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# Questions & Answers:



## Gender Identity in Schools

Canada 

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**Public Health Agency of Canada**

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## Gender Identity in Schools

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## Preface

First published in 1994 and revised in 2003 and 2008, the Public Health Agency of Canada's *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education (Guidelines)* were developed to assist professionals working in the area of health promotion and sexual health education in programming which supports positive sexual health outcomes. Feedback from a national evaluation of the *Guidelines* indicated the need for companion documents to provide more detailed information, evidence and resources on specific issues. In response, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) identified a 'question and answer' format as an appropriate way to provide information to educators and other professional working with school-aged populations. The Questions and Answers styled documents are intended to cover a range of topics reflecting current issues in sexual health education with school-aged populations, are evidence-based and use inclusive language as reflected in the *Guidelines*.

This document, *Questions & Answers: Gender Identity in Schools*, is intended to address the most commonly asked questions regarding the gender identity of youth in school settings. The goal of this resource is to assist educators, curriculum and program planners, school administrators, policy-makers and health professionals in the creation of supportive and healthy school environments for youth struggling with issues of gender identity.

## Acknowledgements

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[www.publichealth.gc.ca/sti](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/sti).

In addition, the Public Health Agency of Canada would like to acknowledge the staff of the Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Section, Centre for Communicable Diseases and Infection Control, for their contribution to the development of this document.

## Introduction

The term ‘gender’ was first used in the 1950s to differentiate the set of feelings and behaviours that identify a person as ‘male’ or ‘female’, from their anatomical ‘sex’ which is determined by their chromosomes and genitals<sup>1</sup>. ‘Gender’ is now understood as the roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that is attributed to males and females by society.<sup>2</sup> Gender is one of the most basic elements of human identity. Gender is so fundamental to our identity, that without being aware of it, many aspects of human life are structured by and reveal our gender. Throughout the life course<sup>3</sup>, everyone subconsciously acts out gender and reflects gender in various ways, including their dress, mannerisms, and recreational activities. These actions and reflections form components of our ‘gender identity’ or our sense of being ‘male’, ‘female’ or something other than these traditional categories.<sup>4</sup>

Most people mistakenly assume that our gender identity is defined by our anatomical sex. In the majority of cases, people’s gender identity is consistent with their anatomical sex. However, some people feel and express a gender identity that is not the same as their biological sex. These inconsistencies can cause a great deal of distress and confusion to individuals, their families and their friends. Gender identity issues can also cause a great deal of anxiety among professionals working with these individuals, who may not feel informed and competent enough on this topic to provide support.

This document provides answers to some of the most common questions that educators, parents/caregivers, school administrators, and health professionals may have about gender identity in the Canadian school context. The answers provided in this resource are based on up-to-date evidence and research.

These Questions and Answers on gender identity are designed to support the implementation of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*<sup>5</sup> (*Guidelines*). The *Guidelines* are premised on the belief that comprehensive sexual health education should reflect the diverse needs and realities of all people, and should be provided in age-appropriate, culturally-sensitive, and respectful manner, inclusive of gender diversity. This Questions and Answers resource is targeted at helping educators (in and out of school settings), curriculum and program planners, school administrators, policy-makers and health professionals implement the *Guidelines* to ensure that:

- 1 sexual health educational programming is inclusive of the pressing health, safety, and educational needs and challenges of gender variant youth;
- 2 the experiences of gender variant youth are included in all facets of broadly-based and inclusive sexual health education; and
- 3 educators, administrators, and school board personnel are provided with a more thorough understanding of the goals and objectives of broadly-based and inclusive sexual health education.

### GENDER VARIANT:

A term to refer to individuals whose expressions of gender do not conform to the dominant gender norms of masculinity and femininity.

### GENDER IDENTITY:

A person’s internal sense or feeling of being male or female, which may or may not be the same as one’s biological sex.

## What do we know about gender identity?

The term ‘gender identity’ refers to an individual’s sense of self as ‘male’, ‘female’ or an identity between or outside these categories.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of people have a gender identity that matches their anatomical sex and/or that matches societal expectations for males and females. However, there are individuals whose gender identity does not match their anatomical sex or that conflicts with societal expectations for males and females. There are a variety of identities and expressions that exist on a continuum between male and female including, cross-dressers (e.g., drag queens, drag kings), gender-benders and gender variant, gender non-conforming, and two-spirit individuals. For consistency in this document, we use the term ‘gender variant’ to refer to all of the above gender identities between male and female, on this continuum.

**Are all gender variant individuals gay, lesbian or bisexual?**

There is a common misunderstanding that gender variant individuals are gay, lesbian or bisexual however, the majority of gender variant individuals do not identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.<sup>7</sup> This is because gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities refer to an individual’s ‘sexual orientation’ which is different than an individual’s gender identity. Sexual orientation refers to an individual’s emotional and sexual attraction which may be to members of the same or the opposite sex, or both. Though it is possible that some gender variant individuals will also struggle with their sexual orientation, we do not specifically address

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION:**

A person’s affection and sexual attraction to other persons.

this issue in this document, focusing instead only on gender identity. A separate document entitled *Questions & Answers: Sexual Orientation in Schools* explores these issues more fully.<sup>8</sup>

**GAY:**

A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. The word gay can refer to both males and females, but is commonly used to identify males only.

**LESBIAN:**

A female who is attracted physically and emotionally to other females.

**BISEXUAL:**

A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females.

**Have gender variant individuals always existed?**

Though the language of gender identity is contemporary, people who have challenged the stereotypical categories of gender have existed for much of human history. Gender variant individuals have existed in many cultures including indig-

**TWO-SPIRIT:**

Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirit rather than as bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender. Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures, two-spirit persons were respected leaders and medicine people. Before colonization, two-spirit persons were often accorded special status based upon their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.

enous<sup>9</sup>, Southeast Asian<sup>10</sup>, South American<sup>11</sup>, Caribbean<sup>12</sup>, European<sup>13</sup>, and African tribes<sup>14</sup>. The most well-documented of these gender variant identities exists in indigenous cultures. “Two-spirit” people of the First Nations are Aboriginal peoples who are ‘other gendered’ in their abilities to cross traditional gender categories and to express both genders. These individuals are recognized as ‘third gender,’ are honoured and respected as healers, and turned to for guidance and strength.<sup>15</sup>

### Do people choose to be gender variant?

Research on the development of gender variant identities suggests that it is linked to a number of factors including neurological<sup>16</sup>, hormonal<sup>17</sup>, biological<sup>18</sup>, social and relational influences<sup>19</sup> and is not a passing phase.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the development of gender identity, including a gender variant identity, occurs in stages across the lifespan.<sup>21</sup> Studies on gender variant individuals suggest that the awareness and experience of being 'different' begins as a child, and that there is a long history of internal tension between the individual's anatomical sex and their sense of their gender that extends into adolescence and, in some cases, beyond.<sup>22</sup>

### There are many terms to discuss gender identities. What are the proper terms and how do I know when to use them?

Language to describe gender variant identities is continually changing and keeping track can be challenging. Gender variant youth self-identify in many ways and have constructed a language about their identities and experiences that is critical for other individuals to understand and respect. For example, gender variant youth may self-identify as one of many terms, including trans or genderqueer. Many of these terms have had

#### **GENDERQUEER:**

Used to describe individuals who perceive their gender to be neither that of a male or female but outside of the gender binary.

controversial histories including their use in derogatory ways, making it unclear how to address and respond to gender variant youth in a sensitive manner. If you are not sure of how an individual self-identifies, don't make assumptions. Let the

youth tell you how they self-identify. Admitting you are unaware is much more respectful than assuming and using the wrong language.

In addition to adopting the language the youth themselves prefer to use, there are other important things to consider. Be cognizant of the language being used in the classroom and during school events. For example, texts and lessons that use the 'she/he' binary ignore the range of gender identities discussed in this document. By using more inclusive language, such as 'they' instead of 'she' or 'he', not only will transgender youth feel more supported but it will also help to educate the entire school community about gender diversity.

Ensure that you use the appropriate language in regards to the pronouns and names of all transitioning students. Refer to a gender variant youth using the name and pronouns they have chosen to fit their gender identity instead of by their birth name which can make them vulnerable to harassment, ridicule and violence from fellow students.<sup>23</sup>

### There are no gender variant youth in my school. Why address these issues?

Gender variant students are attending schools in Canada, whether or not they are visible to other students, staff or administrators. There are several reasons why gender variant students may not be visible within the school community. First, most gender variant youth are invisible out of fear for their safety.<sup>24</sup> Individuals whose behaviours do not conform to the stereotypical societal expectations of male and female genders are vulnerable to discrimination, verbal abuse, bullying, and physical violence.<sup>25</sup> Second, while some gender variant individuals' goal is to 'transition', a process where their external appearance is altered to cross from one gender to the opposite<sup>26</sup>, there are a variety of other gender variant individuals that do not embody such drastic changes. The remainder adopt gender variant identities at various points along the continuum. For example, some may choose to alter only their dress. Finally, making the assumption that there are no gender variant youth in schools creates a



barrier for gender variant youth to disclose their identities or for recognizing students who may be struggling with this issue.

While many gender variant students remain invisible for the reasons cited above, there have been increasing numbers of students openly identifying as ‘transgender’ and/or openly struggling with their gender identity in the past decade.<sup>27</sup> Research studies on the proportion of transgender individuals in a population have found numbers as low as 2% and as high as 10%.<sup>28</sup> Given this prevalence in the population, it is likely that educators, school administrators, and health professionals have or will encounter at least one gender variant youth at some point in their professional career.<sup>29</sup> Addressing gender identity issues in the school benefits the entire school community by providing safe and optimal learning environments for all students, and by increasing the ability of the entire school community to tolerate difference and to respect everyone’s unique experiences.<sup>30</sup> Identifying gender roles and expectations and how they play out in a variety of settings, including the school setting (even without students disclosing a gender variant identity), allows for the healthy development of all students through the creation of safe spaces, prevention of violence, and avoidance of mental health issues, such as depression and suicide, that result when these are lacking in the schools.<sup>31</sup>

## What are the health, safety, and educational concerns of gender variant students in our schools today?

### Harassment and Verbal Abuse

Gender variant individuals, by definition, challenge traditional gender roles. Youth who are targeted by their peers for not assuming the conventional gender roles may be harassed and bullied at a young age. By stepping outside of social expectations, these individuals are

vulnerable to verbal abuse<sup>32</sup>, physical abuse<sup>33</sup> and even sexual violence<sup>34</sup> at higher rates than their gender-conforming peers.<sup>35</sup> Studies suggest that in the school setting, as many as 96% of gender variant youth are verbally harassed and as many as 83% physically harassed.<sup>36</sup> As a result, as many as three-quarters of gender variant youth report not feeling safe in school and three out of four report dropping out.<sup>37</sup>

### Mental Health

In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association listed “gender identity disorder” (GID) in their Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV) and since then some people in the mental health profession have viewed ‘gender variant’ as a mental illness. Some individuals feel that including GID has unnecessarily labelled individuals who express gender variance as having a ‘disease’ or mental defect and advocate for its removal.<sup>38</sup> Others feel that the removal of GID from the DSM IV would not be beneficial since a diagnosis of GID is often required in order for gender variant individuals to start medical and surgical treatment for gender transition<sup>39</sup>. In addition, a diagnosis of GID provides a basis for the provision of supportive counselling to

#### SEX REASSIGNMENT SURGERY:

This is sometimes referred to as either sex change or gender reassignment surgery and is a surgical procedure to change the genitals and secondary sex characteristics from one gender to another.

reduce mental distress from gender identity. This tension illustrates the range of perspectives which are evoked by the discussion of gender identities.

It is important to highlight that gender variant youth face the **same** general risk factors for depression and suicide as other youth. However, due to gender variant youths’ experience of discrimination, stigmatization, harassment, verbal abuse and rejection, the effects of low self-esteem and depression may be severe.<sup>40</sup> While not all

gender variant individuals will experience low self-esteem and depression when compared to their gender-conforming peers<sup>41</sup> there is a strong

**INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA:**

A diminished sense of personal self-worth or esteem felt by an individual as a result of the experienced or presumed homophobia of others.

link between mental health issues and the alienation of not fitting in, especially in the school setting where students can be very critical of others who are different. When confronted with a negative social

environment, some gender variant youth experience confusion<sup>42</sup>, low-self esteem<sup>43</sup>, depression<sup>44</sup> and behavioural problems<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, gender variant youth often lack accurate information, support networks, and role models about emotional and mental health and physical well-being as a gender variant individual.<sup>46</sup> Without the presence of resources or support, gender variant youth may be more vulnerable to internalizing their negative experiences, producing feelings of shame<sup>47</sup>, anxiety<sup>48</sup>, self-hatred<sup>49</sup> and often self-harm<sup>50</sup>. Compounding the lack of support for gender variant youth is the fact that they may be hesitant to seek help. There can be a sense of deep-rooted shame at the individual level for not conforming to the gender norms and gender variant youth may remain silent and try to act 'normal'. Youth may also not seek support for fear of a negative reaction from their parents/caregivers, teachers, peers and health professionals.

**Suicide**

In some circumstances, the increased abuse and emotional turmoil faced by gender variant youth can lead to desperate outcomes. It is estimated that more than one-third of all teen suicide attempts and actual suicides are made by lesbian, gay, bisexual and gender variant youth. Suicide attempts among gender variant youth are higher than they are for lesbian, gay, and bisexual

youth<sup>51</sup>, with some reports indicating that approximately one third of gender variant youth have attempted suicide.<sup>52</sup> Interpersonal violence and a lack of support from family and peers have been cited as reasons for increased rates of suicide attempts in gender variant individuals.<sup>53</sup>

**Hormone Therapy**

While the changes associated with puberty can be unsettling for all youth, the physical expression of biological sex attributes can be even more distressing for gender variant youth. The development of secondary sex characteristics that they feel do not correspond with their gender can have harmful mental and emotional effects.<sup>54</sup> Careful consideration must be given to adolescents who wish to undergo hormone therapy to transition from one sex to another as hormone therapies may cause irreversible effects on the body. Furthermore, health care professionals must be aware that not all youth who express a desire to use hormones to transition to their self-identified gender will still feel this way once they reach

**TRANSITION:**

Refers to the process of changing from one's birth sex to one's self-perceived gender. This process may involve dressing in the manner of the self-perceived gender, changing one's name to reflect the self-perceived gender, and undergoing hormone therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery to change one's secondary sex characteristics to reflect the self-perceived gender.

adulthood. Research has shown that 80 to 90% of pre-pubertal youth diagnosed with GID no longer experienced GID into adolescence.<sup>55</sup> However, delaying the start of hormone treatment past puberty has been linked to depression, suicide attempts, anorexia and social phobias.<sup>56</sup> The changes in their body may be so distressing that some youth who do not receive hormone therapy from a health professional may turn to the streets to get unregulated hormones.

**TRANSSEXUAL:**

A person who experiences intense personal and emotional discomfort with their assigned birth gender and may undergo treatment (e.g. hormones and/or surgery) to transition gender.

Without the guidance from a physician, youth may find it difficult to regulate the appropriate hormonal balance for transitioning sexes. The improper use of hormones can lead to serious health problems, impacts pubertal growth and puts youth at risk for HIV and hepatitis C infection due to contaminated needles<sup>57</sup>.

**Other Health Risks**

Gender variant youth may also be at an increased risk for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. A sense of hopelessness and suicidal tendencies, has been linked to high risk sexual behaviour, making gender variant youth particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.<sup>58</sup> In one study of ethnic minority gender variant youth, African American males transitioning to a female identity were eight times more likely to report being HIV positive than other ethnic minorities. In the same study, sexual assault and unprotected anal intercourse was reported among participants and up to 59% of youth also reported sex in exchange for money, shelter and/or drugs. Gender variant youth may run away for various reasons, including escaping a negative home environment,<sup>59</sup> and end up on the streets where they engage in sex work to survive and become at risk for STIs, including HIV.<sup>60</sup>

**What do I do if a student discloses a gender variant identity to me?**

If a student discloses to you their gender variant identity, it is important to support the student's self-definition and to ensure that they know they are valued.<sup>61</sup> Listen to what the student has to say about how they are feeling and what their gender identity means to them and ask them what they would like you to do (if anything). It is important to not attempt to 'fix' the gender variant youth by attempting to abandon their gender variant identity. This is not effective and actually leads to low self-esteem and mental health issues such as depression, self-harm and suicide.<sup>62</sup>

Current research indicates that gender variant individuals consciously select people to disclose to who they trust and who they believe will be supportive and sympathetic to their gender identity<sup>63</sup>. Maintaining the trust and confidentiality of the gender variant youth is, therefore, paramount. For example, when a student discloses their gender identity, ask them what name they would prefer to be called, what pronouns they would prefer you to use with them, talk to them about who they have disclosed to, who is and is not supportive, and who they would like help disclosing to. Do not talk to anyone about their identity, including parents/caregivers, to whom they have not already disclosed their gender identity.

The disclosure of their gender identity is one of the most challenging and important pronouncements gender variant individuals share with others. For many, it may signify the end point of a very long internal struggle to be secretive with their identity because of fear or shame.<sup>64</sup>

**HETEROSEXISM:**

The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior. Heterosexism is often expressed in more subtle forms than homophobia.

Disclosure of one's identity is a milestone that may signify self-acceptance of their identity and the beginning of a 'new life'.<sup>65</sup> It is important, however, to talk to the gender variant youth about the potential range of reactions to this disclosure within the school community and within the family. Discuss with them the possibility of rejection, harassment, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, and to aid the gender variant youth in developing coping mechanisms.<sup>66</sup> Assist them in identifying resources where they can get information and support (see also the list of resources at the end of this document). Become actively involved in the creation of the school as a safe space for the gender variant student by addressing instances of bullying and harassment immediately, providing inclusive sexual health education programming and educating the entire school community about gender identity issues. For example, organize guest speakers at school assemblies who are gender variant, show films about gender identity issues in the classroom, and ensure that there is literature in the school library related to gender identity.

## What can the schools do to support gender variant youth?

### Provide a Safe Environment

The most important task for schools is to provide a safe, nurturing, non-violent atmosphere in which to learn, to grow, and to develop for all students, inclusive of all gender identities. Today, Canadian society is more diverse than ever before and educators, school administrators and other people involved with school-aged youth need to become informed of these diverse identities, including gender identities. The first important step for educators is acknowledging that gender variant youth exist in the school system and that expressing various gender identities is an acceptable way of living. Schools should not wait until a gender variant student comes forward to address the issue. By the time a student makes their identity known it is likely that they have been struggling on their own for some time.

### Develop School-wide Policies

Gender identity issues need to be handled with dignity and respect in the school system and be clearly outlined through inclusive policies and procedures. School administrators, teaching and support faculty can improve the school environment for gender variant students and foster an environment where people of all gender identities can be themselves, by learning about and providing accurate information about gender diversity, and by supporting gender variant students through inclusive school policy.<sup>67</sup> Educators themselves may also feel more supported when addressing gender identity issues in the school-setting when anti-harassment policies are in place.<sup>68</sup>

For example, a mission statement can be created for the school that affirms gender identity

#### ALLY:

A person, regardless of his or her sexual orientation, who supports the human, civil, and sexual rights of sexual minorities

and demonstrates that the school is a safe space where everyone is valued.<sup>69</sup>

A policy against harassment and violence against gender variant individuals should be implemented in

the school. By adding 'gender identity' to the school's non-discrimination policies, gender variant individuals will be given legal recourse if they have been bullied or victimized. It will also send a message to the school community that gender variant people are worthy of respect and that violence and discrimination will not be tolerated.

When harassment and violence are observed and/or reported, educators and administrators have a duty to react immediately and to create an environment where disrespect of any kind will not be ignored, and to build an understanding among all students of how both words and actions can hurt others.<sup>70</sup> There are many different ways for educators to deal with situations of transphobia in the school, including<sup>71</sup> :

**HOMOPHOBIA:**

Fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, intimidation, or acts of violence. Similarly, “transphobia” refers to the fear and/or hatred of transgender individuals and is exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, intimidation, or acts of violence. “Biphobia” refers to the fear and/or hatred of bisexual individuals and is exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, intimidation or acts of violence.

- addressing assumptions that being gender variant is a bad thing and that everyone in the school environment deserves to be respected;
- confronting the stereotypes and misinformation behind the insults and abuse; and,
- making a plan with students of more appropriate responses to insults rather than physical violence or reverse name-calling.

Students should also be aware of where they can go if they have experienced harassment or abuse and they should be given the option of anonymous reporting<sup>72</sup>, since some students may fear retribution for reporting victimization. The names of staff who are most knowledgeable regarding gender identity issues should be identified and publicized within the school so students can access the appropriate person/people to contact if they have questions or concerns.<sup>73</sup> To resolve problems quickly and to avoid stigmatizing the gender variant person in the situation, allies and role models should be located near areas of the school where students are likely to encounter prejudice from peers (i.e., near bathrooms and/or locker rooms).

Inclusive language should be included on all school-wide forms, printed material and web-sites. For example, schools should consider adding categories other than male and female on all forms so as not to ignore the variety of

gender identities. Such categories may include transgender, two-spirit, and gender variant. By using more inclusive language, not only will gender variant youth feel more supported but it will also help to educate the entire school

**PASSING:**

Refers to when gender variant individuals portray their self-identified gender to others in a way that others correctly perceive this self-identified gender. When this happens, that gender variant individual is said to be “passing”.

community about gender diversity. A mechanism should also be in place for those students who wish to change their gender designation on school records (i.e., students who are transitioning should have their new gender reflected on documents including ID cards, transcripts etc.).<sup>74</sup> The names of individuals within the guidance/

registrar’s office who can facilitate name and gender changes on school records should be clearly publicized and a simple, one-stop procedure should be in place for transitioning youth.<sup>75</sup>

**Professional Development Opportunities**

Educators should be given the opportunity for in-service training and development on gender identity issues.<sup>76</sup> While educators may recognize the need to address issues of gender identity in the school, many teachers and school administrators are not sufficiently trained and may not feel comfortable taking on that role.<sup>77</sup> Educators should be able to reflect on their personal assumptions and beliefs about gender roles in order to facilitate a non-judgmental learning environment.<sup>78</sup> Training sessions on gender identity issues should be made available for all staff. For example, Professional Development days could have workshops or presentations to raise awareness and levels of knowledge about the experiences and needs of gender variant students. These workshops could provide an opportunity to

discuss the skills needed to be a good ally and to develop an ‘action plan’ or list of concrete actions needed to improve the school environment for people of all genders.<sup>79</sup> Training should also be supported at the administrative level to allow for the appropriate subject matter and time requirements needed for learning.

### Raise Awareness

By educating the entire school community on gender identity issues, educators and administrators can help to reduce the risks of discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization experienced by gender variant youth.<sup>80</sup> Opportunities should be provided for the entire school body to learn about gender diversity through activities such as public seminars or presentations, distribution of educational materials and hosting performances that challenge gender norms and/or educate on gender identity issues.<sup>81</sup> The school could also have an event or activity to commemorate the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20). Furthermore, a web-based school resource guide outlining the school’s policy on sexual orientation and gender identity can be developed and distributed for new, existing and prospective gender variant students and staff.<sup>82</sup> When including all students in learning and awareness activities you are affirming and enhancing the self-esteem and sense of self of gender variant youth and fostering an environment of tolerance for all students.

### Challenge Gender Norms

School policies that segregate students by gender ignore and stigmatize individuals who challenge the typical “male” or “female” notions and can cause emotional, and psychological distress for students.<sup>83</sup> Educators should challenge gender norms within the classroom and school community, such as “only boys play rough sports” or “only girls wear nailpolish”<sup>84</sup> and avoid activities that require students to choose a gender (e.g., avoid dividing the class into boys and girls groups

for activities). All school organizations, clubs and teams should be supportive and create a

#### LGBTQ:

A commonly used acronym for the constellation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, and queer identities. Sexual minority is a synonymous term.

welcoming space for all students. Gender variant youth should be allowed to join sports teams according to their self-identified gender as opposed to requiring them to join based on their biological sex.<sup>85</sup> Gender variant individuals should

not have to disclose their gender in order to participate if they are not ready.

One of the main areas where gender variant people experience psychological/ emotional distress and harassment is in the use of public washrooms. To avoid potential conflicts, publicize to all students and faculty the location of single occupancy bathrooms and designated gender neutral facilities including the creation of private showers in locker rooms with curtains or doors. Schools can also create a gender neutral restroom so gender variant individuals can use the restroom they find appropriate.<sup>86</sup>

### What can the schools do to support the parents/caregivers of gender variant youth?

Families are not always a safe place for gender variant youth. It is important not to involve the parents/caregivers of gender variant youth unless the youth themselves have already disclosed their identity to their families or you have a legal duty to report such as in the case of risk of self-harm. The gender variant youth may be put at risk within their homes if parents/caregivers who were unaware of their child’s identity are approached by the school.

**COMING OUT:**

Often refers to “Coming out of the closet”—the act of disclosing one’s sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., to friends, family members, colleagues).

Parents/caregivers whose children “come out” (disclose their identity) to them may have a variety of reactions ranging from loving acceptance to rejection and expulsion of the child from the home.<sup>87</sup> Parents/caregivers who discover their child’s gender identity accidentally may be in emotional crisis. All parents/caregivers of gender variant youth can be supported by directing them to community and counselling resources and support groups to help deal with the range of emotions including shock, anger, grief, guilt, and shame. Parents/caregivers will likely be seeking answers to many questions and should be provided with information on gender identity to educate them on what their child is experiencing and why, as well as the health and safety concerns of their gender variant child.<sup>88</sup> Parents/caregivers of gender variant youth may need help in understanding that the gender identity was not caused by poor parenting, nor did their child choose it.

Well-informed and accepting parents/caregivers can be allies in ensuring the healthy development and resiliency of gender variant youth. For example, parents/caregivers can help gender variant youth learn techniques of recognizing and combating stigma, discrimination, and verbal abuse, and to develop coping strategies.<sup>89</sup> All children, regardless of gender identity, need support, acceptance, and compassion from their families to thrive and parents/caregivers should be supported in this role to ensure the healthy development of gender variant youth.

## How can the schools build resiliency among gender variant youth?

Resiliency is a person’s ability to overcome adversity and effectively cope with and adapt to stressful and challenging situations in life. While the school setting can often be a stressful environment for gender variant youth, schools can take steps to become a safe and respectful place for them.

‘Safe spaces’ should be created in the school where gender variant youth are welcome and can find a sense of belonging. Gender variant students often feel isolated. Creating a support or social group where they feel part of a community can lead to greater sense of self-worth and increase the likelihood that they will remain in school. Research indicates that low school attachment, high feelings of alienation from school and peers leads to greater risk of dropping out.<sup>90</sup>

Gender identity resources should also be made available in the school libraries and be included in the curricula.<sup>91</sup> Educators should also consider introducing resources into their planning which address prejudices and gender identity issues (for a list of resources, see the list at the end of this document).<sup>92</sup> Exposing students to gender identity issues and resources will not cause students to question their gender identity. Rather, it provides assurance to the student who already knows that they are different and who often suffer the consequences of that difference (i.e., name calling, harassment etc.), that they are not alone.<sup>93</sup>

While not all youth require the same supports in order to become more resilient, a Canadian study<sup>94</sup> found that there were seven common protective factors found in resilient youth:

- access to material resources (i.e., availability of food, clothing, shelter, education and health services);
- access to supportive relationships (i.e., relationships with family, peers and community);
- development of a desirable personal identity (i.e., having a sense of purpose, aspirations and beliefs);
- experiences of power and control (i.e., ability to affect change in social and physical environment);
- adherence to cultural traditions (i.e., adherence to or knowledge of cultural practice and values);
- experiences of social justice (i.e., finding a meaningful role, acceptance and social equity in the community); and
- experience of a sense of cohesion with others (i.e., balancing personal interests with a sense of responsibility for the larger community).

By providing the appropriate support systems, schools have the capacity to build the resiliency of gender variant youth. Not all gender variant youth will feel comfortable in a school that is not aware or supportive of their needs. With the appropriate resources and role models, gender variant youth have a greater chance of overcoming their struggles of discovering and developing their gender identity. The tolerance and acceptance of gender diversity in a school setting will also create an atmosphere of safety for other students who are or who may feel different.

## Concluding Remarks

It is paramount that professionals working with gender variant youth ensure that the young person's rights and dignity are respected. It is important that evidenced-based strategies, such as those found in this document, are used to support age-appropriate discussions on gender, sexual health, and informed decision-making. The *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* is a resource that educators, school administrators and health professionals can use to assess their current sexual health education programs, plan and implement sexual health education that is inclusive of the health, safety, and educational needs of gender variant youth, and to monitor and evaluate those programs to ensure that they are accurate, evidence-based and non-judgmental.

The failure to respond adequately to the educational, social, cultural and public health needs of gender variant youth removes these youth from key supports and protective factors in their lives. Lack of supports and protective factors, particularly within the school system where they spend much of their time, increases the risks they experience as vulnerable youth and may encourage them to leave school altogether. It is critical that the schools work to support gender variant youth to develop resilience, and to become healthy, happy and productive adults.



## Additional Resources

The opinions expressed in these resources are those of the authors/organizations and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Public Health Agency of Canada

Note: Before using these resources with students, it is advisable to preview them as some may contain sensitive content and may not be appropriate for all ages.

### I. Organizations

#### Canadian Federation for Sexual Health

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation  
[www.cfsh.ca/Your\\_Sexual\\_Health/Gender-Identity-and-Sexual-Orientation/](http://www.cfsh.ca/Your_Sexual_Health/Gender-Identity-and-Sexual-Orientation/)  
 Canadian Federation for Sexual Health  
 1 Nicholas Street, Suite 430  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7  
 Tel: (613) 241-4474 • Fax: (613) 241-7550  
 Email: admin@cfsh.ca  
[www.cfsh.ca](http://www.cfsh.ca)

#### Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition

[www.rainbowhealth.ca](http://www.rainbowhealth.ca)  
 P.O. Box 3043  
 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7K 3S9  
 Toll Free: 1-800-955-5129 • Fax: (306) 955-5132  
 Email: info@rainbowhealth.ca

The Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition (CRHC) is a national organization whose objective is to address the various health and wellness issues that people who have sexual and emotional relationships with people of the same gender, or a gender identity that does not conform to the identity assigned to them at birth, encounter.

#### Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health

[www.cpath.ca](http://www.cpath.ca)  
 201-1770 Fort Street,  
 Victoria, British Columbia V8R 1J5  
 Tel: (250) 592-6183 • Fax: (250) 592-6123  
 Email: info@cpath.ca

The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health (CPATH) is a professional organization devoted to the health care of individuals with gender variant identities.

#### Centre for Suicide Prevention

[www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca)  
 Suite 320, 1202 Centre Street S.E.  
 Calgary, Alberta T2G 5A5  
 Tel: (403) 245-3900 • Fax: (403) 245-0299  
 Email: csp@suicideinfo.ca

The Centre for Suicide Prevention (CSP) is an education centre specializing in curriculum development; training programs; library and information services. The purpose of the Centre is to inform and equip people with additional knowledge and skills in the prevention of suicide.

#### EGALE

[www.egale.ca](http://www.egale.ca)  
 Tel: (613) 230-1043  
 Toll Free: 1-888-204-7777 • Fax: (416) 642-6435  
 Email: egale.canada@egale.ca

Egale Canada is a national organization committed to advancing equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified people, and their families, across Canada.

#### Gender Identity Research and Education Society

[www.gires.org.uk](http://www.gires.org.uk)  
 Meverley  
 The Warren  
 Ashted  
 Surrey  
 KT21 2SP  
 Tel: 01372 801554  
 Email: info@gires.org.uk

The focus GIRES is on people who experience atypical gender identity development, especially trans people, whether or not they are also affected by lesbian, gay, bisexual or intersex issues.

## **PFLAG**

[www.pflagcanada.ca](http://www.pflagcanada.ca)

1633 Mountain Road

Box 29211

Moncton, New Brunswick E1G 4R3

Tel: (506) 869-8191 • Fax: (506) 387-8349

Toll Free: 1-888-530-6777 (English)

Toll Free French Support Line: 1-888-530-6483

Email: [execdirector@pflagcanada.ca](mailto:execdirector@pflagcanada.ca)

PFLAG Canada is a national organization that helps all Canadians who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. PFLAG Canada supports, educates and provides resources to parents, families, friends and colleagues with questions or concerns.

## **Public Health Agency of Canada**

[www.publichealth.gc.ca/sti](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/sti)

Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections  
Community Acquired Infections Division  
Centre for Communicable Diseases  
and Infection Control

Public Health Agency of Canada

100 Eglantine Driveway, Health Canada Building

A.L. 0602C, Tunney's Pasture

Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9

Fax: (613) 957-0381

## **Rainbow Health Ontario**

[www.RainbowHealthOntario.ca](http://www.RainbowHealthOntario.ca)

333 Sherbourne Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

Toronto Ontario M5A 2S5

Tel: (416) 324-4100 ext. 5058

Fax: (416) 324-4259

Email: [info@rainbowhealthontario.ca](mailto:info@rainbowhealthontario.ca)

Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO) is a province-wide program that works to improve the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people in Ontario through education, research, outreach and public policy advocacy.

## **Sexuality and U**

[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca)

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists  
of Canada

780 Echo Drive

Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5R7

Tel: (613) 730-4192 • Fax: (613) 730-4314

Toll free: 1-800-561-2416

Email: [helpdesk@sogc.com](mailto:helpdesk@sogc.com)

[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca) is committed to providing credible and up-to-date information and education on sexual health.

## **Sherbourne Health Centre**

[www.sherbourne.on.ca](http://www.sherbourne.on.ca)

333 Sherbourne Street

Toronto, Ontario M5A 2S5

Tel: (416) 324-4103 • Fax: (416) 324-4262

E-mail: [info@sherbourne.on.ca](mailto:info@sherbourne.on.ca)

Sherbourne Health Centre offers a wide range of primary health care programs and services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer, or questioning individuals. Their goal is to provide dignified, non-judgemental services to help individuals feel better, cope better with day-to-day challenges, and address specific LGBT health issues.

## **World Professional Association for Transgender Health**

[www.wpath.org](http://www.wpath.org)

South Second Street, Suite 180

Minneapolis, Minnesota, MN 55454

Email: [wpath@wpath.org](mailto:wpath@wpath.org)

As an international multidisciplinary professional Association the mission of The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) is to promote evidence based care, education, research, advocacy, public policy and respect in transgender health.

## II. Programs

### American Library Association Rainbow Project

[www.rainbowlist.wordpress.com](http://www.rainbowlist.wordpress.com)

The Rainbow Project is a joint project of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table and the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association. The Rainbow Project presents an annual bibliography of quality books with significant and authentic GLBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth through eighteen years of age.

### Camp fYrefly

[www.fYrefly.ualberta.ca](http://www.fYrefly.ualberta.ca)

7-104 Department of Educational Policy Studies  
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2G5  
Tel: (780) 492-0772 • Fax: (780) 492-2024  
Email: fyrefly@ualberta.ca

Camp fYrefly is an educational, social, and personal learning retreat for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, and allied (LGBTQ&A) youth. It focuses on building and nurturing their leadership potential and personal resiliency in an effort to help them learn how to make significant contributions to their own lives and to their schools, home/group-home environments, and communities. The camp is designed for LGBTQ&A youth between the ages of 14 and 24.

### Rainbow Resource Centre

[www.rainbowresourcecentre.org](http://www.rainbowresourcecentre.org)

170 Scott Street  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3L 0L3  
Tel: (204) 474.0212 • Fax: (204) 478.1160  
Email: info@rainbowresourcecentre.org

The Rainbow Resource Centre is a not-for-profit community organization that provides support and resources to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and two-spirit communities of Manitoba and North Western Ontario.

### Supporting our Youth

[www.soytoronto.org/](http://www.soytoronto.org/)

333 Sherbourne Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M5A 2S5  
Tel: (416) 324-5077 • Fax: (416) 324-4188  
Email: soy@sherbourne.on.ca

Supporting Our Youth (SOY) is an exciting, dynamic community development project designed to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered youth in Toronto through the active involvement of youth and adult communities. It works to create healthy arts, culture and recreational spaces for young people; to provide supportive housing and employment opportunities; and to increase youth access to adult mentoring and support.

### Vancouver Coastal Health Authority

Transgender Health Program  
<http://transhealth.vch.ca>  
Vancouver Coastal Health Corporate Office  
11<sup>th</sup> Floor, 601 West Broadway  
Vancouver, British Columbia V5Z 4C2  
Tel: (604) 736-2033  
Toll Free: 1-866-884-0888

## III. Non-fiction Books

**Brill, S., & Pepper, R. (2008). *Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals*. San Francisco, CA.: Cleis Press.**

"... explores the unique challenges that thousands of families face every day raising their children in every city and state. Through extensive research and interviews, as well as years of experience working in the field, the authors cover gender variance from birth through college. What do you do when your toddler daughter's first sentence is that she's a boy? What will happen when your preschool son insists on wearing a dress to school? Is this ever just a phase? How can you explain this to your neighbors and family? How can parents advocate for their children in elementary schools? What are the current laws on the rights of transgender children? What do doctors specializing in gender variant children

recommend? What do the therapists say? What advice do other families who have trans kids have? What about hormone blockers and surgery? What issues should your college-bound trans child be thinking about when selecting a school? How can I best raise my gender variant or transgender child with love and compassion, even when I barely understand the issues ahead of us? And what is gender, anyway? These questions and more are answered in this book offering a deeper understanding of gender variant and transgender children and teens."<sup>95</sup>

**Central Toronto Youth Services (2008). *Families in TRANSition: A Resource Guide for Parents of Trans Youth*. Toronto, ON: Central Toronto Youth Services.**

"Families In TRANSition: A Resource Guide for Parents of Trans Youth is the first comprehensive Canadian publication to address the needs of parents and families supporting their trans children. Families in TRANSition summarizes the experiences, strategies, and successes of a working group of community consultants – researchers, counsellors, parents, advocates as well as trans youth themselves. Families in TRANSition provides the stories of parents and youth along with practical and sensitive parent-to-parent and professional therapeutic advice."<sup>96</sup>

**Central Toronto Youth Services. (2009). *Trans Youth at School Guide*. Toronto, ON: Central Toronto Youth Services.**

"This Bulletin provides recommendations for school administration to help create welcoming and supportive schools for trans youth."<sup>97</sup>

**Gay and Lesbian Medical Association. (2006). *Guidelines for care of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender patients*. San Francisco, CA: Gay and Lesbian Medical Association.**

**Huegel, K. (2003). *GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer & Questioning Teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.**

**Killoran, I., & Jimenez, K.P. (2007). *Unleashing the Unpopular: Talking About Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity in Education*. Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.**

"This new publication is a unique teacher education resource that strives to improve understanding of issues related to sexual orientation, gender diversity, and education, and how they affect students, teachers, schools, and the community. Personal narratives offer insight into experiences of LGBT students and teachers in schools...The authors discuss barriers to successfully supporting LGBT students, teachers, and parents; and explore the reasons behind action or inaction, the effects of not having supportive policy around LGBT issues, and possible solutions to the concerns. Educators share their successes and failures in their attempts to address gender diversity and sexual orientation in the classroom and/or school community. They provide strategies for introducing, supporting, and engaging students in dialogue, advocacy, and arts-based activities."<sup>98</sup>

**Lagartera, R. (2009). *Shout Out: Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia and Heterosexism*. Winnipeg, MB: Rainbow Resource Centre.**

"The purpose of this booklet is to share information about some of the challenges, provide resources to help you cope, and let you know loud and clear: you are not alone!"<sup>99</sup>

**Lambda Legal and the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC). (2004) *Bending the Mould – An Action Kit for Transgender Youth*. New York, NY: Lambda Legal.**

"...this kit is designed to help you make your school a safer place. We've included ideas and information to help you advocate for change. There's also an extensive list of resources to help you connect with the transgender community and find support."<sup>100</sup>

Letts, W.J., & Sears, J.T.; (1999). *Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue about Sexualities and Schooling*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

"... these provocative and thoughtful essays advocate the creation of classrooms that challenge categorical thinking, promote interpersonal intelligence, and foster critical consciousness. Queer elementary classrooms are those where parents and educators care enough about their children to trust the human capacity for understanding and their educative abilities to foster insight into the human condition....Queering education means bracketing our simplest classroom activities in which we routinely equate sexual identities with sexual acts, privilege the heterosexual condition, and presume sexual destinies. Queer teachers are those who develop curriculum and pedagogy that afford every child dignity rooted in self-worth and esteem for others."<sup>101</sup>

Lev, A.I. (2004). *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender-Variant People and Their Families*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc.

"This comprehensive book provides you with a clinical and theoretical overview of the issues facing transgendered/transsexual people and their families. *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender-Variant People and Their Families* views assessment and treatment through a nonpathologizing lens that honours human diversity and acknowledges the role of oppression in the developmental process of gender identity formation."<sup>102</sup>

Makadon, H.J., Mayer, K.H., Potter, J., & Goldhammer, H. (2008). *Fenway Guide to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Health*. Philadelphia, PA: American College of Physicians.

"The Fenway Guide provides guidance, practical guidelines, and discussions of clinical issues pertinent to the LGBT patient and community. It also focuses on helping healthcare professionals gain a better understanding of the LGBT population, the LGBT life continuum, health promotion and disease prevention, transgender health, and patient communication and the office environment."<sup>103</sup>

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2008). *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*. Ottawa, ON: Public Health Agency of Canada.

Simpson, A.J. & Goldberg, J.M. (2006). *Let's talk trans. A resource for trans and questioning youth*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Coastal Health, Transcend Transgender Support & Education Society and Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition.

"This booklet is for youth who want information about being trans, gender transition, coming out as trans, or finding resources and getting support."<sup>104</sup>

Wells, K. (2006). *Gay-Straight Student Alliance Handbook*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.

"This handbook is part of a series of bisexual, gay, lesbian, trans-identified and two-spirited (BGLTT) educational resources produced by the Canadian Teachers' Federation. It is designed to assist teachers, school administrators and counsellors in understanding the educational, health and safety needs of those students who are or are perceived as being BGLTT. Other titles in this series include *Seeing the Rainbow: Teachers Talk About Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Two-Spirited Realities* (2002) and *Lessons Learned: A Collection of Stories and Articles About Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues* (2005). A Comprehensive Resource for Canadian K-12 Teachers, Administrators and School Counsellors."<sup>105</sup>

#### IV. Fiction Books

Ewert, M., & Ray, R. (2008). *10,000 Dresses*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.  
Reading level: Ages 4-8

"Every night, Bailey dreams about magical dresses: dresses made of crystals and rainbows, dresses made of flowers, dresses made of windows...Unfortunately, when Bailey's awake, no one wants to hear about these beautiful dreams. Quite the contrary: "You're a BOY!" Mother and Father tell Bailey. "You shouldn't be thinking about dresses at all." Then Bailey meets Laurel, an older girl who is touched and inspired by Bailey's imagination and courage. In friendship, the two of them begin making dresses together. And Bailey becomes the girl she always dreamed she'd be!"<sup>106</sup>

## V. Films

### ***No Dumb Questions (2001).***

**Run time: 24 minutes, Rating: NR (Not Rated)**

“Uncle Bill is becoming a woman. This light-hearted and poignant documentary profiles three sisters, ages 6, 9 and 11, struggling to understand why and how their Uncle Bill is becoming a woman. These girls love their Uncle Bill, but will they feel the same way when he becomes their new Aunt Barbara? With just weeks until Bill's first visit as Barbara, the sisters navigate the complex territories of anatomy, sexuality, personality, gender and fashion. Their reactions are funny, touching, and distinctly different.”<sup>107</sup>

### ***Southern Comfort (2001)***

**Run time: 90 minutes, Rating: NR (Not rated)**

“With a rare blend of humour tragedy & romance Southern Comfort tells the remarkable story of Robert Eads a 52 year old wise cracking cowboy who was born female. The film finds Robert 15 years later during the last year of his life as he falls into a passionate romance with Lola who was born male.”<sup>108</sup>

### ***Toilet Training (2003)***

**Run time: 30 minutes, Rating: NR (Not Rated)**

“The video addresses the persistent discrimination, harassment, and violence that people who transgress gender norms face in gender segregated bathrooms. Using the stories of people who have been harassed, arrested or beaten for trying to use bathrooms, Toilet Training focuses on bathroom access in public space, in schools, and at work.”<sup>109</sup>

### ***Transamerica (2005)***

**Run time: 103 minutes, Rating: R**

“...a small but rich movie about Bree--formerly Stanley--a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual awaiting gender-reassignment surgery who learns she has a wayward teenage son named Toby. When her therapist strongarms Bree into facing her past, she bails Toby out of jail and they end up on a road trip across the country.”<sup>110</sup>

### ***TransGeneration (2005)***

**Run time: 272 minutes, Rating: NR (Not Rated)**

“What is it like to be a man trapped in a woman's body? How does a woman become a man?

TRANSGENERATION, a dramatic and mesmerizing eight-part series, is a year-in-the-life look at four college students--Gabbie, Lucas, Raci, and T.S.—who are juggling the challenges of academia with their commitment to transition from their birth sex.

Faced with life-altering choices--about how to deal with parents and society, whether or not to take hormone therapy and undergo sex re-assignment surgery--these four remarkable individuals deal with their deeply misunderstood identities in starkly unique ways. In every moment of this radical, paradigm-busting film, these collegiate transgendered students blow up stereotypes while coming to terms with how to change their bodies to fit their minds.”<sup>111</sup>

## Endnotes

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