

## Key Terms and Concepts in Understanding Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation Among Students

(Informational guide developed by APA Division 17 and Division 44) &  
*Navigating Transgender Terminology* – [www.teachingtransgender.com](http://www.teachingtransgender.com))  
Definitions and preferred terms will vary by location and group.

**Affirming:** The unequivocal support for an individual person’s gender identity or expression, regardless of the biological sex they were assigned at birth; the systematic support to ensure that transgender people and communities are fully represented, included, valued and honored.

**Affirming Pronouns:** Refers to the most respectful and accurate pronouns for a person, as defined by that person. This is also sometimes referred to as “preferred gender pronouns,” although this phrasing is increasingly outdated. To ascertain someone’s affirming pronouns, ask: “What are your pronouns?”

**Agender:** A person who does not identify as having a gender identity that can be categorized as male or female, and sometimes indicates identifying as not having a gender identity.

**Asexual** refers to a person who does not experience sexual attraction or has little interest in sexual activity.

**Biological Sex:** A person’s combination of genitals, chromosomes and hormones, usually categorized as “male” or “female” based on visual inspection of genitals via ultrasound or at birth. Many assume that a person’s gender identity will be congruent with their sex assignment. Everyone has a biological sex.

**Bigender:** A person who experiences gender identity as two genders at the same time, or whose gender identity may vary between two genders. These may be masculine and feminine, or could also include nonbinary identities.

**Bullying** is unwanted, repetitive, and aggressive behavior marked by an imbalance of power. It can take on multiple forms, including physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., name calling or making threats), relational (e.g., spreading rumors), and electronic (e.g., texting, social networking) (Rossen & Cowan, 2012).

**Cisgender: (pronounced /sis-gender/):** An adjective to describe a person whose gender identity is congruent with (or “matches”) the biological sex they were assigned at birth. (Some people abbreviate this as “cis”).

**DSD** refers to “disorders of sex development”, a term that is used to discuss intersex and variations in sex development by some medical professionals and community members. *See entry for Intersex.*



**Gender** refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity (APA guidelines).

**Gender Binary:** The idea that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth, rather than a continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions. The gender binary is often considered to be limiting and problematic for all people, and especially for those who do not fit neatly into the either/or categories.

**Gender Expression:** A person's outward gender presentation, usually comprised of personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, vocal inflection and body language. Gender expression is typically categorized as masculine or feminine, less commonly as androgynous. All people express a gender. Gender expression can be congruent with a person's gender identity, but it can also be incongruent if a person does not feel safe or supported, or does not have the resources needed to engage in gender expression that authentically reflects their gender identity.

**Gender Diversity** refers to the extent to which a person's gender identity, role, or expression differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex. This term is becoming more popular as a way to describe people without reference to a particular cultural norm, in a manner that is more affirming and potentially less stigmatizing than gender nonconformity (Gender Spectrum, 2013; <https://www.genderspectrum.org/understanding-gender>).

**Gender Dysphoria (GD):** The formal diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM 5), used by psychologists and physicians to indicate that a person meets the diagnostic criteria to engage in medical transition. In other words, the medical diagnosis for being transgender. Formerly known as Gender Identity Disorder (GID). The inclusion of Gender Dysphoria as a diagnosis in the DSM 5 is controversial in transgender communities because it implies that being transgender is a mental illness rather than a valid identity. On the other hand, since a formal diagnosis is generally required in order to receive or provide treatment in the US, it does provide access to medical care for some people who wouldn't ordinarily be eligible to receive it.

**Genderfluid:** A person whose gender identity or expression shifts between masculine and feminine, or falls somewhere along this spectrum.

**Gender Identity:** A person's deeply-felt, inherent sense of being a boy, a man, or male; a girl, a woman, or female; or an alternative gender (e.g., genderqueer, gender non-conforming) which may or may not correspond to a person's sex assigned at birth or to a person's primary or secondary sex characteristics. Since gender identity is internal, a person's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others. 'Affirmed gender identity' refers to a person's gender identity after coming out as transgender or gender non-conforming or undergoing a social and/or medical transition process.



**Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation** are Different Constructs Transgender people, like cisgender people, may be sexually oriented toward men, women, both sexes, or neither sex, and like most people, usually experience their gender identity (who they feel themselves to be) and their sexual orientation (whom they are attracted to) as separate phenomena (Bockting & Gray, 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2000; Coleman, Bockting, & Gooren, 1993; Docter & Fleming, 2001; Docter & Prince, 1997). Many transgender people experience a shift in their sexual attractions at some point (Daskalos, 1998; Meier, Pardo, Labuski, & Babcock, 2013), indicating that sexual orientation may be more dynamic than previously thought.

**Gender Marker:** The marker (male or female) that appears on a person's identity documents (e.g., birth certificate, driver's license, passport, travel or work visas, green cards, etc.). The gender marker on a transgender person's identity documents will be their sex assigned at birth until they undergo a legal and logistical process to change it, where possible.

**Gender Neutral:** A term that describes something (sometimes a space, such as a bathroom; or an item, such as a piece of clothing) that is not segregated by sex/gender.

**Gender Neutral Language:** Language that does not assume or confer gender. For example, "person" instead of "man" or "woman."

**Gender Non-Conforming:** A person whose gender expression is perceived as being inconsistent with cultural norms expected for that gender. Specifically, boys/men are not masculine enough or are feminine, while girls/women are not feminine enough or are masculine. Not all transgender people are gender non-conforming, and not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender. Cisgender people may also be gender non-conforming. Gender non-conformity is often inaccurately confused with sexual orientation.

**Gender Role** refers to a pattern of appearance, personality, and behavior that, in a given culture, is associated with being a boy/man/male or being a girl/woman/female. A person's gender role may or may not conform to what is expected based on a person's sex assigned at birth. Gender role may also refer to the social role one is living in (e.g., as a woman, a man, or another gender), with some role characteristics conforming and others not conforming to what is associated with girls/women or boys/men in a given culture and time.

**Genderqueer** refers to a person whose gender identity falls outside of the gender binary (i.e. identifies with neither or both genders). Genderqueers may also use the term "gender fluid" as an identifier but typically reject the term "transgender" because it implies a change from one gender category to another. Intersex refers to a range of conditions associated with atypical development of physical sex characteristics (American Psychological Association [APA], 2006).

**Intersex or Disorder of Sex Development (DSD):** A category that describes a person with a genetic, genital, reproductive or hormonal configuration that results in a body that often cannot be easily categorized as male or female. Intersex is frequently confused with transgender, but the



two are completely distinct and generally unconnected. Participants may be more familiar with the term hermaphrodite, which is considered outdated and offensive.

**LGBTQ:** An acronym commonly used to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning individuals and communities. LGBTQ is often erroneously used as a synonym for “non-heterosexual,” which incorrectly implies that transgender is a sexual orientation.

**Non-Binary:** A continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/ woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth. Words that people may use to express their nonbinary gender identity include “agender,” “bigender,” “genderqueer,” “genderfluid,” and “pangender.”

**Pangender:** A person who identifies as all genders.

**Pansexual** “is most commonly used in the world outside academia as a sexual identity [and sexual orientation] term similar to ‘bisexuality,’ but more inclusive of trans people. It also shows an awareness of the implied gender binary in the term ‘bisexual.’” (Elizabeth, 2013, p. 333)

**Queer** is an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. Historically, it has been considered a derogatory or pejorative term and the term may continue to be used by some individuals with negative intentions. Still, many LGBT individuals today embrace the label in a neutral or positive manner (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Some youth may adopt ‘queer’ as an identity term to avoid limiting themselves to the gender binaries of male and female or to the perceived restrictions imposed by lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexual orientations (Rivers, 2010).

**Questioning:** A person who is exploring or questioning their gender identity or expression. Some may later identify as transgender or gender non-conforming, while others may not. Can also refer to someone who is questioning or exploring their sexual orientation.

**Sex Assigned at Birth:** The determination of a person’s sex based on the visual appearance of the genitals at birth. The sex someone is labeled at birth.

**Sexual Orientation:** A person’s feelings of attraction (emotional, psychological, physical, and/or sexual) towards other people. A person may be attracted to people of the same sex, to those of the opposite sex, to those of both sexes, or without reference to sex or gender. And some people do not experience primary sexual attraction, and may identify as asexual. Sexual orientation is about attraction to other people (external), while gender identity is a deep-seated sense of self (internal). All people have a sexual orientation that is separate from their biological sex, gender identity and gender expression.



**Sexual Orientation:** A component of identity that includes a person’s sexual and emotional attraction to another person and the behavior that may result from this attraction. An individual’s sexual orientation may be lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, pansexual, or asexual. A person may be attracted to men, women, both, neither, genderqueer, androgynous or have other gender identities. Sexual orientation is distinct from sex, gender identity, gender role and gender expression.

**Social Transition:** A transgender person’s process of creating a life that is congruent with their gender identity, which often includes asking others to use a name, pronoun, or gender that is more congruent with their gender identity. It may also involve a person changing their gender expression to match their gender identity.

**Trans:** This is sometimes used as an abbreviation for “transgender.”

**Transgender** is an umbrella term that incorporates differences in gender identity wherein one’s assigned biological sex doesn’t match their felt identity. This umbrella term includes persons who do not feel they fit into a dichotomous sex structure through which they are identified as male or female. Individuals in this category may feel as if they are in the wrong gender, but this perception may not correlate with a desire for surgical or hormonal reassignment (Meier & Labuski, 2013).

**Transgender:** An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity is incongruent with (or does not “match”) the biological sex they were assigned at birth. “Transgender” serves an umbrella term to refer to the full range and diversity of identities within transgender communities because it is currently the most widely used and recognized term.

**(Transgender) Ally:** A cisgender person who supports, affirms, is in solidarity with, or advocates for transgender people.

**Transgender men and boys:** People who identify as male, but were assigned female at birth. Also sometimes referred to as transmen.

**Transgender women and girls:** People who identify as female, but were assigned male at birth. Also sometimes referred to as trans women.

**Transsexual/Transsexual:** This is an older term that has been used to refer to a transgender person who has had hormonal or surgical interventions to change their bodies to be more aligned with their gender identity than the sex that they were assigned at birth. While still used as an identity label by some, “transgender” has generally become the preferred term.

**Two Spirit:** A term used by Native and Indigenous Peoples to indicate that they embody both a masculine and a feminine spirit. Is sometimes also used to describe Native Peoples of diverse sexual orientations, and has nuanced meanings in various indigenous sub-cultures.