

This is a very sensitive but important topic for parents. We hope to assist parents in understanding how their children may view gender & sexual orientation differences in today's world. The goal is to try to help parents know what the level of understanding is in each age group, to clarify things for children, rather than confuse them. **Some basic principles of gender identity and sexual orientation can be discussed without interjecting a bias.** During our children's development, they can benefit from our support and knowledge.

It is important to understand the average child's ability to comprehend information, at different ages. We stress this 'age appropriate advice' at each of our well-child-office-visits, and at our behavioral health visits. **It is rarely the case that a child under the age of 4 years-old will have questions or concerns about gender or sexual orientation.** They may point out obvious physical differences; and they will note social norms and commonalities. Girls might benefit from all children being told that “their special parts are on the inside, rather than on the outside, of the body”; this may avoid an inherent bias toward “males having something that females do not”.

At approximately four to four-and-one-half-years-old, children start to get pre-occupied with gender differences and start to understand permanence & competition. Also, 'socialization' begins to be an important part of their learning (the original purpose of Kindergarten). Children of this age will start to assimilate the social norms that they see around them. It is common for children of these ages to ask questions about gender in relation to toys, clothes, and physical appearance. Therefore, from 4.5 to 7-years-old, the teaching about gender identity is constantly occurring through television and media and school. Parental awareness, and involvement, is critical in order to create the best education for healthy social development. If a child's brain is 'wired' to be skeptical of their gender identity, then we might note it at this early age. **It would seem critical to try to avoid gender bias in this age group. It would also seem critical to be aware of what children hear, or are taught, at these ages.**

Sometime between 7 & 9 years-old, all children become pre-occupied with their appearance; they **try to understand how others perceive their appearance.** Some of the common topics that are brought up by children of this age are hair styles, earrings, clothing, skin blemishes, height & weight, or any physical traits/deformity that might be evident. It seems that every child has some things that they like about their appearance, and some things that they would like to change. Obviously, this is a critical age to ask children how they feel about their appearance, and then to be very honest with them, while stressing that we are all unique individuals, but all share the same human organs, abilities, and emotions. **Children can be made to feel good or bad about their appearance, based on what others tell them. Therefore, they are very vulnerable and impressionable during these ages.** It is often difficult for parents to answer some difficult questions. We advise parents to emphasize the common human elements that we all share, and then to emphasize that we all have the ability to learn and be together, regardless of our height or weight or blemishes or clothes or language or skin color. Unfortunately, many adults have developed biases (prejudices) that get transferred to our children at this age, with regards to the physical features listed here. The biases can create a scenario where children might learn that anyone who does not have the same appearance or

language as they do, does not fit with them. It would be important to be able to have honest discussions about gender identity during these ages. It is also important to note that friends, relatives, television, social media, & especially parents, are constantly educating this age group.

As children enter Puberty (ages 9-11), they develop many questions about many things. Interestingly, they do not always ask the questions that are on their minds, thus leaving the window to the mind open for whatever they see and hear. Sexuality and cultural diversity are just one topic of incredible interest that develops, in their minds, at this age. Morals, values, ethnic issues, violence, alcohol, smoking, and drugs all begin to become part of what they are exposed to, in one form or another. **This is a very good age for children to begin to hear non-biased discussions about why some people may alter clothing or hairstyles to fit the gender that they feel comfortable with, keeping in mind that this age group is very impressionable to strong opinions from those they trust.** Open discussion should take place whenever the situation arises. It may be important for children of this age to hear about times that people have been afraid to express their thoughts or feelings about gender or sexual orientation. It is also likely beneficial to hear how things have improved quite a bit in this regard, but **that we must have caution with newer ways of thinking that embellish by 'celebrating', rather than 'accepting', gender concerns that were considered outside of previous social norms.** Also, as puberty begins, exposure to sexuality and sexual orientation begin to become part of the daily thought processes in early adolescence. Daily exposure to sexuality is evident throughout screen viewing, which has become an integral part of every pre-teen's daily life. **Parents should be aware that cultural opinions about sexual orientation will begin to add on to the genetically pre-determined thoughts about sexual orientation.**

As puberty reaches its peak at approximately 12-15 years-old (voice change, rapid growth spurt, sexual interest), the common theme is '**Peer Relationships**'. These relationships begin to dominate over family teaching, or that of formal educational teaching. Many people can, and will, influence teens at this stage of development. In order to make this complex topic somewhat easier, it seems clear that it would be best to hear messages and teachings that come from multiple people who care for them as an individual. **We suggest that parents monitor social media exposures, in order to lead to good positive discussion during this time of strong opinions that are easily impacted by peer relationships.** All teens need to be reminded that 'social media posts' are often unchecked opinions; so, they should look for educational viewpoints, rather than just opinions. Parents can, and should, explain that it is difficult to look too far into the future at this age, and that decisions and actions at these ages can be temporarily or permanently affected by those that they trust, and those who care about them. This is an effective age to learn, with assistance from parents and peers, that carefully thought-out decisions can begin to be part of good adolescent thinking, which can lead to the best form of development (discussions vs. arguments). **Brain development, in reference to sexual orientation (and on-going gender identity), is peaking at these ages. Genetic predisposition, as well as all social exposures & teachings, can clearly impact temporary and/or permanent thoughts and decisions regarding sexual orientation.** Of concern might be that past generations had clearly biased teens away from non-heterosexual behavior and/or gender identity concerns; but now the bias seems to have shifted, away from the goal of "acceptance" to more of a "celebration" of non-heterosexual behavior and gender concerns. We encourage open positive discussion, with good education

In the late stages of Puberty, the adolescent begins to have the ability for more clear **rational thought**, and therefore does **much more 'thinking ahead to future outcomes'**. This is a change from the immediate gratification, the simplicity, and the experimentation that had been taking place, with learning from family, teachers, coaches, and peers. Bias can still interfere with the development of how a 'late adolescent' views themselves, and the world. **Clear thought processes are a more likely outcome if late adolescents hear more facts on a regular basis, rather than opinion.** It is becoming easier for this age group to formulate logical or rational thoughts and arguments, as they hear about differences of opinion less often, and facts more often. This stage of adolescent development often needs clear direction about the increased freedoms and choices that we all make entering adult life. Clear limits, clear lines, or clear boundaries, for all adolescent decision making, are an important part of the transitioning to adult logic. **Decisions about Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, & Gender Identity should be clearly thought out by those who care about an individual adolescent, and by those who have become educated on these topics. A third party, who is non-biased, and who can factor in all aspects of the individual's thoughts and exposures, would seem to be ideal for anyone with questions about these topics.**

There is obviously great interest and frustration around the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity. **The goal here is to help parents know what their children are thinking, and what they are capable of thinking, as their brains are developing.** At almost every age, they need to know that there is a lot to be discussed in relation to these topics.