

# Gender identity & trans identification

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## Introduction

Trans identification is becoming increasingly common among young people. How should we understand what is going on and how can we best love and care for those who are themselves identifying as transgender or questioning their gender identity?

## Understanding the terms

**Transgender** – An umbrella term used to refer to a wide variety of experiences in which someone feels there is a disconnect or conflict between their biological sex (what their body says about whether they are a man or a woman) and their gender identity (their internal sense of being a man or a woman). Many other terms fall under this broad umbrella, including non-binary identities (identifying as neither a man or a woman) and fluid identities (feeling one's gendered identity is not static).

**Gender Dysphoria** – The medical diagnosis that will sometimes be made when someone experiences considerable distress because of their transgender experience.

**Transition** – The process of moving to live in line with one's internal gender identity. This can include social (eg name, pronouns, clothes), medical (eg hormones), and surgical (eg mastectomy, sex reassignment surgery) transition.

Transgender covers a huge range of experiences and understandings. It's important not to make assumptions but to get to know each person as an individual.

## The situation among young people

The past decade has seen a huge increase in the number of teenagers reporting gender dysphoria and/or identifying as transgender. This increase has been particularly significant among biological females. It is noteworthy that mental health diagnoses and autistic spectrum disorders (or traits) are more common among this group than among the wider population of teenagers. Many also identify as bisexual or gay/lesbian before identifying as trans.

There is great debate about the cause of this increase and the best ways of helping young people affected by gender incongruence. In general, there are two different perspectives. It is helpful to be aware that the first of these is what a young person is most likely to be exposed to online and among peers, but the second is the perspective best supported by science and Scripture:

- **Diversity perspective** – Internal feelings of gender reveal who we really are (gender identity theory). Young people should therefore be helped to embrace and live out their internal gender identity.
- **Distress perspective** – Gender dysphoria/trans-identification may often be a result of other contributing factors (such as mental health, same-sex attraction, autism, trauma, gender stereotypes). 'Trans' has become the current common way for teenagers to explain some of the dis-ease and distress they may experience. The best way to help such young people is therefore to explore the factors that may be contributing to their experience in an effort to help them without resorting to life-altering interventions (ie transition).

It is often claimed that not affirming a young person in their trans identification puts them at increased risk of self-harm or suicidality. This claim is not based on good evidence ([bit.ly/3EaRzL9](https://bit.ly/3EaRzL9)). However, it is widely recognised that mental health problems are a risk factor for suicidality and that mental health diagnoses are more common among trans-identifying teens ([bit.ly/3KF2T4u](https://bit.ly/3KF2T4u)). It is therefore important that young people who are experiencing mental health difficulties are well supported to address this separately and access help through the available channels.

## A Christian perspective

Biblical teaching supports a distress perspective. The Bible reveals that who we really are is found not in what we feel inside but in what God says to us through our bodies and through his Word. Who we are is communicated to us through the body God has given us. Trans experience is therefore an example of suffering, not a revelation of identity.

A Christian perspective also requires us to take a young person's dis-ease and distress seriously. This will include responding with love and compassion, potentially exploring ways distress could be reduced (within the bounds set by God's Word) and equipping them to navigate the sometimes-unavoidable reality of suffering in a broken world.

## Top tips for supporting a trans-identifying teen

**Love** – Loving is always our priority. Help the young person to know that they are loved, by you and by God, however they identify, whatever they do, and whatever they reveal to you. Work to maintain the relationship as a safe place for them to be honest and to explore what they're feeling.

**Listen** – Listening goes hand in hand with loving. By prioritising listening we show that we value and care for the young person as an individual. Listening also helps us to get a better understanding of the young person's experience and their own understanding of it.

**Use common sense** – Don't switch off your common sense. We may easily feel so overwhelmed and ill-equipped to engage with gender-related experiences that we forget to apply common sense. You are more equipped to help a young person in this situation than you think you are.

**Keep your priorities right** – Remember that our key focus is a young person's relationship with Jesus. How can you keep helping them to come back to him and to develop their relationship with him? How can you help them explore what he has to say to them about their identity and current experiences, not just what you have to say to them?

**Keep gender in perspective** – Gender can easily become all-consuming, both for the young person themselves and in your relationship with them. Remember that there is more to a young person than their experience of gender. Their experience isn't insignificant, and so we don't want to ignore it, but we also don't want it to take over. Remember to keep engaging the young person on other things going on in life, including the light-hearted and things they enjoy. This helps remind them that they are more than their experience of gender.

**Engage with parents/carers** – Where possible (taking into account your church/organisation's safeguarding and confidentiality policies), engage with parents to understand how they are responding and how you can support the family. You may also be able to help them to better understand what their young person is experiencing and to understand and evaluate the various options available to them going forward, including the risks of various forms of transition. Point them to the CMF Quick Guide for parents.

## Suggested resources

Please note that we do not necessarily endorse everything in all of these resources:

### Christian books and resources

Andrew Bunt, *People Not Pronouns: Reflections on Transgender Experience* (Grove Books, 2021)

Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (David C. Cook, 2021)

Theology in the Raw podcast, by Preston Sprinkle. This is a helpful episode on pronouns and social transition: [prestonsprinkle.com/theology-in-the-raw/870-julie-maxwell](https://prestonsprinkle.com/theology-in-the-raw/870-julie-maxwell)

Preston Sprinkle, *Living in a Gray World* (Zondervan, 2015) – A Christian teen's guide to understanding homosexuality and transgender

Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IVP Academic, 2015)

Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Baker, 2018)

Living Out – resources on sexuality, gender and identity: [livingout.org](https://livingout.org)

True Freedom Trust – pastoral support for those wrestling with sexuality and gender: [truefreedomtrust.co.uk](https://truefreedomtrust.co.uk)

### General books and resources

Stats For Gender – helpful summaries of research on gender-related questions: [statsforgender.org](https://statsforgender.org)

Gender Through a Wider Lens – a podcast exploring a wide range of gender-related topics and experiences: [gender-a-wider-lens.captivate.fm](https://gender-a-wider-lens.captivate.fm)

Transgender Trend – a secular organisation giving helpful analysis of trends, studies and legal cases: [transgendertrend.com](https://transgendertrend.com)

Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: Teenage Girls and the Transgender Craze* (Regnery Publishing, 2020)

Phoebe Rose, *Sex and Gender: An Introductory Guide* (My Body is Me, 2021) – designed for the tween/teenage group: [mybodyisme.com](https://mybodyisme.com)

CMF Quick Guides to gender dysphoria and trans identification are also available for healthcare professionals, parents and pastors. Find them at: [cmf.li/QuickGuides](https://cmf.li/QuickGuides)