

# Sex and Gender Identity

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 [plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity](https://plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity)

There's a lot more to being male, female, or any gender than the sex assigned at birth. Your biological or assigned sex does not always tell your complete story.

## What are the differences between sex, gender, and gender identity?

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It's common for people to confuse sex, gender, and gender identity. But they're actually all different things.

- Sex is a label — male or female — that you're assigned by a doctor at birth based on the genitals you're born with and the chromosomes you have. It goes on your birth certificate.
- Gender is much more complex: It's a social and legal status, and set of expectations from society, about behaviors, characteristics, and thoughts. Each culture has standards about the way that people should behave based on their gender. This is also generally male or female. But instead of being about body parts, it's more about how you're expected to act, because of your sex.
- Gender identity is how you feel inside and how you express your gender through clothing, behavior, and personal appearance. It's a feeling that begins very early in life.

## What's assigned sex (aka "biological sex")?

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Assigned sex is a label that you're given at birth based on medical factors, including your hormones, chromosomes, and genitals. Most people are assigned male or female, and this is what's put on their birth certificates.

When someone's sexual and reproductive anatomy doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male, they may be described as intersex.

Some people call the sex we're assigned at birth "biological sex." But this term doesn't fully capture the complex biological, anatomical, and chromosomal variations that can occur. Having only two options (biological male or biological female) might not describe what's going on inside a person's body.

Instead of saying "biological sex," some people use the phrase "assigned male at birth" or "assigned female at birth." This acknowledges that someone (often a doctor) is making a decision for someone else. The assignment of a biological sex may or may not align with

what's going on with a person's body, how they feel, or how they identify.

The factors that determine our assigned sex begin as early as fertilization.

- Each sperm has either an X or a Y chromosome in it. All eggs have an X chromosome.
- When sperm fertilizes an egg, its X or Y chromosome combines with the X chromosome of the egg.
- A person with XX chromosomes usually has female sex and reproductive organs, and is therefore usually assigned biologically female.
- A person with XY chromosomes usually has male sex and reproductive organs, and is therefore usually assigned biologically male.

Other arrangements of chromosomes, hormones, and body parts can happen, which results in someone being intersex.

## What's gender?

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Gender is much bigger and more complicated than assigned sex. Gender includes gender roles, which are expectations society and people have about behaviors, thoughts, and characteristics that go along with a person's assigned sex.

For example, ideas about how men and women are expected to behave, dress, and communicate all contribute to gender. Gender is also a social and legal status as girls and boys, men, and women.

It's easy to confuse sex and gender. Just remember that biological or assigned sex is about biology, anatomy, and chromosomes. Gender is society's set of expectations, standards, and characteristics about how men and women are supposed to act.

## What's gender identity?

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Your gender identity is how you feel inside and how you express those feelings. Clothing, appearance, and behaviors can all be ways to express your gender identity.

Most people feel that they're either male or female. Some people feel like a masculine female, or a feminine male. Some people feel neither male nor female. These people may choose labels such as "genderqueer," "gender variant," or "gender fluid." Your feelings about your gender identity begin as early as age 2 or 3.

Some people's assigned sex and gender identity are pretty much the same, or in line with each other. These people are called cisgender. Other people feel that their assigned sex is of the other gender from their gender identity (i.e., assigned sex is female, but gender

identity is male). These people are called transgender or trans. Not all transgender people share the same exact identity.

# What's intersex?

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 [plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex](https://plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex)

Intersex is an umbrella term that describes bodies that fall outside the strict male/female binary. There are lots of ways someone can be intersex.

## What does intersex mean?

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Intersex is a general term used for a variety of situations in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the boxes of "female" or "male." Sometimes doctors do surgeries on intersex babies and children to make their bodies fit binary ideas of "male" or "female". Doctors always assign intersex babies a legal sex (male or female, in most states), but, just like with non-intersex people, that doesn't mean that's the gender identity they'll grow up to have. This brings up questions about whether or not it's OK to do medical procedures on children's bodies when it's not needed for their health.

Being intersex is a naturally occurring variation in humans, and it isn't a medical problem — therefore, medical interventions (like surgeries or hormone therapy) on children usually aren't medically necessary. Being intersex is also more common than most people realize. It's hard to know exactly how many people are intersex, but estimates suggest that about 1-2 in 100 people born in the U.S. are intersex.

There are many different ways someone can be intersex. Some intersex people have genitals or internal sex organs that fall outside the male/female categories — such as a person with both ovarian and testicular tissues. Other intersex people have combinations of chromosomes that are different than XY ( usually associated with male) and XX (usually associated with female), like XXY. And some people are born with external genitals that fall into the typical male/female categories, but their internal organs or hormones don't.

If a person's genitals look different from what doctors and nurses expect when they're born, someone might be identified as intersex from birth. Other times, someone might not know they're intersex until later in life, like when they go through puberty. Sometimes a person can live their whole life without ever discovering that they're intersex.

## What happens when someone is born intersex?

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Most of the time when a baby is born intersex, doctors and the family decide on a sex, either male or female, and raise the baby as the gender expected of that sex. It's pretty common for surgery to be done on the baby's genitals and also for the child to be given hormones to make them fit into male/female categories as they go through puberty.

But activism by and for intersex people is growing, leading to some changes in our culture, which right now treats intersex as a medical problem instead of a natural, healthy way bodies can be. Today, more and more people believe unnecessary surgery and other medical interventions shouldn't be done on intersex babies and children at all. Instead, intersex people should be able to decide for themselves when they're older if they want treatment or surgery.

If you have a child who's intersex, the best thing you can do is support them and love them for who they are. It's also a good idea to find some support from other parents with children who are intersex, and make sure your child has opportunities to connect with other children who are intersex. A good place to start is [InterACT](#).

# What are gender roles and stereotypes?

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 [plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/what-are-gender-roles-and-stereotypes](https://plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/what-are-gender-roles-and-stereotypes)

Our society has a set of ideas about how we expect men and women to dress, behave, and present themselves.

## What are gender roles?

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Gender roles in society means how we're expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct ourselves based upon our assigned sex. For example, girls and women are generally expected to dress in typically feminine ways and be polite, accommodating, and nurturing. Men are generally expected to be strong, aggressive, and bold.

Every society, ethnic group, and culture has gender role expectations, but they can be very different from group to group. They can also change in the same society over time. For example, pink used to be considered a masculine color in the U.S. while blue was considered feminine.

## How do gender stereotypes affect people?

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A stereotype is a widely accepted judgment or bias about a person or group — even though it's overly simplified and not always accurate. Stereotypes about gender can cause unequal and unfair treatment because of a person's gender. This is called sexism.

There are four basic kinds of gender stereotypes:

- Personality traits — For example, women are often expected to be accommodating and emotional, while men are usually expected to be self-confident and aggressive.
- Domestic behaviors — For example, some people expect that women will take care of the children, cook, and clean the home, while men take care of finances, work on the car, and do the home repairs.
- Occupations — Some people are quick to assume that teachers and nurses are women, and that pilots, doctors, and engineers are men.
- Physical appearance — For example, women are expected to be thin and graceful, while men are expected to be tall and muscular. Men and women are also expected to dress and groom in ways that are stereotypical to their gender (men wearing pants and short hairstyles, women wearing dresses and make-up).

Hyperfemininity is the exaggeration of stereotyped behavior that's believed to be feminine. Hyperfeminine folks exaggerate the qualities they believe to be feminine. This may include being passive, naive, sexually inexperienced, soft, flirtatious, graceful, nurturing, and accepting.

Hypermasculinity is the exaggeration of stereotyped behavior that's believed to be masculine. Hypermasculine folks exaggerate the qualities they believe to be masculine. They believe they're supposed to compete with other men and dominate feminine folks by being aggressive, worldly, sexually experienced, insensitive, physically imposing, ambitious, and demanding.

These exaggerated gender stereotypes can make relationships between people difficult. Hyperfeminine folks are more likely to endure physical and emotional abuse from their partners. Hypermasculine folks are more likely to be physically and emotionally abusive to their partners.

Extreme gender stereotypes are harmful because they don't allow people to fully express themselves and their emotions. For example, it's harmful to masculine folks to feel that they're not allowed to cry or express sensitive emotions. And it's harmful to feminine folks to feel that they're not allowed to be independent, smart or assertive. Breaking down gender stereotypes allows everyone to be their best selves.

## **How can I fight gender stereotypes?**

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You probably see gender stereotypes all around you. You might also have seen or experienced sexism, or discrimination based on gender. There are ways to challenge these stereotypes to help everyone — no matter their gender or gender identity — feel equal and valued as people.

- Point it out — Magazines, TV, film, and the Internet are full of negative gender stereotypes. Sometimes these stereotypes are hard for people to see unless they're pointed out. Be that person! Talk with friends and family members about the stereotypes you see and help others understand how sexism and gender stereotypes can be hurtful.
- Be a living example — Be a role model for your friends and family. Respect people regardless of their gender identity. Create a safe space for people to express themselves and their true qualities regardless of what society's gender stereotypes and expectations are.
- Speak up — If someone is making sexist jokes and comments, whether online or in person, challenge them.

- Give it a try — If you want to do something that's not normally associated with your gender, think about whether you'll be safe doing it. If you think you will, give it a try. People will learn from your example.

If you've been struggling with gender or gender identity and expectations, you're not alone. It may help you to talk to a trusted parent, friend, family member, teacher, or counselor.