

WHAT IS GENDER?



What is gender?

Gender is the societal and cultural expectations assigned to females and males (femininity and masculinity) on the basis of biological sex. Gender is learned as a young child. Biological sex is determined at birth by sexual/biological characteristics (“Is it a boy or a girl?”). Most children are born as either a male (with a penis) or a female (with a vagina). There are also:

GENDER ROLES

How society says you are supposed to act based on your biological sex (male or female). Your gender role is determined by messages from family, friends, community, religion, culture, and the media about what you should do, what you should be, what you should say, and how you should act depending on whether you are a boy or a girl. What are some of the things that your family, religion, and community expect of you as a boy or a girl? The answer to these questions describes your gender role and this too is something that you learn when you are young. Some people follow the gender roles society offers them. Others do not.

GENDER IDENTITY

Do you think of yourself as male or female? Your gender identity is the gender you feel yourself to be, sometimes regardless of your biological sex. Even if you are born as a boy, you may feel that you are a female, and vice versa. Some people identify as transgender. A transgender person is someone whose gender identity, gender expression, or gender attribution is different from societal expectations for the person’s biological, chromosomal, and/or physical sex. A transgender person may appear to be male, but may identify more with the female gender. Likewise, a transgender person may appear to be a female, but may identify more with the male gender.

OK, enough with all of the terms and definitions. Why should I care about this?

YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT THIS BECAUSE GENDER ROLES MAY LIMIT US AND MAY HURT OUR COMMUNITIES. BUT, HOW?

Gender roles can often force people to do things and pursue careers that are not their first choices. For example, girls may be encouraged to become teachers or nurses because these are seen as feminine jobs. However, some girls may want to become scientists or firefighters. If they are unable to pursue their dreams and interests, their communities suffer. How? Their communities could have gotten a brilliant scientist. Instead, they get an unhappy and bored teacher. The same goes for boys. Perhaps a boy wants to become a nurse but doesn’t because of the messages he received as a child that nursing is a woman’s job. Instead of a community getting a wonderful nurse, the boy is encouraged to pursue a different career, one that is considered more masculine but perhaps will suit him less.

Now for something fun...

Even though you may not support such gender roles, they still exist and it’s important to recognize that gender roles can be harmful to both males and females. Think about this as you test your knowledge about gender.

TRUE OR FALSE: MARK YOUR ANSWER

- | | TRUE | FALSE |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. If a girl likes a boy, it’s always OK for her to ask him out. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. Boys should stop greeting their fathers with a kiss on the cheek or a hug when they become teenagers. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. Women and men should share the responsibility for taking care of their children. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. Boys shouldn’t play with dolls. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 5. Girls need to be careful of being too strong-minded because it makes them less “feminine.” | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. Crying is a sign of weakness in a guy. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

ANSWERS

1. **TRUE.** Why should boys have to make all the moves? If a girl asks a boy she likes out, it just means she’s expressing her interest.
2. **FALSE.** All people need affection, like kisses and hugs, whether they’re male or female, young or old. Expressing and receiving affection is an important, healthy part of relationships.
3. **TRUE.** Raising children takes a lot of energy and teamwork. Responsibility for child care should be based on what’s best for the parents and children, not on gender roles. Both women and men have skills that allow them to care for their children.
4. **FALSE.** Playing with dolls can help a person to become caring and nurturing, qualities that benefit both genders and society. There is nothing abnormal about boys who want to play with dolls. There is nothing abnormal about girls who want to play with cars either.
5. **FALSE.** When girls are constantly checking themselves to make sure they’re not “making waves,” they start to become unsure of themselves, and speak up for themselves less and less. This can be especially dangerous when girls face challenges in life, and need to make and voice important decisions.
6. **FALSE.** Everybody gets upset sometimes, but from a very early age boys may be given the message that it is not OK to cry. This teaches guys to hide their feelings and can make it hard for friends or romantic partners to feel close to them, and for guys to seek help when they need it.

So what can you do?

If you think people should express themselves as they wish and not be held back by gender roles, here are some things you can do:

- Respect girls and boys equally and don’t make gender-based jokes.
- Talk to your friends, families, and teachers about gender and gender roles.
- Discuss how gender roles are portrayed in the media (TV, movies, advertisements, Internet, etc.). All of these things have a huge influence on what we think about how girls and boys, and men and women, should act. When you see things about gender that bother you, talk to someone about it.
- Be a role model for your peers and those younger than you and make sure they get positive messages about gender.
- Push the limits! If you want to act differently than your gender role, go for it! Create new gender roles.

If you have been struggling with issues related to gender roles or gender identity, you might want to talk with a trusted parent, family member, friend, teacher, or professional. Also check out the resources below.

Resources

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY www.ppnyc.org

This website has useful information about sexual health and relationships.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD’S “FACTS OF LIFE” LINE 212-965-7015

A 24-hour hotline offering pre-recorded messages in English and Spanish on more than 100 topics concerning sexuality and reproductive health.

GIRLS, INC. www.girlsinc.org

Strives to inspire girls “to be smart, strong, and bold.”

GURL www.gURL.com

A webzine (web magazine) for girls to which you can contribute.

GENDER EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY www.gender.org

A website that educates and advocates about all who suffer from gender-based oppression.

SEX, ETC. www.sexetc.org

A sexuality and health newsletter written by teens for teens.

For more information, contact:

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY

Margaret Sanger Square, 26 Bleecker Street, New York, New York 10012-2413

Tel: 212-274-7200 Fax: 212-274-7300

www.ppnyc.org

ABOUT PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY: At Planned Parenthood of New York City, we have more than 90 years of experience providing quality reproductive health care in a safe, supportive environment. We offer services to women, men, and teens throughout New York City, regardless of age, income, or immigration status. When you talk to us, it’s always confidential. To make an appointment at any one of our three health centers in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, call 212-965-7000 or 800-230-PLAN.

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