

Questions from Parents
On gender identity, sexual identity, pronouns, sex education & child-friendly drag shows

Introduction:

Over the last year, I have received an increase in questions from parents about gender and sexual identity, particularly as these topics relate to child sexual abuse prevention. I am writing this document for parents and professionals who value diversity, inclusion, and safety of all children – and who seek accurate information about child development, gender and sexual identity formation, and best practices in age-appropriate sex education.

This document addresses seven topics based on parent inquiries:

- School confidentiality policies for pronouns
- Sex Education & teaching materials
- Sex Education and LGBTQ+ youth
- Drag Queen story hours
- Bathrooms and gender identity
- Transgender Youth
- Gender & Sexuality Alliances

In each section, I offer some definitions to make sure we are all on the same page about terms.

You will see one common message throughout the entire document: For the safety of all children, please resist the urge to conflate gender and/or sexual identity with grooming and sexually abusing children. When adults confuse these issues, they do a tremendous disservice to LGBTQ+ youth, who need our support, and to all children, who we have committed to protect from sexual abuse.

I stand with all of the National Child Assault Prevention organizations and programs in delivering fact-based information to keep children safe from the terrible crime of child sexual abuse. Please join me in this mission.

Warmly,

Feather Berkower

School Confidentiality Policies for Pronouns

Parent Inquiry:

“Our child’s school has a confidentiality policy around pronouns (gender identity), and I’m concerned that this is teaching children that it’s okay to keep secrets from their parents. You’ve taught us that secrets are a grooming tactic and I fear that the school is making my child vulnerable to child sexual abuse.”

Parenting Safe Children:

I understand why you asked this question because Parenting Safe Children – and all sexual abuse prevention research – acknowledges that secrets are one of the tactics used by people who groom and sexually abuse children. School policies around gender identity and sexual identity, however, are about confidentiality, not the keeping of unsafe secrets, and thus have nothing to do with grooming or child sexual abuse.

Confidentiality policies around pronouns vary from state to state and school district to school district, but when they exist, they typically give students these rights:

- The right to have the names and pronouns of their choice used by school staff (without requiring a legal name change or court order).
- The right to have input on parental notification, with no mandatory outing of students.

It’s important to distinguish between consent and confidentiality – and secrets. In the case of confidentiality policies around gender or sexual identity, it is the child who is asking for confidentiality and consent, usually because they don’t feel safe or are scared to talk about their feelings at home. And when children do not feel safe at home to talk about feelings around gender identity, sexual identity, or anything else, they will naturally try to find people with whom it is safe to talk – and may find great relief in knowing they can use gender pronouns at school that are in line with who they feel they are.

So what can parents do to create an environment where their children are comfortable talking about gender and sexual identity? You can model open and honest communication, without shame and/or judgment. I know this can be difficult when the topic feels uncomfortable or does not align with your values; however, if you want your child to feel safe and disclose their feelings to you (versus someone else), it’s important to listen deeply to your child’s feelings about everything and anything – including gender identity, gender expression, and sexual identity.

With regard to keeping children safe from sexual abuse, please remember that child sexual abuse occurs most often in one-on-one situations and secret-keeping is coupled with other tactics of grooming – e.g. isolating a child, excessive gift-giving, favoritism, sexualized language, exposure to pornography, abuse of trust – so to keep children safe from sexual abuse, we need to pay attention to multiple grooming tactics and prevention efforts.

As I teach in my [Parenting Safe Children Workshop](#), to keep children safe from sexual abuse, I focus on these evidence-based prevention methods:

1. Teach your children accurate information about their bodies, sexual development, consent, privacy, and healthy relationships. Children who understand their bodies, feel good about themselves, and understand the concept of consent, are less vulnerable to sexual assault.
2. Talk to youth-serving organizations in your children's lives. Ask [questions](#) about policies and tell staff about your child's body-safety rules. All youth-serving organizations ought to have policies for child sexual abuse prevention (and policies supporting LGBTQ+ youth). The more parents who ask to see policies, the more youth-serving organizations will be accountable to developing effective policies that prevent discrimination of any kind based on sexual identity and gender identity (see [US Department of Education, Title IX](#)) and policies that prevent child sexual abuse (see [Parenting Safe Children](#)).
3. Make the school part of your [Prevention Team](#)™.
4. Remind your child that you love them unconditionally, no matter what they share.

These tools are effective no matter where you live, how you identify, who you choose to love, the religion to which you belong, and so forth. When children feel heard and believed, and see that difficult topics can be handled with love and support, they are more likely to disclose grooming or abuse if it occurs.

Sex Education & Teaching Materials

Parent Inquiry:

"I'm concerned that my child's school is exposing our youth to inappropriate sexualized material, under the guise of diversity and inclusivity, and trying to normalize sexual topics."

Parenting Safe Children:

Teaching children about their bodies and their sexual development, in age appropriate ways, is an effective tool for reducing vulnerability to child sexual abuse. All child sexual abuse prevention research and prevention organizations agree on this point.

Laws about sex education requirements vary greatly from state to state, which means that some states and school districts lack access to comprehensive sex education. For information on the status of sex education in your state, visit [The National Conference of State Legislatures](#) or [The Sex Ed State Law and Policy Chart](#).

In Colorado, where I reside, school sex education is not required, but if a district does elect to provide sex education certain criteria must be met, per House Bill 1032 and by the [Colorado Department of Education](#).

In short, as a “home rule” state, school districts do not have to teach sex education. If they choose to, however, the sex education must:

- Follow the Colorado’s [Health Education Standards](#), and deliver age-appropriate / grade-appropriate content.
- Provide medically accurate information.
- Be comprehensive, which includes:
 - Consent
 - Multiple pregnancy prevention methods (not just abstinence)
 - Cultural sensitivity to “young people of color, LGBT youth, young people with disabilities, and young people who have experience sexual abuse.”
- Provide parents with notice and the option to “opt-out” of the lessons

To be engaged in your child’s life around sex education, parents can:

1. Ask your schools if they teach sex education and if they do not, let the school district know it is important for the health and safety of all children and teens.
2. Ask to see a copy of the school’s sex education curriculum, just like you would review any program, game, movie, etc., before your child engages with it.
3. As you review the curriculum, be open to the idea that a comprehensive sex education program – inclusive of a spectrum of bodies, genders, and sexual identities – does not “sexualize” or “groom” children, but rather reduces vulnerability to sexual abuse and builds both safety and compassion.
4. Invite the school to meet with you about the curriculum to a) Build your child’s [Prevention Team™](#) and b) Explore how your values may or may not align and what you’ll be teaching at home.
5. Start teaching your child about their bodies, consent, and sexual development before they go to school. Don’t wait for children to ask you questions; be proactive. Check out the [Parenting Safe Children Resource List](#).
6. When providing age-appropriate information about sexual development and answering questions, weave in your cultural and religious values. (“In our culture, we usually think about ----- this way. Other people think ---- about that. People have different values and experiences.”)
7. When answering a child’s question or asserting your values, avoid shame and judgment. If a child senses that there are certain sexual development topics or ideas that are “wrong” or “cannot be discussed,” they may not feel comfortable asking important questions. If they feel they cannot candidly discuss a topic, this may prevent them from disclosing something unsafe that happens to them.

When parents and schools teach children about their bodies and sexual development, in age appropriate ways, they are working together to reduce children’s vulnerability to child sexual abuse.

Sex Education & LGBTQ+ Youth

Parent Inquiry:

“Our school’s sex education class includes discussions about lesbians, gays and transgender people, and I’m concerned that our youth are being groomed, recruited, and sexualized.”

Parenting Safe Children:

Please resist the urge to conflate education about gender identity and sexual identity with “recruiting.” Gender and sexual identity cannot be “recruited!” To learn more about identity formation, please visit the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Likewise, please don’t conflate education about gender identity with “grooming.” Grooming is a set of manipulative behaviors that people who sexually abuse use to gain access to children and their parents. Grooming behaviors include isolating a child, excessive gift-giving, favoritism, sexualized language, exposure to pornography, asking children to keep secrets, and abuse of trust.

Whatever your personal values with regard to sexual identity and gender identity, and whatever you’ve heard, there is no connection between sexual identity/orientation or gender identity and grooming or sexual abuse. Anyone can perpetrate sexual abuse and because most of the population is heterosexual, most people who perpetrate child sexual abuse are heterosexual.

More importantly, 90% of child sexual abuse is committed by people who are known to you and your children – and have their trust: parents, coaches, relatives, school personnel, religious clergy, and older youth.

- Please work together to reduce the chances of child sexual abuse in your community, with research-based and data-informed tools. See [Parenting Safe Children](#), [RAINN](#), [Darkness to Light®](#), and [Stop It Now!®](#) for evidence-based prevention material.
- All children have a right to accurate information about sexual development. It is well understood that accurate information reduces child sexual abuse.
- Conflating sexual identity and gender identity with grooming marginalizes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, making them more vulnerable to bullying and self-harm, and less likely to seek support.

Prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth can result in bullying, violence, and even self-harm. Parenting Safe Children stands against discrimination of any kind. To protect children, please remember that we humans have more in common than not, and the protection of our youngest is among those commonalities.

To learn more about keeping children safe from child sexual abuse: [Parenting Safe Children](#). To learn more about gender and sexual identity formation as part of child development: [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Drag Queen Story Hours

Parent Inquiry:

“What do you think about family-friendly drag shows and drag queen story hours at libraries and bookstores? I’m concerned that they are sexualizing children and making them more vulnerable to child sexual abuse.”

Parenting Safe Children:

“Drag” is the art of dressing up as another gender – in an exaggerated manner – for entertainment and includes singing, dancing, lip-syncing, and/or humorous skits. Depending on the venue, the performance may have sexual undertones.

Drag is performed by both gay (homosexual), straight (heterosexual) men and women and people across the gender spectrum. The costumes tend to be quite extravagant, often with full length gowns (the term “drag” may have originated from gowns that “drag” on the floor.) The act of cross-dressing is not deviant: Drag can be found in Shakespeare, Greek theater, Kabuki, Harlem Renaissance, and in both the gay and mainstream communities.

Whether you attend a family-friendly drag queen show or drag queen story hour is entirely up to you as the parent(s). As with all activities involving children (movies, books, concerts, TV, beauty pageants, online games and content, after-school activities, school), Parenting Safe Children recommends that you learn about the content to which your children will be exposed, ask questions, and assert your child’s body-safety rules.

Here are specific questions you might ask if you are considering taking your child to a drag queen story hour:

- How will the performers be dressed?
- What will the performers be reading?
- How will the performers, library staff, and my child be interacting?
- Will there be other activities taking place at the library (music, singing)?

Here are specific questions you might ask if you are considering taking your child to a family-friendly drag show:

- How will the drag queen performers be dressed?
- What will the performers be doing (e.g., song lyrics, dance moves)
- How will the performers and my child be interacting?
- Will there be other activities taking place at the venue?
- Is this show “R-rated” or “PG?”

Bathrooms

Parent Inquiry:

“My daughter is being asked to share a bathroom with a transgender classmate. I think girl parts should be in one bathroom and boy parts in another; otherwise, I’m concerned bathrooms will be places for sexual abuse.”

Parenting Safe Children:

I have received numerous questions from parents about safety, privacy, and behavioral expectations when transgender children wish to use a school bathroom that is consistent with their gender identity (rather than their sex assigned at birth). I addressed many points in a blog post called, [“Bathroom Panic,”](#) and complement this post with these key points:

1. There is no evidence that a transgender child, using the bathroom consistent with their gender identity, poses a safety issue to cisgender children using the same bathroom (a person whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth).
2. There is evidence, however, that transgender and gender-non-binary teens are at an increased risk of sexual abuse when prevented from using bathrooms and locker rooms consistent with their gender identity. ([Pediatrics](#), June 2019.)
3. It is inappropriate for any child to show their genitals or attempt to view another child’s genitals in a bathroom. Such behavior should be addressed immediately by school staff as an individual student matter; as part of this inquiry, school administration should also look at adult supervision, school policies, and the structural set up of the bathroom. There is no more or less risk of inappropriate behavior if transgender children use the bathroom. In fact, most transgender children are self-conscious and want increased bodily privacy.
4. In accordance with the [United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights](#), and [The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act](#), Colorado schools are legally required to allow all students to use the public bathroom consistent with their gender identity. Some transgender students may choose to use an all-gender private bathroom, such as the nurse’s bathroom, for increased privacy. However, transgender students cannot be forced to use a separate bathroom than their peers. Additionally, please note that federal law (Title IX) prevents school staff from talking about any particular student to anyone other than that student’s legal guardian, so transgender status and other identifying information is private.
5. If a cisgender student is uncomfortable using a bathroom with a transgender child, they can request to use a separate bathroom (e.g. the nurse’s bathroom). Keep in mind that this is a lack of comfort and not a lack of safety. There is no evidence that transgender children pose a safety concern to anyone when they are using the bathroom consistent with their gender identity.

6. To keep all children safe from child sexual abuse, please educate others about the facts and alleviate the fears generated by the myths about transgender people and children. In the absence of facts, these myths contribute to discrimination and they fail to keep us focused on the things we CAN do to protect children from child sexual abuse:
- Educate yourself about grooming behaviors so you can spot behaviors of concern.
 - Teach children the difference between secrets and surprises. A secret is something that someone asks you “never” to tell and makes you feel uncomfortable. A surprise is something that makes you feel good and will come out into the open like a gift or a party.
 - Maintain a “No secrets” policy in your home. Let your children know that secrets are not safe to keep, but surprises are okay. Instead of saying, “Don’t tell Mom I let you stay up tonight or we’ll both get into trouble,” you might say, “I’ll let you stay up late tonight and if Mom and I disagree about bedtime, we’ll work it out. It’s not your problem.”
 - Discuss boundaries around touch with all of your child’s caregivers, including family members, coaches, teachers, and faith leaders, and let caregivers know that your child does not keep secrets and has permission to tell you everything.
 - Let adults know that your child has permission to say “No” if they ever feel unsafe.
 - And teach your children about consent!

To learn more about keeping children safe from child sexual abuse: [Parenting Safe Children](#). To learn more about gender and sexual identity formation as part of child development: [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Transgender Children

Parent Inquiry:

“It seems like there’s an increase in the number of transgender children and I can’t help but wonder if children are being encouraged or even groomed at school and in the media to change gender and explore their sexuality. How else would you explain this?”

Parenting Safe Children:

I will address this question in two parts:

First, yes, there has been an increase in the number of transgender teens (from 0.7 to 1.4% of teens) and adults. Here are some possible reasons ([Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2022](#)):

- Inaccuracies in previous estimates
- Evolving language and social acceptance allowing people to express their authentic gender identities (just like in the 1990’s when lesbian and gay people were coming out in record numbers due to changing social norms and a new sense that it would be safer to do so).
- The role of social media in helping teens and young adults find friendships, community, and courage to “come out of the closet.”

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Second, please resist the urge to confuse education about gender identity with “recruiting.” Gender and sexual identity cannot be “recruited.” Explaining the concept of gender identity and the importance of using preferred pronouns makes for a safer and more respectful school community.

Likewise, please don’t confuse education about gender identity with “grooming,” which refers to manipulative behaviors that people who sexually abuse minors use to gain access to children and their parents. Grooming behaviors include isolating a child, excessive gift-giving, favoritism, sexualized language, exposure to pornography, asking children to keep secrets, and abuse of trust. When adults use the term “grooming” incorrectly, they are making children more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

To learn more about keeping children safe from child sexual abuse: [Parenting Safe Children](#). To learn more about gender and sexual identity formation as part of child development: [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)

Parent Inquiry:

“I learned that my child’s school has a GSA (Gender & Sexuality Alliance) and participation does not require parental consent. I don’t like this because it means youth and staff are keeping secrets from parents.”

Parenting Safe Children:

What are GSAs?

Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) play a vital role in creating safe and inclusive environments in schools for LGBTQ+ students. A GSA is a student-led group, and like other student-led clubs, has at least one staff person who is the “sponsor” or “advisor.” A GSA typically:

- Offers safety and support for LGBTQ+ youth.
- Combats bullying.
- Advocates for equity.

When students disclose their gender and sexual identity to teachers, it’s crucial for educators to respond with empathy, respect, and confidentiality. Confidentiality helps youth feel like they can trust someone with their personal experiences, without fear of judgment or negative repercussions.

Confidentiality vs. Secrets

Confidentiality is different from keeping secrets from parents. Confidentiality is about safeguarding sensitive information shared by the student, but if there is a legitimate concern for the student’s safety or well-being, educators are ethically bound to seek appropriate support and intervention.

Grooming and GSAs

Gender & Sexuality Alliances do not “groom” children and suggesting this is a misinterpretation of the term, and leaves children who are in fact being groomed more vulnerable to child sexual abuse. Misleading information can be harmful and perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discrimination.

Gender & Sexuality Alliances support and empower students, not exploit or manipulate them. When youth don’t feel comfortable talking with their parents or relatives about their gender or sexual identity, they naturally turn to adults they can trust and sometimes that person is an educator. It should also be noted that youth who don’t feel comfortable, welcome, or safe talking with their parents are also more vulnerable to child sexual abuse by an actual person who abuses children. Creating a safe space at school helps these students feel valued and respected, which can lead to improved mental health and academic performance.

Educators do work towards connecting students with safe, affirming family members whenever possible. When educators and family members are jointly affirming, the mental health, academic performance, and physical wellbeing of our youth are greatly improved.

Glossary of Terms

Binary means “two parts.” Non-binary denotes a gender identity in which the individual does not identify as exclusively male or female; the individual might feel like they are a mix of genders, somewhere in between or no gender at all. People who identify as binary use the pronouns he/him or she/her. People who are non-binary commonly use the pronouns they/them, and you may also hear people who identify as non-binary use she/they or he/they. Gender classification varies by culture. Ask people what pronouns they prefer.

Cisgender is a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth. (e.g., someone who identifies as a man and was male-assigned at birth). If a person is not transgender, they are cisgender.

Diversity is about our identities and our differences. There are so many kinds of diversity – e.g., based on race, gender identity, sexual identity, class, age, geography, cognitive and physical, and more. Valuing diversity means that we recognize, acknowledge and appreciate our differences as valuable – and seek to build diverse environments which amplify a broader range of voices and ideas.

Drag is the art of dressing up as another gender – in an exaggerated manner – for entertainment, and includes singing, dancing, lip-syncing, and/or humorous skits. A drag queen is a performer, usually someone with a male gender identity, who dresses in drag, and a drag king is a performer, usually someone with a female gender identity, who dresses in drag.

Gender Identity is the internal perception of one’s gender based on how much they align or don’t align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Common gender identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, transgender, and more. Self-recognition of gender identity develops over time, much the way a child’s physical body does.

Grooming refers to manipulative behaviors that people who sexually abuse minors use to gain access to children and their parents. Grooming behaviors include isolating a child, excessive gift-giving, favoritism, sexualized language, exposure to pornography, asking children to keep secrets, and abuse of trust.

Inclusivity is about fostering an environment (school, place of worship, extended family, workplace) that values diversity and welcomes and includes diversity of thought, identity, experience, and language in all aspects of the organization.

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer. The “+” stands for other sexual identities not covered in the acronym.

Sexual Identity (or sexual orientation) is the type of sexual, romantic, emotional/spiritual attraction one feels for others. An individual’s sexual identity is independent of their gender identity. An individual who is transgender may sexually identify as straight, gay, bisexual or something else. Like gender identity, sexual identity can’t be changed and can’t always be predicted in early childhood.

Transgender is used to describe a person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on the sex assigned at birth (e.g., someone who identifies as a woman, but was assigned male at birth). It is also an umbrella term covering a range of identities that transcend socially defined gender norms.

For a glossary of terms, please visit [HRC](#).