



On the Path 2.4 Gender & Sexuality: Terms, FAQs, and Resources

Welcome to the On the Path podcast. I'm Joyce Sherry, York School Dean of Students.

Over the last several months, I've been hearing more than usual from parents with questions regarding navigating what they feel are increasingly complex waters when it comes to their adolescents' gender identification and sexuality. I've also entertained questions from parents regarding how to help their teens to navigate friends' exploration and identification. I thought I'd dedicate this podcast to some definitions, FAQs, and resources.

Let's start off with some basics.

What is the difference between sex and gender? Our sex, also called our biological sex, refers to internal and external reproductive organs and our chromosomal makeup. A very small percentage of people (0.0005, to be exact) is born intersex, meaning they have both or undefinable sex organs. The majority are born either clearly female or clearly male.

So what is gender? I think that GenderSpectrum.org defines it well: "Gender ... is the complex interrelationship between an individual's sex," in other words, biology, "one's internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither," what many people refer to as gender identity, and "one's outward presentations and behaviors" or how one expresses one's gender, including in dress, body language, name, pronoun usage, and other ways of presenting oneself. GenderSpectrum concludes, "The intersection of these three dimensions produces one's authentic sense of gender, both in how people experience their own gender as well as how others perceive it."

Today, we are aware that gender, as the name of the organization I've referenced suggests, is a spectrum. On one end, perhaps, is the cisgendered individual, the biological male who identifies himself as a man, for example. On the other end is the transgendered individual, the biological male whose inner identity proclaims that she is a woman. The cisgendered man, as a "gender normative" or "gender conforming" person, might embody cultural or societal norms of what it is to be a man. We can start to get a sense of the spectrum of gender when we think about "gender nonconforming" or "gender expansive" or "gender non-binary" people: the woman who works as a lumberjack or the man with long hair and bronzer. Neither of these seems the least bit surprising to us today, but not long ago, either would have been unimaginable. Expression of gender in a non-binary way can take many, many forms.

Okay, that was an awful lot of terms. Let's have a quick review. So far, we've covered biological sex (male or female organs and hormones), gender identity (one's innermost perception of oneself as male or female, both or neither), gender expression (how one communicates one's gender to the world), gender role (the expectations of society for men and women), cisgender (the individual whose biological sex and gender identity align), and transgender (the individual whose biological sex and gender identity are at odds).

Now, a couple more terms.

Gender fluidity. This term can refer to, for example, the rough and tumble girl who climbs trees, spits, catches spiders with her bare hands, and chops a stack of cordwood all day, then perfectly comfortably dons a pink dress with bows and frills to go out to dinner with the family that night. It can refer to the boy who loves tackle football every bit as much as he loves playing with baby dolls. It can also refer to the person who feels that neither term girl or boy, man or woman describes them accurately.

And before we go on to the final term, a note about pronouns. Those of you who were just listening or reading closely might have noticed that in the last sentence, I committed a grave English teacher error. I replaced the singular antecedent "the person" with the plural pronoun "they." Some of you may remember that many years ago, a furor raged over what term we would use for women that had the same neutral, marital-statusless meaning as "Mister" does for men. When we settled on Ms, initially without a period as it's not an abbreviation, the anxiety lingered over how to pronounce the darn thing. Today, it's extremely rare to encounter a student who uses any term besides "Ms." to refer to a female teacher. I've even had to correct students who assign the title to characters in fiction that were written long before Ms. came into being. Though I chuckle at the idea of Juliet being referred to as Ms. Capulet! Now in the 21st century, we're looking for pronouns to use that respect gender non-binary individuals. Several options have been put forward across the country. At York, students have adopted the pronoun "they," and we English teachers (and even many official style sheets for writing) are learning not to twitch at the lack of antecedent-pronoun agreement. Here's an example, for instance: Robin is a gender non-binary student. They have asked that we refer to them not as "he" or "she," but rather, "they."

And now the final term for this podcast: Sexual orientation. This is a term most of us are already very familiar with. It refers to one's romantic or physical attraction to people of a certain gender. Sexual orientation and gender identity are separate parts of ourselves or our overall identity.

So given all of this, you can appreciate the challenge of using inclusive language. We used to talk about the LGBT community: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Then, of course, we began to recognize that four letters didn't cover the amazing wealth of human expression. We needed to add an A for asexual, another A for androgynous, an I for intersex, a Q for those questioning how their sexual orientation or gender might be labeled, a P for pansexual, and honestly the list could go on. In an act of daring reclamation, today's community has adopted what used to be a pejorative to positively label all individuals who don't tidily align with the sexual or gender norm: Q is for queer. You'll hear many people use the common parlance of the LGBTQ community. At York, we use the term "queer" to reference the umbrella that safely shelters the panoply of human sexuality and gender expression. Our club's name, Q&A stands for Queers and their Allies.

Now to another question I'm often asked. Our children are only teenagers! Isn't it too early for them to know what their gender or sexuality is? The answer is no. And also maybe. First of all, we need to distinguish between gender awareness and sexuality. People become aware of their biological sex and gender identity between the ages of eighteen months and three years. However, it can be years before a child realizes that not everyone feels the sense of discordance inherent in a lack of alignment. After all, we are locked inside our own perspectives; it rarely

occurs to us that others might feel different inside than we do. I'll never forget a conversation I had with a York alumna who told me that it wasn't until the last semester of her senior year, as she read a novel with a transgender character, that she recognized what had been amiss all her life. She suddenly realized that she was not alone, and the weight of depression that had been with her since her earliest memories lifted. She still had a long and difficult journey between then and now, but recognition was a first step.

Okay, now to sexual orientation. The easiest answer would be to say, No, your child isn't too young to be aware of his or her sexual orientation. In fact, people can be aware of their orientation before puberty, but are almost always fully conscious of it once they're in the full throes of puberty. Sexual orientation is not a choice. The preponderance of credible scientific research shows that it is genetic. However, in a very small number of people, sexual orientation is fluid. I'm sure we've all heard stories of someone who fell in love and spent a lifetime with someone of another gender than that which the person had previously been romantically connected with. Chirlene McCray, the wife of New York's mayor Bill deBlasio, may be one of the more famous examples. A close friend of mine who had always happily dated men recently celebrated her third anniversary of marriage, eighteenth of couple-hood with her wife. But again, the percentage of people who fall into this category is decidedly small.

And let's face it, even in a progressive state like California in the 21st century, being queer is no easy path. Quoting again from GenderSpectrum: "The daily need to make judgments about what one does, or wears, or says...is a burden that many people never encounter. These everyday reminders of being different are also constant reinforcement of being 'other.'" Queer people still face lack of understanding, discrimination, and even violence today. Identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer means a rocky road ahead. Honestly, would anyone self-identify unless they were pretty sure?

If your students have friends who are grappling with any of these issues, perhaps you could share these thoughts with them. You might also direct them to the Dean of Students Office on Haiku where I have links to resources. Encouraging an understanding and appreciation of difference in this area is every bit as important as in any other area, and education and compassion go a long way.

If you're listening to the podcast, I'm going to reel off a list of resources. You can find links to all of these on the York website.

PFLAG.org: Parents, Families, LGBTQ & Allies Group
Our closest local chapter is in Santa Cruz with info at PFLAGSCC.org

PlannedParenthood.org

Human Rights Campaign at hrc.org

OurTrueColors.org

GenderSpectrum.org

And finally, a book that I've just purchased myself, so haven't had a chance to peruse, but which came highly recommended: *Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens*, by Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney.

As always, if you have questions or comments about any of this, please be in touch with me at jsherry@york.org.