

SPARK

A CONVERSATION

UNDERSTANDING GENDER

What is gender?

Gender refers to a sense of one's self as a woman, a man, neither, both, or a different gender all together.

→ Some examples: agender, woman, nonbinary, genderqueer, man, gender-fluid, Two-Spirit

Gender may or may not align with the sex assigned at birth. In general, if it does align, we're cisgender, and if it doesn't, we're transgender.

What does *gender nonconforming* mean?

Gender is often thought of as binary, meaning only two genders. But gender is really more of a spectrum. Many individuals identify as neither a man nor a woman, but as gender nonconforming or nonbinary.

Nonbinary people are celebrated in many cultures and have existed throughout time. In our current society, gender diversity is beginning to be recognized more, including on things like medical or government forms.

What is your gender?

Most children know their gender between age 3 and 5. What's your gender, and when did you know it?

- Did anything about your gender conflict with societal or cultural expectations? Were you ever told you shouldn't dress or behave in certain ways because of your gender?
- How might our world be different if we didn't assign gender at birth, but waited for people to define it for themselves?

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TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

FOR TALKING WITH AND ABOUT TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NONCONFORMING PEOPLE

Ungender your language.

If you don't know a person's gender or identity terms, it's best not to guess.

- Avoid words like *boyfriend*, *wife*, *ladies*, *guys*, *sir*, *miss*.
- Use words like *partner*, *loved ones*, *folks*, *team*, *friends*, and (if you can pull it off) *y'all*.

Listen and mirror terms.

Listen to how people refer to themselves and their loved ones and mirror those terms.

- Example: If a woman refers to her wife, you now know a way you can be respectful to this woman—switch from the excellently chosen, ungendered word *partner* to *wife*.

Always use current names and pronouns.

Follow this simple rule, even when referring to the past.

- Example: Say, "I loved Elliot Page in the movie *Juno*." Even though he wasn't using his current name when that film was made, this is the way to refer to him in the past.

Created by Jeannie Gainsburg in collaboration with the George Eastman Museum to accompany *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults* by Jess T. Dugan and Vanessa Fabbre (June 19, 2021–January 2, 2022). The exhibition is organized by Barrett Barrera Projects and supported at the Eastman Museum by Trillium Health and Matt Haag & Bill Schaefer and the Schaefer-Haag LGBTQ Advocacy Fund.

Jeannie Gainsburg is the author of the book *The Savvy Ally*. For more tips on how to be an LGBTQ+ ally, go to her website: savvyallyaction.com.