

Preparing Students for the Transition of a Transgender or Gender Diverse Peer

You have just found out that a transgender student will be transitioning to affirm their gender identity in your class. You want to prepare your students for this transition, and do your best to minimize potential bullying and harassment, as well as equip classmates to be friends and allies.

So, what do you need to consider in having this conversation with your class?

The following document is meant to assist school staff with key considerations and language to approach a conversation regarding the upcoming transition of a trans classmate.

Depending on the grade and age level of the class with whom you will be speaking, there will be differences in the way in which the information is approached. However the following key messaging will remain a baseline frame of reference regardless of age or grade level.

We suggest approaching a conversation that prepares students for the transition of a trans peer by following these steps:

1. Model a Supportive Attitude
2. Teach the Basics
3. Use Affirming Language with Respect to the Transition
4. Discuss What Will Change
5. Negotiate Solutions to Potential Slip Ups in Affirming Identity
6. Explicitly Discuss what Constitutes (Transphobic) Bullying
7. Reaffirm School's Commitment to a Safe Learning Community for Everyone
8. State Your Availability for Further Questions
9. Small Group Follow-Up
10. Further Opportunities for Self-Selected Allies

1. Model a Supportive Attitude

As the person leading the conversation, your level of comfort in approaching the topic of transition and normalizing this aspect of life and human identity will be absolutely vital to how well-received the information will be by students. Students will rely on your exhibited level of ease about the transition to inform their own reactions to the situations.

This conversation will be a crucial time for you to model support for the transitioning student, as well as kindness towards, and openness about, diversity in human reality.

When it comes to body language and tone of voice, be cognizant of the ways in which your body may contradict statements of serious commitment to positive support.

For example if you normally communicate serious issues and requests about respect to the class by making firm eye contact with each of the students in a way that demands their acknowledgement, then practice ensuring you are confident enough with the subject matter of transition to do the same. If you diverge from your pattern, for example by not holding students accountable to your eye contact when discussing consequences of transphobia, or by using a tone of voice that is less demanding, students will undoubtedly pick up on these cues.

As another example, if you normally have discussions of a thoughtful nature with students by having them sit in a circle, then ensure the conversation about transition occurs in the same way.

Consistency will support students' psychological association between spatial placement, and topics that they are expected to take with heightened attention and responsibility.

2. Teach the Basics

Regardless of how you approach the conversation specific to grade level, and the best way to situate the upcoming conversation within prior-learnings and social dynamics of your class, the following three scaffolded steps to teach the basics are applicable. Each step is of course open to a range of learning complexity at the discretion of the educator.

a. Allow Students to Situate Themselves within the Conversation

The first step should be to consider how best to get students to see themselves *as part of* the conversation around gender diversity.

One of the best ways to do this is to begin by pointing out that we all have a gender identity. All of us have a sense of ourselves as a man or a woman or neither or both or something else entirely. And we all have experience about what it means to identify with that gender identity according to how others think we should look, act, and behave.

From there the conversation can branch out to talk about the gender binary. For higher grades this can be done in a more involved and complex way such as discussing the gender binary as situated in a socially constructed European ideology that was brought to Canada through colonization.

While there will be a broader range in complexity of answers, the following reflections are largely applicable across age ranges:

- What does it really mean to be a boy or a girl?
- What does society say about what it means to be a boy/girl/neither?
- How have students themselves contradicted some of these stereotypes or narratives about what it means to be a boy/girl/neither?
- Have students ever felt like they weren't "masculine" or "feminine" enough?
- How have others tried to define their gender identity and expression *for* them, and how did that make them feel?

b. LGBTQ Acronym

All students, from elementary to high school can begin their learning by understanding the identities represented by the LGBTQ acronym: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning.

Reviewing this acronym will introduce the term transgender.

For your reference, the definition of transgender is as follows:

Transgender: refers to a person who does not identify either fully or in part with the gender associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. It is often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions.

c. Components of Human Identity: Cisgender and Transgender

To aid students with an understanding of what it means to be transgender, one inevitably opens up a discussion about the different components of human identity. For a visually supportive graphic, we suggest using *The Genderbread Person* at itspronouncedmetrosexual.com.



Gender Identity

Sex/ Assigned Sex

Of most importance is that peers understand:

1. Gender identity and assigned sex are two different, and separate components of human identity.
2. Sometimes they are “the same” and someone is *cisgender*.
3. Sometimes they are “not the same” and someone is *transgender*.
4. Gender identity originates from the brain (mind), not from what someone’s body looks like/ or what’s in their pants.

3. Use Affirming Language with Respect to the Transition

At this point, so long as the student has given explicit permission and consented to being directly spoken about, you can introduce the name of their peer who is transgender and state when they will be arriving to school in a way that reflects their authentic gender identity.

For example:

- On Monday, Jay will be arriving to school as their true self, a boy.
- Jay is a boy, and always has been. To live his true self, Jay will come to school on Monday presenting as a boy, and using male pronouns.
- While you have known Jay as a girl, that is not who he is, and he would like to share his real identity with you as a boy.

Be cognizant to not use language that implies this is a “switching” of genders, or statements that make it seem like the student was not *always* the gender identity they will be presenting as.

The following example phrasings can imply trans identities are false, which is damaging and should not be used to explain the transition:

- On Monday, Jay *will now* be a boy.
- Jay *used to be* a girl, but *is now* a boy. And so on Monday we will use masculine pronouns.
- On Monday, Jay *will no longer be* a girl, and will come to school as a boy.
- On Monday, Jay *becomes* a boy.
- Even though Jay *was a* girl, he will come to school as a boy on Monday.
- *Jayden* is a boy. [*using birth name instead of affirmed name*]

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust is Canada’s only national charity promoting LGBT human rights through research, education and community engagement.

4. Discuss What Will Change

Next it should be explicitly stated and outlined what will change and what is expected of students in supporting their peer by affirming their identity:

- **Gender Presentation:** If the trans student will be changing their gender expression to be more feminine, masculine or androgynous in a way that will be noticeable enough to warrant discussion, than it should be spoken about.
 - Reiterate that all people regardless of gender are free to express themselves how they choose, and feel most comfortable. Boys can wear dresses and nail polish, and girls can wear sports jersey's and basketball sneakers. Just because the trans student is asking that their identity be affirmed, does not necessarily mean their gender presentation will change, or that they are expected to conform to the traditional gender presentation associated with their gender identity.
- **Pronouns:** Explicitly state that the student will now use feminine/masculine/neutral pronouns to affirm their identity.
 - For example: "Jay uses masculine pronouns. So you will say "he," "him" and "his" when referring to Jay."
- **Name:** If a student is changing or altering their name it should be explicitly stated.
 - For example: "Jayden will now be called Jay to better reflect who they are."
- **Washroom/Change room:** If the trans student has expressed their desire to use the washroom/ change room associated with their gender identity this should also be explicitly stated.
 - For example: "Because Jay is a boy, he will use the boy's washroom and change room just like all the other boys do."

5. Negotiate Solutions to Potential Slip Ups in Affirming Identity

There will undoubtedly be a transition time for peers and staff as they adjust to affirming the identity of the transitioning student. This is normal and should be communicated as such.

For example you can say to the students:

- It is okay to make some mistakes at first, it's normal. However it is important that you show you are trying to remember, and to be respectful if you do slip up.

It's important to follow this up by equipping students with the language to catch themselves and others if they make a mistake. Open up a discussion with the students, ask them what they think they should do if they make a mistake, or if they hear someone else accidentally use the wrong name or pronoun. Engage them in actively practicing allyship as much as you are able.

A main solution agreed upon by students should be that if a mistake happens, they apologize and then automatically correct themselves in the sentence.

For example:

- Ask Jay if I can borrow her pencil sharpener. Sorry, I mean *his* pencil sharpener.
- Hey Jayden can you hand me that ruler. *Sorry*, I mean *Jay*!

Students should also practice correcting each other, by rehearsing possible scenarios such as:

- S1: Ask Jay if I can borrow her pencil sharpener.
S2: Whoops, I think you meant *his*. Yea, I can ask Jay if you can borrow his pencil sharpener.
- S1: Can Jayden come play jump rope with us?
S1: You mean *Jay* right? I'd love if he could come jump rope with us! I'll ask.

6. Explicitly Discuss what Constitutes (Transphobic) Bullying

Having equipped students with the skills to respectfully respond to a slip up in affirmed name and pronouns, it is also important to discuss with students what is considered bullying.

For more on this, please consult the document *What Constitutes Transphobic & Cisnormative Bullying and Harassment*. This will help outline for you and for the students, what transphobia looks and sounds like. Additionally, the document organizes transphobia according to its various forms, and articulates the originating source. This will help you discern which forms of transphobia are more relevant for the age demographic that you are engaging in a conversation.

For example, with elementary grades you may simply need to focus on the fact that purposefully using the wrong name and/or pronoun is hurtful, and is considered bullying. Or discuss gender policing such as, “You can’t wear that, you’re a boy!”

With higher level grades you may incorporate a discussion of misogyny and sexism, and how these types of attitudes are often present in transphobia. This may include actions such as whistling at the trans student in a way that signals sexualized attention, potentially accompanied by assertions such as, “If you want to be a girl, then I’ll treat you like one.”

For another strategy in helping to equip students with the skills to address bullying when they see it happening, refer to the attached appendix.

7. Reaffirm School’s Commitment to a Safe Learning Community for Everyone

Having equipped students with a greater understanding of what transphobia looks and sounds like, it is important to assert that in instances of bullying students will be held accountable to the policies and codes of conduct of the school, and reaffirm the school’s policy stance on bullying and harassment.

Use the school’s code of conduct and anti-bullying policies to directly quote the responsibility of all school members to treat everyone with equal dignity and respect. Outline the process through which instances of bullying and harassment can be reported, as well as the potential consequences for transphobic behaviour.

In signalling that transphobia will not be tolerated, and that the school is taking seriously its commitment to ensuring all persons are respected, it may be worthwhile to bring in an individual from beyond the classroom. Especially in situations where securing student commitment to safe and respectful behaviour, and zero tolerance towards transphobia is of larger concern. This message for example can come from the school’s principal or vice-principal, a respected athlete or recognizable figure within the community, or a member of the local police.

Remind students where they can access the school's policies (online, hanging in a certain place in the school, etc.), and who they can talk to if they have any questions related to content, expectations and protocols for holding bullies accountable to their behaviour.

8. State Your Availability for Further Questions

Conclude the conversation by letting students know you are available to them if they have any questions or concerns about being a good friend and ally to their transgender peer.

As much as possible, school staff need to ensure that concerns and curiosities are not being placed on the student who is transitioning. It is not the trans* student's responsibility to educate those around them. Education is the school's responsibility.

To support students in accessing you as a potential resource going forward, articulate how best to approach you. For example, do you have a "feedback and questions" box available in the classroom for students to submit their inquiries, with the potential for anonymity in doing so? Do you have office hours? Are you somewhere accessible over the lunch hour or a certain resource hour for students to stop by informally to chat? Do you plan on hosting a "lunch and chat" and have reserved a certain day/time for students to eat lunch with you and discuss being a trans ally?

Further options for students to feel supported in their learning and allyship should also be made readily available. Let students know if your school's library contains LGBTQ related content, details about how to join the school's GSA (day, time and location of meetings), and other school staff who have indicated that they are allies, and more than willing to talk about diversity in gender, attraction and expression with students.

9. Small Group Follow-Up

Step 8 officially wraps up the main class conversation with respect to preparing peers for the upcoming transition. However, to confirm this isn't a one-off conversation but an on-going topic worthy of attention, and to ensure you are meeting the needs of peers, there should be a follow-up lesson/ discussion within a day or two once students have had time to process the information.

Ideally the follow-up conversation would occur in smaller groups with one-on-one attention from the leader/ educator of the discussion. Where possible, friends should be separated so that students are able to speak more freely without the influence or peer pressure of friends.

This conversation could be as simple as the leader/educator of the discussion asking students in small groups if they have any questions about their peer's transition, or about trans identities and give them the opportunity to express concerns or inquiries without the pressure of a large group dynamic. This may also be a time to review with students the key concepts and basic teachings that were previously covered and relay more complex information if need be.

10. Further Opportunities for Self-Selected Allies

Undoubtedly there will be students in the classroom who feel motivated to actively engage in demonstrated allyship. This may be because they are within the transitioning student's group of personal friends, because they occupy a leadership position within the school community and feel others are looking to them for answers and guidance, or simply because they recognize the need for more learning so that they may act in allyship to the best of their ability.

Having self-directed learning resources available such as books, video clips, and documentaries that these students can utilize will help in your ability to support the transitioning student and their peers as they each navigate their respective journeys. You should be prepared to recommend reputable websites such as <http://mygsa.ca/>, and a local LGBTQ community centre or support group where students can go to find additional resources and increase their understanding.

You should also look into the various options available through which these students can demonstrate engaged allyship within and outside of the school community. In the school you can suggest that students join or start a GSA, or work with the Student Council to undertake trans-inclusive initiatives. Outside of the school, students may wish to join community efforts in organizing a pride parade, or adding LGBTQ visibility to already existing neighbourhood/ local events.

Appendix

The following chart can be used to assist students in thinking of ways that they can be an ally to their transitioning peer, or anyone else being teased or bullied.

<i>What Can I Do When I See or Hear Bullying?</i>		
	Now	Later
Easy		
Not So Easy		
Difficult		

Example Options for When Students Encounter Name-Calling or Teasing:

<i>What Can I Do When I See or Hear Bullying?</i>		
	Now	Later
Easy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I wouldn't laugh. ▪ I would walk away. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Afterwards I would talk to the person being bullied to make sure they were okay, and let them know I cared about them.
Not So Easy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I would try to change the subject and take the focus off of the person being bullied. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Afterwards I would get a group of friends together and we would go talk to a teacher about what happened and also let the person know we support them.
Difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I would tell the person doing the bullying to stop. ▪ I would tell the person doing the bullying that they are discriminating, and that everyone has a right to be treated equally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it were my friend doing the bullying, I would talk to my friend when we were alone. I would tell them I have another friend who is transgender, and that it hurts me when people make fun of others for being transgender. I would ask them to please not do that anymore.

The above chart has been adapted from a resource tool indicated in the following:

Julie C. Luecke (2011) Working with Transgender Children and Their Classmates in Pre Adolescence: Just be Supportive, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 8:2, 116-156, DOI: 10.1080/19361653.2011.544941