

# The Gender Spectrum

## **Lisa Pepera, MEd, LPCC-S (she/they)**

My name is Lisa. I'm one of the co-founders of Colors+ Youth Center, also one of the -- my counterpart here, Kristin. I'm one of the managers and owners of Colors+ Counseling, which shares space with Colors+ Youth Center. We founded Colors+ in 2018. We both are licensed mental health professionals -- graduated from Kent State University with our Master's in Community Mental Health counseling.

## **Kristen Pepera, MEd, LPCC-S (she/they)**

I feel like she hit all of them. My name is Kristen. Both of our pronouns are she and they. So, we use either of them, which we'll talk a little bit about what that means in here, but also co-founder and co-director of Colors+, which is our youth center nonprofit, as well as our Colors+ Counseling, which is our private practice that we see all ages -- parents, adults, youth, families, couples. But we'll go over that a little bit.

But I know you all need to change your names to match your registration. Could you also, if you haven't already, put your pronouns in there too, so that if anyone has questions, we can make sure that we use the correct pronouns for you too. If you don't know what that is, we will be talking about it too. So don't feel like pressured for that.

Let's get into it a little bit. So, a lot of times we get questions about sex and gender, and we're also going to talk on the next screen, the next slide to you about expression and the differences between these things. So, sex and gender are not the same thing. Sex is literally what someone is assigned at birth because of what their genitalia is on the outside. So, a doctor will look at a baby, say, "I am assigning this child male, female, or intersex, based on what I can see." They don't usually go beyond that unless there is a concern or something doesn't appear as average, so then they won't go into that.

But the sex characteristics are personal. It's not something that we need to know in order to be respectful of someone. So, when someone does tell you what their gender is, we want to make sure that we're being respectful of that. Gender and sex do not equal one another. So again, sex is based on what a doctor says usually, and that's usually based on genitalia. And gender is someone's intrinsic beliefs and understanding of themselves and their identity.

## **Lisa Pepera**

I think today is Intersex Awareness Day.

## **Kristen Pepera**

There you go.

## **Lisa Pepera**

The person who's intersex either has characteristics of both male and female or characteristics -- sex characteristics -- that are not traditionally representative of either male or female. Oftentimes doctors will perform surgeries to create genitalia that represents the traditional male or female.

## **Kristen Pepera**

If you know a redhead, you probably know someone who's intersex because it's the same percentage of people. But a lot of people don't know if they're intersex unless it was something that was very obvious with genitalia, external genitalia at birth.

## **Lisa Pepera**

So unlike the doctor's assumption and guess at birth, when you're talking about gender, you can't tell someone's gender by looking at them. Like Kristen said, it's your own internal understanding and experience. So oftentimes our brain likes to look at people and place them in categories, and sometimes it can be confusing when we see people where we don't really know where to place them, but we can't and we shouldn't assume from what we see. So, it is an internal understanding that you really don't know what someone's gender is unless you ask them.

You can make a guess by looking at the presentation and their expression. If someone is feeling safe, and comfortable, and using their hair and their clothes and their behaviors and things like that to express their gender, then we may have a better idea. Sometimes people don't feel safe to do this, and so really, we just don't know someone's gender based on what we see because of that. So, you just want to be mindful when you're looking at someone that you're asking pronouns or sharing your own pronouns, and then you kind of are getting a better understanding of who this person is that you're talking with.

And remembering that gender identity can change over time. It's something that can be fluid, especially with our younger folks. We see some experimentation and experiencing an exploration of different gender identities, and a lot of parents sometimes wonder about a phase of things, and this is where that idea comes from because gender identity can change over time.

## **Kristen Pepera**

And for some people, it doesn't, and that's okay. But either way, meeting people where they're at and if that's what they're telling you and believing them -- I know that that's still hard. It's not like, "oh, okay, yeah, I believe you and I'm good, and I understand fully where you're coming from." It's a process. So just trying to validate their experiences and support them in any way you can.

-- went past the pretty slide. So we do Safe Zone trainings in a way well, we do a twist on Safe Zone trainings. And so one of the things in a lot of Safe Zone trainings are either the gender bread person or the gender unicorn. And we like to ask our youth for feedback for training so that they can get their voice heard. And they told us they are not mythological creatures and please do not use those. So we found this instead. We did not create this. I wish we could have said that this is something that we created, but this is not inclusive by any means. But it is basically saying that gender is as expansive as the galaxy and assign sex while there are only three assigned sexes that people have at birth, when you go over to gender identity -- those are not all of the by the way, this is not all of the plan. So it could be around gender identity sun, but it's a good amount so far.

And then you have playing into that mixture gender expression galaxy, like the Milky Way almost running through there and how that can be infinite possibilities. And truly, I feel like there is as many identities as there are people on Earth because everybody expresses themselves a little differently. And just because someone is expressing themselves better one way does not mean anything to do with their sexuality or their gender and vice versa with masculinity.

But then you'll also see up in the right hand corner that there's a Two Spirit galaxy as well as the sexuality galaxy. All of these parts are just parts of someone's identity. It is not their only part of their identity. It is not the main part of their identity. It's something that goes into who they are. Two Spirit galaxy is very inclusive of a Native American indigenous culture. So that's not something that people outside of that culture can claim. But it is similar to trans in some ways, but it's also feeling like there's a male and female spirit in one person, and it's actually really celebrated in those communities. So it's kind of cool to see it from a different perspective. But this is a neat thing to look at, too.

### **Lisa Pepera**

Another pretty picture.

### **Kristen Pepera**

Yes.

### **Lisa Pepera**

So, if we think about language as adults, we know that we've learned a lot of words, and sometimes our children and young people start saying new words that we don't know. That's on purpose. They don't want us to know all their words. But that's to say that language is always changing. It's culturally and generationally specific. So, it's okay as adults if we don't know some of these words. We learn them. And there are a lot of them. And like I said, it's always changing.

So, there was a study, a survey done by the Trevor Project where they surveyed thousands of LGBTQ youth, ages 14 to 24 -- I think that's their age range. But anyways, they didn't do a multiple choice. They

left a fill in the blank answer for them to say what their identity was. And there was thousands of different answers -- different languages that they all used, unique answers. So, like I said, there's a lot.

But labels are important because it allows people to connect to each other and to feel less alone. It also allows researchers to help us understand certain groups of people, which for a long, long time, this group of people, this LGBTQ plus community, we were never researched about.

We're often just excluded. And so finally, there's starting to be a little bit more information available about these groups. And so we are presenting what we have. But as the years go by, there will be and should be more.

### **Kristen Pepera**

Yeah, and I think the most generic term that there is right now is, like, for example, GSA used to be Gay Straight Alliance, and now it's Gender and Sexuality Alliance. So that it can kind of hit both of those things. But when we're talking about the LGBTQ+ community, that is the most PC term right now of saying it LGBTQ+. You can add a bunch of letters too, if you want to, whatever you feel comfortable. But the plus sign makes it so that it is open to endless possibilities.

### **Lisa Pepera**

The letters could keep going and sign. You will see it with a few more letters in there. Sometimes we've truncated ours with the plus because once you keep adding letters, you might as well not stop.

### **Kristen Pepera**

Yeah, and there's like triples and quadruples of most of the letters. And I'm telling you what some of the labels too like, not to get too much into it, but the generation now of youth are changing the definitions of some of these words. So, for example, we have some non-binary youth who identify as lesbian. It's breaking in your mind like, that's not the definition, but it is their identity, and they get to choose what that is or not necessarily choose. They get to decide what that label is for their identity. So, where they're at.

### **Lisa Pepera**

In the opposite direction, some of the older folks are hesitant to use the letter Q or the word queer because when they learned it, it had a really negative connotation. And so we sometimes get older folks asking us, whispering the Q word. That's just another example of how language changes over time.

### **Kristen Pepera**

And the Q word, queer, can actually also describe someone's sexuality or their gender. So it's an umbrella term that can be used for either. So if someone tells you they're queer, you can ask, "what was

that? Your sexuality or gender? Can you tell me more about that?" If you want to hear that -- that was kind of a therapist twist on it, but you can ask, "what's that mean for you?"

You did the last one, sorry.

So pronouns, this is probably the one that we get asked about the most when it comes to gender. Like "what pronouns am I supposed to use?" Pronouns are hard and they are -- especially if you've been using one or a certain one for someone for their whole life and it's changing or you're adjusting to a new one or going back and forth -- because we have some youth who are gender fluid too.

And so depending on the day, depending on the morning or afternoon, sometimes it might change. So kind of going back to what I said earlier, meeting people where they're at and realizing that we don't need to understand it to respect it. It's great if you want to try to understand it and they're willing to share it, but just trying to meet them when they're okay, you can say, "okay, I don't understand, but I will respect it."

Just like this really nice picture on the side shows it's explaining pretty much what we said in the first two slides gender, sex and expression and sexuality. Actually, all four of those things, they don't equal one another. So, someone's expression, someone's gender does not equal who they are and what's pronouns they are using. It doesn't equal their sexuality either.

In this youth group right now, one in four of them use pronouns or pronoun combinations that fall outside of the binary. So outside of the binary is she and he. So anything outside of she and he, they are considered outside of the binary.

So, I said we would talk about what she and they means. You can see them on the top left-hand corner of the picture too for that person. They use she and they as well. It's going to be unique for each person, why they do that. But when me and Lisa described it, it's pretty similar where we're comfortable with either we have used she and her most our lives and then they and them also feels fitting and feels affirming too. So, there's not a huge long explanation, but that's why it feels good for us to use both.

### **Lisa Pepera**

I was going to say people have asked us before if that means they have to alternate between she and they each time they use a pronoun to refer to someone who uses she and they pronouns and no -- what Kristen said is appropriate.

### **Kristen Pepera**

I think it was an English teacher too. So they were really wanting to make sure that they were using them in the correct ways too. You don't have to alternate. It means you can use either one. Sometimes people will say the one that they prefer the most first, but others don't necessarily do that. So you can always ask if there's one that someone would like over the other ones too.

And just being aware of our biases and expectations that we have out there. We from a very young age are putting things in boxes because that's a way of understanding them, and that's our way of grouping things together and being able to interact and feel comfortable and safe. So, it's okay if it takes some time to understand it. It's okay if it takes some time to feel comfortable with it. But again, going back to that respect part, trying to meet people where they're at, and if it's your youth, if it's your clients, your students -- trying to learn more from them when they're open to it, but also during your own research like you are doing right now, you're finding that support and learning more.

And I'm telling you, this is not going to be. I wish I could tell you this is the only time that you would have to learn about it, but because it's ever changing, these are going to be things that we do, trainings for people and organizations that we are updating this probably every other month just to make sure that the correct statistics and things are still accurate.

### **Lisa Pepera**

Okay, so if you're not familiar with gender dysphoria, here's a little bit about what that means. I apologize for the language because I did take it out of the DSM. So it's boring, not fun kind of language, but basically they say it's a "marked incongruence between one's experience and expressed gender and their assigned gender." And so of at least six months, this is, you know, in order to have this diagnosis applied to you, of at least six months duration and then manifested by different things in children and adolescents, but pretty similar. Obviously, children and adolescents are not doing the same things.

So a strong desire to be of another gender. Preference for wearing either masculine or feminine clothing that don't match the assigned sex at birth. Preference for cross-gender roles in play, or toys, playmates. Things like that. Also could include a dislike of one's sexual anatomy or for example, a strong desire to rid one of one's penis, things like that. You don't have to have all of these things in order to have gender dysphoria. These are just some examples of things that a child or an adolescent might experience that you would call gender dysphoria.

So, in adolescence, it looks a little different because you have secondary sex characteristics that are starting to develop that might be really uncomfortable for a person. A strong desire to be treated as another gender, strong conviction that one has vocal feelings and reactions of another gender, things like that.

Gender dysphoria can occur very young, I think here, as young as age two, although it's not very common for it to occur that young. It can, though. But I know when my child was two, he didn't have this concept developed. But every child is different, so it can happen that young. And it does occur more commonly in children who are assigned male at birth. That's what this AMAB here is the AMAB that's "assigned male at birth." It does occur more commonly for them.

Interestingly, here you see that in most children, gender dysphoria does disappear before or early in puberty. So, it only has a 12 to 27% persistence rate to move forward through adolescents and adulthood. So, like we said before, gender identity can change over time. And this is a great example where it's backed up by science that only in 12 to 27% of cases of gender dysphoria does it persist.

So, I think if you're concerned about your child or wondering about your child and thinking about what life is going to be like for your child, if your child experiences gender dysphoria, we don't know. So, the most important thing is to support your child as they are in the moment that they are, and try not to be too far ahead of yourself, because we're not really sure what that's going to look like. And your child isn't really going to have that answer either.

### **Kristen Pepera**

No, and it's just like you were saying. I think that it's again, coming back to meeting the person where they're at. And whether it's a phase or not, the more support you're able to give, the more open they're going to be if it changes or they're going to tell you how they're feeling or what they're experiencing, not just within themselves, but when they're interacting with others too.

And just like I said, if your youth had just recently come out and you were not 100% on board right away, this is not to shame you, this is not to tell you you're doing it wrong. This is just information so that we can learn and continue to grow and do things a little bit differently moving forward.

### **Lisa Pepera**

When we look at gender dysphoria and adolescence, the persistent rate is actually a little bit greater than for it to persist into adulthood than when you look at children with gender dysphoria. So that's important to keep in mind. Also, many adolescents have gender dysphoria as adolescents not necessarily needing to have it through childhood. It's not exactly linear like that. So, I think the significant thing here is that adolescents are in the -- it's developmentally appropriate for them to be experimenting and exploring things like their identity, who they are and who their friends are and all these kinds of things. Something that generations previously didn't necessarily explore at this stage. But it is totally normal and developmentally appropriate for them to be exploring this at this time in their life.

### **Kristen Pepera**

Yeah, and just like Lisa said, it's still valid if someone has dysphoria at any age, whether they had it previously or not. It could be an adult experiencing it for the first time and it's still validating. It's not a prerequisite to have previously at any age.

So if I haven't said it like five times already, respecting someone when they tell you who they are believing them. We don't need to understand to respect it and mirroring their language. So if someone is saying, "these are my pronouns, this is the name I want to use," then that is what we're going to use.

When we make mistakes -- because we will make mistakes -- especially if it's our youth that we're used to saying different pronouns or different names on their whole life -- we're going to make mistakes. So when we make mistakes, apologizing, correcting ourselves, and then moving on. And we need to process it further, processing it with a partner or a friend so that we can help the youth feel safe. Not saying that you don't talk to youth about your feelings, but when it comes to something like this, if it's not something that we don't want to make, it about ourselves whenever it's about their identity. Doing our own research, which is exactly what I said earlier, what you all are doing right now.

You are taking the time that you could be doing anything with your Tuesday evening and you decided to come here and learn and grow. You are doing exactly that. This isn't easy to reach out. It's not easy to even listen, let alone ask questions and be engaged. So you should really be acknowledging how much you're putting into this and how hard it is to get support. So if we can do anything to help support you, and if we can get any resources, making sure you're getting that support you want to need. Like Nicole said, Connecting for Kids has a great amount of resources and they're amazing. We would love to help in any way that we can and collaborate with each other and with all of you in making sure that you have those resources.

### **Lisa Pepera**

I think I saw a question that was pre-submitted about this, about this "just a phase," so hopefully this answers it, but if not, we'll get to that too.

So, if you're wondering if it's just a phase, like I said earlier, exploration and experimentation is part of everyone's journey. So, youth are doing it as adolescents. That's exactly when they're supposed to be doing that. They're navigating the world; they're finding out who they are and what they like. This isn't usually a casual claim to say that you're LGBTQ+ because it comes with stigma and challenges and bullying and sometimes being outcasted or isolated. So, it's not usually, although there are events like Pride, it doesn't sometimes come with that feeling, especially when someone's first coming out. So, it's hard to come out. And so, when somebody does, it's not the best thing to challenge a person. But again, we don't know if it's going to persist, if it's forever, if it's for now, if it's fluid, it is yesterday and tomorrow, but not today. I guess that the answer is that we don't know if it's just a phase or not. We don't know if it's something that is going to stick around or not. But we do know that when it comes to our children, our love is going to stick around for them and our support for them will stick around for them. And that's the most important thing.

### **Kristen Pepera**

Yeah. And the safer that they feel and coming to you and talking about things, the more they're going to talk about the happy, the challenging, all in between.

### **Lisa Pepera**



Yes. Showing them empathy, understanding that this might come with some discrimination or bullying -- it's important to show that you are supportive of your child despite your worry for them, or you know, that they might be bullied.

If your family is religious or spiritual, attempting to use that positively as opposed to negatively, there are many different faiths and denominations, and many faiths welcome all families. Depending on where you're at, I think there's always a way to use faith positively.

Conversion therapy was just banned recently. The city of Cleveland -- not banned in the state of Ohio, but is banned in many parts of the country for good reason. And I know that some religions are tied closely with conversion therapy, so that's why that comes to mind.

And lastly, you want to include your child in all sorts of things -- I know like holidays are coming up and things like that and you don't want to exclude your child if there's a difficult family member. You don't want your child to feel like they are outcasted or ostracized. Family is really important and by showing your support and showing love, you're going to be raising a happier, healthier child.

### **Kristen Pepera**

So, the importance of affirmation -- some of these statistics are really great and some of them are hard to see. So, we are talking about all the things that we've already talked about, decrease in some of these risks.

So, 65% decrease in suicidal attempts when a youth can use their chosen name at home, school, working with friends. So, this isn't just like a random study either. This is the Journal of Adolescent Health. So just by using the name alone, 65% decrease in suicidal attempts. Then you see that when a transgender student name and pronouns are used, 29% decrease in suicidal ideation. So we go from 65% drop for attempts and then we have 29% decrease for suicidal ideation. So those are huge, huge numbers. I hate that there's any youth or any person really that has suicidal ideation, let alone attempts. But if something like this can decrease that so greatly, just imagine what it's like to be an affirming household, that decreases all the things across the board.

And then you have 78% of transgender nonbinary youth reporting their health has been poor either most of the time or always during the pandemic. So, I know that we have all been very vulnerable and very challenging space with the pandemic. Unless you're an introvert, then you've been thriving. But all of our youth who are part of the transgender expansive community, depending on their household, if they can't be their authentic self, if they can't interact with other youth who are supportive of them, it really, really harms our mental and physical health. So we want to make sure that they're around supportive adults, supportive peers, supportive staff members and teachers if they're going to a public school or private school, not homeschooled, but either way -- making sure they're surrounded by a support group of people.

## **Lisa Pepera**

Just quick from our two programs here, Create and Connect Art Therapy and our Trans You program that we run weekly, we do survey our youth. So this is just showing that treatment, our therapy treatment and social support through Trans You is really effective. We always ask our youth how they were doing before they started coming to Colors and how they're doing after they've been coming to Colors. And it feels really special when all of them agree that it has helped them feel much better. So for the art therapy, they also that they used art to improve their mood or promote their wellbeing. And four out of every five youth felt a reduction in nervousness, anxiety or depression after completing the art therapy program, which is huge. And again, then for Trans You, saw an increase in feeling accepted for who they are, with more than 50% of them reporting that they felt better about their future.

## **Kristen Pepera**

So, it doesn't have to be something extensive to help them to feel accepted and help them feel validated and authentic. Having connections to other people, having connections to other adults for yourself, that can make a huge, huge difference in quality of life for everyone.