# KINDNESS AND GENDER IDENTITY

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## Kindness and Gender Identity: How Are They Connected?

In thinking about gender, children's development, and kindness, we want to create safe spaces for children's exploration. Children, especially our youngest school children, seek to understand gender through categories, which are often binary (male vs. female, masculine vs. feminine, etc.). This reflects a lot of what they see and hear around them regarding gender, but it is also a reflex of their developmental stage. Our role as educators is to keep possibilities open and to keep kindness at the forefront of our classrooms and teaching, so that children who don't conform to gendered expectations still feel safe and welcome in our educational environments.

The included infographic, "The Gender Unicorn," helps adults understand the different developmental categories that form in our students. Adults often conflate these categories (male sex organs = man = masculine expression = attraction to women). But, when we use open-ended vocabulary and kind communication, our students can understand and welcome all people into their community alongside the adults in their lives.

## Tips for creating an inclusive and kind classroom for gender development:

1. **No unkind words or making fun:** This should be a firm rule in our educational spaces. There is no space for being unkind to another child or making fun of someone. Take time to help students understand why. Explain that on a Kind Campus, we want everyone to feel safe and welcome. Choose books and other media that prioritize kindness and offer students an opportunity to think about situations when it is not easy to be kind. Come back to the "be kind" Code that you created at the beginning of the year (or make one now!), and use celebrations, holidays, and academic content as opportunities to think about creating kind and inclusive spaces for gender expression. Find creative ways to tie in this critical, foundational lesson as a key to all other learning.

2. **Clothing:** Often kids associate colors with gender. We can create kind and creative classroom environments by expressing that all colors are for all people. Repeat this often, and be the keeper of this motto anytime you hear children using unkind words or embarrassing another child for their choice of clothing or shoe color. If you hear judgmental phrases ("Those shoes are for girls" or "Why do you have on boy's clothes?"), remind students of the fun, inclusive, and kind space that you are creating. Use responses like, "All the shoes are for all the people," "All the clothes are for all the people," and "All the colors are for all the people!" This not only redirects unkind behavior and embarrassment, but it also challenges the gender binary so that children can develop their own tastes, gender identity, and gender expression, free from unkind social shaming.

3. **Pay attention to jobs assigned or assumed:** Even as adults, we fall into traps that boys would like to play with building jobs in the classroom, while girls would like to play with more relational or craft jobs in the classroom. Often our language and the expressions of our expectations help to establish or further reinforce this. Be mindful when introducing content, curriculum, or jobs to your students so that you're not associating certain tasks with certain genders. Make an effort to "cross-associate," encouraging or asking a child who identities as a boy to volunteer for a typically feminine task, and vice-versa with a girl. A kind space encourages students to express their affinities! Our goal is to help students grow their natural talents. But because children are so keen to our adult expectations, be mindful that you are not establishing binary gender norms for your classroom in this way. Talk with another educator and establish mutual accountability, even through occasional observation of one another. Help everyone on your Kind Campus grow by pointing out tendencies that we cannot notice in ourselves.

4. **The Power of Language:** It's important that we model and use inclusive and kind language to encourage our students to express themselves. Try referring to groups of students as "folks" or some other fun name (such as, team, squad, troupe, etc.). Have students vote on their own kindness-themed name for your group! Then work to verbally intercept students when they call a group of people "guys." Gently interrupt with terms "guys and girls," "people," or "friends." Use whatever feels comfortable to you! The kindness comes through modeling inclusive language and then interrupting in a warm way that supports children without shame, so they can learn to modify their own language. We can also work to avoid dividing students by gender, or creating gendered identifiers/name tags (such as flowers for girls and sports themes for boys, or even just pink and blue). Finally, change job titles ending in "-man" to be inclusive: fireman to firefighter, policeman to police officer, "manning the desk" to "staffing the desk," etc.

## Kindness and Gender Identity Activities

**Teaching Tolerance** has a great activity that teachers can do with their students at:
*http://www.tolerance.org/toolkit/toolkit-gender-spectrum.*
The language of this activity would need to be modified for younger students, but could still be very powerful for everyone!

**Redefining Labels:** These words and job titles are gender-specific, but a more kind and inclusive language would modify them to be inclusive and gender fair or neutral. Work with students to think of ways to change these titles to make them more inclusive.

| | |
|---|---|
| foreman | repairman |
| fisherman | congressman |
| manpower | housewife |
| weatherman | mailman |
| policeman | sportsmanship |
| anchorman | man-made |
| meter maid | cleaning lady |
| men working | journeyman |
| freshman | manhole |
| landlord | tomboy |

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**be kind** *ben's bells project*

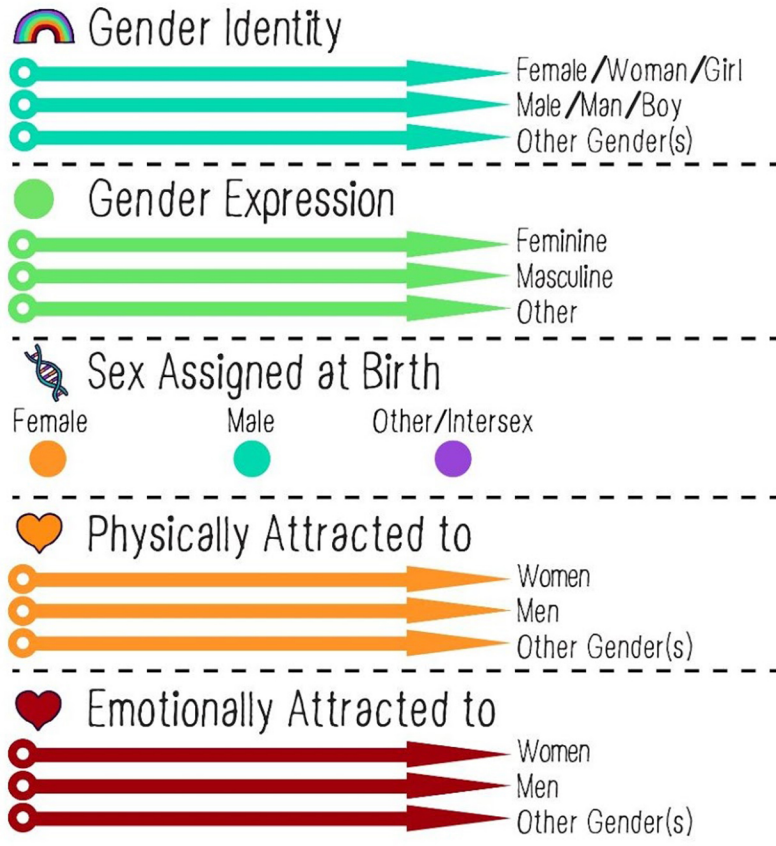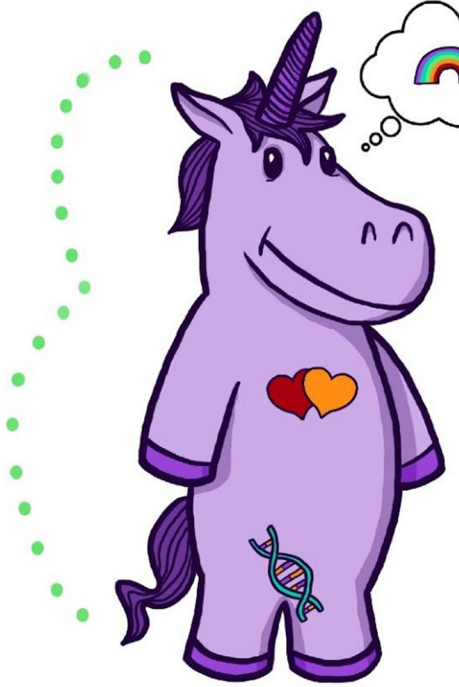## Want to Know More About Kindness and Gender Identity?

❁ There is an excellent guide on Healthy Gender Development and Young Children for Early Childhood Programs and Professionals: *https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/healthy-gender-development.pdf*.

❁ The Human Rights Campaign has a great article on creating inclusive classrooms: *http://www.hrc.org/blog/four-ways-to-make-a-classroom-gender-inclusive*.

❁ This article from The Guardian explains how Sweden has implemented gender-neutral schools: *https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/feb/02/swedish-schools-gender-alien-concept*. If you are interested, here are the guidelines for their pedagogy: *http://www.sodermalmsforskolor.se/egalia/extern/our-pedagogy.htm*.

❁ This CNN report showcases steps that some schools have taken to create more inclusive schools; it also offers some tips to get started: *http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/03/living/children-gender-inclusive-schools/index.html*.



The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by: **TSER** — Trans Student Educational Resources

**Gender Identity**
- Female/Woman/Girl
- Male/Man/Boy
- Other Gender(s)

**Gender Expression**
- Feminine
- Masculine
- Other

**Sex Assigned at Birth**
- Female
- Male
- Other/Intersex

**Physically Attracted to**
- Women
- Men
- Other Gender(s)

**Emotionally Attracted to**
- Women
- Men
- Other Gender(s)

To learn more, go to:
www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore