

# Working with Families to Support Children's Gender Development: Strategies (handout)

*\*adapted from Supporting Gender Diversity in Early Childhood Classrooms: A Practical Guide* by Pastel, Steele, Nicholson, Maurer, Hennock, Unger and Flynn (2019). See especially chapter 7 for a more nuanced description of these key approaches and strategies.

## *Key Approaches:*

- Build partnerships—"Move at the speed of trust" (Adrienne Marie Brown, *Emergent Strategy*).
- Reciprocity—Resist the role of "expert." Teachers and families both have valuable contributions to make.
- Meet families where they're at in their gender journey.
- Focus on strengths—of families as well as children.
- Check your biases and assumptions about families' receptivity to gender diversity.

## *Setting the Tone:*

- Draft a mission/values statement for the school or program.
- As you welcome families to your school or program, provide resources about the language you plan to use around gender.
- Share ongoing information with families about topics your class is exploring, including conversations and conflicts that emerge in the classroom around social identities, including gender.

## *Talking with Families About TGE Children:*

- Remember the **whole child** in conversations with family members.
- Take a **strengths-based approach** when talking about TGE identities and expressions.
- Have gender-expansive **resources on hand** to offer families, such as books, videos, podcasts, organizations, events, and information about local or online support groups.
- The **Both/And Stance**: help parents and children to move from an experience of "either/or" to one of "both/and" (Malpas, 2011). Children can both affirm their identity and understand the demands of a world mostly organized around the gender binary. Family members can both nurture their child's unique self and help mediate between the child's wish and the social reality.
- Practice holding **empathy** for all the ways that families are having to navigate this experience with their children. Tune in to what's coming up for family members as they seek to support their children. Even if you don't feel the same way they do, validate their

feelings. Remember that adults need to be validated just as much as the children we work with do.

*“Inviting in” Families Who are Reluctant to Embrace Gender Diversity:*

- Be thoughtful about **who** engages upset family members in conversation, and **when, where, and how** they do it. (Email? All-school meeting? Private conversation with a director or teacher or another parent?)
- Establish a **shared purpose** (typically, the well-being of the child). Bring the conversation back to this shared purpose, as needed.
- Keep a **curious mind**.
- Ask questions to uncover their **underlying fears**. Address these fears.
- Listen to a family’s responses with **empathy** and **reflect back** what you hear so that you can make sure you understand correctly, and so the family members feel that you are actually listening. [**Never** validate transphobia/homophobia/sexism -- keep asking questions to uncover the underlying fears.]
- Remember that most fears families have about gender **come from a place of love and concern for their children**.
- Remember that **productive communication cannot happen when people are triggered/shut down**. When you see someone getting activated by a fight, flight or freeze stress response, name it. Be conscious about tone policing.
- Emphasize **child agency**. Use your **school’s mission statement** and ECE **standards** including the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) [Advancing Equity in ECE Position Statement](#) (2019) and the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) to build the case for supporting children’s gender agency.
- Use **observations and documentation** in communication about gender with families.
- Help families **stay in the present moment**—for today and tomorrow—instead of worrying about what today’s behaviors mean for a child’s future.
- Help family members move from helplessness to **empowerment**.
- Emphasize the importance of having at least “**one safe place**” to explore gender with full support. (Nowhere is really safe, it’s just an ideal to aspire to.)
- **Reflect on your own biases**, experiences, and beliefs and understand how they influence your work with families.