

Schools and Mental Health Project

Transitioning Back to School: Gender, Mental Health, & Education Summit

Meeting Summary

Transgender and gender diverse children have a higher prevalence of mental health diagnoses than children and youth whose gender identity matches their natal sex. Compared to their cisgender peers, they are 3 to 10 times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health condition.¹ The frequency of depression, self-harm, and attempted suicide among transgender/non-binary youth is alarming.²⁻⁴ Over a quarter have attempted suicide and over a third engage in self-injurious behavior such as cutting.⁵ However, recent studies suggest these outcomes are not inevitable. Transgender children who have socially transitioned and live in accordance with their gender identity have lower rates of depression and anxiety than children who are living as their assigned sex at birth.⁶

To understand how we can improve outcomes for transgender children and youth, the Commission sponsored the *Transitioning Back to School: Gender, Mental Health, & Education Summit* on September 7, 2018 in Oakland, California. This meeting was part of a broader stakeholder outreach strategy for the Commission's project on Schools and Mental Health. This strategy includes engaging with a broad array of stakeholders and members of diverse communities to inform commissioners and to help them develop an action agenda for improving access to services and supports.

The September 7 meeting was designed to explore the developmental trajectory of transgender and gender diverse youth, beginning in early childhood and discuss how schools can support these children and reduce their risk of developing mental health problems. The meeting was co-hosted by #Out4MentalHealth and Gender Spectrum. Commissioner Gladys Mitchell, a member of the Schools and Mental Health Project Subcommittee and Executive Director Toby Ewing provided opening remarks. Approximately 70 individuals, including parents, advocates, educators, and mental health professionals, participated in the meeting.

“Trauma, shame, and rejection in children are the trajectory into mental health problems and suicide ideation in transgender and non-binary youth. It starts young.”

*Poshi Walker, #Out4MentalHealth Co-director & LGBTQ Program Director,
NorCal MHA*

Joel Baum of Gender Spectrum began the meeting with a presentation on how all children are affected by gender. Mr. Baum explained that gender is most often understood as a binary between being either female or male (and the identities, behaviors, and appearances associated with each). This binary system can have a negative impact on the well-being of all children, not just those that are transgender. The gender binary system is predicated on stereotypes and expectations about what it means to be a girl or a boy that limit a child's ability to explore their interests, likes, desires, and be true to themselves (e.g., girls are not good at math and science, boys should be strong and independent).

Definition of Terms*

Gender identity is one's internal experience and naming of gender. Most children have a stable sense of their gender identity by the age of 4.

Transgender, gender expansive, gender fluid, gender diverse, and gender non-conforming are some of the terms used to describe a person whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth.

Cisgender is a gender identity that matches one's assigned sex at birth.

Gender binary is a socially constructed system that assumes all people fit into the categories of female/male.

Non-binary identities are identities that do not fit into the gender binary system (i.e., gender queer, gender variant).

Sexual orientation is different than gender and refers to a person's physical and emotional attraction to others.

*Terms and definitions are rapidly changing to account for the complexity of gender and identity.

Our sense of self is organized by gender very early on in development. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, most children have a stable gender identity by the age of four. For children who are transgender or gender diverse, barriers to living according to the gender they identify with can create internal distress (gender dysphoria), even at young ages. Mr. Baum illustrated this point by telling a story of a child in Kindergarten who drew a picture of an elephant trapped in a cage. This child had been trying to tell her parents that she was a girl even though she had been assigned male at birth. Her drawing depicts her sadness and struggle of feeling trapped in a body that did not match her identity.

For many children, there can be a gap between self-realization of being a transgender person and living according to their gender identity. Thus, many years can pass before a young person may even discuss what they have been struggling with internally. In addition, transgender children often experience rejection from their families as well as from their peers. The *2015 National School Climate Survey* found that transgender students face more hostile school climates than other LGBTQ cisgender students including incidents of verbal harassment, physical harassment and assault.⁷ Such experiences undermine a youth's ability to learn and succeed in school. Transgender students who experience high levels of harassment at school miss more days of school and have lower grade point averages than transgender students who experience lower levels of harassment.⁸

As meeting participants noted, the internal struggle that transgender and gender diverse children often feel can be diminished by healthy, safe, and affirming school environments that are gender inclusive. Gender inclusive schools implement various strategies at the district, school, and

classroom level to normalize gender diversity, challenge outdated and limiting notions of gender, and teach children empathy and respect for differences.

“I believe that we can transform our society and that schools play a really big role in doing that...This talk about gender is about creating spaces where kids tell us who they are rather than we telling them who they are.” *Joel Baum, Gender Spectrum*

A panel comprised of parents, educators, and advocates discussed how schools can become more gender inclusive and responsive to the needs of transgender and gender diverse children. There was discussion among the panelists about the importance of schools complying with Assembly Bill 1266, School Success and Opportunity Act, which was approved by Governor Brown in 2013 and became a provision in the California Education Code (Section 221.5(f) in 2014. California law requires that students “be permitted to participate in sex-segregated school programs, activities, and use facilities consistent with their gender identity, without respect to the gender listed in a pupil’s record.”⁹

Panelists expressed concern that too often schools were unprepared to respond effectively when a student identified as transgender or gender diverse, and “scrambled” to accommodate the needs of the student. For example, a mother of three LGBTQ youth discussed some of the challenges her children faced with name and pronoun changes, gender neutral bathrooms, locker room concerns, and substitute teachers; all of which could have been circumvented with clearly defined gender inclusive policies and practices.

Schools and school districts need to create the infrastructure for gender inclusion through policies, professional development, and student information systems. Panelist Kelly King, the Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services emphasized the importance of preserving the privacy of a transgender student and keeping a student’s permanent record (which contains the child’s birth name and assigned sex) in a locked file separate from the school’s records and files. The child’s preferences for their name and gender marker (female, male) are then reflected in the school files, which if desired keeps their transgender status private. It is also an important, albeit first step, in affirming the child’s sense of self and ensuring that teachers and school staff are sensitive to a child’s preferences for their name, use of pronouns, etc.

Facilities such as locker rooms and student bathrooms were another topic of conversation among the panelists and meeting participants. These are public spaces where transgender and gender diverse students feel unsafe and experience harassment and bullying. California law requires that students should have access to bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their gender identity at school. Furthermore, students should be given the choice as to whether they would prefer access to a gender neutral bathroom or locker room. As noted by meeting participants, access to gender neutral facilities at school can inadvertently be restrictive and inconvenient for students. An example is a student who must ask school staff for a key every time they go to the bathroom.

Structural approaches such as those described above provide the foundation for gender inclusion. The day-to-day reality of a gender inclusive approach is relational (inclusive messages, stopping gender-based harassment and bullying) and rooted in curriculum that explores human diversity

and the limitations of gender stereotypes. Gender inclusive practices in schools provide a mental health prevention and early intervention strategy for young students. By making all students feel welcome, physically and emotionally safe, and confident in who they are, they can focus on learning and school success. Ultimately, gender inclusive practices in schools coupled with the love and support of families can help mitigate the risk of children developing later mental health problems.

In sum, the meeting focused primarily on education policy and practice around gender inclusion and support of transgender children and youth. The intersection of mental health and wellness in children and families although discussed during the meeting, requires further investigation as questions remain, such as:

- What types of stressors and challenges do transgender children experience at home and at schools, especially when families are unsupportive of their child's identity?
- How can schools work with communities to educate parents and support healthy family functioning as children are transitioning?
- How can we best identify mental health risk in transgender children and intervene early, without pathologizing their sense of self and identity?
- How can gender inclusive student plans also address the social and emotional wellness of students and build resilience?

Next Steps

Information gathered from the September 7 meeting will be incorporated into the project's final report to be submitted to the Commission in early 2019. During this time, staff will continue to engage with stakeholder and subject matter experts as we seek to answer the questions above and develop policy recommendations for the report that include the needs of transgender and gender diverse children.

In addition, there were several lessons learned during the September 7 meeting. These lessons are rooted in the challenges that transgender and non-binary people encounter when navigating cisgender institutions and social spaces. For example, the bathrooms where the meeting was held were gender assigned rather than gender neutral. For people that are transgender or non-binary, this lack of choice and accommodation can cause distress and add to their sense of marginalization. Future meeting planning should strive to be as inclusive as possible and ensure that all people feel valued and affirmed in who they are.

References

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