

What it means to be non-binary: A guide for parents

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Today, 14 states plus New York City and the District of Columbia offer a third gender option on drivers' licenses, allowing those who don't identify as male or female the ability to choose to represent their gender with an "X" instead. Celebrities like actors Indya Moore and Amandla Stenberg, model Rain Dove, activist Jacob Tobia, and TV personality Jonathan Van Ness have come out as non-binary. And in September, *Merriam-Webster* added "they" to the dictionary as a grammatically correct way to describe a non-binary person. It seems that the issue of gender — and of non-binary identities in particular — has never been timelier.

But being non-binary goes beyond simply choosing a particular letter — and it isn't a trend. "We're starting to see more kids at younger ages identifying as non-binary, but it's not a new concept," explains [Col Williams](#), a psychologist in the [Gender Management Service \(GeMS\)](#) at Boston Children's Hospital. "Having new language to describe gender identity may be giving both adults and kids the ability to express what they've already been feeling."

Here, Williams, who is also non-binary and uses "they/them" pronouns, answers parents' common questions about the topic.

Q. My child says they're non-binary. What does that mean?

Like the word "[transgender](#)," "non-binary" is an umbrella term and can mean different things to different people. For some kids, being non-binary means that they don't identify as exclusively male or female. Some non-binary people may feel like they're a blend of both genders, while others may feel like they don't identify with either gender. Williams recalls one child who described their gender identity as a drop of water between two buckets — one "female" and the other "male."

"The key here is that those two male and female 'buckets' of the gender binary just don't work for non-binary folks," says Williams. Ask your child how they personally define "non-binary" to better understand that it means to them.

Q. Could this be a phase?

It's accurately described as an exploration. Gender is a journey for some kids and their families, but it isn't necessarily completely linear or predictable. Some children might first identify as cisgender — their gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth — and later affirm their gender as transgender or non-binary, or vice versa. "A person's gender identity can shift and change over time as they grow," says Williams. "At its heart, it's a journey of authenticity and of just trying to be themselves."

Q. What pronouns should I use for my non-binary child?

One of the best things you can do to support your child is to use their preferred name and pronouns. Indeed, recent [research](#) shows that being allowed to use their chosen name and pronouns at home, school, and work appears to help protect against the risk of depression and suicide in gender-diverse teens.

“Using your child’s chosen language is an incredibly important way to communicate love, support, and affirmation,” says Williams. If you find yourself stumbling over using “they/them/their” pronouns, apologize and understand that it’s a process. If it’s easier, start by using neutral language, like “child” instead of “son” and “sibling” instead of “sister.”

Q. Should my non-binary child see a doctor?

Follow your child’s lead. If they’re experiencing emotional distress, staying home from school, or avoiding activities they used to enjoy — or if they express the desire for more support — it’s worth reaching out for specialty care. That can mean an individual therapist or a comprehensive multidisciplinary program like GeMS. It also helps to have support from someone who understands the lived experience of being non-binary, whether that’s a health care provider or someone in your community.

“At GeMS, we take a really individualized approach to patients,” says Williams. In addition to meeting with a medical doctor, families see a psychologist or social worker, who gets to know your child as a whole person beyond their gender identity and expression. “Keeping kids healthy, happy, and safe are the building blocks of care, and we help support their gender journey as way of achieving that.”