



Brief Guidance on Social Transition:

Names, pronouns & single-sex spaces



INTRODUCTION

Social transition is the term used to describe the process where an individual decides to change their social identity. It is a new psychosocial intervention that has become very popular in recent years among gender non-conforming young people.

It often includes a change of name; a change of pronouns (she/her, he/him or they/them); and a change of clothes, style, hair, grooming and even mannerisms to an expression of an identity that the individual believes better matches their inner sense of self.

Social transitioning may also involve the person coming out as transgender to their school, family, friends and/or wider community. This requires the participation of other people in a young person's social network; as a result, the responses of others are significant influencing factors in how the young person experiences their identity exploration.

It is important to note that not everyone feels a sense of gender identity, and students should never be compelled to announce how they identify, or the pronouns they would like people to use to refer to them.

Social transition is a powerful therapeutic intervention. Many studies have highlighted the risk that, in the short-term, social transition can increase the likelihood of the [persistence](#) of a young person's unease with their birth sex, and that it can [interfere](#) with children's natural identity [development](#). There is [no quality long-term peer-reviewed evidence](#) about the impact of social transition. As such, as with all new interventions, it is best practice for schools to apply caution when managing social transition within schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This guidance offers  **recommendations** based on the principles of child safeguarding so that schools can avoid further, more complicated challenges in the future. Changes to school policies intended to provide support for a select few members of the student body can often indirectly impact other students within the school. Consequently, legal issues, psychological issues, risk assessments, impact assessments and safeguarding issues are often more appropriately evaluated on a case-by-case basis. When considering changes to school policy:

 **We recommend** that schools are cognizant of their right to protect their school ethos with a comprehensive Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Policy. You can [contact us](#) for help with this.

 **We recommend** that information about gender and sexuality be delivered in a factual and objective manner. Gender identity issues have become increasingly common among adolescents in recent years: you can download further resources from [Genspect](#) to help you deal with this reality.

 **We recommend** that you bear in mind the differences between biological sex, gender, and sexual orientation:

- **Sex** refers to either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions.
- **Gender identity** relates to culturally influenced, societal expectations of behavior, aptitudes and appearance based upon masculine or feminine stereotypes.
- Finally, **sexual orientation** is an enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction to persons of the opposite sex, the same sex, or to both sexes.

Every school creates its own cultural context. However, in terms of sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, we believe the more detailed recommendations that follow will help schools meet the needs of their students in relation to these issues.

COMMUNICATION

Sometimes, young people can use triangulation as a communicative strategy. In the triangulation system, a third entity (the school) can be used either as a substitute for direct communication with the subject of the communication (in this case, the parents), or can be used as a messenger to carry the communication. Usually, this expresses implicit dissatisfaction with the parents. The goal of triangulation is to divide and conquer, which often happens through the use of exclusion or manipulation of a situation.

It is inappropriate for schools to act against the parents' will unless there are genuine and serious concerns about the fitness of the parents. When these cases arise, concerns must be addressed via formal channels, such as contacting social services.

✔ **We recommend** that schools avoid allowing triangulation to occur between the student, parents and school body.

⚠ **We caution against** cutting parents out of decisions, unless this takes place within a formal structure such as the involvement of social services.

UNIFORM, JEWELRY AND HAIR

It is gender, not sex, which influences school policies on uniforms, hair-length, jewelry and make-up.

✔ **We recommend** that schools retain a flexible approach towards these issues, allowing gender non-conforming students to explore their identity freely in a neutrally supportive environment.

✔ **We recommend** that no uniform items have a gendered label, so that pupils are free to choose from a list of uniform items.

⚠ **We caution against** stereotyping specific clothes or certain behaviors as evidence that an individual should transition. A more progressive outlook allows boys and girls to explore their identities without being limited by categories that may be welcomed today, but may one day feel restrictive.

NAME CHANGES

It is well-documented that young people often change their names and use nicknames during the process of identity exploration that occurs between the ages of roughly 12-25 years. Now that there is often less formality between teachers and students, many teachers choose to use their students' preferred names.

However, teachers and other school staff should acknowledge the responsibility of their position, and be careful not to give an official imprimatur on any given name: this may inadvertently foreclose further exploration of a vulnerable student's identity exploration. Some gender non-conforming young people go through a series of different names, so it might not be helpful to concretize a current chosen name.

If parents have concerns about the name that a child is going by in school, these should take precedence over the child's desires, and parents should not be cut out. It is important to note that a child cannot change his/her legal name without parental consent in most jurisdictions. Further, any name change after the age of 18 may cause issues when applying for jobs if qualifications are awarded in a different name.

✓ **We recommend** that schools avoid allowing triangulation to occur between the student, parents and school body.

✓ **We recommend** that schools retain students' official names on all official documents, and exercise caution with regard to teachers' use of students' new names. If parental permission is required for official 'known by' name changes for other pupils, then it also needs to be so for gender non-conforming pupils.

⚠ **We caution against** allowing students to adopt new names against their parents' will, or allow a student's new name to be interpreted as the official imprimatur of a student's gender identity.

PRONOUNS

Names and pronouns are very different ideas: when students make requests relating to these issues, schools should deal with names and pronouns separately. Never before have school bodies made the decision to refer to students with anything other than with their biologically correct pronouns, and the outcome of such decisions remain to be seen.

✓ **We recommend** that schools retain the use of biologically accurate pronouns.

⚠ **We caution against** allowing students to dictate other people's use of language when it comes to pronouns. While friends and peers may choose to use a requested pronoun if they wish, it is not acceptable to act as though it is an act of hostility to use the biologically correct pronoun.

"MISGENDERING"

"Misgendering" is a term to describe the situation when, for example, a teacher refers to or addresses a person with language that inaccurately represents the person's inner sense of gender identity. Although this can be perceived as harmful to an individual, there is no quality evidence that supports this perception; nor is there evidence available to demonstrate the impact of referring to a person with terms that do not align with their biological sex.

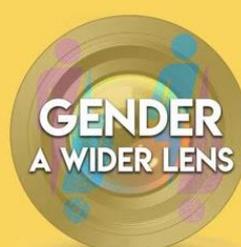
"Misgendering" is a first world concept that has never before been considered a significant problem. It is worth remembering that students with social communication difficulties will find it harder to use the language that others might prefer when it comes to the social construct of gender identity.

✓ **We recommend** that school authorities use biologically accurate language in all cases.

⚠ **We caution against** equating "misgendering" with violence, or making other hyperbolic comparisons. Unless a wider pattern of bullying or other malicious behavior is taking place, "misgendering" should not be punishable.

Take a wider look at gender, with the **Gender: A Wider Lens** podcast.

Click **here** to listen.



TOILETS AND CHANGING ROOMS

Puberty is difficult for many adolescents. This may be due to difficulties they encounter relating to gender, or to other problems, such as shame around menstruation. In other words, it is not just gender non-conforming students who should be borne in mind when it comes to the provision of toilets and changing rooms.

In our work with gender non-conforming young people and their families, we have noted that it can help to provide an option for additional single-occupancy toilets and single-occupancy changing rooms, so that more vulnerable students can have privacy.

✔ **We recommend** that single-sex spaces are maintained, and that a third space is provided where single-occupancy toilets and changing rooms are available, allowing those who wish to use a gender neutral space to do so. This ensures the safety and privacy of all pupils.

⚠ **We caution against** removing single-sex spaces.

SPORTING ACTIVITIES

Many students want to avoid sporting activities for a variety of reasons. Gender non-conforming students may present a further challenge, as they may want to play sports with students from the opposite sex, given that their inner sense of gender aligns with this group.

However, safety and fairness issues can quickly arise from this, and schools need to take a long-term perspective when evaluating these issues. There is very little morphological difference between boys and girls at the age of 10 or 11, and they can often compete with one another safely and fairly. But given the changes in physicality which accompany puberty, decisions made for 11-year-olds are unlikely to be appropriate for 17-year-olds. It is important that girls and young women have opportunities to compete in safety.

✔ **We recommend** that schools create viable alternative options and activities for students who do not want to engage in single-sex sports. If the decision to allow mixed-sex sports is made, a full risk and impact assessment should be conducted and documented according to the relevant protocols, looking at the impact not just on the individual concerned but on the wider student population.

⚠ **We caution against** placing girls and young women at risk by removing single-sex sporting activities. Not only is there a safety risk in doing so, competing without the prospect of winning is demoralizing.

RESIDENTIAL STAYS AND DORMITORIES

Some creative options may need to be explored to meet all students' needs. Safeguarding principles always need to be followed, and schools need to remain mindful that these are often based upon sex, not gender or gender identity.

✔ **We recommend** that schools retain single-sex residential stays and dormitories, while offering a viable alternative option for students who may find staying overnight with students of the same sex difficult. If a school should decide to allow mixed-sex dormitories or sleeping arrangements against our advice, there needs to be comprehensively documented risk and impact assessment, to ensure that safeguarding is upheld for all students. The parents of all pupils need to be informed, and their consent obtained where appropriate.

⚠ **We caution against** allowing mixed-sex sleeping arrangements, as all students' needs must be considered.

BINDING AND TUCKING

Breast binding or chest binding is a technique used to flatten the breasts with constrictive materials such as cloth strips or purpose-built [undergarments](#). Binders are often made of [spandex](#) or other [synthetic fiber](#); some young people use a number of tight tops layered from tight to loose. Peer-reviewed evidence shows that breast-binding is damaging for bodies in both the short and long-term, with regard to skeletal growth, lung function, skin health and more. See [here](#) for more information on the health consequences of binding in females.

Tucking is a technique whereby an individual hides the crotch bulge of the penis and testicles so that they are not conspicuous through clothing, by using materials such as bandages or masking tape. The tucking of the male genitalia to reduce their appearance in clothing can have serious health consequences, such as oligospermia and testicular torsion. See [here](#) for more information on the effects of tucking in males.

✔ **We recommend** that schools ban all binding and tucking on safety grounds, especially during sports activities.

⚠ **We caution against** allowing concerns about appearance to override serious health concerns.

“STEALTH TRANSITION”

Some families make the decision to seek help from the school to maintain the secret transition of a child. This is often known as “stealth transition,” and may involve failing to disclose that a child is staying overnight with or changing clothes alongside children of the opposite sex.

All children have a right to have their privacy and boundaries respected, and this can be violated if there is a veil of secrecy. Segregation of the sexes based on safeguarding principles will be difficult to adhere to if staff are kept in the dark.

There may be circumstances where the child is already taking puberty blockers; in further, rarer cases, the child may have already accessed cross-sex hormones. “Outing” the child could be seen as putting the child at risk of bullying or harassment.

In all situations, the consideration of the student body as a whole needs to be balanced with the needs of the child. Full discussion with the child, family and health professional input should be sought, and risk and impact assessments should be carried out before any decisions are made.

✔ **We recommend** that schools prize openness and transparency wherever it is possible to do so. Vulnerable individuals should have access to extra counselling support so that they can live with honesty and integrity, liberated from the pressure to live a secret life. The school can also support vulnerable students by nurturing a school community that is supportive of gender non-conforming behavior.

⚠ **We caution against** school staff disregarding well-established principles of best practice in favor of keeping secrets, especially when it comes to a process that has no quality peer-reviewed evidence to support it. Psychologists and therapists often remind us that “we are only as sick as our secrets”: as such, we encourage schools to focus on creating an environment of openness and transparency in staff’s dealings with schoolchildren and parents.

⚠ **We caution against** compromising other members of the school community by keeping secrets inappropriately.

SECRECY WITHIN THE FAMILY

In general, it is not helpful for school staff to keep secrets from parents of students, and adults keeping secrets for children is a safeguarding “red flag.” The declaration of a young person’s transgender identity is sometimes accompanied by other safeguarding issues, such as comorbidities, online exploitation, sexual grooming, bullying, self-harm, internalized homophobia, and so on. It is parents who are best placed to support their children to navigate these difficulties, and keeping parents in the dark helps neither the child nor the family.

In recent years, this dilemma is arising more often, as increased numbers of students confide in a teacher about their distress over their gender identity. Sometimes the student might confide in other students or members of staff about their bid to socially transition, and seek reassurance from the school body to keep this a secret from their parents. This is not the same as a child confiding in a teacher about being gay: being gay doesn’t have any of the associated safeguarding issues (bar homophobic bullying). In addition, there are no comorbidities associated with being gay, while gender dysphoria is often accompanied by other mental health conditions.

Historically, schoolteachers may have kept a student’s secret because of a fear of serious repercussions from their family, often for cultural or religious reasons. Yet there is a significant difference between a conversation that is kept in confidence between a student and a teacher when the student feels endangered by their family, and an open secret kept by the school staff and entire school community. The latter can be humiliating for the parents, and damaging for the family’s wellbeing. There have been reports of families being the last to know, even though the entire school community was fully aware of the child’s social transition. We believe that needlessly keeping secrets from parents can inadvertently cause divisions between the school body and the parents, and damage the parent-child relationship.

✔ **We recommend** that schools immediately follow the appropriate protocol if there is a suspicion that any student is unsafe. However, if parents have previously shown themselves to be reasonable, loving and engaged, the school should collaborate as far as possible with the family, and nurture healthy communication between students and parents.

✔ **We recommend** that schools distinguish between coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual and coming out as trans. Sexuality has no implications for names, pronouns, clothing, hair or other styling issues, and so students can declare their sexual orientation with few ramifications. Yet with regard to gender identity, coming out may cause further problems, such as triangulation or cognitive dissonance. A child may end up changing clothing, names and pronouns halfway between the home and the school in order to facilitate the living of a “double life.” Schools should be mindful of how distressing this could be for everyone, including the child..

✔ **We recommend** that that schools help parents who feel distressed by their child’s gender dysphoria by giving them information about [family support groups](#), such as the [Gender Dysphoria Support Network](#).

⚠ **We caution against** encouraging children to keep secrets from their families when there is no serious justification to do so.

Get all the facts and stats you need
at our sister site, statsforgender.org.
Click [here](#) to get started!



PRIVACY

Students' need for privacy allows them to maintain a sense of control, autonomy, self-identity, and wellbeing in their lives. It also creates space to deal with intimate bodily functions (particularly relating to menstruation) that may cause distress or embarrassment in inappropriately public settings.

✔ **We recommend** that schools maintain the need for privacy within toilets, changing rooms and other spaces where issues related to sex and gender identity might arise.

⚠ **We caution against** being cavalier about the legitimate desire for privacy in adolescence when it comes to body issues.

MEDICAL TRANSITION

Some students may undergo medical intervention with parental and therapeutic support, through puberty blockers and/or cross-sex hormones. As students may reach adulthood while still in school, some will no longer require parental consent to legally or medically transition, and so may be prescribed cross-sex hormones at that point.

These individuals may seek full recognition as a member of the opposite sex, whether with the consent of their parents, or – if over the relevant age in the jurisdiction in question – regardless of their parents' views. Schools will often find themselves under an obligation to recognize this desire for recognition. However, this can be undertaken in such a way that is fair, and balances the competing rights of different protected groups, maintaining the school's responsibility over the student community.

✔ **We recommend** that schools recognize the legal rights of students who have undergone medical or legal transition. Aforementioned single occupancy toilets and changing rooms should be helpful in this regard, as there also remains the obligation to safeguard those under 18 through the provision of single-sex facilities.

✔ **We recommend** that a flexible approach is taken, so as to avoid unnecessary, time-consuming challenges to school policies.

✔ **We recommend** that parents, mental health professionals and the school body be included in each stage of the process of decision-making, and full risk assessments and impact assessments are undertaken when appropriate.

✔ **We recommend** that students who have medically transitioned follow the school rules in the same way as any other student, so as to retain a sense of equality and fairness within the student community.

⚠ **We caution against** creating unnecessary rules for students which risk undermining the wider school community.

FINALLY...

We strongly urge you to consider very carefully the legal and constitutional rights of parents and families. In many jurisdictions, socially transitioning a child against the will of the parents may be a violation of the parents' legal or constitutional rights. It is imperative that you are informed on this.

Written by Stella O'Malley, Psychotherapist and Executive Director of Genspect

Want to find out more?



Genspect Training

As part of our mission to improve understanding of sex and gender issues, Genspect offers comprehensive training for schools, colleges and universities.

With sensitivity, compassion and factual information, we cover topics such as gender and gender identity exploration, sexuality and sexual orientation, mental health, bullying, bias, the rights of the child, the role and responsibilities of parents, and the role of the educator and the school community.

To find out more, drop us a line via the email link above.