

The background of the cover features a series of diagonal, overlapping streaks in a rainbow color palette (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, pink). Scattered throughout the background are numerous small, solid-colored circles in various colors, including red, pink, purple, blue, green, yellow, and orange. The overall effect is vibrant and celebratory.

Guidance for

**SUPPORTING**

# **GENDER DIVERSITY**

in **Early Childhood Education**

**Jenny Fererro, MS,**  
with  
**Rebecca Bishop**



Guidance for  
**SUPPORTING  
GENDER  
DIVERSITY**  
in **Early Childhood Education**

**Jenny Fererro, MS,**  
with  
**Rebecca Bishop**

  
Gryphon House

## **COPYRIGHT**

© 2022 Jenny Fererro and Rebecca Bishop

Published by Gryphon House, Inc.

P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023

800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 [fax]

Visit us on the web at [www.gryphonhouse.com](http://www.gryphonhouse.com).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or technical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior written permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States. Every effort has been made to locate copyright and permission information.

Cover and interior images used under license from Shutterstock.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022934301

## **BULK PURCHASE**

Gryphon House books are available for special premiums and sales promotions as well as for fund-raising use. Special editions or book excerpts also can be created to specifications. For details, call 800.638.0928.

## **DISCLAIMER**

Gryphon House, Inc., cannot be held responsible for damage, mishap, or injury incurred during the use of or because of activities in this book. Appropriate and reasonable caution and adult supervision of children involved in activities and corresponding to the age and capability of each child involved are recommended at all times. Do not leave children unattended at any time. Observe safety and caution at all times.





**DEDICATION**

For all gender-creative children and the early childhood educators working to make their classrooms and programs inclusive and welcoming for **all** children.



# TABLE *of* CONTENTS

vi	<b>FOREWORD</b>	
ix	<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	
xi	<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> A Journey with Gender	
1	<b>CHAPTER 1:</b> Gender Basics	
29	<b>CHAPTER 2:</b> The Importance of Affirmation and Support	
45	<b>CHAPTER 3:</b> Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education: Reinforcement for Supporting Gender Diversity	
57	<b>CHAPTER 4:</b> The Role of the Early Childhood Teacher	
79	<b>CHAPTER 5:</b> The Role of the Early Childhood Administrator	
95	<b>CHAPTER 6:</b> Support for Families: Ensuring Positive Communication about Gender Diversity	
109	<b>CHAPTER 7:</b> In the Future...	
116	<b>APPENDICES:</b> Appendix A: Gender-Diversity Resources for Early Childhood Professionals	
124	Appendix B: Recommended Children's Books	
128	Appendix C: Gender-Diversity Resources for Parents and Families	
131	<b>REFERENCES</b>	
138	<b>INDEX</b>	


# FOREWORD

It would be unfair to share my story without acknowledging the incredible privilege I hold as a middle-class, light-skinned, cis-presenting woman living in a reliably blue state. So while I identify as biracial (Black/White), genderqueer (she/they), and neurodiverse (autistic), none of these identities are apparent to strangers. I find safety in ambiguity. The same is true for my eleven-year-old transgender son, Sunny. No one would mistake him for anything but a happy, healthy tween boy for whom the whole world is his oyster. The difference is that those strangers' first impressions of Sunny are 100 percent true.

I count Sunny and myself as lucky. We haven't suffered for our identities or been pushed to the margins because we choose to live out loud. We owe much (if not all) of our health, happiness, and safety to our privilege. But the impact of Sunny's privilege also serves as an example of what is possible when trans people's identities are affirmed by those closest to them: family, friends, teachers, religious leaders, and community.

Thus far, Sunny's story is uncommon, his childhood idyllic. When he first started showing clear preferences—for certain types of clothing, toys, and activities—at two years old, we figured he was trying to be more like his older brothers, not expressing his gender identity. Then, there were times when Sunny drew himself as a boy with short hair or refused to wear a dress for holiday pictures with Santa. All fine by us. He was barely out of diapers, so we thought, "What could Sunny know about gender?" His father and I were far more curious about than alarmed by Sunny's declarations, but we were also naive to how real and meaningful they were for him and his well-being.





Sunny was in kindergarten when he asked to cut his hair short and was in second grade when he asked for a suit and bowtie to wear to our church's holiday show. The signs that he didn't fit neatly into a binary gender box were all there. Eventually, with the guidance of two trans women in our community, my husband and I started attending a local PFLAG meeting for transgender adolescents and their families.

Around that time, I recalled a conversation I had had with my midwife during my pregnancy with Sunny. Louise didn't order routine ultrasounds, but we were anxious to know the sex of our fourth child, so we decided to get one on our own. Louise offered, "You can find out *what* you'll get but never *who* you'll get." She was right, thank goodness. Watching my five babies become full-grown people with opinions, passions, and dreams for the future surprises and nourishes me daily.

Louise's message wasn't just wise; it was prophetic. When Sunny came home from school one day not acting like himself, I knew something was very wrong. "They separated the boys and girls into different teams in gym today. I don't want to be with the girls," he said with eyes downcast. It was happening. Over the next several hours, Sunny shared what we had long anticipated. He wanted to change his name. He wanted to use he/him pronouns. He was a boy.

That was a Friday. We emailed his second-grade teacher, and she immediately began preparations to welcome *him* back to school on Monday. She would change the name tags on his desk and cubby and set up meetings for us to meet with the school's guidance counselors, principal, and vice principal. Sunny would use the bathroom of his choice, and his bus driver would be briefed on the update before Sunny was picked up on Monday morning. Everything was going to be okay. Like I said, lucky.

Our church, his guitar teacher, and his jujitsu sensei responded with the same warmth and assurance that Sunny would be safe in their care. Not one member of our immediate or extended family batted an eyelash. Sunny was Sunny, and he was a boy—no big deal.

But being this lucky doesn't always feel good. I'm reminded of our exceptional experience constantly. Lawmakers seem to introduce another piece of anti-trans, anti-child legislation every day. Trans adolescents continue to hurt themselves because their communities refuse to accept them and their schools refuse to protect them.

I look at Sunny—a beautiful, happy, well-liked, curious child—and I can't imagine anyone would think there was anything *wrong* with him or kids like him. While writing this, I asked Sunny what being an eleven-year-old trans boy



is like, and he said, "I don't know, normal." What do his friends think? "Mom, it's no big deal. We don't talk about it. Danny asked me if I could turn into a robot, like a Transformer. It's a joke. Don't worry." This is eleven.

I don't believe Sunny's purpose is to prove trans people's humanity to those who doubt it, but I know that everyone in Sunny's life is better for knowing him. I know that when his friends hear a hateful lie about trans people, Sunny will come to mind as evidence that nothing so ugly could be true.

My hope for this book is that it will allow you, the reader, someone who loves, cares for, and teaches children, to know how critically important it is to affirm them in all the beautiful ways they express what makes them unique. Sunny's experience is uncommon and exceptional but a story every child deserves. It's our privilege as grown-ups to make sure the children in our care have every chance to be happy and healthy, to make the whole world their oyster. We'll all be better for it.

—Rebekah Borucki,  
Author, publisher, mother to five





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to offer our sincere thanks and appreciation to the many parents and families who were generous with their time and trust in sharing their stories and perspectives.

Thank you to the early childhood educators and administrators who provided us with guidance, ideas, and anecdotes.

We appreciate the doctors, therapists, and gender advocates who provided us with important context for understanding the needs of gender-diverse children.

We are especially grateful to the gender-expansive children and young adults who shared their thoughts with us.

Jenny: I want to thank my colleagues at Palomar College for their support for the sabbatical in spring 2020 that led to this book. Many thanks to Camille Catlett and Sarah Garrity for their belief in the value of this work, their encouragement, and for connecting me with Gryphon House. Great love and appreciation to my family, especially my husband and daughter, for their

continuing support. And most of all, thanks to my friend Becca for teaching me, believing in me, and partnering with me.

Rebecca: I am so grateful to Kathie Moehlig and Darlene Tando for their incredible support and to TransFamily Support Services for their dedication to the community. I want to thank my husband, Shane, and our children for their love and patience. A special thank you to my son who encouraged my participation in this book “to help other kids” and who reminded me when I worried about his privacy that I wasn’t actually a movie star or something. Thank you for teaching me and keeping me humble. So much gratitude to the friends and family who have supported our experiences and grown with us. And thank you to Jenny who made this possible. I’m so honored to be part of anything you do.





# INTRODUCTION: A JOURNEY WITH GENDER

## WHO ARE WE?

My name is Jenny Fererro, and I am a professor of child development and early childhood education and a former early childhood teacher. Most of my students are studying to become early childhood educators. I have been a professor for nearly twenty years, and I love helping my students become great teachers and develop a profound respect for children. My interest in gender diversity in early childhood was spurred by my friendships and personal relationships with parents of gender-diverse young children. I am a mother, a wife, a friend, a sister, a daughter, and more. My pronouns are she/her/hers.

My name is Rebecca Bishop\*, and I am a mother of two. I worked previously in the early education field and currently work as a behavioral specialist for children with autism spectrum disorders. I am also an advocate for trans and

nonbinary youth. My older daughter is cisgender. This means we identified her as female at birth, and she has continued to identify with that gender label. Our younger son is transgender. When our son socially transitioned in early childhood, my family and I found ourselves completely overwhelmed by the breadth of information and the lack of community education. Our family was given so many wonderful tools by therapists and advocates, but we consistently had to work hard to integrate what we knew into our son's play and school environments. My pronouns are she/her/hers.

\*My decision to use a pseudonym was made with the support of my family to protect the privacy of my children.

## WHO ARE YOU?

This book is written for early childhood providers: classroom teachers, aides and assistants, and administrators. If you are a person who works with children in the early years (birth to eight years), a parent, or a person interested in child development, then you may also find topics of interest here. While our focus is on classroom-based early childhood programs, families, nannies, and other home-based child-care providers can also benefit. At the end of the book are resources, including websites, books, and more.

Your picking up this book suggests that you are likely a person who is interested in learning more about children's gender development and may be open to exploring new ways of thinking about gender.

## WHAT ARE YOU READING?

This book is designed to provide an introduction to working with and supporting young, gender-diverse children and their families. Rebecca's voice as a parent and advocate will be included throughout the book in Rebecca's Reflections.

This book has a focus on understanding and utilizing available resources. It is designed to provide you with the confidence to begin making changes in your classrooms and programs that will help create supportive and affirming environments for **all** your students. This is *not* an exhaustive resource, but rather a starting point for further growth and learning.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

We decided to write this book after recognizing the gap in knowledge related to gender issues that exists for many early childhood educators. While it

has become common practice to disrupt stereotyped gender roles by encouraging little girls to engage in outdoor play and little boys to use the dress-up area, many early childhood teachers may not truly understand gender identity development, and often feel unequipped to



navigate conversations about gender, support families who have children who are gender creative, or to create classroom environments that are welcoming and supportive of children who are gender diverse. Within our circle of family, friends, and acquaintances, we know many families with young children who identify as transgender and socially transitioned in early childhood. These families are more common than most early childhood education (ECE) professionals think, and they deserve to be recognized and supported.

In 2014, President Obama signed Executive Order 13672, adding gender identity to the categories protected against discrimination in employment in the civilian and federal workforce. This executive order started an ongoing roller coaster of both gender-affirming and transphobic legislation throughout the United States. While the World Health Organization and the U.S. federal government recognize the validity of transgender and nonbinary identities, adults and children continue to be denied protection in many areas. Providing education about the developmental and scientific understanding of gender better equips teachers and families to share accurate information. Normalizing education around gender allows children to learn about gender and gender roles without conflating those with sex and sexuality and can help counter misinformation.

Based on census and population data, it is likely that one or more gender-expansive or LGBTQIA+ children is already enrolled in every child-care center or preschool in the country. It is simply not accurate to say, “I don’t know any children like this.” Transgender youth and gender diversity comprise an area of burgeoning research and interest—resources are multiplying by the year, and acceptance continues to grow. We want to provide a primer and help connect ECE professionals with resources they can use to help improve their teaching and programs. Studies show that children who are gender diverse who are supported at home and in school have far better outcomes than children who are not supported (more on this in Chapter 3). Supporting gender diversity in

the classroom should be a regular part of best practice for ECE educators!

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We offer sections related to gender basics, tips for teachers, tips for administrators, affirming and best practices, support for families, resources, and more. It is recommended that those who are new to the topic begin with Chapter 1: Gender Basics, but the rest of the book is designed to be read in any order, depending on the needs of the reader. Please note that all ECE professionals will find useful information in Chapter 4: The Role of the ECE Teacher, and Chapter 5: The Role of the ECE Administrator. Throughout the book you will find Parent Perspectives, where parents of children who are gender diverse share their experiences and thoughts, and Youth Perspectives, where gender-diverse children and young adults share their opinions.

Please note, throughout this book, *parents* refers to a child's primary adult caregivers, whether that is a sibling, another family member, a guardian, or other main adult.

Remember...

It is always best to learn from those you are learning about. In the past few years, multiple excellent resources compiled and written by gender-diverse authors have been published. There are many excellent resources available, both in print and on the internet, that can provide even more detail and expertise, depending on what you are hoping to learn. It is our hope that this book will help you begin your journey of expanding your understanding of gender, and that you will be inspired to continue to learn and grow.





# CHAPTER 1: **GENDER BASICS**

## SO, WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?

One of the very first questions people ask when they learn of a new baby is “Is it a boy or a girl?” Most Americans think of gender as simple: people are either male or female, boy or girl, and those labels are tied to the body parts hidden by a bathing suit. Adults often teach children from a very early age, “Boys have penises and girls have vaginas.” Ignoring the fact that this is an incorrect pairing—vaginas are internal organs, so it would be more correct to say, “Girls have vulvas”—this explanation of gender is vague and incomplete. A good illustration of the typical American perspective of gender is the common “gender reveal” parties held for pregnant women. Cut into the cake or pop the balloon, and blue icing or confetti means it’s a boy; pink means it’s a girl...



right? Not necessarily! It is impossible to tell a baby's gender identity from an ultrasound or diaper change.

Gender is complicated and much more nuanced than the binary boy/girl, blue/pink ideals that are so commonly advertised. And to best work with children and help them understand gender, adults need to understand these concepts themselves. It can be overwhelming to look at long lists of terminology and definitions, making it easy to throw up our hands and think that people are unnecessarily complicating something that is very simple. But as people who work with children, you care about understanding development, so let's learn!

## GENDER 101: THE BASICS

At a very basic level, gender is what someone feels on the inside about who they are. It's not about body parts, clothing, or hairstyle. And gender has *nothing* to do with sexuality or sexual orientation. Gender is about identity and is tied to a person's sense of self. Gender exists on a spectrum; it is not just male or female. People can experience their gender at any place on that spectrum of gender identity. Assuming gender to be binary is not biological or even universal. Many cultures have *gender variances*, or more than two genders that are recognized and even celebrated. In nature, gender is fluid among many animal species, such as hyenas, colobus monkeys, clownfish, and seahorses.

Let's start with a little bit of terminology:

- **Gender:** social construction of personal identity
- **Sex:** physical characteristics and genetic makeup (what lives under the bathing suit and in the chromosomes). Sex is usually assigned at birth based on external genitalia.
- **Gender identity:** who a person is and how they see themselves (what lives in the brain)
- **Gender expression:** how a person is seen or expresses themselves through external appearance and behavior

Gender is not the same as sex; identity is not the same as expression. And sexual orientation is separate from all of these.

Over the years, many attempts to simply illustrate the spectrums associated with the terminology around gender have been used and developed. One of the most widely accepted is the Gender Unicorn, developed by TSER (Trans Students Educational Resources <https://transstudent.org>).

Open Your Worldview  
to **ENCOMPASS** the  
**GENDER SPECTRUM**  
to create environments that  
**AFFIRM AND ACCEPT ALL CHILDREN.**

+ + + + + + + + + + + + + + +

Based on census and population data, it is likely that one or more gender-expansive or LGBTQIA+ children are enrolled in every early education program in the country. Transgender youth and gender diversity is an area of burgeoning research, and resources are multiplying by the year.

*Guidance for Supporting Gender Diversity in Early Childhood Education* is a starting point—a primer—for early educators who are interested in learning more about working with and supporting young children who are gender diverse and their families. With a focus on understanding children's gender development, this groundbreaking guide reflects the voices of those you are learning about and connects readers with useful resources to improve teaching and programs.

- Explore new ways of thinking about gender.
- Expand your understanding of gender-identity development.
- Discover practical strategies to navigate conversations about gender with confidence.
- Help support families who have children who are gender creative.
- Set the values and tone for a classroom culture that ensures all children feel welcome.

Supporting gender diversity in the classroom should be a regular part of best practice for early educators. Begin your journey of learning today!

**JENNY FERERRO, MS**, is a professor of child development and early childhood education at Palomar College, San Marcos, CA, as well as a former early childhood teacher. In her work, she helps her students become great teachers and develop a profound respect for children. Her pronouns are she/her/hers.

**REBECCA BISHOP\*** is a behavioral specialist for children with autism spectrum disorder and has worked previously in the early education field. She is an advocate for transgender and nonbinary youth and is the mother of a daughter who is cisgender and a son who is transgender. Her pronouns are she/her/hers. \*A pseudonym

  
www.gryphonhouse.com

**GHI5990 \$44.95**

ISBN 978-0-87659-944-0



9 780876 159944 0



5 4 4 9 5 >

+ + + + + + + + + + + + + + +