

## Understanding Gender

### Activity from Advocates from Youth - MD Aligned Lessons

#### **Objectives:**

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Explain what gender and gender identity are, and how they are different from biological sex.
2. Define “gender script” while providing several examples of these scripts.
3. Identify at least three sources of gender scripts and messages they have received growing up.

#### **PROCEDURE :**

**STEP 1:** Say, “Today we are going to be talking about gender. Let’s look at what that means before we do some activities about it.”

Write the word “gender” on the board. Ask, “What does gender mean?” In most cases, people will say, “it’s whether you’re a boy or a girl.” After a few responses, ask, “How does someone determine whether you’re a boy or girl?” There will likely be a range of responses, but most commonly they will get at “it’s how you’re born.” Ask, “When you’re born, how do they know what your gender is?” Probe for “by looking at the baby’s genitals.”

Explain that there’s a slight difference here - that when you look at the baby’s genitals and see either a penis or a vulva, all you’re seeing is their body parts. Based on what we see, we assign a gender to the baby at birth - we say, “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl.” This is called a person’s biological sex (write the phrase “biological sex” up on the board to the left of the word gender).

Say, “Gender, however, is different - and far more complex. To make it clearer, let’s break it down a bit.”

Say, “If you were to look in the mirror and see your body, what you see in the mirror - what we just discussed - is part of your biological sex. If you were to close your eyes, how you see yourself based on those body parts is your gender identity. In most cases, how people feel when they close their eyes matches what they see in the mirror. This is called being ‘cisgender.’ You might commonly hear people refer to just being ‘male’ or ‘female,’ but the correct term is ‘cisgender.’”

For some people, what they see in the mirror and how they feel on the inside are different. This is called being ‘transgender.’”

Say, “Regardless of our gender identity, we are getting lots of messages about what is or isn’t okay to say, do or wear based on who we are.” Write the word “gender script” on the board. Ask, “Has anyone here been in a play yet at school? What does a script tell us in a play or movie or tv show?” Probe for it tells us what we should say, how we should move and how we should react to others. Say, “So our gender scripts are how we’re told to behave based on the answer to that question when we’re born: Is it a boy or a girl?”

Divide the class into groups of three. Say, “I am going to give you all a sheet of paper and would like to ask you to think about the gender scripts you have gotten or have heard about people of a different gender from yours. For this activity, we’re just going to talk about boys and girls.”

Distribute the handout, “Gender Scripts” and tell students they will have about 10 minutes in which to complete it. (14 minutes)

**STEP 2:** After about 10 minutes, ask students to stop their work. Create two lists on the board and go around the room, asking individual students to share an example from their lists. Record their responses.

Once all the responses are on the board, ask the following questions:

- What do you notice about the two lists?
- How did you know that these were the gender scripts growing up?
- From where/whom have you been receiving these scripts?

Say, “So far, we’ve been talking about the alignment between biological sex and gender identity. Sometimes they align and sometimes they don’t. When biological sex and gender identity do not align, a person may call themselves ‘transgender.’ How might someone who identifies as transgender react to these scripts?” (11 minutes)

**STEP 3:** Say, “To what extent do you think our culture, as a whole, has been scripted around gender? Let’s look at that now. To do so, we need to get into pairs.”

After students get into their pairs, say, “Each pair is going to get an envelope. Inside are four pictures. You are going to face each other. One person will start by taking out one of the pictures from the envelope without showing it to the other person. They will then describe the person in the picture and the other person needs to guess the gender of that person. Seems easy, right? But wait - there are a few rules!” (Write key words on the board as you go through these):

- The guesser may not ask questions, they can only go by what’s shared by their partner.
- No gender pronouns. You may not use any pronouns other than “they” or “them” - so no “he” or “his” or “she” or “hers.”
- No gender words like “masculine” or “feminine”; “man” or “woman;” and so on. For example, you cannot say, “This person looks like a man but isn’t” or ‘This person looks really girly.’ Just describe what’s in the picture. For example, “This person has long hair.” “This person is a child. They are playing football.”
- You may not refer to whatever’s in the picture as a “girl” or “boy” thing - for example, you cannot say “This person is playing with a girl’s doll.”
- If you recognize the person in the picture, please do not just say, “Oh, it’s so-and-so” or describe what tv show or movie they’re in - it’s about what they look like physically.”

Put up the PowerPoint slide with the sample photo. Provide students with examples of descriptions they can use for the sample provided. Then explain to students that after they give the descriptions, they will allow their partner to guess.

\*Consider showing one of the approved pictures to the class to share as an example.

Answer any questions and then distribute the envelopes, reminding students to take turns and not show their pictures to their partners. As they work, walk around the room to see how they are doing. (10 minutes)

**STEP 4:** After about five minutes, ask students to stop their work. Process by asking the following questions:

- What was it like to do that? What was [insert participant responses] about it?
- Did you find it easy to guess a person’s gender? What was the language

that tipped you off?

- What made it difficult to guess the person's gender?
- What was it like to be the person giving clues? What was easy or challenging about doing that?

Say, "In the photos, there were certain features that could apply to someone who is or who we perceive to be female, to someone who is or we perceive to be male or to someone whose gender identity we do not know or who does not identify as male or female. If these terms can apply to someone of any gender, why do you think we gender them in the first place? Why would we say, 'she's dressed like a guy' vs. 'she's wearing pants?'"

Say, "What we call ourselves is called our 'gender identity.' And while you may assume that someone who looks a particular way on the outside identifies the same way on the inside, that may not necessarily be the case. Our 'gender expression' is how each person expresses or presents their gender to the outside world. It could be what we wear, or how we do our hair."

Ask, "How many people feel they guessed the genders of the people in both of their photos correctly?" Explain that, unless the photo you had was of a famous person who's made their gender known, you wouldn't know for sure what that person's gender is unless you asked them. However, you might be making guesses about their gender based on their gender expression.

Say to students, "Society will continue to give messages about biological sex and gender. Everyone has the right to express their gender identity in a way that feels right for them." (12 minutes)

**STEP 5:** Answer any questions students may have.

**Images to use for activity :**







### Student Worksheet: Gender Scripts

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** From the time we are born, we are told how we are supposed to act, dress and speak based on our biological sex. In the space below, please provide examples of some of the messages you or people close to you have received about how we are supposed to behave based on our biological sex.

BIOLOGICAL FEMALE

BIOLOGICAL MALE

