

Responding to concerns about gender diversity and intersex inclusivity

Members of your school community may have concerns or questions about discussing gender diversity and variations of sex characteristics (VSC) at school. These might come from the parents or caregivers of a child who is transitioning, other students' caregivers, school staff and students, or wider community members.

In most cases these concerns reflect a deeper care for the safety of all students. However, because gender diversity and VSC seem like new and unfamiliar topics for many people, they may also be based on assumptions or misconceptions about gender diverse and intersex people. In some cases, concerns may be trolling from people who hold transphobic views and are seeking to exclude or marginalise trans people. Schools are encouraged to recognise the difference between genuine misunderstanding and hostility towards trans people, and respond accordingly.

Responding to concerns or questions can be good opportunities to educate staff and whānau on gender diversity and VSC, and the benefits of creating safer schools for all students. We also acknowledge these can be difficult or uncomfortable conversations to have.¹ When responding to concerns, it can be helpful to be prepared with resources which explain the benefits of creating affirming environments.

Below are some example responses to questions whānau or community members might have.

Why are you teaching my child about gender diversity and variations in sex characteristics? Won't it confuse them?

- The reason we discuss gender diversity and VSC at school is because we know that trans and intersex students are more likely to experience bullying

¹ InsideOUT is here to support you in having these conversations. Please contact InsideOUT or your local Schools Coordinator for more assistance, advice or resources. A list of contact details can be found at <https://insideout.org.nz/contact/>

and poorer health outcomes than their cisgender and endosex peers.²³

Through fostering critical thinking, we can challenge the assumptions and stereotypes that enable this discrimination.

- Teaching about gender diversity and VSC is positive not only for the wellbeing of trans and intersex students, but also equips those young people who aren't trans with a framework of understanding that will help them be more empathetic towards those around them.
- Sexuality and health education that includes gender diversity and variations in sex characteristics can benefit everyone's understandings of bodies, and challenge understandings of 'normal' bodies.
- The idea that teaching gender 'confuses' students reinforces the message that existing outside of the gender binary is somehow bad or harmful, rather than a natural part of human diversity. Trans and intersex people have always existed, but these people's experiences have historically been excluded from school curricula.

Can't a boy claim to be a girl to use the girls' toilets or changing rooms?

- Being trans is completely different from 'pretending' to be another gender. Being trans comes with many challenges, and it is not something a person simply chooses to be. It can take a great deal of courage for trans students to use the facilities that align with their gender. This decision is not taken lightly.
- It is not up to the school to determine if a student is trans or not. Only students know this about themselves. Our school supports individual students in many ways, and gender diverse and intersex students are no different. We work closely with individual students who are trans or exploring their gender. We carefully plan the support they need together.
- The safety of all students is our top priority, and we strive to educate our students on respecting trans and intersex students' rights. If a cisgender or endosex student feels unsafe in a toilet or changing facility, we would address each case individually. The concern around safety may also speak to issues within the wider school climate which we are striving to address, not an issue with trans or intersex students. The concern that a cisgender or endosex student might pretend to be another gender does not hinder trans and intersex students' right to safety.

What will you do to support cisgender and endosex students to feel safe and comfortable at school?

² Veale, J., Byrne, J., Tan, K., Guy, S., Yee, A., Nopera, T., & Bentham, R. (2019). *Counting Ourselves: The health and wellbeing of trans and non-binary people in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Transgender Health Research Lab, University of Waikato: Hamilton NZ. Retrieved from <https://countingourselves.nz/>

³ Fenaughty, J., et al. (2021). *A Youth19 brief: Transgender and gender diverse students*. Available at www.youth19.ac.nz/publications

- We expect all students to respect other students' physical and emotional needs. If a student feels uncomfortable, we take this seriously regardless of their gender or sex characteristics, and work with the students involved to resolve this and address the underlying causes.
- If your child does not feel comfortable using a certain toilet or changing area, we can provide alternative options for their safety.

What if my child decides they are trans because someone in their class is?

- Being trans is not a trend nor a phase. Your child will not choose to be trans because someone they know is.
- If your child expresses they are exploring their gender, take their lead and listen to them. Everyone has the right to explore their gender in a safe and open way, and our role at school is to support the student in their personal growth.
- We encourage you to ask why you are concerned about your child exploring their gender. What might you be worried about if they are? It might be helpful to talk with your child about their gender, or connect with other parents who are going through the same thing.