



With the excitement of holiday gatherings also come the possibilities of affirmation or rejection of your child's gender by family members and loved ones. Shifts in identity or expression, new names and pronouns, unsupportive family members and general lack of gender knowledge can provide fertile ground for helping your family and community deepen their understanding of your child while building their knowledge about gender in general. Unfortunately, these things can also create difficult situations for your child and you as well.

The following suggestions are designed to help you anticipate and prepare for situations that might come up. The needs of each child and family will be unique, but these areas have proven to be important areas of focus for many.

Using the Plan

You may need to do some detective work to identify and address any issues your child might be facing. It is not uncommon for kids to dismiss questions from parents - they may be worried about "ruining the holidays" or adding stress to your life. They may simply be sick of talking about their gender.

Consider the time and place you are seeking information. Many find that talking in the car can be a great way to engage in these discussions. You might need to gather information in bits and pieces. It is also important to remember that even if your child is not particularly engaged in the conversation, you are communicating a very important message: *"You matter enough to me that I don't want to guess what is happening for you or what you need, and I want to support you."*



Guiding Principles

Seeking gender congruence: Your child's experience will be impacted by the degree to which they can be fully congruent in their gender. Wearing the clothing they prefer, being acknowledged by their correct name and pronouns and receiving gifts that feel consistent with who they are will play a critical role in that process. Consider asking your child:

1. What does gender congruence look and feel like for you at this point in your life?
2. What needs to happen for you to feel good during the holidays?

Learning from the past: Take time with your child to reflect on previous gatherings and identify specific instances that did or did not feel good. Try to be as specific as possible about the words and actions of others and the impact they had. Ask your child to think about previous gatherings and ask themselves:

1. What are three things that didn't go well that we could change for this year?
2. Were there specific conversations or questions that were difficult for you?
3. How did you find yourself reacting to these situations?

Identifying what your child needs/wants: From your questions above, think about the specific requests that you will make of others. Here is a starter set of some of the most common areas to think about in advance:

- Name and pronouns
- Clothing, shoes, hairstyle, accessories
- Gifts
- Questions that are okay to ask
- Questions that are NOT okay to ask
- Gender-based traditions
- People making general comments about gender
- Gender issues in the news



Communicating with others: This will be the most important step you will take. Different individuals have different relationships with you and your child. It is likely that you will want some people to know things about your child's gender, and that there are others with whom you do not wish to share certain information (or any at all).

Explain to those you will be with what your child needs. Help others realize that what may seem like an innocent comment, question or mistake to them can have a lasting negative

impact, perhaps permanently altering their relationship with you and your child. Enlisting everyone in the process of making it work will lead to a more positive result.

Here are some questions to consider when deciding what and with whom to communicate:

1. For anyone who you wish to communicate with about your child's gender, what do you want them to know? To do?
2. Who will tell them and how will communication be handled? [Communicating with Friends and Family](#) is a helpful resource for different ideas, language and approaches.
3. If there will be guests attending who have never met your child, be clear with your hosts or others who have invited them about what, if anything, you want them to communicate about your child's gender. If necessary, be very direct:

"I know you are inviting the Smiths to Thanksgiving dinner. Please do not say anything about Maya's gender to them; we want them to just see and treat her like any other girl. I hope you can respect Maya's privacy in this way."

And here are a few other ideas to keep in mind about communication:

- Be careful starting with ultimatums. Instead, try to create space for questions from those with whom you are communicating. Help them understand that they don't have to agree or be comfortable for the holidays to be positive. Invite them to listen and learn.
- Provide sample language they can use with your child, like "that must be hard," "I appreciate you sharing," or "I can't imagine what that would feel like."
- Be clear about what is off-limits. If your child does not want to discuss their gender, others must know that.
- If people are struggling with particular aspects of your child's gender, they need to know that that is not something to discuss with your child.
- Try not to place blame for past experiences.



Meeting people where they are: Let people know that you're not looking for perfection, and that they can be wherever they're at in their acceptance and understanding of gender. Name ways they can show love for your child even if they don't understand or are not fully supportive of your child's Gender expression or identity. Your child's gender is only one aspect of who they are; remind others that it doesn't

need to become a make-or-break factor in their relationship.

During the Gathering

- Check in: Even if things seem to be going well, plan to check in as the gathering is happening.
- Take a break: Be ready to suggest ways for you and your child to step away. This could be as simple as going outside, sitting in the car, taking a walk, going back to your lodging, getting on the phone/internet, playing cards or anything else that releases some pressure. You may also want to consider what, if anything, will be cause for you to simply leave the gathering.
- Seek support: There may be a number of ways for you or your child to get some support as things unfold. This could include calling a friend or connecting with an online group.

After the Gathering

Check in with your child following the event. It doesn't have to be right away, but try not to let it go too long without talking about how things went. Not only will this help your child feel that you are in this together, it can also be a great way to identify specific difficult instances to help you prepare for the next gathering. Providing your child with a sense of perspective can also be helpful; perhaps something unfortunate was said or done, but there were lots of positives as well. Maybe someone you expected to be difficult came through in really positive way.

It is also important to identify if there are any relationships that need to be repaired, and, if so, how that will be done. If something especially hurtful took place, what needs to happen now? You can decide whether you need to follow up with the person directly, or help your child do so. You or your child may decide to write something to the person, or perhaps direct them to a resource, such as a video or article, that will help communicate what you and your child are feeling.



Other Areas and Ideas to Plan for and/or Communicate About

Clothing

Clothing choices during the holidays can be particularly challenging. It may be fine to wear jeans and T-shirts for dinner at grandma's house during most of the year, but a holiday

dinner may be another story. Notions about formal occasions and clothing often come from gendered assumptions and expectations. Keep in mind that the last thing you want is for issues to come up while packing the night before a trip; well before the gathering, seek to clarify these questions:

- How formal will the gathering be?
- What outfits will be worn? Shoes? Hairstyle? Accessories?
- If there are expectations about things like dresses or suits, are there ways to modify aspects of an outfit to better support the child's gender congruence (e.g., underwear, jewelry, nail polish, accessories, shoes, etc.)?
- Will anyone in attendance find my child's gender expression difficult or upsetting? How do we want to handle these instances? Is there a bottom line for us?

Presents

For many children and teens (adults too!), gifts are an important part of the holidays. Giving a child a present that is aligned with their gender can be an incredibly powerful form of affirmation. On the other hand, giving them something that is not affirming of who they are is destructive and can have long-lasting consequences. Not only does this negatively impact the gathering itself, it can potentially ruin the holiday for your child for years to come, even into adulthood. In speaking with family and friends, make these suggestions:

- Give my child what they are asking for! Please don't use your gift as a way to challenge my child's gender.
- Think twice about giving gendered presents in general. Unless my child has specifically asked for something that's marketed "for girls" or "for boys," an explicitly gendered gift could signal that you don't understand them or are not supportive.
- **If giving my child a gift that you are uncomfortable with will be difficult for you, please consider giving them a gift certificate, or perhaps offer an experience they can do with you.**

Holiday Traditions

It can be helpful to consider alternatives to holiday traditions and roles that are associated with gender stereotypes. Here are some activities or roles that may need to be reconsidered:

- Holiday photos/cards
- Dressing up for meals/services
- Cooking
- Setting the table
- Carving the turkey
- Doing dishes
- Chopping wood
- Decorating
- Saying prayers/grace
- Lighting candles
- Moving furniture
- Setting the table
- Watching sports
- Watching parades

- Family football game

Along with the traditions and activities themselves, be conscious about what messages are being associated with them.



Housing

Will your child be comfortable where you're staying for the holidays? If not, you might consider alternatives, such as a hotel or staying with other family members who are more affirming.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Hopefully, clear communication will help to avoid or at least minimize negative interactions. But it's always important to be ready for any situations that might arise.

A great tool for preparing for potentially negative interactions (and minimizing their impact) is to imagine scenarios and plan responses. After you have identified the various comments and/or situations that might come up, walk through different ways your child can respond.

As different situations unfold, it is not always easy to know how or if to help your child. Do they want you to step in and say something? Would they prefer that you absolutely not do so? Be sure to establish a way for your child to signal to you when they want you to step in, such as a certain gesture or phrase. You could also identify specific topics that require intervention. For example, your child may want you to step in if anyone starts discussing surgery. You may also decide on the spot that a certain situation requires action on your part.