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Questions and Answers: Gender Identity in Schools

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Preface

First published in 1994 and revised in 2003 and 2008, the Public Health Agency of Canada's *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education (Guidelines)* were developed to assist professionals working in the area of health promotion and sexual health education in programming which supports positive sexual health outcomes. Feedback from a national evaluation of the *Guidelines* indicated the need for companion documents to provide more detailed information, evidence and resources on specific issues. In response, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) identified a 'question and answer' format as an appropriate way to provide information to educators and other professional working with school-aged populations. The Questions and Answers styled documents are intended to cover a range of topics reflecting current issues in sexual health education with school-aged populations, are evidence-based and use inclusive language as reflected in the *Guidelines*.

This document, *Questions & Answers: Gender Identity in Schools*, is intended to address the most commonly asked questions regarding the gender identity of youth in school settings. The goal of this resource is to assist educators, curriculum and program planners, school administrators, policy-makers and health professionals in the creation of supportive and healthy school environments for youth struggling with issues of gender identity.

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In addition, the Public Health Agency of Canada would like to acknowledge the staff of the Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Section, Centre for Communicable Diseases and Infection Control, for their contribution to the development of this document.

Introduction

The term 'gender' was first used in the 1950s to differentiate the set of feelings and behaviours that identify a person as 'male' or 'female', from their anatomical 'sex' which is determined by their chromosomes and genitals¹. 'Gender' is now understood as the roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that is attributed to males and females by society.² Gender is one of the most basic elements of human identity. Gender is so fundamental to our identity, that without being aware of it, many aspects of human life are structured by and reveal our gender. Throughout the life course³, everyone subconsciously acts out gender and reflects gender in various ways, including their dress, mannerisms, and recreational activities. These actions and reflections form components of our 'gender identity' or our sense of being 'male', 'female' or something other than these traditional categories.⁴

Most people mistakenly assume that our gender identity is defined by our anatomical sex. In the majority of cases, people's gender identity is consistent with their anatomical sex. However, some people feel and express a gender identity that is not the same as their biological sex. These inconsistencies can cause a great deal of distress and confusion to individuals, their families and their friends. Gender identity issues can also cause a great deal of anxiety among professionals working with these individuals, who may not feel informed and competent enough on this topic to provide support.

This document provides answers to some of the most common questions that educators, parents/caregivers, school administrators, and health professionals may have about gender identity in the Canadian school context. The answers provided in

GENDER VARIANT:
A term to refer to individuals whose

this resource are based on up-to-date evidence and research.

These Questions and Answers on gender identity are designed to support the implementation of the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*⁵ (*Guidelines*). The *Guidelines* are premised on the belief that comprehensive sexual health education should reflect the diverse needs and realities of all people, and should be provided in age-appropriate, culturally-sensitive, and respectful manner, inclusive of gender diversity. This Questions and Answers resource is targeted at helping educators (in and out of school settings), curriculum and program planners, school administrators, policy-makers and health professionals implement the *Guidelines* to ensure that:

expressions of gender do not conform to the dominant gender norms of masculinity and femininity.

1. sexual health educational programming is inclusive of the pressing health, safety, and educational needs and challenges of gender variant youth;
2. the experiences of gender variant youth are included in all facets of broadly-based and inclusive sexual health education; and
3. educators, administrators, and school board personnel are provided with a more thorough understanding of the goals and objectives of broadly-based and inclusive sexual health education.

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