

What's the difference between gender and sexuality?

Sexual orientation is different from gender and gender identity.

Sexual orientation is about who you're attracted to and who you feel drawn to romantically, emotionally, and sexually. It's different than [gender identity](#). Gender identity isn't about who you're attracted to, but about who you ARE — male, female, genderqueer, etc.

This means that being transgender (feeling like your assigned sex is very different from the gender you identify with) isn't the same thing as being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Sexual orientation is about who you want to be with. Gender identity is about who you are.

(From Planned Parenthood, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation/sexual-orientation>)

It's also important to note that some people don't think any of these labels describe them accurately. Some people don't like the idea of labels at all. Other people feel comfortable with certain labels and not others.

Biological Sex

Sex refers to a person's anatomy, physical attributes such as external sex organs, sex chromosomes and internal reproductive structures.

For most people, the anatomical indicators of sex line up in a way that is typically understood as male or female. However, intersex conditions also occur naturally in all species, including humans. *Intersex* refers to a variety of conditions in which an individual is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical understanding of female or male bodies.

In the past three decades, more than 25 genes have been identified that were once believed to be associated solely with male or female biology, but in fact exhibit more complex, nonbinary variations. With the advent of new scientific knowledge, it is increasingly evident that biological sex does not fit a binary model. Intersex conditions are increasingly being recognized as naturally occurring variations of human physiology.

Following years of organizing by intersex activists, momentum is growing to end what was once a standard practice of "gender-normalizing surgery" performed on intersex infants with ambiguous genitalia. In 2013, the United Nations condemned the use of this unnecessary surgery on infants, putting it in the same category as involuntary sterilization, unethical experimentation or reparative therapy when enforced or administered without the free and informed consent of the person receiving the surgery.

Gender Identity

Gender identity is an individual's deeply held sense of being male, female or another gender. This is separate from biological sex.

Some children become aware at a very young age that their gender identity does not align with their physical sex characteristics, even expressing the disconnect as soon as they can talk. Other transgender and gender-expansive people recognize their gender identity during adolescence or adulthood.

Individuals whose biological sex and gender identity “match” rarely think about the alignment of biology and identity because they have the privilege of being considered normal by society. People whose gender identity and biological sex align are called *cisgender*. Cisgender is an important word because it names the dominant experience rather than simply seeing it as the default.

Individuals living comfortably outside of typical male/female expectations and identities are found in every region of the globe. The *calabai* and *calalai* of Indonesia, the two-spirit Native Americans found in some First Nation cultures, and the *hijra* of India all represent more complex understandings of gender than a binary gender model allows. At least seven countries—including Australia, Bangladesh, Germany, India, Nepal, New Zealand and Pakistan—recognize a third gender for legal documents. As people around the world use a growing variety of terms to communicate their gender identities, Facebook now offers its users 52 options with which to define their gender.

Gender Expression

Gender expression can be defined as the way we show our gender to the world around us. Societal expectations of gender expression are reinforced in almost every area of life. Even very young children are clear about the gendered choices that boys and girls are “supposed to” make in relation to toys, colors, clothes, games, and activities.

Girls whose gender expression is seen as somewhat masculine are often considered tomboys. Depending on the context and the degree to which they transgress norms, tomboys might be seen positively, neutrally, or negatively. For example, a girl who identifies as a gamer geek, cuts her hair short and wears clothing perceived as masculine may be labeled as a “cute tomboy” or met with words intended to hurt, such as *dyke* or *freak*.

Positive or neutral labels are harder to come by for boys whose sex and gender expression are seen as incongruent. Common words used to describe such boys tend to be delivered with negative—sometimes hateful—intentions, words like *sissy* and *faggot*. There also is little room for boys to expand their gender expression. Just wearing a scarf or walking in a stereotypically feminine way can lead to abuse from peers, educators, or family members.

Bias related to race, economic status, religion, and other identities also influences responses to young people who break out of gender constraints. School-discipline data provide a disturbing example of this, as seen in the report [Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected](#). The report reveals that African-American girls who act in ways considered stereotypically masculine are far more likely to be disciplined by their teachers than white girls who exhibit similar behaviors

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is about our physical, emotional and/or romantic attractions to others. Like gender identity, sexual orientation is internally held knowledge. In multiple studies, LGBT youth reported being aware of their sexual orientation during elementary school, but waited to disclose their orientation to others until middle or high school.

Students might identify as bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual or use a host of other words that reflect their capacity to be attracted to more than one sex or gender or not to feel sexual attraction at all. This emerging language illuminates a complex world in which simple either/or designations such as gay or straight are insufficient...

Embracing a Spectrum Model

[B]inary notions of gender, biology and sexual orientation exclude large swaths of human diversity. This diversity can be better understood by using spectrum-based models. Spectra make room for anyone whose experiences do not narrowly fit into binary choices such as man/woman, feminine/masculine or straight/gay.

Gender-expansive and *genderqueer* are two of many terms used by people to describe themselves as somewhere on a gender spectrum—outside of the either/or choices relating to sex and gender.

A spectrum model not only makes room for people who are gender-expansive but for those who are perceived to be more typical as well. A spectrum provides an avenue to a deeper understanding of the separate yet interrelated concepts of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. For educators, this understanding is a critical first step toward changing school-based practices and toward being advocates for *all* students—regardless of where they fit on any spectrum.

(from “Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression? Knowing the difference Can Make all the Difference to Students who do not Conform to Binary Norms”. Joel Baum and Kim Westheimer, Issue 50, Summer 2015. Southern Poverty Law Center/Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2015/sex-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-gender-expression>)