

THE FAMILY JOURNEY

YOUTH & GENDER MEDIA PROJECT STUDY GUIDE



THE
Youth & Gender
MEDIA PROJECT

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helping stories take flight

*H. van
Ameringen
Foundation*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome.....	2
About the Film and Guides	2
How to Use this Guide.....	2
Why I Created the Youth & Gender Media Project	3
About the Filmmaker	3
Why Talk About Gender With Youth?.....	4
Sidebar: Cultivating Respect ..	4
Gender Basics.....	5
Sidebar: Preferred Gender Pronouns	5
The Importance of Creating Safe Spaces	6
Tips for Facilitators.....	7
Sidebar: How Parents Can Support Their Gender Expansive Children.....	7
Pre-Screening Activity: My Gender Journey	8
Discussion Questions.....	10
Activities:	
Gender Boxes	11
Gender Spectrum	12
Complete the Thought	14
One Parent's Journey	16
Listening Without Judging ..	18
Take Further Action!	19
Resources	20

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funders

The Fledgling Fund
The Arcus Foundation
H. van Ameringen Foundation

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WELCOME!

Welcome to the Youth & Gender Media Project study guide for *The Family Journey*. We're pleased that you've decided to join the effort to create inclusive communities for all youth, regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of gender identity and expression. By doing this work, you are joining a growing number of educators, parents, and other professionals who understand that young people need safe environments where they can be true to their own internal sense of gender in order to effectively learn and thrive. And the good news is that gender inclusion work intersects beautifully with all the other work that needs to be done to embrace and celebrate diversity. We look forward to supporting and hearing from you as you join us on this fascinating and fun journey around re-defining gender for the 21st century.

ABOUT THE FILM AND GUIDES

In *The Family Journey*, parents and siblings of trans and gender expansive children share their fears, hopes and dreams as they move from shock to acceptance and finally celebration around nurturing their unique children. This film is ideal for parents and families at PTA meetings, parent information nights and other parent gatherings.

The four films and accompanying study guides of the Youth & Gender Media Project can be used individually or in combination. Each film targets a particular audience that together encompasses all stakeholders in K-12 communities. To learn more about the other films in the project, please visit youthandgendermediaproject.org.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to accompany screenings of *The Family Journey* in workshops, trainings, and PTA meetings for parents and guardians. It is meant to spark discussion about gender—not to be a comprehensive training curriculum for teaching about this very important topic. For more thorough trainings on incorporating gender in your work or school, please see the resources section of this guide.

This guide is flexible to suit the needs of various audiences and time constraints. For example, if you have only one hour to devote to the film, you can screen *The Family Journey* and use the group discussion questions provided to reflect on the topics.

If you have a longer time period, feel free to incorporate any of the activities below that make the most sense for you, your goals, your time frame, and your group. You can pick and choose discussion questions and activities that resonate with you most.

Before implementing any of these activities, you may want to familiarize yourself with the concepts in the film, and reflect upon the role of gender in your life. As a facilitator, you are also learning. Some of the language in this guide may be new to you, but you don't have to be an expert to be an understanding and compassionate ally. Learning these concepts takes time, and there are many resources to help you continue on your journey.

This guide will help you begin to create the kinds of safe spaces that are necessary for thoughtful discussion and reflection about gender. However, some

activities may be more or less appropriate for your particular setting. Please use your judgment when selecting activities, keeping the comfort and safety of the participants in your particular workshop as your number one priority. We want to create a safe and supportive learning environment for sharing and discussion so that ultimately, we create more inclusive and supportive learning environments in our families, schools, and communities as well.

WHY I CREATED THE YOUTH & GENDER MEDIA PROJECT

I was a gender nonconforming child who loved to play with both dollhouses and Hot Wheels, wear pants and dresses. Like any child, I wanted it all! Around second grade, I started to get teased and bullied for my “sissy” ways and decided to give up “girly” things in order to evade the harassment that I intuitively knew would only get worse as I grew older. But this also meant that I abandoned an important part of myself.

In the early 2000s I began to read about children who were gender creative and transgender and were living in communities that supported them. These children and their families were doing what my community hadn’t been able to do when I was a child. As a social change filmmaker, I wanted to document and help grow the movement that embraces rather than suppresses children with gender expansive identities.

In 2007, I began work on a film that eventually turned into the Youth & Gender Media Project, a series of short films about gender expansive young people and their families and communities. I’m happy to say that the films have screened in festivals around the world and are being used in hundreds of middle schools, high schools and colleges throughout North America to help make the world safe for youth of any and all manifestations of gender identity and expression.

The parents and siblings in *The Family Journey* come from all over North America and from all walks of life. But the one thing they have in common is a commitment to nurturing their trans and gender expansive children, despite all sorts of challenges and disappointments. Their willingness to tell their stories with such vulnerability and candidness inspires me and so many others to face our own struggles—whatever they are—with vulnerability and hope.



ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Jonathan Skurnik’s many award-winning [documentaries](#) have broadcast on PBS and cable channels in the US and on European television. His films have screened at over a hundred film festivals and art galleries around the world. As an activist and educator, Jonathan creates ground-breaking grassroots outreach and engagement projects for his films that provide transformational educational experiences through facilitated screenings, activities and discussions and immersive digital resources on handheld devices and the web. Jonathan also teaches documentary filmmaking classes at universities, writes and directs [narrative films](#), and creates [video art installations](#).



WHY TALK ABOUT GENDER WITH PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS?

In recent years, gender has become an increasingly prevalent topic of discussion in our culture, and it has become clear that the issue needs to be brought up and addressed in different contexts over time—not just for students, but for teachers, administrators and parents as well. For more detailed information about addressing gender at school, refer to Gender Spectrum’s “Common Questions and Concerns” tool, available at genderspectrum.org/commonquestions.

As parents and educators, we are all invested in providing safe environments for our children to learn. Teaching and learning about gender can help prevent and transform bullying behaviors—which are often based on gender stereotypes—at home, at school, and in our communities. In addition to cultivating empathy and compassion for young people who express their gender in different ways, teaching about this topic can help foster a culture of respect that celebrates *all* youth, regardless of the ways in which they express or identify their gender.

Addressing this topic early and often can also help youth who feel isolated because of other people’s reactions to their gender identities or expressions. These youth are at greater risk of suffering harassment, bullying, dropping out of school, and committing suicide. According to GSLEN’S 2013 National School Climate Survey, 75.1% of transgender students feel unsafe at school because of the way they are treated regarding their gender expression. Transgender youth experience bullying at alarming rates—73.6% of transgender youth experience verbal harassment at school, 32.5% experience physical harassment, and 16.2% experience physical assault.¹ Tragically, *half of transgender youth have contemplated suicide, and a quarter of them have attempted it.*² While it is impossible to know how many deaths can be traced back to bullying and harassment at school, clearly there would be a world of difference if school curricula and policies actively created safe environments for all youth.

CULTIVATING RESPECT

In order to cultivate a culture of respect, it’s important to know what not to say.

- Don’t out people.
- Don’t make assumptions about a person’s gender or the gender of partners, family members or friends.
- It is not respectful to ask about a person’s anatomy, surgery, hormones, birth names, etc. It’s important to respect a person’s privacy and asking such personal questions can potentially trigger emotions that negatively impact a person’s well-being.
- Always use preferred pronouns and names [see opposite page].

PROBLEMATIC VERSUS PREFERRED TERMS

PROBLEMATIC	PREFERRED
Tranny/trannie, transgendered, transgenders, a transgender	Transgender (as an adjective, not a noun)
He/she, she-male, “it,” shim, lady man, freak	Transgender (and always use preferred pronouns)
Transvestite	Cross-dresser
Hermaphrodite	Intersex

GENDER BASICS

Whether this is your first time teaching about gender, or if you just need a refresher, it's helpful to review some key terms. The language we use about gender is critical to understanding this topic. Language is constantly evolving, and what matters is not who is using the terms "the right way," but how we are using the terms right now!

Biological Sex/Birth-Assigned Sex: At birth, people are assigned a biological sex—male, female or intersex—based on physical attributes such as reproductive anatomy.

Gender: While many people incorrectly use "sex" and "gender" interchangeably, "gender" refers to *cultural* ideas of what it means to be a man or woman or other gender. These expectations can vary significantly depending on the particular cultural and historical context.

Gender Binary: The cultural idea that there are only two distinct and very different genders: female and male.

Gender Expression: The ways in which people express themselves to others through clothing, hairstyle, physical attributes and ways of speaking, moving, and behaving. What is deemed appropriate gender expression for a particular gender is largely dependent on the specific cultural and historical context.

Gender Identity: A person's internal sense of themselves as female, male, some combination of the two, neither, both, or one of the many other ways people identify their gender. While many people's internal gender identity matches their biological sex, plenty of people have a gender identity that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. And for some people, gender identity is fluid and changes over time.

Gender Spectrum: The idea that gender is not binary, but rather a spectrum with infinite possibilities for how a person may express and/or identify their gender.

Cisgender: When someone's biological sex, gender identity and gender expression align.

Transgender: Someone whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. The words transgender or trans* (trans followed by an asterisk) are sometimes used as a broad term to describe a range of gender identities, expressions, and experiences that are not cisgender.

There are infinite combinations of ways for people to present and understand their own gender—and not everyone who identifies or expresses gender outside of the gender binary necessarily identifies as transgender. These identifications may be different from rigid cultural expectations of gender and are referred to as **gender expansive**, **gender creative**, **genderqueer** or **queer**, **non-binary**, and **gender nonconforming**, among many other terms. In addition, this terminology tends to change over time, as society's understanding of gender continues to evolve.

People understand and experience gender in a wide variety of ways.

Unfortunately, when youth step outside of our traditional ideas of how boys and girls should look or behave, they can encounter cruelty, harassment, bullying from other students—and sometimes from adults as well, including teachers, school staff and parents of their peers. Much of this negative behavior stems from a lack of education and appreciation for gender diversity.

As educators, parents, and family members, we all have our own ideas about gender based on our lived experiences. Regardless of what your personal beliefs regarding gender are, we are all in agreement that our goal is to create safe spaces for *all* of our youth in order to protect them from emotional, verbal and physical harm. This means creating spaces where young people can feel free to be who they are, regardless of their gender identity or expression. Students who feel free to be themselves at school—without the fear of judgment and harassment—also perform better academically.³

PREFERRED GENDER PRONOUNS

Preferred gender pronouns are the pronouns or set of pronouns that a person prefers. Some people feel more comfortable using a pronoun different from those associated with their biological sex, regardless of their gender identity or expression. Gendered pronouns like "he" and "she" can be uncomfortable and limiting for some people who prefer gender-neutral pronouns or to be referred to by name only. The English language is evolving to include some gender neutral pronouns. Currently, a lot of people who don't identify with pronouns like "her" or "him" are using a singular "they" instead.

HELLO

My name is

My preferred pronouns are

¹ Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network. The 2013 National School Climate Survey. <http://www.glsen.org/article/2013-national-school-climate-survey>

² Grossman, A.H. & D'Augelli, A.R. (2007). Transgender Youth and Life-Threatening Behaviors. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviors*. 37(5), 527-37.

³ Op. cit.



THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING SAFE SPACES

Begin by creating a shared agreement together so that everyone in the group feels comfortable participating. Explain to participants that you will be learning more about how different people experience gender. This will involve reflecting on our own experiences with gender, so it's important that we first agree upon how we will discuss these issues so that everyone feels safe.

Ask participants, "What are our shared agreements about our discussion here today? How do we want people to treat each other so that everyone feels comfortable participating?" If someone names "respect" as an expectation, ask the group to name specific ways they can demonstrate respect toward each other. What does respect look like? Write their expectations on the board or a flipchart so that you can refer back to it throughout the discussion and group activities if necessary.

Each group's agreement will be different. However, you may want to begin with some sample expectations, like:

- Confidentiality: Don't share outside of this room.
- Use "I" statements.
- Be specific: Don't generalize about people or groups.
- Allow others to speak without interrupting.
- Respect all of the different perspectives in the room.

WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE ACTS DISRESPECTFULLY

If someone violates your shared agreements by acting disrespectfully, follow these guidelines:

Try to turn it into a teachable moment. If someone is being disruptive, call out the behavior and explain why it's inappropriate or hurtful. Refer back to the agreement that was created at the beginning of the session and make it clear why this kind of behavior is not acceptable in your school or community.

After you address the disrespectful behavior, redirect the group to the discussion or group activity.

If someone insists on repeating slurs or hurtful phrases, it may be necessary to ask them to leave.



TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

Before facilitating any group discussions or activities, take some time to reflect on your own potential biases and limitations based on your knowledge and training. What are your own thoughts on gender? What are your thoughts about the information presented in *The Family Journey*? Watch the film by yourself beforehand and think about how you would answer the discussion questions.

Be open and respectful of the differences in the room. Help to create a safe space where all can participate by demonstrating a positive and non-judgmental attitude.

Be fellow learners—be honest about what you do and don't know. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," and refer to the resources in this guide to learn more.

Be aware you may have participants who are out as transgender or non-binary, some who are not out, and others who are questioning. Don't make assumptions about them, and don't rely on trans or gender expansive participants who are out to speak for the whole community.

Ensure everyone is heard. Ask, "Is there anyone who hasn't spoken yet who has something to share?" However, do not push anyone who is not comfortable to share or participate.

Remember you are not in the role of therapist. If someone shares something that may require further intervention, acknowledge it positively (e.g., say, "That was brave, thank you for sharing that."). Then bring it back to the group (e.g., "Can other people relate to this?") See the resources section in this guide for more information about connecting participants to resources.

HOW PARENTS CAN SUPPORT THEIR GENDER-EXPANSIVE CHILDREN

Accept their child/family member. Be a safe person to talk to about their gender identity and expression.

Engage with their child/family member. Ask questions, listen, empathize, share and just be there for the child without passing judgment.

Get educated. Learn terminology. Find out about local, state and national policies regarding gender identity and gender expression.

Connect with support. Research what resources and support are in place at your school and in your school district. If there aren't adequate resources available in your community, you can start your own support group for family members of transgender or non-binary youth. Explore the resources in this guide to find national resources for support.

PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY

Before you screen *The Family Journey* for parents and caregivers and engage them in any discussion or activities related to the film, use this exercise to stimulate discussion and ideas around gender stereotypes.

MY GENDER JOURNEY

TIMING: 20 minutes

MATERIALS: Copies of the My Gender Journey Worksheet

PREPARATION: Review the instructions and make worksheet copies for participants. Take some time to reflect on your own experiences with gender by completing the worksheet yourself before leading workshops with participants.

As professionals working with families and their children, there is a unique and influential role to be played in helping create the conditions where children can be safe in authentically expressing and identifying their gender. By embracing the richness of the gender spectrum, parents, caregivers, siblings, and other family members can help to broaden their own as well as children's understandings of gender, and in so doing, help every child feel seen and recognized. An important part of that work is to consider one's own experiences, messages, and beliefs about gender.

Ask participants to spend a few minutes answering the questions and suggest that they hang on to them. They may find it interesting to revisit their reflections at some point in the future, after they have had a chance to learn more about gender through training and their own efforts. Let them know that there are no "right" answers; each of us comes by our own understandings of gender in a context. Messages and traditions associated with gender are complex reflections of society, family, culture, community, and other socializing forces. We can use this opportunity to pause, and examine our own gender history.

Adapted from Gender Spectrum:
[genderspectrum.org/
resources/education](https://genderspectrum.org/resources/education)

MY GENDER JOURNEY WORKSHEET

Today's Date:

1. Growing up, did you think of yourself as a boy, a girl, both, neither or in some other way? How did you come to that recognition? When?

2. What messages did you receive from those around you about gender? Did those messages make sense to you?

3. What's your first memory of gender defining or impacting your life?

4. How were students who did not fit into expectations about gender treated in school by other students? By the adults around them? By you?

5. Have you ever been confused by someone's gender? How did that feel for you? Why do you think you felt the way you did?

6. Has anyone ever been confused by your gender, possibly referring to you in a manner not consistent with your own sense of gender? How did that feel for you? Why do you think you felt the way you did?

7. Is there anyone in your immediate circle (family, close friends, colleagues) who is transgender or otherwise gender diverse? How would you characterize your comfort level about their gender?

8. If you were to describe your gender without talking about how you look or what you do, what would you share?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

TIMING: 15-30 minutes

Regardless of how much time you have in your workshop, please allow participants to discuss and reflect upon what they learned from watching the film. Use the questions below to guide the discussion. Feel free to pick and choose the questions that resonate with you.

1. If someone asked you what this film is about, how would you describe it? What would you say are the main themes?
2. What did you learn from this film? What information was new to you? What is the main message you took away from it?
3. How did you feel as you watched the film? How do you feel differently after watching the film?
4. What do you think influenced your reaction to the film? Your gender? The way you grew up? Your cultural background?
5. What were the different ways that parents and siblings responded to their transgender family members, and how did those responses change over time?
6. What did you think of the parent who said, "Changing the binary system of these two strict boxes will benefit everyone"? Can you think of some benefits?
7. Can you describe a single moment or scene in the film that especially resonated with you? How did this moment make you feel?
8. Did anyone featured in the film stand out to you in particular? Why? Was there any person you wished you had gotten to learn more about?
9. If you could ask anyone in the film a question, who would it be and what would you ask them?
10. One parent in the film says she didn't know what to search for to learn more about her child. What would you search for if you were looking for information on this topic? What resources would you turn to?
11. What did you think about the father who compared his child's experience to his own experience growing up African American in an all-white area? What other comparisons can you think of regarding "growing up different"?
12. One parent in the film says that the parent-child relationship is the only relationship that is unconditional. What are some examples of how you love your child unconditionally?
13. The kids featured in the film had an easier time accepting their siblings than many of the parents. What factors do you think contributed to this? How important do you think siblings are in the acceptance process?
14. How do you feel the parents in the film are doing with regard to supporting their kids? What would you do differently as a parent?
15. What did you think about the child who just needed to wear a *Cars* shirt to feel good? Why did that make such a difference? Can you think of ways your clothes or appearance make a difference in you feeling more like "yourself"?
16. Reflect on ways you were treated differently based on gender while you were growing up. Do you parent your kids in the same ways you were parented? Are there ways you treat your children differently because of their gender?
17. What did you think when family members indicated that their trans child might be the most important thing that ever happened to them? Can you relate to that sentiment at all? Can you think of other examples of people who found their life purpose through something that originally seemed like a challenge?

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Please select the activity or activities that are most appropriate for your group and timing.

GENDER BOXES

TIMING: 15-20 minutes

MATERIALS: Board or flip chart and markers

PREPARATION: Review the instructions.

Draw two boxes on the board or on a flip chart. In one, write “Girl” and in the other, write “Boy.”

Ask participants to brainstorm as many words as they can think of that describe what people think is “okay” for girls—characteristics, toys, behaviors, colors, emotions, etc. Explain that the task is not to write what you feel personally, but stereotypes of what most people think is okay for girls.

Repeat the exercise with the “Boy” box.

Ask participants: “What happens when people step outside of these boxes? What might happen to them physically? Socially? Emotionally? At school? At home?”

Outside of the box, write what participants say could happen (they could be called names, bullied, harassed, hurt, they may want to hurt themselves, etc.)

When participants are finished brainstorming, ask the group the following reflection questions:

1. What did you notice about the boxes? How do people think girls are “supposed” to be different from boys? How would the boxes be different if we were talking about “women” and “men” instead of “girls” and “boys”? Where do you think these ideas come from?
2. If you could go back in time to when you were a child, would the boxes contain different items? What do you think your boxes might look like 20 years from now?
3. Why do some people get so angry when people don’t fit inside one of these boxes? Who here can relate to the characteristics in both boxes? What are some of the ways that you have lived inside of the “girl” box or the “boy” box throughout your life? What are some of the ways we react when we’re told that we don’t fit into our boxes—that we are not acting the way a woman or a man “should” act?

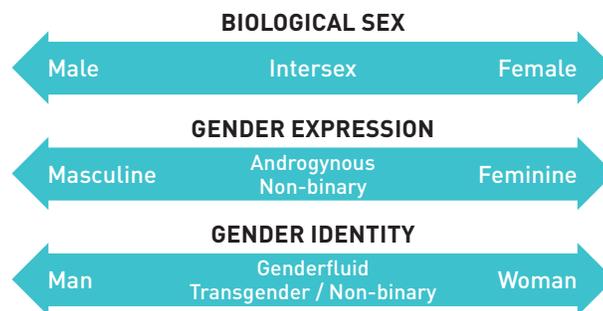
GENDER SPECTRUM

TIMING: 20-30 minutes

MATERIALS: Board or flipchart and markers, copies of the Gender Spectrum Worksheet

PREPARATION: Review the instructions. Make copies of the Gender Spectrum Worksheet.

Draw a graphic like this on the board or flipchart:



Explain the following terms:

Biological Sex/Birth-Assigned Sex: At birth, people are assigned a biological sex—male, female or intersex—based on physical attributes such as reproductive anatomy.

Gender Expression: The ways in which people express themselves to others through clothing, hairstyle, physical attributes and ways of speaking, moving, and behaving. What is deemed appropriate gender expression for a particular gender is largely dependent on the specific cultural and historical context.

Gender Identity: A person’s internal sense of themselves as female, male, some combination of the two, neither, both, or one of the many other ways people identify their gender. While many people’s internal gender identity matches their biological sex, plenty of people have a gender identity that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. And for some people, gender identity is fluid and changes over time.

Explain that people can fall along many different places along this spectrum. As an example, you may want to plot yourself on the chart so that participants can see how someone may fall along the spectrum in the three categories.

Pass out **Gender Spectrum Worksheets**. Ask the group to plot themselves on the three lines. They can fold their paper in half for privacy if they wish.

Now, ask the group to think back to when they were children. Where did they fall on the gender spectrum then? Did they dress as the gender they were assigned at birth? Did they play with games and toys that were associated with their gender? How did they feel inside? If they’d like, they can plot themselves on their worksheet again. Is it the same or different?

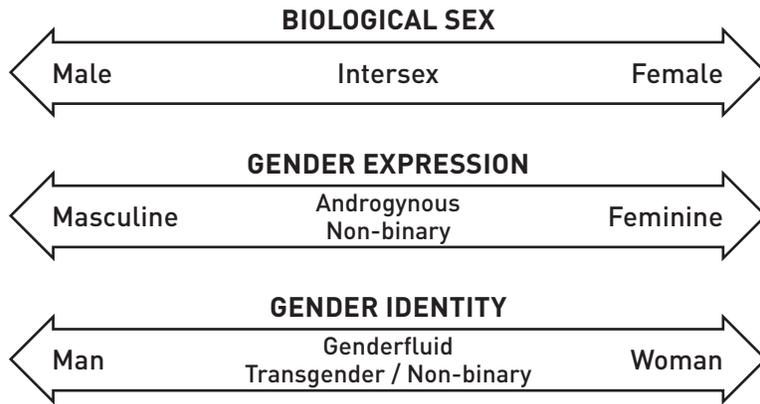
Ask if anyone would feel comfortable sharing and placing themselves on the spectrum for the group to see. After everyone who is comfortable doing so shares with the group, have the group spend ten minutes reflecting on the following questions together:

- What do you notice when doing this exercise? Were there any surprises? Did any memories come up for you?
- Think about your gender expression and gender identity as a child and now. Are there any similarities? Any differences? What factors contributed to those differences? (For example, did you have restrictions growing up that you do not have now? Do you have restrictions now that you did not have as a child?)
- What are some of the ways this exercise can help us understand gender better? What are some of limitations of this model?
- When you were a child, did you ever feel like you weren’t “acting like a boy” or “acting like a girl”? What would have made you feel supported? How could you provide that kind of support for the young people in your life?

Adapted from Gender Spectrum:
www.genderspectrum.org/resources/education

GENDER SPECTRUM WORKSHEET

Use these lines to map your own gender. Then answer the questions that follow.



1. Was mapping your own gender difficult or easy? What made it so?

2. What are some ways that this model helps us to understand gender better?

3. What are some of the ways that this model is still not enough to really understand gender?

4. Has your gender profile changed over time? In what ways?

5. What is your comfort level with your own gender? What about the gender of others?

6. What does the "Gender Spectrum" mean to you?

COMPLETE THE THOUGHT

TIMING: 20 minutes

MATERIALS: Copies of Sentence Prompts Worksheet

PREPARATION: Review the instructions. Make copies of the Sentence Prompts Worksheet for participants.

Divide participants into pairs or small groups. Pass out copies of the Sentence Prompts Worksheet. Feel free to add additional sentence prompts that apply to your school or community. Ask participants to go through the prompts, sharing their reactions within their pairs or groups.

After the pairs or groups finish their discussions, reflect together as a whole group:

- How did this activity feel for you?
- Did you learn something new about yourself and your own feelings?
- What were some important take-aways that emerged from your discussions?

Note that these prompts are meant to spark reflection about how participants feel, not to have participants provide a “right” answer. However, some example responses are provided below to show the range of possible responses.

If my daughter said she wanted to play football I would ...

Example responses might include:

- *I would feel uncomfortable at first, but I would do what I could to support and understand her.*
- *I would worry about whether other students would tease her.*
- *I would sign her up immediately and be cheering at every game!*

If a close friend of mine told me their child was transgender I would feel ...

Example responses might include:

- *I would accept their child and affirm their identity.*
- *I would honestly be confused at first, because I don't know much about raising a transgender child.*
- *I would support my friend first and foremost, and seek out resources for parents of transgender children to share.*

SENTENCE PROMPTS WORKSHEET

If my daughter said she wanted to play football I would ...

If a close friend of mine told me their child was transgender I would feel ...

If my son wanted to take ballet I would feel ...

If a child in my life told me they didn't feel like a girl or a boy, I would ...

If I found out my child were taught by a transgender teacher, I would ...

When I think about children who are being raised by transgender parents, I feel ...

What I admire about youth who don't conform to gender stereotypes is ...

ONE PARENT'S JOURNEY

TIMING: 30 minutes

MATERIALS: Copies of the excerpt from the article "My Daughter, My Son," highlighters, pens.

PREPARATION: Review the instructions. Make copies of the Article Excerpt for participants.

Tell participants that they will be reading an article to go deeper into one parent's perspective of raising a transgender child. Pass out the article, pens, and highlighters.

Allow participants to read the article silently or take turns reading the article out loud together as a group. As you read, ask participants to highlight or circle any words or phrases that speak to them in particular.

After you complete the reading, reflect together in small groups:

- How did you feel after reading this article? What resonated with you in particular? What words or phrases did you highlight or circle? Why?
- Could you relate to the author? How would you feel in her shoes?
- How was this parent similar or dissimilar from the parents we saw in *The Family Journey*?
- How did you expect the article to end? Were you surprised at all?
- What did you think about the author's own journey from "fear and ignorance" to advocacy and understanding? In what ways did the experience of parenting a transgender child change her life?

Return to a large group and reflect together:

- What was the experience of reading and discussing this article like for your group?
- How do you think we could best work together to make our school and community more supportive of gender expansive youth and their parents? What are some specific steps we could take right now?



Excerpt from

MY DAUGHTER, MY SON: HOW SCHOOL BULLIES AND STATE LAWS MADE ME THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT MY TRANSGENDER CHILD

by **Terri Cook**

Read the entire article at the74million.org/article/my-daughter-my-son-how-school-bullies-and-state-laws-made-me-think-differently-about-my-transgender-child

Our son was a straight-A student, a social butterfly, and involved in scouts, sports, student council, and countless clubs and activities. We were proud and grateful to have a happy, healthy, loving, and successful child.

But in adolescence everything changed.

He was 11 or 12, at the onset of puberty and middle school, when the depression, anxiety, and social isolation began. Each day became more and more of a struggle. Although I saw the changes, I had no idea how much pain he was in and the internal (and external) battles he faced every day.

By middle school he no longer fit in. He didn't look, dress, or carry himself like his peers expected him to as a girl, and so he was relentlessly teased and bullied. Kids asked if he was a boy or a girl, knocked him down in the hallways, laughed at him, called him "a freak" and "a loser" and told him he'd be better off dead. He never let us know how bad it was, and it was years later before we learned the horrific details of all the awful things that were said and done to him.

...

Our son continued to withdraw, yet we still didn't know or understand that he was transgender. He didn't just wake up one morning and profess he was a boy, not a girl. Rather, he endured depression, anxiety, bullying, and torment for nearly two more years before *any* of us understood that his gender identity was the source of his pain.

...

My husband and I started out as many parents do, full of fear and ignorance. I was uncomfortable. At first I didn't want this for my son's life or my own. I wondered who would love my child the way he deserved to be loved. I was worried about what family, friends, colleagues and even strangers would say. I didn't know how to explain what was happening or how to effectively advocate for my child. I felt alone, afraid and overwhelmed.

Later, as I learned more about the violence, rejection, suicide, depression and discrimination faced by transgender people, I became even more afraid.

However, despite our fear and discomfort, my husband and I committed to learning what we needed to learn and to finding support and resources. We love our child unconditionally, and we needed to learn how to best support

him, save his life, and give him hope for a better future.

...

For years my life revolved around helping my son finally be able to live as the young man he always knew himself to be. It was a long and difficult process. There was bullying and rejection and discrimination along the way. We moved to another city, changed schools multiple times, and had to educate countless people — including healthcare workers, educators, and court officials.

As parents, we succeeded.

My son is now happy and healthy. He's a full-time college student, has a steady job where he was promoted to manager, is in a wonderful relationship, and is living his life fully as the young man I now know he has always been.

But my focus has changed now.

I no longer want to change my son so that society sees him as a man and accepts him. Instead, I want to change society and our laws so that he (and all transgender people) can be seen for the remarkable human beings they are.

Today, I am a full-time advocate for change. I have two sons. Both are college students. Both are hardworking, loving, kind, thoughtful, and giving. Yet my two sons are not treated equally under the law in our state. One of my sons is protected from discrimination and violence, while the other is not. So I advocate not only for my child, but for the entire transgender community, demanding access to healthcare, education, economic security, and the freedom to move about this world without fear of state-sanctioned discrimination and violence. More than that, I advocate for dignity, respect, justice, compassion and love that all people should be entitled to.

Being the parent of a transgender child has changed my life. It has changed how I see all people, not just transgender or gender nonconforming people. It has opened my eyes to how much I really don't know about somebody else's life, identity, or experiences. It has made me a more compassionate person who recognizes and respects that my own experiences and identity may not be the same as others'. I am now less judgmental and more open to a new understanding. I try to catch myself whenever I fall into the trap of measuring against society's norms.

LISTENING WITHOUT JUDGING

TIMING: 20 minutes

MATERIALS: N/A

PREPARATION: Review the instructions.

Begin by asking the group: “Does anyone have someone in their life—a friend, a colleague, a family member—who is *not* a good listener? Why do you say that? What do they do while they are supposedly listening that is difficult for you? How does this impact your conversations with this person?”

Then ask: “Does anyone have someone who is a particularly good listener? Why do you say that? What do they do that makes them a good listener? How does this impact the way you talk with this person?” Explain to participants that as parents and family members it is important that our children feel accepted, not judged, for their gender identity or expression.

Divide the group into pairs. In each pair, one person will be the listener and one person will be the speaker.

Explain that the speaker will speak for three minutes on their reaction to *The Family Journey*. They can share their reflections, critiques, feelings the film brought up for them, experiences they have with gender in their own life, and whatever else related to the film they wish to discuss.

Explain that the listener’s job is to give the speaker their undivided attention, remain attentive, and show interest and encouragement—without interrupting the speaker or passing judgment on what the speaker is saying. While they are listening, the listener will make mental notes of the key elements of what the speaker is saying.

Set a timer for three minutes, and let participants know when there is one minute left, and again when there are thirty seconds left. At the end of the three minutes, tell participants that the listener will now have one minute to share back what they heard from the speaker, reflecting on key ideas and affirming anything the original speaker said that was positive or inspiring. While the listener shares their thoughts, the original speaker will listen actively without interjecting. After the end of one minute, participants will switch roles and repeat the process.

Once everyone has had a chance to be both the listener and the speaker, bring it back to the group for larger discussion and reflection. Ask the group:

- How did it feel to be listened to actively?
- How would it feel to be ignored instead?
- How would it feel to be interrupted? What’s worse for you—to be ignored completely or to be interrupted and judged?
- How did it feel to be the listener?
- Can you think of more ways to listen actively to your children?
- If your child was trying to talk to you about their gender identity, how would you respond? Would you listen without judging? Would that be easy or hard for you? Why?
- How can you express concerns for your child’s safety while making sure your child still feels supported, loved, and listened to?

TAKE FURTHER ACTION!

There are lots of things you can do to take more action in your community.

- Brainstorm ideas for a non-discrimination ordinance for your workplace or your community. (See models here: glsen.org/article/model-laws-policies)
- Set up a training series for your local PTA. Set up your own training series for educators, administrators, and staff. Contact Gender Spectrum for a consultation: genderspectrum.org/we-can-help.
- Advocate for sensitivity and competency training for all teachers and administrators in your school district.
- Add books with topics about gender identity and expression in your local library.
- Identify restroom(s) that are gender-neutral or welcome all genders in your community. If you don't find any, advocate for some!
- Form a monthly support group for parents with trans and gender expansive youth.
- Connect with your local PFLAG chapter and make sure they're including trans perspectives in their work. Host a community screening of *The Family Journey* or the other films in the Youth & Gender Media Project.
- Explore Gender Spectrum's incredible resources: genderspectrum.org/resources



RESOURCES

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION

The ACLU is a national organization advocating individual rights, by litigating, legislating, and educating the public on a broad array of issues affecting individual freedom in the United States, including the rights of LGBT individuals.

www.aclu.org

FAMILY ACCEPTANCE PROJECT™

A research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to prevent health and mental health risks for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) children and youth, including suicide, homelessness and HIV – in the context of their families, cultures and faith communities.

www.familyproject.sfsu.edu

GAY, LESBIAN AND STRAIGHT EDUCATION NETWORK

GLSEN conducts extensive and original research to inform our evidence-based solutions for K-12 education and authors developmentally appropriate resources for educators to use throughout their school community. Every day GLSEN works to ensure that LGBT students are able to learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment.

www.GLSEN.org

GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCE NETWORK

The GSA Network is a next-generation LGBTQ racial and gender justice organization that empowers and trains queer, trans and allied youth leaders to advocate, organize, and mobilize an intersectional movement for safer schools and healthier communities.

www.gsanetwork.org

GENDER DIVERSITY

Increases the awareness and understanding of the wide range of gender variations in children, adolescents, and adults by providing family support, building community, increasing societal awareness, and improving the well-being for people of all gender identities and expressions.

www.genderdiversity.org

GENDER SPECTRUM

Gender Spectrum helps create gender sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens. They provide consultation, training and events designed to help families, educators, professionals, and organizations understand and address the concepts of gender identity and expression.

www.genderspectrum.org

GLAAD (GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION)

GLAAD works with print, broadcast and online news sources to bring people powerful stories from the LGBT community that build support for equality. When the media get it wrong, GLAAD responds and advocates for fairness and accuracy.

www.glaad.org

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION: WELCOMING SCHOOLS

Welcoming Schools, a project of the HRC Foundation, is a comprehensive approach to improving school climate in elementary school environments with training, resources and lessons encouraging educators and families to embrace family diversity, develop LGBTQ-inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying and gender stereotyping and support transgender and gender-expansive students.

www.welcomingschools.org

INTERSEX SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

ISNA provides information about Intersex conditions and links to support groups.

www.isna.org

KESHET

Keshet works for a world in which all Jewish organizations and communities are strengthened by LGBT inclusive policy, programming, culture, and leadership. See Keshet's curricula addressing gender and sexual orientation in Jewish settings.

www.keshetonline.org

LAMBDA LEGAL

The oldest and largest national legal organization whose mission is to achieve full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those with HIV; through impact litigation, education and public policy work.

www.lambdalegal.org

NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS

NCLR is dedicated to advancing the civil and human rights of LGBTQ people and their families through litigation, legislation, policy, and public education.

www.nclrights.org

NATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSGENDER EQUALITY

A national social justice organization devoted to ending discrimination and violence against transgender people through education and advocacy on national issues of importance to transgender people.

www.transequality.org

ORGANIZATION INTERSEX INTERNATIONAL USA (OII-USA)

Advocates equality and human rights for intersex people, particularly the right to bodily integrity and self-determination.

www.oii-usa.org

PFLAG

PFLAG is the first and largest national organization for LGBTQ+ people, their parents and families, and allies.

www.pflag.org

SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION

A public-private partnership, in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, queer and questioning youth, working to help schools become safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation.

www.safeschoolscoalition.org

SYLVIA RIVERA LAW PROJECT

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project works, through legal services and trainings, to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing discrimination or violence.

www.srlp.org

TRANS YOUTH EQUALITY FOUNDATION

A nonprofit foundation that advocates for transgender, gender nonconforming, and intersex youth ages 2-18.

www.transyouthequality.org

TRANS YOUTH FAMILY ALLIES

Trans Youth Family Allies empowers children and families by partnering with educators, service providers and communities, to develop supportive environments in which gender may be expressed and respected.

www.imatyfa.org

TRANSGENDER LAW CENTER

Transgender Law Center works to change law, policy, and attitudes so that all people can live safely, authentically, and free from discrimination regardless of their gender identity or expression.

www.transgenderlawcenter.org

THE TREVOR PROJECT

The leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) young people ages 13-24.

www.thetrevorproject.org