how one sees oneself, "Who I am"), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (who I am attracted to physically, emotionally, and/or romantically). One of the most common ways the confusion between gender and sexual orientation shows up is when young children who are assigned male show interest in behaviors considered to be feminine (gender expression). Jen, a 24-year-old nonbinary person assigned male at birth, recalls: "I used to carry a doll as a child. I don't know much about the doll—just that my parents thought dolls would make me gay."[9]

Gender and sexual orientation are, however, related to one another. Societal beliefs about what is acceptable or normal in terms of gender have implications for sexual orientation as well. For example, many adults communicate strong messages to young children about what it means to be a boy or girl (gender identity), how boys and girls should behave (gender expression), and who they should be attracted to as they grow up (sexual orientation). Thus, from children's youngest years, they receive messages from adults about the relationship between gender and sexual orientation. It is essential for early childhood teachers to understand that gender and sexual orientation are two separate aspects of identity:

- Transgender or gender expansive individuals can have a range of sexual orientations including gay, bisexual, queer, straight, or others.

- Similarly, individuals with different sexual orientations (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) have a range of gender identities (e.g., cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, and more).

distinct but interrelated aspects of identity

While gender and sexual orientation are separate identity categories, they are very much interrelated. Members of minority groups from both categories have struggled alongside each other for recognition and rights in many countries. The umbrella acronym of LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other marginalized identities) is used occasionally in this book to refer to all individuals who are not both cisgender and heterosexual—the dominant identities. It is important to remember that, while gender and sexual orientation are often grouped together in this way, they are entirely different aspects of one's being!

While sexual orientation is not the focus of this book, we believe it is important to achnowledge that homophobia—fear of, and power exercised against, non-heterosexual orientations—is pervasive in early childhood education settings.

> *Some people think sexuality has no place in the early childhood classroom and therefore we shouldn't talk about it. But we do all the time—every story where a princess marries a prince, every set of toys that contain a man and a woman and a baby: these are giving messages about sexual orientation. The message is that heterosexuality is normal. We need to counter this message by showing what a range of sexuality looks like, in age-appropriate ways. So, we're not talking about what people do in bed; we're talking about all the kinds of attraction and romantic relationships that happen, including queer relationships and also people who have multiple romantic relationships at the same time, or none at all! –Kira, Kindergarten Teacher*

Heteronormativity

This is the cultural assumption that all people fall into opposing gender categories (male and female), and that they will be attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Intersectionality

Gender is an essential aspect of children's identities, and can only be understood in relation to other aspects of identity. Children are developing as whole beings and their understandings and experiences with gender are interrelated with other aspects of their identity (i.e., social categories including their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, citizenship, religion, age, primary language, ability/disability, and other factors). Acknowledging these distinct but interconnected aspects of identity is the foundation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Intersectionality recognizes that an individual's position, or membership in different social categories, impacts their identity formation and experience of privilege and/or marginalization. For example, the identity development of a young Black gender expansive child would be significantly different than a white gender expansive child because the Black child would face discrimination related to race and gender— experiences that would increasingly influence a child's developing sense of themselves and their accumulated trauma.

Intersectionality is not only about privilege and marginalization. It also recognizes other ways our experiences differ based on our unique positions in the world. For example, that same Black child might have different references for masculinity and femininity based on their family's values and norms than the white child might have. And a Black child raised by queer, disabled college professors in a rural setting would have different gender references than a Black child raised by straight restaurant workers in an urban Baptist community. And so on. It is our job as early childhood teachers to support children's sense of validation and pride in all their identities, including those of their families (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). A child is more than any one of their parts.

Young children might reflect their intersectional identities by saying:

- "I'm brown, just like my mamas! My family comes from _____."

- "In my family, all the boys grow really long beards and wear turbans."

- "I want to wear pretty dresses like Angelica, but my mom says we can't afford them."

I Identify as...	Gender Identity. "What I feel like inside. What I know my authentic gender to be." Boy, girl, transgender, agender, boy-girl, in-betweener, sometimes boy/sometimes girl, neither boy nor girl...
Please call me...	Pronouns: She/hers, he/his, they, theirs...etc.
My body has...	Anatomy and physiology: Penis, vulva, etc.
When I was born, people thought I was...	Legal designation at birth Female, male, third designation (in some locales)
Now people look at me and see...	Gender attribution
And I want them to see...	Gender identity and gender expression
My favorite toys, games, clothing, hairstyles are...	Gender expression
My other identities and experiences are...	Intersectionality: Religion, race, socioeconomic status, ability/disability status, etc.

As you are learning, gender is a lot more than a pair of check boxes! Below we introduce several metaphors and models for representing the slowly evolving changes in societal attitudes, beliefs, and understandings about gender and all its component parts. These metaphors do not comprehensively represent every cultural belief system related to gender. Instead, our goal is to illustrate a significant shift seen in Western cultures in the last two decades. We also realize that different readers will be coming in at different points along this progression of gender models, and we find that it's helpful for folks to see each of the steps along this path rather than jumping over some of them. We acknowledge that the concept of gender is dynamic and will evolve over time as children and adults continue to reveal to us new layers of understanding about what it means to live in a just society that values gender diversity. By the time you are reading this book, we're sure we will have tweaked our model again to account for our own new learnings!

Gender boxes
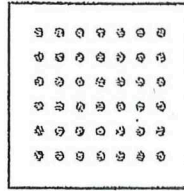
- Boy
- Referred to as "he"
- Has penis and testicles
- Has more testosterone
- Is attracted to girls
- Doesn't cry
- Plays with trucks
- Likes roughhousing
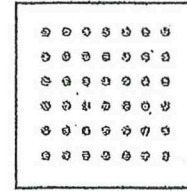
- Girl
- Referred to as "she"
- Has vulva
- Has more estrogen & progesterone
- Is attracted to boys
- Feelings! Tears!
- Plays with dolls
- Wears dresses

Binary boxes: A visual tool to illustrate the gender binary. It features a pink square containing rows of pink dots and a blue box containing rows of blue dots. Credit line: Julia Hennock.

In this model, all the component parts of gender that we defined (anatomy, physiology, identity, expression, legal designation, pronouns, and sexual orientation, which we know isn't even part of gender!) are bound up together and predetermined by external genitalia at birth. You are placed in a single gender box with strict walls around a set of ideals and expectations governing all the elements of gender. These ideals and expectations prescribe what a child's anatomy and physiology should look like and the preferences they should have in activities, clothing, career paths, sexual desires, and more as they grow up. If an individual performs their assigned gender correctly based on these ideals (including physical development), gender attribution is expected to come easily for others who meet them. In this way, it is often seen as your fault if someone else cannot immediately tell which box you belong in because you have failed to meet the expectations laid out for you at birth.

As you now have a broader sense of the different aspects of ourselves that combine to make up gender, you can see how a gender binary where there are only two choices does not accurately represent the

range of variation that actually exists. Many cultures across the world and throughout history have acknowledged three or even more genders (see box near start of Chapter 1). However, Western cultural beliefs have largely only acknowledged two, and the gender binary is still the primary belief system about gender around the world.

The ideals and expectations in the gender box model are all but impossible for any individual to adhere to in reality. We have a hard time believing anybody has reached adulthood without trying to stick an arm or a leg outside of their prescribed box at some point, although society has a lot of ways of reprimanding you when you do that! The gender binary, with its solid and unbending boxes, is damaging for everyone. Can you think of a time when your gender was regulated by others because you were not being "manly" or "womanly" enough according to someone else? How did it feel to be pushed back inside the box when someone else thought you had reached out too far? Have you ever seen someone who you couldn't immediately put in a discrete binary gender box? How did that make you feel? The impossible ideal of two gender boxes is damaging to all of us, and extremely dangerous for those who don't fit (or can't squeeze themselves) neatly into one of them.

It is worth noting that there are many people who are not opposed to the idea of transgender folks climbing out of the box they were given at birth, as long as they climb all the way out of that box and get all the way into the other binary box. Even many transgender people hold a binary view of gender. However, when we think of all the possible combinations of identities, expressions, bodies, and more, it becomes clear that trying to force everyone into only two boxes is simply not adequate.

Gender as a spectrum

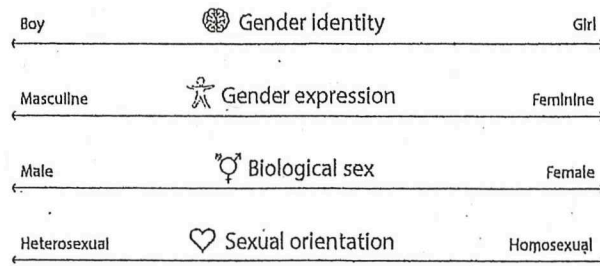| Male	Nonbinary/Agender	Female

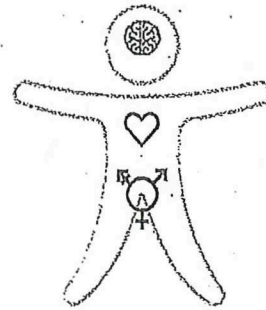The concept of gender as a spectrum rejects the boxes view as too simplistic and failing to capture the wider variation of genders that exists among children and adults. A gender spectrum positions male/masculine on one end and female/feminine on the other; this model allows for people to position themselves anywhere along the spectrum. Someone can identify in the middle (equal amounts feminine/female and

masculine/male *or* gender neutral/agender), lean towards one side of the spectrum (more feminine/female than masculine/male or vice versa), or locate themselves on one extreme or the other (only feminine/female or masculine/male). The spectrum allows for an acknowledgment of fluidity as well, since individuals can change where they position themselves on the spectrum over time (Gender Spectrum, "The Language of Gender," 2017). This was the first Western model to introduce individual agency to define oneself, but it still uses the gender binary as a framework, and all the individual components of gender that we have defined are still bound together. This limits how gender can be understood.

Gender as multiple spectrums—the Genderbread Person

Boy	Gender identity	Girl
Masculine	Gender expression	Feminine
Male	Biological sex	Female
Heterosexual	Sexual orientation	Homosexual

Gender as a Genderbread Person: A visual tool that features a gingerbread-person-shaped figure. This figure's gender identity is connected to their brain, their biology to the genitals, and their gender expression to the body. Gender identity, biology, gender expression, and sexuality are accompanied by binary-based spectrums to show the complex, independent nature of these facets of gender and sexuality.
Credit line: itspronouncedmetrosexual.com.

gender, the TGE community and researchers of gender diversity began to break gender down into all the component parts we have discussed. Models such as the Genderbread Person became popular to show the various elements of identity, expression, and anatomy and physiology (shown in this model as biological sex) as distinct yet interconnected pieces of the greater picture of gender. Sexual orientation is shown in these models as a separate spectrum, independent of gender identity or expression. In this model, we begin to see more possibility in combining various identities, expressions, and bodies as they are no longer tied to one another like they are in the boxes or on the single spectrum model. An individual may have a body that was labeled male at birth, identify as female, and enjoy wearing cargo shorts and baseball jerseys that are typically coded as masculine. This model continues to build on agency and diversity in our understanding of gender.

Many TGE community members and educators acknowledge the limitations of the gender spectrum model, and have sought to improve or replace it with other models. One commonly observed limitation is that the spectrum model continues to rely on two oppositional concepts (feminine/female vs. masculine/male—the gender binary!) to make sense of gender. The implication is that a move towards "boy" is a move away from "girl," and this does not fit everyone's experience. Another limit to the model is that it views gender in a vacuum, isolated from the other facets of a person's identity and position in the world.

Gender as spinning a web
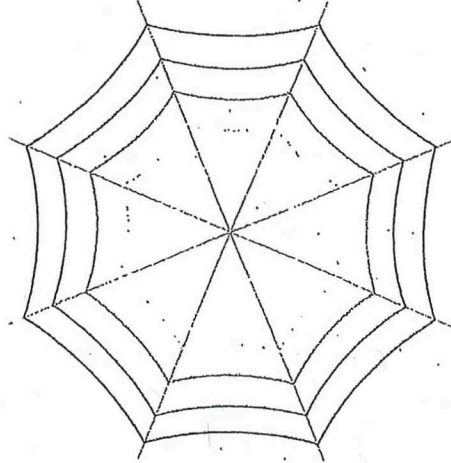
Gender as a web: A visual tool which recognizes that gender is a deeply personal and individualized concept for children and adults, and that no two webs are identical. Adapted from Ehrensaft (2016b).

Diane Ehrensaft (2016b) introduced a new model for understanding gender in her book *The Gender Creative Child*: a web that is woven actively by each individual child with three major threads—nature, nurture, culture—and a fourth factor, time. The theory of gender as a web recognizes that gender is a deeply personal and individualized concept for children and adults, as no two webs are identical. Gender is understood to be individually constructed, and in this way, Ehrensaft's model distinguishes itself by giving children agency beyond a binary in creating their own unique webs.

According to Ehrensaft (2016b), "Nature includes chromosomes, hormones, hormone receptors, gonads, primary sex characteristics, secondary sex characteristics, brain, and mind" (p. 25). This maps closely, though not exactly, with what we refer to as anatomy and physiology. Nurture includes "socialization practices and intimate relationships, and is usually housed in the family, the school, peer relations, and religious and community institutions" (p. 25). This includes all the ways children are treated and taught to behave as a result of their legal designation at birth and the community in which they live. And culture includes "a particular society's values, ethics, laws, theories, and practices" (p. 25).
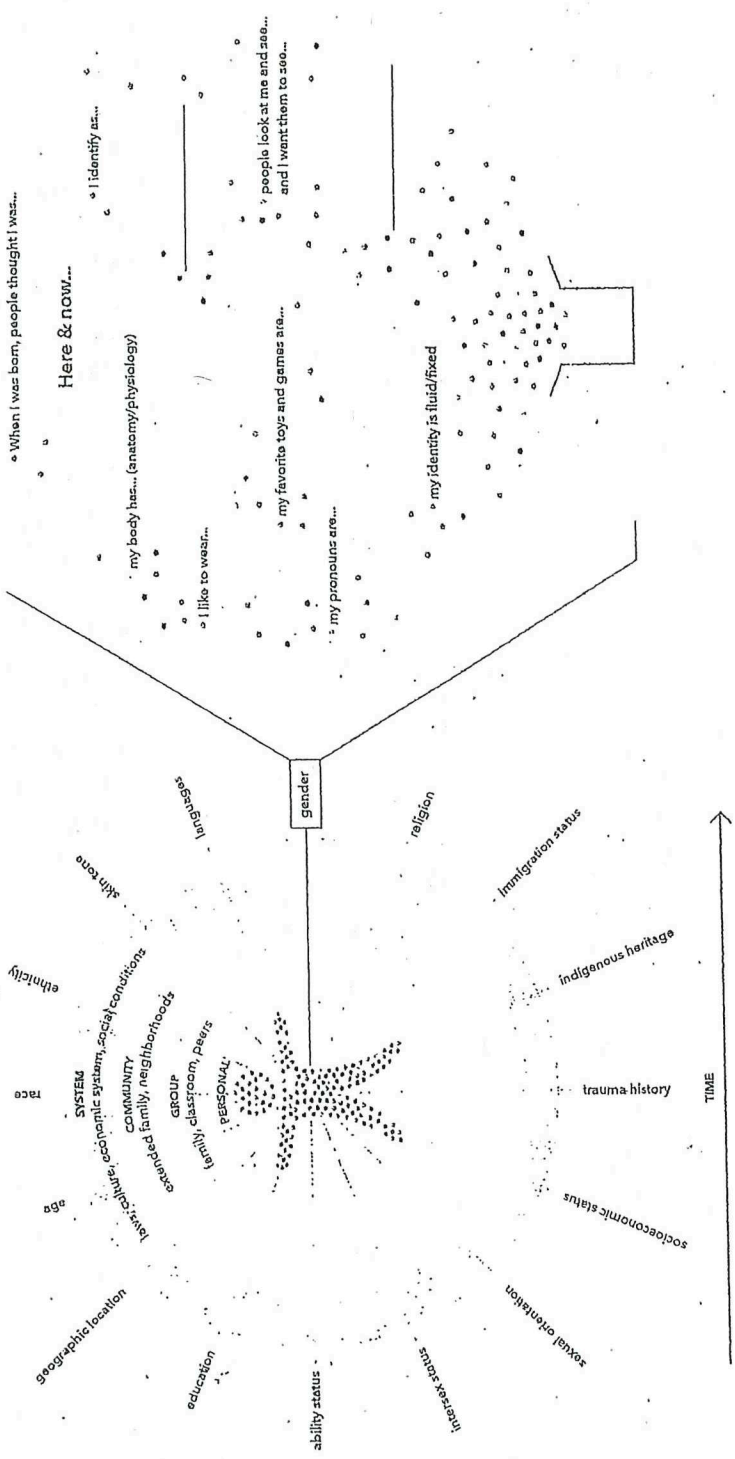
What it means to be female or male, feminine or masculine, varies fro[m] culture to culture across the globe and throughout history. The fin[al] element of Ehrensaft's model is time—acknowledging that "we all, y[ou] and I and everyone around us, will always be tweaking our gender we[b] until the day we die" (p. 25).

Compared to the spectrum models, the web model is better ab[le] to capture the dynamic way an individual actively shapes their gend[er] (identity, expression, and more) over the course of their life. Gender we[b] offer an infinite number of combinations of these threads, and so diverg[e] from the gender binary even as it is represented in the spectrum mode[l]. Another element of the web model that is unique is that a web can [be] damaged. According to Ehrensaft, if others "grab the thread of the w[eb] from us as we are spinning it, and tell us what our gender has to be, rath[er] than listening to us as we spell out our gender, or rather than watching [us] do our own creative work, we are at risk of ending up with a tangled kn[ot] of threads, rather than a beautifully spun web that shimmers and glow[s]" (p.25). This aspect of the web model allows us to talk about a child's gend[er] health—something that is missing from previous models of gender.

What is gender health?

Gender health is the opportunity for a child to live in the gender that feels most real and/or comfortable for them. Gender health includes the ability for children to express their gender without being rejected, criticized, ostracized, or restricted from living their authentic gender selves.

(Hidalgo et al., 2013; Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018[)]

Gender

Here & now...

- When I was born, people thought I was...
- I identify as...
- my body has... (anatomy/physiology)
- I like to wear...
- my favorite toys and games are...
- people look at me and see... and I want them to see...
- my pronouns are...
- my identity is fluid/fixed

TIME

PERSONAL

GROUP (family, classroom, peers)

COMMUNITY extended family, neighborhoods

SYSTEM laws, culture, economic system, social conditions

- languages
- skin tone
- ethnicity
- race
- age
- geographic location
- education
- ability status
- intersex status
- sexual orientation
- socioeconomic status
- trauma history
- indigenous heritage
- immigration status
- religion

Gender as an intersectional constellation: This is our evolving gender model. It is not based in the binary; rather it prompts us to describe our gender by completing phrases related to our current gender identity, anatomy, gender expression, and more. In this way, we understand our gender as unique, its parts connected (and often changing) like a constellation. It looks at gender as it relates to our various identities and sociopolitical contexts. Credit line: Julia Hennock.

The Gender Justice model of gender combines elements of both the Genderbread Person and Ehrensaft's web. It also expands upon these models to reflect our intersecting identities and the systems of power and oppression that affect us as a result.

Like the Genderbread Person, we recognize that there are many component parts of gender—identity, expression, anatomy, physiology, legal designation, pronouns and language, and attributions. However, we do not see any of these factors as existing on simple linear spectrums. These factors are represented in our model in open-ended reflections for each individual child to fill in using all the many ways that very young children communicate (not just by verbally finishing the prompts). There are also unwritten bullet points to show the facets of gender yet to be discovered and invented by children. Each of those bullet points are represented by dots, once tightly bound by the walls of an assigned gender box, now shown floating freely in our image of the child. You might imagine these facets of a child's gender moving like particles, shining like stars, clustering in the air and forming dynamic constellations that shift and rearrange over time. This view of gender breaks free of the binary entirely and offers the greatest possible agency to children as they form their own unique gender constellations. These gender particles mix and mingle with particles representing all the component parts of a child's religion, ethnicity, trauma history, race, and every other intersecting identity they hold—each of which is just as multifaceted and individual as gender.

Like Ehrensaft's web model, we recognize socialization and culture as influences on gender. We also emphasize the dynamic nature of gender shown in Ehrensaft's model by the image of a child actively weaving the threads of nature, nurture, and culture together. In our model, this active agency over time is captured by open-ended gender components and the movement of the entire image through a child's lifetime, starting from a particular point in history. At any slice along that timeline, a person's gender might look different.

However, gender must also be understood as intersectional in relationship to other aspects of an individual's whole identity. Culture is not monolithic or consistent child to child, even between two children growing up in the same neighborhood. It is important to understand how gender expression, identity, and other components might vary by race, class, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, immigrant/migrant

status, and more. These multiple identities and characteristics are shown as spokes intersecting through the child.[10] As the child moves through their life, different spokes might be closer to the foreground of their experiences while others move to the back for a while. For those who live in poverty, the stress of simply meeting basic survival needs can overshadow other intersecting identities in many ways. Perhaps a child who has needs related to their gender health can't differentiate that particular pain from their hunger or lack of sleep related to poverty.

A person might hold relative power or experience relative oppression on any of these spokes, based on the values of their communities during their lifetime. For example, in most Western cultures at the start of the 21st century, some privileged identities and characteristics include whiteness, maleness and masculinity, Christianity or having no religion, being able-bodied, heterosexuality, cisgender identity, financial wealth, being a non-immigrant, and more. For most of us, it is easier to recognize the areas where we experience relative oppression or marginalization, because the unfairness is highlighted in our own eyes. However, learning to see where we each hold relative power and privilege is a critical step in helping to fight for justice for everyone. Intersectional oppression is not simple math, though. We can't just count up our privileged identities, subtract our marginalized ones, and see where we stand. But it is extremely important to understand that gender-based bias and oppression cannot be considered in isolation from other systems of power and oppression.

A child's unique profile of intersecting identities and characteristics, power, and marginalization makes up the middle circle of our model—the **personal** influences. We further break "culture" down into increasingly wider circles of influence on the child. As teachers, our first point of contact with children is in the next circle: **groups** the child belongs to. This includes all the social circles with which a child has regular and direct contact—family, classrooms, playgroups, religious groups, and other close relationships. In this circle, our own intersectional identities and areas of power or marginalization inform how we make assumptions about and gender attributions for children.

Moving further out, children are influenced by their **communities:** extended families, neighborhoods, local politics, geographical location (urban or rural environments), etc. Beyond this layer, children are influenced by the **systems** in which we all live—laws, economic structures, social hierarchies, language structures, and more. The gender

binary exists in this layer in Western society, as it is embedded in so many of our systems. Someone whose first language is Spanish will grow up internalizing a gender binary that extends beyond people to inanimate objects, as most Spanish nouns—along with the nouns of all Romance languages are designated as either masculine or feminine regardless of context. When we look at gender within an intersectional framework, we can more deeply understand how power structures are built into our systems and perpetuated through each circle of influence on children.

Supporting children's gender health in an intersectional model

Now that we have completely reframed gender from the old boxes model, what is a teacher's role in supporting children's gender health?

Colt Keo-Meier and Diane Ehrensaft sum up a few of the key points to remember in their Gender Affirmative Model (GAM) (2018). Central to the GAM is the evidence-based idea that attempting to force someone to live as a gender with which they do not identify does that person harm. Instead, the GAM supports children's gender health by creating the opportunity for children to live in the genders that feel most real and/or comfortable for them and by giving them the freedom to express gender without experiencing restriction, criticism, or ostracism.

A gender affirmative approach supports all children's gender health. The GAM is based on several beliefs (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018):

- No gender identity or gender expression is pathological (wrong, "sick," needing to be "fixed").

- Gender identities and gender expressions are diverse and vary across individuals and cultures. Supporting children's gender health requires cultural sensitivity and culturally responsive practice.

- Gender is a complex integration of biology, development, socialization, culture, and context.

- Gender can be fluid or fixed. When gender is fluid, it can change for an individual over the course of their life. Additionally, these changes can take place at different times for different people.

The classroom culture can be a place where children get to explore gender in a way that they don't in certain other areas of their life. It's such an opportunity to create a culture that can create a new norm in the world. –Encian, Preschool Teacher

Our job as early childhood teachers is NOT to categorize or try to determine children's gender identities. This will feel uncomfortable for many adults as it is ingrained in us to try to categorize and label others. Teachers can and should acknowledge this difficulty. However, it is our responsibility to create early childhood environments where children are supported in exploring their genders without pressure from adults to categorize themselves. Equipped with your new expansive understanding of gender and what you are learning about gender health, it is your job to advocate for children's right to build their genders in loving, supportive environments with adults who see and celebrate them for who they are.

How will teachers learn what children are thinking and feeling about gender?

Children have many ways of communicating with us about how they are making sense of the world around them—what they find interesting, puzzling, concerning, frightening; what questions they have; and the forms of support they desire. If teachers take time to observe and listen to children, they will discover that children are sharing their thoughts and feelings about gender in their **verbal and nonverbal interactions** (their language, stories, gestures), **in their play** (the pretend play themes, who they include/exclude in their play, the play materials they use), and **through their participation in the expressive arts** (painting, drawing, movement/dance, music/singing, writing, theater/acting/pretending). Throughout the chapters of this book, teachers will learn how to tune in to what children are communicating to others about gender and how they can respond to children with messages that are gender affirmative and support all children's gender health.

Why have I never heard about gender diversity or how to support TGE children in any of my classes and textbooks?

It is true that most early childhood teachers are only exposed to child development research and descriptions of best practices that ascribe

to the binary gender boxes model. The majority of early childhood teachers learned about children's gender development using theories and empirical research that have now been significantly challenged as inaccurate and, in many cases, harmful. Therefore, an important step in the process of creating gender justice is "unlearning" information about children's gender development based in outdated theories and beliefs.

Unlearning traditional theories of gender development

The process of creating gender justice in early childhood must include a conscious unlearning of traditional child development theories and the beliefs and assumptions about gender we now know are not accurate. The first step in this unlearning process is to examine how traditional theories of gender development in early childhood have shaped early childhood teachers' beliefs about what is typical/atypical, appropriate/inappropriate, and normal/abnormal for young children. As you will see below, some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in these traditional theories are not only inaccurate; they can also be harmful if and when they are used to **misgender** children and/or create environments that do not support all children's gender health.

Some of the gender myths represented in child development and early childhood textbooks, and reflected in the assumptions of many adults that need to be unlearned, include the following.

Myth: Anatomy and physiology determines one's gender. Traditional gender theories reinforce the idea that anatomy and physiology determine a child's gender. Further, these traditional beliefs associate pathology (mental illness) with anyone who rejects the gender that was legally assigned to them at birth. This leads to the stigmatizing and shaming of any child who does not identify as cisgender and express their gender according to the strict norms associated with the gender binary.

Myth: Gender identity is determined in early childhood and is stable throughout an individual's lifespan. Lawrence Kohlberg's (1966) theory of gender constancy claims that young children realize their gender identity—that they are either male or female, and dictated strictly by genitalia—by the age of three. The next stage he claimed happens at about four years of age when children begin to understand that gender is "fixed" or stable, and they will still be

male/female when they are older. Finally, between the ages of five to seven, Kohlberg asserted that children begin to understand that changes to clothing, names, or behavior will not change a person's gender. Kohlberg believed that children first learn that gender is permanent or constant, and then they use this understanding to learn to behave in "gender-appropriate" ways. Kohlberg's theory of gender constancy has been widely cited in child development courses as the most important developmental theory related to children's gender development. As a result of Kohlberg's theory of gender constancy, children whose gender identities and gender expressions fall outside of traditional male/female categories have been perceived as atypical in their developmental progression, pathologized, and assumed to be destined for lifelong negative consequences.

Kohlberg's theory of gender constancy has been widely disputed and is not supported by the evidence emerging from contemporary research studies on young children's gender development. Current research highlights that gender diversity is the norm and that gender is much more complicated and individualized than traditional Western developmental theories like Kohlberg's work represented. While identity does develop in early childhood, it is not tied strictly to anatomy, and it is harmful to children to force them to accept gender roles and identities with which they do not align.

Myth: Children 0–5 years old are too young to know their gender identity. Oddly, many people subconsciously hold both beliefs that children must know and accept their genders in early childhood (as proposed by Kohlberg), and beliefs that early childhood is too soon for children to know their gender identities. The catch is that they usually consciously hold whichever one works against TGE children in a given context. When working with young children, many people will subtly or not so subtly enforce Kohlberg's theory—directing children into their designated boxes and making sure those children "know" exactly what their gender is (by assignment). Then, when faced with a transgender child who is very confident about what their gender is, the same people will claim that this child is too young to know. This invalidation of TGE children comes so naturally that most people don't even notice the contradiction.

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In Black families we have these sayings about being soft or about "having sugar in your bowl…" and so from a young age, I had some sugar in my bowl, and I was soft. At age four, I had a doll and I would take the doll to church, and it was my grandpa's church and it was like, "People are gonna think you're this way if you carry a doll with you," and I was like, "I don't care. I'm gonna carry my doll." –Jen, Nonbinary person thinking back to early childhood

Myth: Young children are too young to understand or learn about oppression. Traditional child development theories—for example, Piaget's (1958) stage theory of children's cognitive development—created images of children as naïve and egocentric, unable to see a situation from another person's point of view. These theories influenced decades of thinking about young children as too young and intellectually immature to have much awareness of their own participation in social categories (gender, race, etc.). As a result, it was also assumed that young children were incapable of participating in intentionally harmful or oppressive interactions (racism, classism, sexism, etc.). We now know from research that children at very young ages have an awareness of various social categories of identity and that they understand and read the cultural norms that associate some social categories as privileged (e.g., being white, English speaking), and others as marginalized (being a person of color, immigrant, etc.) (Terry, 2012). Studies have shown that children reproduce oppressive dynamics in their play and other interactions with each other (Zosuls et al., 2009). It is our belief that, if children are capable of reproducing these oppressive dynamics, then they are old enough to learn about them in order to disrupt them. As always, teaching young children should be done at an age appropriate level, focusing on concrete experiences and what is fair and unfair.

The process of unlearning these myths and shifting one's understanding of gender will take courage and persistence. It is worth the effort! Throughout this book we will share strategies that you can use to notice and disrupt the assumptions and myths about gender that are harmful. We will talk about what you can do to communicate to every child in your care that it is safe for them to be authentic whenever they are in your presence.

REFLECTION TIME

Young children are already thinking about gender.

- What ideas do you have about what children know or don't know about gender?

- What assumptions have you heard from friends and relatives when they talk about children's ability to understand their own gender?

- What could you say to address these assumptions in the future?

Adults do not determine children's identities.

- Next time you're with young children, observe the way that others address them. What do you notice about the messages adults are sharing with children about gender? What messages do you hear that reinforce the gender binary and cisgender experience as normal and anything else as pathologized?

- Think about your own language. Does the language you use support children to authentically express their gender identities?

- What is a step you could take to help reduce the circumstances (language use, messages in the environment, lack of representation, etc.) that may be creating stress and trauma, and lead to the development of gender-related shame for children?

Why Early Childhood Is Such an Important Time to Talk about Gender Diversity

Because gender identity develops between ages one-and-a-half and three years (Ehrensaft, 2016b), access to information about how to work with transgender and gender expansive children is essential for professionals who work with young children (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010).

The early childhood years, and especially the first three years of a child's life, are uniquely important because this is the most sensitive period for children's brain development. The experiences a child has during this time shapes the architecture of their brains. Through healthy and caring relationships where adults help children feel safety, a sense of belonging, and the freedom to explore their environment, children are supported to build the brain connections they need for learning and

healthy development. Similarly, early experiences with prolonged stress and trauma can lead to impaired brain development for young children, with negative outcomes that can last a lifetime unless there is effective intervention.

We know from research and reports from TGE adults that many young children also know that their authentic genders are not aligned with the genders originally assigned to them. TGE adults report that they knew they had to hide their authentic gender self from their families, teachers, peers, and communities as young as the age of two (Steele, 2016). Living with this type of secret, where children have to hide their authentic gender identity on a daily basis from the adults who are caring for them, is exactly the type of situation that can create so much stress and trauma for young children that their brain development is negatively impacted.

Research suggests[11] that early childhood is a critical time for children's gender development. Here is why...

By 12 months:

- Children begin to categorize individuals by gender (Quinn *et al.*, 2002).

There is no biological or intellectual reason why children categorize gender as boys/girls. They do this because they are reading the social norms of the world around them. If they grow up in environments that are inclusive of gender diversity, they will learn from the earliest ages that gender is not restricted to a binary.

By 18 months:

- Children begin to understand their gender identity (Halim, Bryant, & Zucker, 2016).

Given children's emerging awareness of their gender identities, it is critical that adults observe, listen, and not claim to know children's genders based on their gender expression or their anatomy.

By 2 years:

- Children can communicate awareness that their gender identities are incompatible with their legal designations (Steensma, Biemond, de Boer, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2011; Steensma, McGuire, Kreukels, Beekman, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013).

- Children begin to recognize gender stereotyping, which may be displayed through toy preference or an expectation for other children to present gender a particular way. For example, children may invalidate or reject a boy wearing a dress (Zosuls *et al.*, 2009).

- Children consistently attribute genders to others based on the gender-boxes model during categorizing picture activities (Zosuls *et al.*, 2009).

By 2½ years:

- Most children have awareness of their gender identity and can communicate about it using language ("I am a boy", "I am a girl", "I am an in-betweener," "I am a boy and a girl," etc.). Children understand how they are feeling inside about their gender (I am happy to be a girl) (Halim, Bryant, & Zucker, 2016).

By 4 years:

- Children construct a personal belief system of gender stereotypes that is reinforced by cultural and social norms (Halim & Ruble, 2010). For example, children may have strong feelings about what male or female tasks are, such as cleaning or fixing something. This may be seen in their play or descriptions of experiences (Halim, Bryant, & Zucker, 2016).

As you can see, young children are not only old enough to start talking about gender; they will also have already formed foundational understandings of themselves and the world of gender by the time they leave your program. If you don't start talking to them about gender in an affirmative and justice-based way, they are bound to soak up the restrictive and oppressive norms of the gender binary system we live in.

We all have agency to influence change. Working for gender justice requires courage and it is continuous and long-term work. And it is essential that all early childhood teachers begin their own personal journey to learn about gender diversity so they can support all of the children in their care to thrive. Each chapter in this book will provide you with information and strategies for becoming a champion for gender justice. We hope you enjoy your learning journey!