



# Affirm me

## Affirming LGBTQ+ children and youth in their gender expression

Everyone has a gender expression, a way in which one chooses to express themselves their clothing they wear, makeup, facial/body hair, body and mannerisms etc. Western society identifies these cues as masculine, feminine, androgynous, etc. Parenting and providing care for the well-being of transgender, non-binary or gender fluid youth requires knowledge around the manner in which they wish to express themselves.

Young people may come to your care with the knowledge and ability to access what they need to fully express their gender. Some young people's gender expression may evolve over time and they may need help in accessing information and resources that can support who they are at any given time. Research has shown that Transgender and nonbinary youth with access to binders, shapewear, and gender-affirming clothing reported lower rates of attempting suicide in the past year compared to transgender and nonbinary youth without access (14% compared to 26%). Teens who perceived parental support regarding gender identity were 93% less likely to attempt suicide than youth who did not perceive parents as supportive. While every young person's gender identity and expression is unique to each individual, it is helpful, as a caregiver, to have basic information on ways young people express their gender, so that we may effectively support, affirm and advocate for LGBTQ+ young people.

**Clothing:** Children and youth can and often times do express themselves and their identity through clothing. It is important for them to have clothing that affirms their identity. Some young people choose a variety of ways in which to express themselves through clothing, regardless of their sex assigned at birth. This may or may not match the traditional Western culture's expectations of masculine or feminine. (i.e., dresses, skirts, jeans, hoodies, shirt, tie). Expectations around dress should be applicable to all youth regardless of their sex assigned at birth. For example, if a 15 year old cisgender girl can wear a crop top, a 15 year old transgender girl can also wear the same crop top. Another example would be that any youth can wear a skirt regardless of their sex assigned at birth. As a caregiver, it is important that you become familiar with school or other community organizations' policies specific to makeup and dress code, so that you may advocate for the young person in your care to wear the clothes they choose, regardless of their sex assigned at birth.

**Hair:** young people may express themselves and their identity through hair styles. Young people may need support on how to access, care for and wear wigs. Young people may feel more comfortable going to a barber versus a beauty salon to get their hair cut or styled. Finding providers that are affirming to the young person is important. For youth in emergency or temporary custody, parents maintain residual rights and make decisions around haircut/style. It is important to have conversations with youth about this and who they are comfortable being their true self. We want to ensure we do not "out" a youth as part of ongoing conversations specific to haircut and hair style with parents and/or county staff. If a parent will not allow a young person to cut their hair or wear their hair at a length or style they want, working with the youth and their network on how to support their expression is critical. As a caregiver, you will need to become familiar with school or other community organizations policies specific to hairstyles/hair length so that you can advocate with the young person in your care if school/organizational policies are not applicable to all young people regardless of their sex assigned at birth. As mentioned above, it is important for a caregiver to become familiar with school or other community organizations' policies specific to hair style and length, so that you may advocate for the young person in your care to wear the hairstyle that best express their true self, regardless of their sex assigned at birth.



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**Make Up:** young people may wear make up to affirm or express their gender. Young people may look to social media on how to apply makeup and may look to particular influencers that they closely identify to replicate specific looks or styles. Young people will need space and time to try different make-up looks or styles as well as need support in accessing makeup. Expectations around make-up should be applicable to all youth regardless of their sex assigned at birth. For example, if a 15 year old cisgender girl can wear eyeshadow and eyeliner, a 15 year old transgender girl can wear eyeshadow and eyeliner. If a 12-year-old cisgender girl can wear nail polish, a 12 year old cisgender boy can wear nail polish.

As mentioned above, it is important for a caregiver to become familiar with school or other community organizations' policies specific to make up, so that you may advocate for the young person in your care to wear makeup, regardless of their sex assigned at birth.

**Personal Care/Hygiene:** Young people should have access to personal care products (i.e. soap, shampoo, deodorant, shaving gel/razors, waxing materials) that are gender affirming. Young people may need support in accessing these items and understanding how to use them. If a young person cannot have access to items based on placement policies (i.e. cannot have access to a razor), it is important that caregivers advocate and educate others on the impact that affirming personal care can have on a young person's gender dysphoria.

**Binders:** A garment used to flatten or minimize the appearance of breasts for the look and feel of having a flatter chest. There are a variety of methods that can be used to bind one's chest including sports bras, layering clothing, ace bandages and commercial binders. Some young people will wear binders under clothing or as clothing. The size of a commercial binder is dependent upon an individual's bust/chest size. Young people may need support in identifying their size. Young people should also have education on how to bind safely. Young people should not use tape or plastic wrap to bind their breasts. Continuous binding or binding too tightly can result in health issues including but not limited to skin irritation, pain, shortness of breath, and rib fractures. It is important that young people have affirming health care providers that can provide further education and support in this area.

**Breast Forms or Breast Plates:** Any object (prosthetic, padding, etc.) that supports someone to have the look and feel of breasts. Individuals may use layered clothing, padding within a bra, padded bra, breast forms or breast plates. Some breast forms may require adhesive tape. Young people may need support in understanding breast size as well as bust and cup size. Young people may need to try various ways to have the look/feel that affirms them the most. How young people view their breast forms and breast plates varies from individual to individual. Some young people may identify breast forms and breast plates as part of their body. Typically, a caregiver should not be asking questions about a person's breasts, regardless of the child or youth's sex assigned at birth. Those questions are inappropriate, unless the young person initiates the conversation. It is best to let a young person know that you are there for them should they have any questions or if they would like to see a medical provider that can answer questions about chests and breasts.

**Packers or STP Packers:** Any object (prosthetic, sock, etc.) that supports someone to have the look and feel of a penis or a penis and testicles. Individuals that utilize a sock as a packer may place a sock in their underwear or safety pins it to their pants or underwear. Individuals that use prosthetic packers may require packing straps, harnesses or underwear specifically made for packers to secure the packer to their body or underwear. STP (Stand to Pee) packers support individuals whose sex assigned at birth is female to stand to urinate. Some



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young people may need support and education on understanding their anatomy and the anatomy of a penis to understand how to use a packer. STP packers can create safety for individuals that utilize the “men’s” restroom. Young people that utilize packers are encouraged to practice using them within the privacy of their home. Some young people may have “accidents” (e.g., urinating on their clothes, floor, etc.) as they learn how to use the STP packer. Young people need the support and validation that learning to use a packer and/or a STP packer takes time and with time, they will find the best process for packing that is most comfortable for them. Some young people may identify their packer(s) as a part of their body. Asking questions about their packer or asking to see their packer is inappropriate and can be experienced as sexual harassment. Those questions are inappropriate, unless the young person initiates the conversation. It is best to let a young person know that you are there for them should they have any questions or if they would like to see a medical provider that can best answer questions about packers.

**Padding (hips and buttocks):** any object used to have fuller, wider hips and buttocks. Young people may use multiple layers of clothes or padded underwear to achieve this look.

**Tucking:** the practice of arranging and supporting external genitals between the legs for a smoother appearance of the pelvic area for a gender-affirmed look. This can be achieved through multiple layers of clothing, taping or compressing with garments/underwear like a gaff. Duct tape and other adhesives not designed for use on the skin should never be used directly on the skin. Young people should take breaks from tucking to prevent stress on the body and be mindful of skin irritation and blood flow. It is important that young people have affirming health care providers that can provide further education and support in this area

### Supportive Questions to Ask:

- What types of clothes, hairstyle, makeup etc. would you like? How can I help you access these items?\*
- What type of personal care products do you like? Would you like me to come with you to the store to find ones that work best for you?
- Is there someone you are currently working with (case worker, doctor, therapist) that you talk to about your gender affirming needs? I would like to support you in any way I can. I am here if you would like to talk about anything regarding affirming your gender.
- If/When a young person and caregiver have established a rapport and supportive gender affirming conversations are welcomed by the young person:
  - You have shared that you would like [wider hips, breasts, penis]. There are many ways in which to affirm you and you can definitely have [wider hips, breast, penis]. Would you like to talk about it with me or someone else?
  - Do you have what you need to wash/care for your binder, packer, breast forms etc.? Is there something I can do or get you support in caring for or washing your binder, packer?
  - How is your binder feeling? Is it fitting well (not too tight, too loose)?

*\*Caregivers should do their homework! If a young person does not have a go-to barber, stylist, clothing store, etc., identifying businesses in your community that are supportive and affirming of LGBTQ+ young people is essential. Do more than Google. Ask for recommendations, go to the business, and have questions ready.*