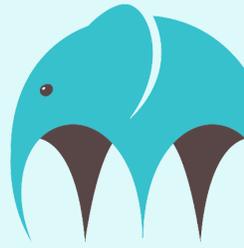


Understanding Gender, Sexuality & Expression: Supporting Queer & Gender-Diverse Children and Youth



Gender, sexuality, and expression can evolve continuously throughout a person's life. It can be a complex experience to navigate for children and youth as well as their parents and caregivers. Broadly, our understanding of gender has evolved beyond the male-female binary, and the way people interpret these shifts is sometimes informed by cultural views, religious beliefs, or other factors.

If you think your young person is exploring their gender, sexuality, and/or expression but hasn't yet shared much about their journey, you may find it difficult to initiate a conversation, and that's okay. If you've been walking alongside your young person for some time as they navigate their gender, sexuality, and/or expression, you may still feel uncertain about how best to support them, and this is also normal.

We've developed this resource in consultation with youth from [The New Mentality's](#) Rainbow Connections program and [PFLAG Canada](#) President Christa Duvall, to help you understand important facts and concepts related to gender, sexuality, and expression and provide information about how to best support the young person in your life.

What's in this resource?

- What are some common terms I should know?
- What are pronouns and why do they matter?
- How can I tell if my child or youth is exploring their gender, sexuality, or expression?
- How might gender, sexuality, or expression affect my child or youth's mental health?
- How can I support and advocate for my child or youth through this journey?
- How can I take care of myself?
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Additional Resources



What are some common terms I should know?

Language is constantly evolving, so it's important to stay caught up on different terms and how they are used. Using the proper language and terminology is one way to show your child or youth that you understand them and their perspective. You can ask them what language they prefer to define their identity. As a parent or caregiver, taking the time to learn these concepts shows that you care for and respect your child and are choosing to use language that makes them most comfortable.

2SLGBTQIA+

2S stands for Two-Spirit

This is a broad term coined by Elder Myra Lamaree and used by some First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples to refer to a person who embodies both feminine and masculine qualities and a spiritual and gender identity outside of the male-female binary.

L stands for Lesbian

This refers to a woman who has an emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to other women. Attraction and self-identification determine a person's sexual orientation, not their sexual experience. Some women use the term "lesbian," and some use the term "gay."

G stands for Gay

This describes people who have an emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to people of the same gender (i.e., men who are attracted to people who identify as men; women who are attracted to people who identify as women). As with the term "lesbian," attraction and self-identification determine a person's sexual orientation, not their sexual experience.

B stands for Bisexual

This describes someone who is attracted romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually to people of the same or a different gender. This can vary over time and across situations, and someone might prefer one gender more often than another. As with the terms lesbian and gay, attraction and self-identification determine a person's sexual orientation, not their sexual experience.

T stands for Transgender

Sometimes shortened to "trans," this describes a person whose gender identity doesn't align with their assigned sex at birth. A person can identify as transgender at whatever point they realize that their gender identity and assigned sex are misaligned. Not all transgender people are interested in having surgical or hormonal treatments that work to align their gender identity and sex.

Q stands for Queer or Questioning

Queer is an umbrella term used by people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender identity does not align with their assigned sex at birth. “Genderqueer” is sometimes used to describe gender, and “queer” can refer to gender and/or sexuality. The Q can also refer to a person who is “questioning” either their sexual orientation or gender identity.



I stands for Intersex

This refers to people whose bodies show characteristics that are associated with both female and male biology (hormones, chromosomes, internal or external genitalia, or any combination of primary and/or secondary sex characteristics). This can sometimes be the case from birth, or it might develop in adolescence or adulthood—and in either case, since this is about biological sex, it isn’t necessarily associated with a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation.

A stands for Asexual

Sometimes also called “ace,” this refers to a person who doesn’t experience sexual attraction. This is different from a chosen behaviour, such as celibacy or abstinence. Instead, it’s an orientation that doesn’t define sexual behaviours.

+++

The plus sign can refer to people who identify as non-binary, pansexual, omnisexual, aromantic, polysexual, or another expression.

Definitions

Gender

This is a set of socially constructed roles, behaviours or attributes that people in society think are appropriate based on a person’s assigned sex. We used to consider gender and sex to be the same, but we now recognize that a person’s gender might be different from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender Identity

This is a person’s core sense of self as it relates to gender. It’s how we feel as an individual (which could be female, male, neither, both, or somewhere else along the spectrum of gender). Gender identity doesn’t always correspond with a person’s biological sex, can shift and change over a person’s lifetime, and isn’t necessarily visible to others.

Gender Expression

A person can present their gender identity to others through the clothes they wear, their voice and speech patterns, their body language, the way they wear their hair, and their names and pronouns. “Feminine” or “masculine” characteristics and behaviours may be different across cultures and shift with time. Gender expression (also called “gender presentation”) does not necessarily reflect a person’s sexual orientation.

Gender Binary

This is the notion that there are only two genders (female and male) and that every person is one or the other, there is no blurring or mixing, and there is a clear distinction of roles. It is used to reinforce the idea of gender roles in society (e.g., the women stay home and care for the children while the men go out to work). This concept has been disproven.

Sexual Orientation

This is a way to describe patterns in who a person is sexually or romantically attracted to. Who a person is attracted to and how they self-identify determines their sexual orientation—a person’s sexual behaviours may not always reflect their sexual orientation. While sexual orientation and gender identity are distinct concepts, they are related—sexual orientation is related to a person’s gender and the gender of the other person. You can refer to the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym above to learn about different sexual orientations.

Gender Diverse or Gender Non-conforming

This is a broad term for those who either don’t follow gender stereotypes or who have an expanded view of gender expression or gender identity. The way a person expresses their gender can shift and change over time.

Non-binary

Similar to gender diverse or gender non-conforming, non-binary refers to people who don’t define their gender according to binary categories and see themselves as existing between or beyond the man-woman continuum. In addition to the term “non-binary,” people can refer to themselves as “genderqueer,” “genderfluid,” “gender non-conforming,” “gender diverse,” or “gender expansive. As with all language, it’s important to use the term that the individual you’re interacting with prefers.

Cisgender

Sometimes shortened to “cis,” this is a term used to refer to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth. People who are not trans should avoid calling themselves “normal” and instead refer to themselves as cisgender or cis.

Heteronormativity

The assumption that heterosexuality (i.e., being “straight”) is superior to all other sexualities, is the “default” or norm, and that other sexualities are “different” or “abnormal.”

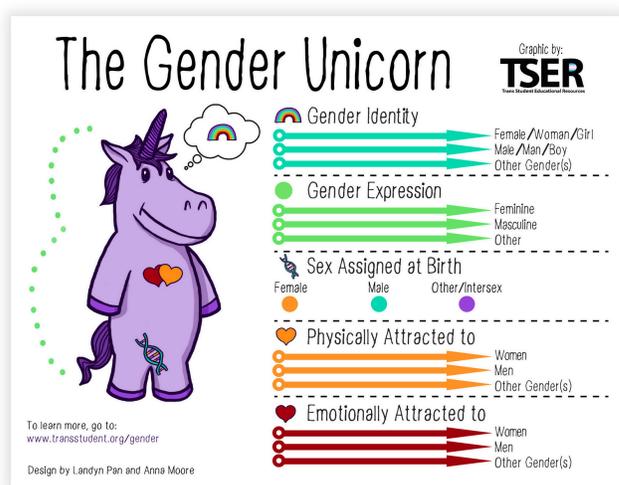
Gender Dysphoria

Sometimes, a person's assigned sex at birth doesn't align with their gender identity, which can lead to feelings of distress. When these feelings of distress reach clinical levels, the term used is gender dysphoria.

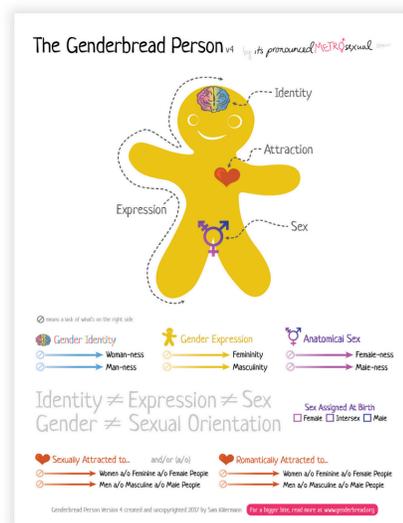
Questioning

When someone is "questioning" their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression, they're in the process of exploration. This is an important process that may happen at any age.

Check out these two infographics to help get a better understanding of some of the above concepts.



[The Gender Unicorn](#)



[The Genderbread Person](#)



Visit [PFLAG Canada](#) to find many more definitions related to gender, sexuality, and expression.

Remember, these terms tend to shift and change over time, and people may favour one way of identifying themselves over another. Sometimes, you might have to be comfortable with not knowing and asking your child or youth what they mean by a given term. Listen to them and make space for them to not have all the answers. As a parent or caregiver, the terms you use around gender and sexuality are very important to the young people in your life, so it is incredibly meaningful when you learn these common terms and support your child or youth's preferences.

What are pronouns, and why do they matter?

You may be hearing a lot about pronouns lately. Pronouns are significant since they are used to represent someone's gender identity. Remember, gender identity is a person's core sense of self and how they feel as an individual, so it means a lot.

Common Pronouns

She / Her / Hers

Typically used for people who identify as female.

He / Him / His

Typically used for people who identify as male.

They / Them / Their

Used as a singular pronoun for people who identify outside of the male-female binary or when you're unsure of a person's gender identity.

Meet Toni, 19

Toni remembers what it felt like to be placed into a gender category at a young age. Toni is intersex, and the doctors chose the gender female. Being referred to as "she" never felt right. Today, Toni uses the pronouns they/them. These pronouns allow Toni to live as their true self.

By the time your child becomes a youth, you've probably said their name and used certain pronouns to refer to them millions of times. So, it might feel uncomfortable or awkward to make a change after all these years. But if your child or youth asks you to refer to them by a new or different pronoun and/or chosen name, it's important to hear what they're saying and know that the choice of words you use matters a lot.

When you use your child or youth's chosen name and pronouns, it shows that you respect, affirm, and accept them for who they are and that you support their gender identity. It also goes a long way in creating a safe and inclusive home for everyone.

PARENT
to **PARENT**

"I asked my child to be patient with me while I adjusted to using their new pronouns. I explained that I am retraining my brain, and it may take a few tries, but I promised I would get there. Don't confuse my mistakes with disapproval."

Misgendering

Misgendering is when a person is referred to using pronouns that don't align with their gender identity or chosen pronouns. A person may experience many feelings when being misgendered, including distress, sadness, anger, shame, guilt, and other negative emotions. When a transgender person is misgendered, these feelings may be experienced even more intensely. Some transgender people describe it as feeling like "a punch to the gut" or a slur. These feelings may arise whether or not the misgendering was done with the intent to cause harm.

Sometimes, you might forget or make a mistake—and that's okay. It's important to own your error, correct yourself in the moment and in future situations, and show your child or youth that you see and respect them.



If you're not sure what someone's pronouns are, it's perfectly acceptable to ask them since it's important not to make assumptions about how people identify in terms of their gender.

How can I tell if my child or youth is exploring their gender, sexuality, or expression?

There usually isn't one defining moment that tells you that your child or youth is considering their gender identity or sexual orientation. Instead, this is usually a process that takes place over a lengthy period of time. There are some signs that signal this exploration is underway.

1 They may share with you.

Your child or youth might start to express uncertainty about their gender or say that they strongly identify with a different one. They might also start to use a different name and/or pronouns. They may start to express that they feel different than their peers or have feelings they don't understand. They may open up to you about their sexuality or feelings they have for another person. Families are often not the first ones to know because the risk of losing your family is so great.

2

They may show you.

There may be shifts in your child or youth's interests or activities to those that align more closely with the way they see themselves (e.g., wanting to play on a boys' hockey team rather than a girls' team or joining a queer community group). They may start to change the way they dress or style their hair and might adopt different mannerisms to align with their identity. Those exploring their gender identity may be more self-conscious in different situations that make it hard for them to express their true gender (e.g., using gendered washrooms) and have difficulty with various aspects of personal hygiene (e.g., bathing, showering, grooming).

3

Their social circles may change.

Your child or youth may start spending time with different friends or social groups who share similar experiences or identities. They might start to avoid different social situations and activities that reinforce assigned gender roles (e.g., traditional sleepovers) or heteronormativity. They might also start to [avoid school](#), and their academic performance may be impacted.

Coming Out

Coming out refers to the multi-step process of sharing an incredibly personal part of a person's identity with others. It is an act of enormous trust and vulnerability for a person to "come out" to another, particularly to family members, where the potential repercussions may feel enormous. A person's gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or pronouns can change over time, and they may wish to share this with you. When your child or youth comes out to you, you may experience a range of emotions. Know that how you feel is okay, and it's normal to wonder and have questions. Learn more about how to manage your own experience in the next section so that you can focus on supporting your child or youth.

Your child or youth may choose to come out on more than one occasion as they learn more about themselves, and each time is valid, nor does it invalidate how they may have identified in the past. Coming out multiple times may add to their anxiety, so having a parent, caregiver, or adult ally respond in a way that validates their identity can make a big difference.

PARENT to PARENT

“At first, I brushed off what my child was saying about not feeling ‘girly,’ not realizing they were experiencing changes in how they identified. Now I just listen and follow their lead.”

Responding to Coming Out

When your child or youth first comes out to you, how you react matters. Responding in a calm and happy tone can be reassuring. Avoid responding in a shocked or angry tone. Try to match the energy of your child or youth and use supportive, affirming language. If they are acting happy, you can act happy with them. If they seem anxious to come out, you can be supportive by validating their feelings and reassuring them that their feelings are okay.

Reassure your child or youth that this new information and journey they are going on doesn't change your love for them. If you have questions, don't be afraid to ask. Have conversations with your child or youth to learn more about their experience.

Sometimes, it doesn't go so well—maybe it catches you off guard, or you jump to worries about what it may mean. Even a difficult or disastrous “coming out” can be repaired.

Focus on your own reaction—why did it trigger those responses in you? What would you want to say instead if you could do it over?

Tip: If you find yourself in this situation, here's a conversation starter you can try with your child or youth: “I am sorry for what I said/how I reacted. I truly apologize. You shared something huge with me, and I want you to know that I love you, and while it may take a bit for me to understand, I am not going to love you any less...”

PARENT to PARENT

Here is an affirmation you can offer your child or youth: “You are loved, and you are my child no matter what, and no one else's opinion can change that.”

How might gender, sexuality, and expression affect my child or youth's mental health?

Thinking about gender, sexuality, and expression is a process for the young person in your life. The teen years are all about figuring this stuff out—and when the way you look and are treated is misaligned with how you feel and see yourself, it can be anxiety-provoking, frustrating, and depressing. Sometimes, it can also lead to suicidal thoughts. It's important to keep in mind that every person's journey of determining their gender identity, sexuality, and expression is different. Your child or youth might feel scared or nervous at various points in the process and might start to feel:

- Isolated from friends if they feel like they don't fit in or are being teased for being unique.
- Confused, stressed, worried, and unsure about who they are and how they want to be seen. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness.
- Struggles around body image and how they "feel in their skin" if their body's features don't match their gender, including gender dysphoria.
- Distressed when others don't acknowledge and respect their identity.
- Like they can't be who they are if they've experienced stigma, discrimination, bullying, rejection, hostility, or a lack of acceptance from others.
- Unsafe in certain situations or groups (including with families, religious communities, etc.) where they can't share or express their gender, sexuality, or expression.

In some cases, these feelings can impact your child or youth's mental health. In fact, many gender-diverse youth might also experience higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to their peers and face approximately 14 times the risk of suicide and substance misuse than their heterosexual peers since they might experience stigma, discrimination, and a lack of affirmation for their identity.



[Kids Help Phone](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bi & Trans Youthline](#), and [One Stop Talk/ Parlons Mainenant](#) are all helpful supports that you can access with your child or youth if they're in mental distress.

What is intersectionality, and why is it important?

Understanding the complex relationship between race, culture and/or religion is important for parents and caregivers whose children or youth are exploring their gender, sexuality, and expression, especially for those who are Black, Indigenous or racialized. Each of these factors plays a significant role in shaping how a young person sees themselves and experience the world around them.

Law professor and activist [Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the concept of intersectionality](#), which refers to the way that the overlapping, intersecting identities a person holds can lead to unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. For example, a young transgender woman who is also a person of colour might face racism and stigma together. It's not a simple "this identity plus this identity equals this," but rather these identities interact in complicated and unique ways that sometimes produce very negative consequences for a person's mental health and wellness.

Cultural norms, religious beliefs, expectations, etc., can sometimes lead to feelings of distress, rejection or isolation for children and youth who are navigating their gender identity, sexuality, and expression. As a parent or caregiver, it's important to recognize that your youth's experience is multi-faceted and complex, so it's critical to help them find safe spaces that affirm all aspects of their identity.

How can I support and advocate for my child or youth through this journey?

As a parent or caregiver, you set the tone in your family. Creating or maintaining an open, safe environment where you are approachable and supportive is critical for many reasons, including while you walk alongside your child or youth as they explore their gender, sexuality, and expression. Here are some things you can try at home.

- Create a welcoming home where your child feels comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- Listen and ask questions. Show interest in how they see themselves and hear about their experiences at school and in social settings.
- Be clear that your love is unconditional and that you will accept and support them no matter what.

- Thank them for sharing their feelings, as this can be a difficult thing to do.
- Encourage diverse friendships and involvement in a range of social groups.
- Step in and remind people of your child or youth's name and/or pronouns if necessary.
- Work with your child or youth's school and educators to build a safe and supportive learning environment.
- Learn and grow alongside your child or youth. Read books and watch movies together and include art in your home that reflects diverse identities.
- Connect with other families who might be on a similar journey.
- Seek professional support from [therapists or counsellors](#) who specialize in supporting children and youth exploring their gender identity.
- Be patient. It's natural for you to feel concerned for your child, since you want them to feel accepted, fit in and be well, and any big change can feel overwhelming. With time and an open mind and heart, you'll get there together as a family.

This may be more of a long journey than a quick trip, and there is no set path or “blueprint.” It can take time for everyone in the family to adjust to changes in a young person's gender, sexuality, and/or expression, but with openness, communication, and a nurturing environment, the young person in your life will feel supported and will thrive as their authentic self.

Support Strategies

Depending on the situation, there are different ways you can support and advocate for your child or youth. You can advocate from behind, beside, or in front.

Behind



You may need to stand behind someone to support them, recognizing that they are the experts and know what is best for them. This means being comfortable taking a back seat and letting your child or youth advocate for themselves. You can be available and ready to support, if needed. Letting your child or youth be in charge of their own narrative/ story is a powerful way to support them.

Real-life Scenario

At a school book fair, your child picks out a book and a teacher tells them they shouldn't buy the book because it's a girl's book or a boy's book. This could be a good opportunity to stand behind and allow the child to self-advocate if they feel comfortable. You can be ready to stand in front and advocate on behalf of your child if the teacher continues.

Beside

You may need to stand beside your child or youth to support them. This means listening to them and walking with them through an experience and showing them that you are invested in this journey or experience with them.

Real-life Scenario

Your youth returns from a party and shares that overheard other youth using queer slurs. This may be a good opportunity to stand beside and give them space to talk about how they'd like to respond to their peers. Listen to your child's experience and how they felt in that moment.

In Front

You may need to stand up in front of your child or youth to help them avoid harm and hurt. This means using your privilege to support and advocate on their behalf.

There are times when you need to know your child or youth's rights if in a situation when needed or requested. In some situations, a child may need an adult present to help advocate for themselves.

Real-life Scenario

Your youth shares with you that a person at their workplace won't allow them to access the appropriate bathroom and has told other employees to "watch their back" in their bathroom. They said, "It's okay, they can just hold it, and the other employees don't bother them."

This may be a sign it's time to stand in front and advocate on behalf of your youth by raising awareness of human rights legislation and their rights as a worker or contacting a labour lawyer if necessary. Depending on their age and capacity, you can also stand beside to help them understand their rights to self-advocate. Of course, you can always offer emotional support.

PARENT
to **PARENT**

Celebrate your child or youth's journey of figuring out who they are.

How can I take care of myself?

Learning that your child or youth is questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation may bring up a range of emotions. You might also find that the experience challenges some of your beliefs and experiences. There is a coming out process for parents too, and recognizing yourself as the parent or caregiver of a queer child may be an adjustment. Your feelings and reactions are normal, and an important part of your journey in supporting your child or youth.

While focusing on supporting and affirming your child or youth, ensure you allow yourself time and space to process your feelings without judgement and seek support as you need it (e.g., from other parents in your community, faith or cultural leaders, supportive family members, or friends).

There are a range of local support groups for parents and caregivers supporting queer and gender-diverse children and youth. Parents for Children's Mental Health can help you find these—email support@pcmh.ca for more information. If you feel that you or your family need professional support, you can speak with a [therapist or counsellor who specializes in gender and sexuality](#) to help your family navigate this journey and provide coping strategies as needed.

The most important thing is to celebrate your child. Acknowledge when you've had a good conversation or when you've really supported them to feel good about themselves.

PARENT
to **PARENT**

Educate yourself, be supportive in a positive way, get supports for you, and find a community that has lived experience.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is it okay to use they/them pronouns as an ally?

Be authentic to yourself and what pronouns you feel best reflect your identity. If it feels right to use they/them pronouns, then you should! It all depends on the intent you bring when using pronouns. Be honest about what feels right to you.

I notice some signs that my child or youth is exploring their gender or sexuality. Why haven't they said anything to me?

Some children can be aware of their gender and/or sexuality from a young age but may not have the words to talk about it or to describe it. In other cases, your child or youth's experiences may be evolving, and they may not be ready to share this information with anyone just yet, and that's completely okay. It's also possible that they are aware of risks you haven't considered or are unsure of what your response might be. Families are often not the first ones to know because the risk of losing your family is so great. It's important to encourage them to seek out spaces where they feel safe and accepted and speak positively about 2SLGBTQIA+ people or current events to show you are supportive.

When people mention two pronouns such as he/they, does that mean that both pronouns can be used? Is it implied that the first pronoun listed is preferred?

Ask the person if they are comfortable talking to you about it! Pronouns are personal and may be different for everyone. It may be situation-dependent or change depending on who the person is with. Sometimes the person may prefer both pronouns equally; in other situations, the dominant pronoun may be capitalized.

What would you suggest to help encourage others who don't understand the importance of using a person's chosen pronouns, especially for those who are cisgender and heterosexual?

Education is key. A person's beliefs or understanding may be coming from a place of confusion or lack of knowledge. Give the person a chance to be educated and make more informed choices. If the person chooses to continue not being accepting, it can be tricky to navigate. It is important to keep in mind the queer person's emotional safety with that person. Practicing self-affirmations and seeking out support from caring loved ones can be helpful.

Whose choice is it to accept risks for transgender youth wishing to transition?

While you may be worried, it is your child's body and their life. Remember that trans children and trans youth ultimately grow up to be trans adults. Being unsupportive of your youth's desire to transition may only delay the process. You can be supportive by helping your child/youth access safe transitional supplies and education. If you are worried, talk to your child or youth. Navigating the school system may be a challenge for transgender students. Get their permission to be an advocate or resource navigator as they go through their transition in and outside of school.

Additional Resources

Resources for You and Your Child or Youth

- [PFLAG Canada](#) promotes the health and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ people by helping to keep families together through support and education.
- [CHEO Gender Diversity Clinic](#) is a multidisciplinary team of experts in gender care and support.
- [LGBTQ + Pride Flags](#) provide a comprehensive overview of Pride Flags and their use.
- [The 519](#) offers leadership and innovation in 2SLGBTQIA+ youth programs.
- [Planned Parenthood Toronto](#) offers tips for supporting trans and gender diverse youth, as well as judgment-free counselling.
- [Kids Help Phone](#) offers counselling for children and youth aged 5 to 20 (1-800-668-6868).
- [Lesbian, Gay, Bi & Trans Youthline](#) offers free peer support for youth aged 26 and under (1-800-268-9688).
- [PCMH Webinar: Gender, Sexuality, and Breaking the Binary.](#)

Culturally Responsive Services

- [Black Queer Youth Collective](#) provides services for Black, gender diverse youth.
- [Black Youth Helpline](#) is a support resource for Black youth.
- [The Trevor Project: Supporting Black LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health Guide.](#)
- [Salaam Canada](#) is a national, volunteer-run organization dedicated to creating and cultivating safe and supportive spaces for gender diverse Muslim youth.
- [Anishnawbe Health Toronto](#) offers healthcare based on Indigenous culture and traditions.
- [Intersections: Indigenous and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Identities](#) is a resource created by the Native Women's Association of Canada.
- [Miles Nadal JCC YouthLine](#) provides queer Jews opportunities to gather, celebrate and thrive.
- [Jewish Family and Child Services of Toronto – LGBTQ2S+ Services](#) provides support counselling, groups, and workshops, welcoming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

You don't have to do this alone.

If you are a parent or caregiver worried about your child, or a young person looking for help yourself, please use our Find Help tool to connect with a service provider near you. Our network of child and youth mental health centres has 4,000 professionals ready to help children, youth, and families with free counselling and treatment. Our agencies provide care in person, on the phone, and virtually. No problem is too big or small.

[Find your closest child and youth mental health centre.](#)