

Ask a Lurie Center Researcher

Q. “What is the relationship between autism and gender diversity, and what can I do to support my autistic gender diverse child?”

Gender is often described as binary: male or female. However, gender diversity acknowledges a spectrum that includes a range of identities: male, female, non-binary, agender, intersex, etc. Studies have shown that people with autism are more likely than neurotypical people to be gender diverse. Furthermore, autistic people who identify as gender diverse are at higher risk for mental health challenges, so it is important that parents, caregivers, and practitioners understand how to support them.



First, it is important to clarify that gender diversity is distinct from sexuality—that is, to whom an individual is physically or emotionally attracted. Gender diversity includes an individual’s *gender identity* and *gender expression*, and how those two aspects do, or do not, align with their sex assigned at birth. To break that down a bit more, *gender identity*, describes how an individual thinks about their gender, while *gender expression* describes the decisions an individual makes about their clothing or outward appearance as related to gender.

Examples of health risks for autistic people who identify as gender diverse

- 79% of autistic LGBTQ people report having a mental illness compared to 34% of straight cis-gendered autistic respondents⁶
- Higher rates of smoking, sick days, and health disparities than autistic people who are cisgender⁶
- 3-4x more likely than straight, cisgender respondents with ASD to have unmet healthcare needs (e.g., unable to see a doctor, unable to get needed prescriptions)⁶
- More likely to encounter barriers to counseling and other supports⁷

Recently, a number of research studies have looked at the association between gender diversity and ASD. One of the larger ones, published in 2020, analyzed over half a million people, and found that those identifying as gender diverse were 3 to 6 times more likely to be autistic than those identifying as cisgender (i.e., identifying as the sex assigned at their birth). This same study showed that even in the absence of an ASD diagnosis, gender diverse individuals were more likely to have autistic traits than cisgender individuals.¹ Relatedly, another study found that people with autism more frequently report wishing to be the opposite gender than neurotypical people. Specifically, the researchers found that 7% of autistic adolescents in the United States and 11% of autistic adults, said they wished to be a different gender than their sex assigned at birth, compared with just 3-5% of the general population.²

Exploring gender identity and expression is a normal part of development for many people – including typically developing individuals and those with autism. Unfortunately, people with autism may be perceived as being incapable of

determining their own gender identity. This takes a toll on an individual's mental health, further compounding the mental health risks faced by those with ASD. For reasons that we are only beginning to understand, people with ASD have higher rates of a variety of mental health conditions compared with neurotypical people. For example, a 2020 study found that adults with ASD were over two and half times more likely to have a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder. The authors noted that this was likely to be an *underestimate* of anxiety in those with ASD given that anxiety is often misdiagnosed or missed altogether in people with ASD and co-occurring intellectual disability.³ Another study showed that adults with ASD had three times the rate of depression as those without ASD.⁴ Likewise, gender diverse individuals are another population that are at higher risk of a variety of mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression.⁵ Increasing awareness of the challenges faced by these populations, and especially those at the intersection of both identities, is the first step to improving care, and ultimately well-being.



Supporting your autistic child (of any age)

Parents and families can provide many supports to their children or loved ones who identify as gender diverse or are exploring their gender identity, no matter what their age. Educating yourself is a great first step to understanding your loved one's unique experiences and challenges.

- **Respect Their Identity**

Respect your child's gender identity and pronoun preferences. Use their chosen name and pronouns consistently to show your support and affirmation. When meeting new people, you can tell others your own pronouns too. Keep in mind, a person's chosen names and pronouns may change over time. If you make a mistake with your child's pronouns, apologize, and then use their preferred pronouns. For people with autism who are minimally speaking or non-speaking, adding pronoun choices on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices can allow individuals the space to try out different pronouns and see which ones feel right.

- **Allow and facilitate gendered and non-gendered play and activities**

Be intentional about giving your child access to a broad range of toys and activities, regardless of gendered marketing. For example, for young kids, ensure your child has access to both trucks and dolls, princess costumes and knight's armor. Foster their unique interests and be aware that your own bias may be steering your child towards or away from something based on their gender. This is true for group/extracurricular activities and social groups as well.

- **Give choice in clothing**

Consider taking your child shopping with you and ask them to show you things they like. Or, when helping your child build their wardrobe, show them images of all types of clothing regardless of their sex assigned at birth: "This is a dress. Would you like to have one to wear?" Try to avoid

making assumptions than an individual wants to dress in a way that depicts their sex assigned at birth.

- **Observe and ask questions**

If you notice signs that your child may be exploring their gender, ask questions and show both support and curiosity. Encourage them to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns with you. By creating a safe and open space for your child or loved one to express themselves without judgment, you demonstrate that you are a safe person for these conversations.

- **Explore role models**

Try to expose your child to gender diverse role models. Representation matters, especially for individuals on the autism spectrum who may need concrete examples to comprehend abstract concepts.

- **Connect with supportive communities**

Connect with local and online communities of parents who have similar experiences. Sharing stories and advice can provide a valuable support network. A 2020 study found that the primary desire among people with autism exploring gender was for peer support groups and specialized services. If appropriate for your child, support groups can be a great resource.

- **Seek professional guidance**

Consider consulting with healthcare professionals, therapists, and support groups specializing in autism and gender diversity. They can offer guidance and resources tailored to your child's needs. (If you are concerned about depression, anxiety, or have other health and safety concerns, alert your healthcare team. Crisis helplines, like this [one](#), may also be a useful resource).

Every autistic and gender-diverse person is unique and you'll need to tailor your approach to your child's individual needs, abilities, and preferences. One conclusion, however, is universal: children, adolescents, and adults experiencing issues around gender identity need the support of their family and community. For families, this means listening, respecting, and supporting autistic individuals as they navigate learning to express themselves.

Want to learn more? Check out these resources:

For parents and caregivers:

[Supporting Transgender Autistic Youth and Adults](#) by Finn V. Gratton, LMFT, LPCC

[Working with Autistic Transgender and Non-Binary People](#) by Marianthi Kourti

[Supporting Autistic Girls & Gender Diverse Youth](#) by Yellow Ladybugs

[Gender Identity, Sexuality and Autism](#) by Eva Mendes and Meredith R. Maroney

[Spectrums: Autistic Transgender People in Their Own Words](#) by Maxfield Sparrow

For autistic individuals:

[Trans and Autistic: Stories from Life at the Intersection](#) by Noah Adams and Bridget Liang

[The Autistic Trans Guide to Life](#) by Yenn Purkis and Wenn B. Lawson

[The Trans Self-Care Workbook](#) by Theo Lorenz

[Queerly Autistic: The Ultimate Guide for LGBTQIA+ Teens on the Spectrum](#) by Erin Ekins

[The Awesome Autistic Guide for Trans Teens](#) by Yenn Purkis and Sam Rose

[Being You: A First Conversation About Gender](#) by Megan Madison and Jessica Rall, Anne/Andy Passchier (Illustrator)

Note: This article includes the use of both person-first (individual with autism) and identity-first (autistic individual) language to honor the diversity of preferences when discussing autism in the community.

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