Understandings of gender continually evolve. In the course of a person's life, the interests, activities, clothing and professions that are considered the domain of one gender or another evolve in ways both small and large. This has perhaps never been more true than it is now. The data show that today's young people have significantly different understandings of gender than previous generations, with consequences for all children, families, organizations and institutions. For example:

- A 2015 Fusion Millennial poll of adults ages 18-34 in the USA found that the majority see gender as a spectrum, rather than a man/woman binary.
- A 2017 Harris Poll of millennials found that 12% identify as Transgender or gender non-conforming.
- Research by J. Walter Thompson Intelligence (the research arm of the global marketing communications company) found that 56% of those aged 13-20 know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns (such as they/them).
- Leading businesses are beginning to change traditional gender-based marketing of products, such as removing "pink and blue" clothing and toy aisles.

All of us are inundated with gender messages from the time we are born, yet we offer children few opportunities to more deeply consider or understand this fundamentally important aspect of life. Basic gender literacy is essential for children to understand their own gender, engage in healthy relationships, identify and place media and social messages in context, and have agency in determining aspects of their gender now and in the future. Societal ideas about gender will affect every critical aspect of their lives, from education to career, finances, relationships and more.

Dimensions of Gender

People tend to use the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably. But, while connected, the two terms are not equivalent. Generally, we assign a newborn's sex as either male or female (some US states and other countries offer a third option) based on the baby's genitals. Once a sex is assigned, we presume the child's gender. For some people, this is cause for little, if any, concern or further thought because their gender aligns with gender-related ideas and assumptions associated with their sex.

Nevertheless, while gender may begin with the assignment of our sex, it doesn't end there. A person's gender is the complex interrelationship between three dimensions:

- **Body**: our body, our experience of our own body, how society genders bodies, and how others interact with us based on our body.
- **Identity**: the name we use to convey our gender based on our deeply held, internal sense of self. Identities typically fall into binary (e.g. man, woman), Non-binary (e.g. Genderqueer, genderfluid) and ungendered (e.g. Agender, genderless) categories; the meaning associated with a particular identity can vary among individuals using the same term. A person's Gender identity can correspond to or differ from the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Social**: how we present our gender in the world and how individuals, society, culture, and community perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Social gender includes gender roles and expectations and how society uses those to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Each of these dimensions can vary greatly across a range of possibilities and is distinct from, but interrelated with the others. A person's comfort in their gender is related to the degree to which these three dimensions feel in harmony. Let's explore each of these dimensions in a little more detail.

Body

Most societies view sex as a binary concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female, based on a person's reproductive anatomy and functions. But a binary view of sex fails to capture even the biological aspect of gender. While we are often taught that bodies have one of two forms of genitalia, which are classified as "female" or "male," there are Intersex traits that demonstrate that sex exists across a continuum of possibilities. This biological spectrum by itself should be enough to dispel the simplistic notion that there are just two sexes. The relationship between a person's gender and their body goes beyond one's reproductive functions. Research in neurology, endocrinology, and cellular biology points to a broader biological basis for an individual's experience of gender. In fact, research increasingly points to our brains as playing a key role in how we each experience our gender.

Bodies themselves are also gendered in the context of cultural expectations. Masculinity and femininity are equated with certain physical attributes, labeling us as more or less a man/woman based on the degree to which those attributes are present. This gendering of our bodies affects how we feel about ourselves and how others perceive and interact with us.

Identity

Gender identity is our internal experience and naming of our gender. It can correspond to or differ from the sex we were assigned at birth.

Understanding of our gender comes to most of us fairly early in life. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity." This core aspect of one's identity comes from within each of us. Gender identity is an inherent aspect of a person's make-up. Individuals do not choose their gender, nor can they be made to change it. However, the words someone uses to communicate their gender identity may change over time; naming one's gender can be a complex and evolving matter. Because we are provided with limited language for gender, it may take a person quite some time to discover, or create, the language that best communicates their internal experience. Likewise, as language evolves, a person's name for their gender may also evolve. This does not mean their gender has changed, but rather that the words for it are shifting.

The two gender identities most people are familiar with are boy and girl (or man and woman), and often people think that these are the only two gender identities. This idea that there are only two genders–and that each individual must be either one or the other–is called the "Gender binary." However, throughout human history we know that many societies have seen, and continue to see, gender as a spectrum, and not limited to just two possibilities. In addition to these two identities, other identities are now commonplace.

Youth and young adults today no longer feel bound by the gender binary, instead establishing a growing vocabulary for gender. More than just a series of new words, however, this shift in language represents a far more nuanced understanding of the experience of

gender itself. Terms that communicate the broad range of experiences of non-binary people are particularly growing in number. Genderqueer, a term that is used both as an identity and as an umbrella term for non-binary identities, is one example of a term for those who do not identify as exclusively masculine or feminine. This evolution of language is exciting, but can also be confusing as new terms are created regularly, and since what a term means can vary from person to person. For further information on specific identities and what they commonly mean, please see "**The Language of Gender.**"

Social

Social gender is the third dimension. This includes Gender expression, which is the way we communicate our gender to others through such things as clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms. It also includes how individuals, communities and society perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Social gender includes gender roles and expectations and how society uses those to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Practically everything is assigned a gender—toys, colors and clothes are some of the more obvious examples. We begin to teach children about gender from the moment they are born; given the prevalence of the gender binary, children face great pressure to express their gender within narrow, stereotypical definitions of "boy" or "girl." Expectations regarding gender are communicated through every aspect of our lives, including family, culture, peers, schools, community, media, and religion. Gender roles and expectations are so entrenched in our culture that it's difficult to imagine things any other way.

Children who express gender outside of these social norms often have a difficult experience. Girls thought to be too masculine and boys seen as feminine face a variety of challenges. Kids who don't express themselves along binary gender lines are often rendered invisible or steered into a more binary gender presentation. Pressures to conform at home, mistreatment by peers in school, and condemnation by the broader society are just some of the struggles facing a child whose expression does not fall in line with the binary gender system.

Because expectations around gender are so rigid, we frequently assume that what someone wears, or how they move, talk, or express themselves, tells us something about their gender identity. But expression is distinct from identity–we can't assume a person's gender identity based on their gender expression. For example, a boy may like to wear skirts or dresses. His choice in clothing doesn't define his gender identity; it simply means that he prefers (at least some of the time) to wear clothes that society has typically associated with girls. In fact, how we interpret a person's gender and the assumptions we make about them is related to our personal understanding of gender and the norms and stereotypes we have integrated—it isn't about them.

Finally, norms around gender change across societies and over time. One need only consider men wearing earrings or women having tattoos to see the flexibility of social expectations about gender. Even the seemingly intractable notion that "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" is relatively new. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, pink was associated with boys' clothing and blue with girls' clothing (still due to the gendering of colors, but with a different rationale associating each color with particular gendered characteristics).

Congruence

Gender congruence is the feeling of harmony in our gender:

- experiencing comfort in our body as it relates to our gender;
- naming of our gender that adequately corresponds with our internal sense of who we are;
- expressing ourselves through clothing, mannerisms, interests and activities;
- being seen consistently by others as we see ourselves.

Finding congruence is an ongoing process throughout each of our lives as we continue to grow and gain insight into ourselves. It is most often found through exploration. For some, finding congruence is fairly simple; for others, it is a much more complex process. But the fundamental need to find gender congruence is true for us all, and any degree to which we don't experience it can be distressing.

"Transitioning" is a term commonly used to refer to the steps a transgender, agender, or non-binary person takes in order to find congruence in their gender. But this term can be misleading as it implies that the person's gender identity is changing and that there is a moment in time when this takes place. More typically, it is others' understanding of the person's gender that shifts. What people see as a "Transition" is actually an alignment in one or more dimensions of the individual's gender as they seek congruence across those dimensions. A transition is taking place, but it is often other people (parents and other family members, support professionals, employers, etc.) who are transitioning in how they see the individual's gender, and not the person themselves. For the person, these changes are often less of a transition and more of an evolution.

Instead of "transitioning," a more apt phrase is "pursuing congruence measures." A person can seek harmony in many ways:

- *Social congruence measures:* changes of social identifiers such as clothing, hairstyle, gender identity, name and/or pronouns;
- *Hormonal congruence measures:* the use of medical approaches such as hormone "blockers" or hormone therapy to promote physical, mental, and/or emotional alignment;
- *Surgical congruence measures:* the addition, removal, or modification of gender-related physical traits; and
- *Legal congruence measures*: changing identification documents such as one's birth certificate, driver's license, or passport.

It's important to note, though, that a transition experience can be a very significant event in a person's life. A public declaration of some kind where an individual communicates to others that aspects of themselves are different than others have assumed, and that they are now living consistently with who they know themselves to be, can be an empowering and liberating experience (and moving to those who get to share that moment with them). Oftentimes during a transition experience a person will announce a change in the name and pronouns that they use and ask that others use their new name and pronouns going forward. Honoring this request is a sign of respect and a critically important way to demonstrate support.

Personal Gender

While the Dimensions of gender and the desire for congruence are common to us all, ultimately gender is personal. Each dimension of gender is informed by our unique intersection of

identities, experiences, and personal characteristics. We are more than our body, gender identity and gender expression: we are also our race, ethnicity, class, faith, sense of geographic place, family history, and more. Our gender is personal because, while we share some of these aspects of self with others, the way that all of these identities, influences and characteristics come together is unique to each of us.

Gender Is Different Than Sexual Orientation

One final distinction to make is the difference between gender and Sexual orientation, which are often incorrectly conflated. In actuality, gender and sexual orientation are two distinct, but related, aspects of self. Gender is personal (how we see ourselves), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (who we are physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to).

Why is it so critical to distinguish between these two concepts? When we confuse gender with sexual orientation, we are likely to make assumptions about a young person that have nothing to do with who they are. For example, when someone's gender expression is inconsistent with others' expectations, assumptions are frequently made about that person's sexual orientation. The boy who loves to play princess is assumed to be gay, and the girl who buys clothes in the "boys'" section and favors a short haircut may be assumed to be a lesbian. These could be faulty conclusions. What someone wears and how they act is about gender expression. You cannot tell what a person's sexual orientation is by what they have on (for that matter, you can't know what their gender identity is, either ... unless they tell you).

Our society's conflation of gender and sexual orientation can also interfere with a young person's ability to understand and articulate aspects of their own gender. For example, it's not uncommon for a transgender or non-binary youth to wonder if they are gay or lesbian (or any sexual orientation other than heterosexual) before coming to a fuller realization of their gender identity. How we come to understand our gender and our sexual orientation – and the choices we make to disclose and express these parts of ourselves – are distinct paths. Thinking of these two aspects of self as interchangeable may, instead of helping us know ourselves and one another better, actually get in the way of understanding and communication.

What's Next?

There is a generational divide in how we think about gender. In order to bridge this gap, those of us who were raised with a more limited view of gender can take this as an opportunity to explore gender with new eyes, to read and ask questions to better understand gender's complexity. As with any learning experience, you'll learn more about the world around you and about yourself in the process.

Gender diversity has existed throughout history and all over the world. As one of the most fundamental aspects of a person's identity, gender deeply influences every part of one's life. Where this crucial aspect of self is narrowly defined and rigidly enforced, individuals who exist outside of its norms face innumerable challenges. Even those who vary only slightly from norms can become targets of disapproval, discrimination, and even violence.

This does not have to be the case. Through a thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness and validity of every person's experience of self, we can develop greater acceptance for all. Not only will this create greater inclusion for individuals who challenge the norms of gender, it will create space for all individuals to more fully explore and express who they are.