



Research Points: Sex & Gender

Welcome to the *We Are Allies Research Points*. Here you will find research-based information about gender-affirming care and transgender, Two-Spirit, and nonbinary (TTNB) youth. These resources were developed to support the *We Are Allies project*.

In 2023, a team of researchers conducted an environmental scan to identify misinformation messages being shared online related to gender-affirming care for TTNB youth. The team reviewed published research to systematically gather accurate information that addresses common misinformation messages. These have been organized by topic and can be found in this series of Research Points. References are provided for people who would like to learn more.

If you have questions about accessing gender-affirming healthcare for yourself or a loved one, we encourage you to reach out to a trusted healthcare provider or organization.

Introduction to Sex & Gender

While sex and gender are often linked together as if they are the same thing, they are different concepts. Scientists use the word “sex” to refer to biological characteristics.^{1,2} In contrast, they use the word “gender” to refer to social and cultural expectations associated with certain sexual traits.² Understanding this difference is important when learning about TTNB youth’s experiences and health.

Research about Sex & Gender

The following sections summarize important definitions established by provincial, national, and international scientific institutions, including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the United States Department of Health and Human Services. These scientific definitions note that gender and sex are different concepts and that gender and sex are not binary.

Gender and sex are different

Sex refers to biological traits. These include chromosomes, hormones, and sexual anatomy. Sexual anatomy includes body parts such as a penis or vagina.¹ Sex is a label usually given to a person when they are born based on their body characteristics.



Gender is shaped by social factors. Gender roles, expressions, and identities vary across cultures. Gender identity is about how people feel on the inside. A person may feel like a boy/man or a girl/woman, or they might feel like neither or both.^{2,3} There are many ways to describe what gender is. Different people and places around the world have different expectations and ideas about gender.² These social and cultural understandings of gender can change over time.²

Gender and sex are widely understood to be different concepts. Sometimes, a person's gender matches what is expected in a society or culture based on the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., cisgender) and sometimes it does not (e.g., transgender, non-binary).⁴ The distinction helps us better understand the difference between the concepts of gender and sex.⁵

Gender is beyond binary

There are more than two genders. Binary refers to the existence of only two categories. Sometimes these categories are seen as opposite. While gender is often thought of as binary, with only two options of boy/man and girl/woman, there are many more genders.²

People may have binary genders, nonbinary genders, more than one gender, or no gender at all. Binary genders are girl/woman and boy/man. Cisgender and transgender people can have binary genders.⁵ Non-binary genders include gender fluid, genderqueer, and many other genders.^{6,7} Indigenous people may identify as Two-Spirit or Indigiqueer, although these identities are not the same as non-Indigenous genders.⁸

Over 40,000 Canadians identified as nonbinary on the 2021 census.⁹

Sex is beyond binary

While it is often thought that sex is binary, there are more than two sexes. Sex is often put into two categories: male and female. Intersex, or differences in sex development, indicates when a person's body does not fit the typical expectations of male or female bodies.¹⁰

Intersex, or differences in sex development, describes many variations of sex beyond male and female. People may be born with combinations of internal and external body parts and hormones different from those typically seen in females and males. There are several different combinations of sex chromosomes (X and Y). These and other biological differences naturally occur among humans, resulting in differences in sex development.

It is estimated that up to 1.7% of people are intersex or have differences in sex development.^{10,11} Some people may not be aware that they are intersex until puberty or later in life. Some people may never know.

REFERENCES

1. Canadian Institutes of Health Research. What is gender? what is sex? Published May 8, 2023. <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48642.html>
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Sex & gender. National Institutes of Health. <https://orwh.od.nih.gov/sex-gender>
3. Trans Care BC. Gender. <http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/gender-basics-education/terms-concepts/gender>
4. Aultman B. Cisgender. *TSQ Transgender Stud Q.* 2014;1(1-2):61-62. doi:10.1215/23289252-2399614
5. Frohard-Dourlent H, Dobson S, Clark BA, Doull M, Saewyc EM. "I would have preferred more options": accounting for non-binary youth in health research. *Nurs Inq.* 2017;24(1):e12150. doi:10.1111/nin.12150
6. Monro S. Non-binary and genderqueer: An overview of the field. *Int J Transgenderism.* 2019;20(2-3):126-131. doi:10.1080/15532739.2018.1538841
7. Richards C, Bouman WP, Seal L, Barker MJ, Nieder TO, T'Sjoen G. Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *Int Rev Psychiatry.* 2016;28(1):95-102. doi:10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446
8. Richards C, Bouman WP, Seal L, Barker MJ, Nieder TO, T'Sjoen G. Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *Int Rev Psychiatry.* 2016;28(1):95-102. doi:10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446
9. Richards C, Bouman WP, Seal L, Barker MJ, Nieder TO, T'Sjoen G. Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *Int Rev Psychiatry.* 2016;28(1):95-102. doi:10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446
10. 6. Monro S. Non-binary and genderqueer: An overview of the field. *Int J Transgenderism.* 2019;20(2-3):126-131. doi:10.1080/15532739.2018.1538841
11. UN Free & Equal | Intersex. Accessed April 5, 2024. <https://www.unfe.org/en/know-the-facts/challenges-solutions/intersex>