



gender joy



Messages about how bodies “should” look are different depending on a person’s gender. Girls tend to face more pressure to have thin bodies and long hair and to wear clothes like skirts, dresses, and blouses. Boys tend to feel more pressure to have a muscular body, keep their hair short, and wear pants and shorts. Luckily, it’s not your job to look the way people expect—it’s your job to be you.



The way you show your gender to the world through clothes and behaviors is your *gender expression*. Your gender expression can be feminine, masculine, or somewhere in between—and it might change! Maybe you’ll experiment with bright dresses and long, feminine hairstyles. Or you might try baggy shorts, plaid shirts, and a buzzed haircut. Your gender expression should make you feel at home in your body.



While gender expression is what you show on the outside, *gender identity* is how you feel on the inside—a girl, a boy, or someone who doesn't quite fit into either category. When a baby is born, a doctor looks at the baby's body parts to assign its *sex*—whether the baby is female or male. Most kids grow up feeling comfortable in the sex the doctor assigned. This kind of person is *cisgender*. (Say it *sis-jen-dur*.) But for some, that assigned sex doesn't match who they know they are inside. A kid who was assigned as male might know herself to be a girl inside, for example. Someone whose gender is different than the sex they were assigned at birth is *transgender*. Some people don't feel like a girl or a boy inside—which is totally OK! People in this group are usually called *nonbinary* and might use a pronoun like *they* instead of *he* or *she*.



Being transgender is not an illness or something to be ashamed of. If you're questioning your gender identity—or if you already know for sure that you're trans or nonbinary—talk with an adult you trust, like a parent or school counselor. That person can connect you with a specially trained doctor, who can help you and your family decide what's best for your body. At first, you and the doctor might talk about wearing the clothes and using the pronouns (like *he*, *she*, or *they*) that make you feel most like the true you. If you haven't gone through puberty yet, the doctor might offer medicine to delay your body's changes, giving you more time to think about your gender identity. And if you've already gone through puberty, a doctor can still help. Studies show that transgender and nonbinary kids who get help from doctors have much better mental health than those who don't.

If you don't have an adult you trust, there are organizations across the country that can help you. Turn to the Resources on page 95 for more information.



Being transgender isn't a medical transition. It's a process of learning to love yourself for who you are.

—Jazz Jennings

If you're transgender or nonbinary, loving your body might feel a bit different than it does for a cisgender person. Parts of your body might make you feel uncomfortable, and you might want to change the way you look. That's totally OK! You can appreciate your body for everything it allows you to experience and still want to change certain things about it. When you're feeling out of place in your body, do things that make your body feel more like home, like dressing in your favorite clothes and doing something you love. Celebrate the good feelings you have in your body right now. Remember, you deserve love and respect, no matter what your body looks like or how it changes.