

Welcome...

We'd love you to participate but please use the 'raise hand' facility to ask questions and contribute when others are talking.

Please be considerate to others – this should be a safe, open and reflective space to learn.

If you need live captions, click on the 3 dots at the top of your screen.

Please do take 2 minutes to provide us with some feedback – we love to hear what you think. The QR code and link will be provided later.

Some of these Practice Week sessions are being recorded for learning purposes. Your presenter will let you know at the start.

Thank you!

Norfolk Practice Week

The Art of Individuality

Monday 18 – Friday 22 May 2026



Beyond boxes: Rethinking gender
through a neurodiverse lens

Dr Sue Ackerley, Senior Educational Psychologist

What this session covers



- Why this topic matters
- Explore key concepts
- Consider the intersection of neurodiversity and gender identity
- Reflect on acceptance and inclusive ways of thinking across our settings

Why this matters ...

- Education staff increasingly support children and young people who may be exploring gender, questioning identity, or expressing distress.
- This becomes more complex when neurodivergence, communication differences, anxiety, sensory needs, or social vulnerability are also present.
- This is a complex evolving area where views can be strong and controversial. Staff therefore need language and practice that are inclusive, calm, evidence-aware, and professionally grounded.

Guidance for schools

- DfE 'Gender questioning children: draft schools and colleges guidance' (consultation Dec 2023 – March 2024) – more respondents expressed negative views about useability.
- Cass Review (April 2024) - focused on Gender Identity Services (GIDS) for CYP seeking support to resolve gender-related distress. This acknowledged that school/college guidance should reflect the evidence and principles from the review.
- KCSiE 2026 (consultation Feb to April 2026) Schools and colleges have obligations to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their care, and children who are questioning their gender are no exception.
- When supporting a gender questioning child, the guidance is to take a cautious approach which consider the broad range of their individual needs, in partnership with the child's parents. Seeking clinical advice in relation to social transition of pre-pubertal children.

Key concepts and shared language

TERM	CLEAR WORKING MEANING FOR SCHOOLS	WHY IT MATTERS IN PRACTICE
Sex	A biological classification typically recorded at birth	Relevant in some safeguarding, legal, health, and data contexts; staff should use terms carefully and accurately
Gender	The social, cultural, and personal meanings associated with being male, female, both, neither, or otherwise	Helps schools distinguish between social expectations and a young person's lived experience
Gender identity	A person's internal sense of their own gender	Reminds staff that identity may be deeply felt, but not always easy for a child or young person to describe consistently
Gender expression	How someone presents themselves through clothing, language, hairstyle, manner, or interests	Prevents schools from equating appearance or nonconformity with a fixed identity conclusion
Neurodivergence	Natural variation in how people think, process, communicate, sense, and learn, including profiles such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and others	Encourages schools to adapt communication and support, rather than assuming all pupils interpret experience in the same way
Intersectionality	The way multiple aspects of identity and experience interact, sometimes compounding disadvantage or misunderstanding	Helps staff avoid single-issue thinking and see the whole pupil in context



THE GENDERPERSON

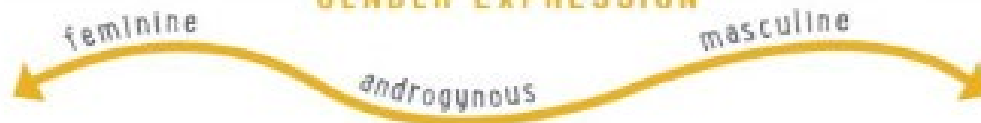
GENDER IDENTITY



SEX CHARACTERISTICS



GENDER EXPRESSION



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



How I describe my gender



sex/gender assigned at birth

● male/boy ● female/girl

BIGENDER

CIS/CISGENDER

DEMIGENDER

GENDER FLUID

GENDER NEUTRAL/
AGENDER

INTERSEX

NON-BINARY

POLYGENDER

QUEER

QUESTIONING

TRANS/ TRANSGENDER

<https://www.theproudtrust.org/young-people/exploring-identity/gender-identity-t/>

Intersectionality:



- Intersectionality offers an understanding around overlapping social identities and experiences of privilege and oppression. This includes: race, culture, religion and gender
- There is a strong link between neurodivergence and young people who are exploring their identity or lived gender (Centre for Social Justice, 2025 – Gender Dysphoria and Disadvantage)

Why might children and young people question their gender identity?

- Sexual orientation- study found that after homophobic name calling more gender questioning (DeLay et al, 2018), suggesting those who may have otherwise explored sexual orientation are exploring gender.
- Neurodivergence- partial explanation is a sense of otherness to neurotypical peer groups
- Mental health - worse in gender-questioning young people than it is in young people who are happy with their sex.

What We Know About Neurodivergence and Gender Questioning

Schools should treat links between neurodivergence and gender questioning as complex, listen carefully, and respond with dignity rather than simple assumptions.

Observed Relationship	Processing Self and Social Expectations	Co-Occurring Needs
<p>Research reports higher rates of gender diversity or questioning among some neurodivergent young people, especially autistic pupils. This is an observed overlap, not proof of cause and effect.</p>	<p>Some pupils relate to social categories differently or describe identity more directly. Their communication style should not be taken as making their experience less valid.</p>	<p>Anxiety, low mood, sensory needs, bullying, and stress can shape both distress and support needs. Staff should consider wellbeing, relationships, communication, and environment together.</p>

CASS REVIEW: KEY MESSAGES FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

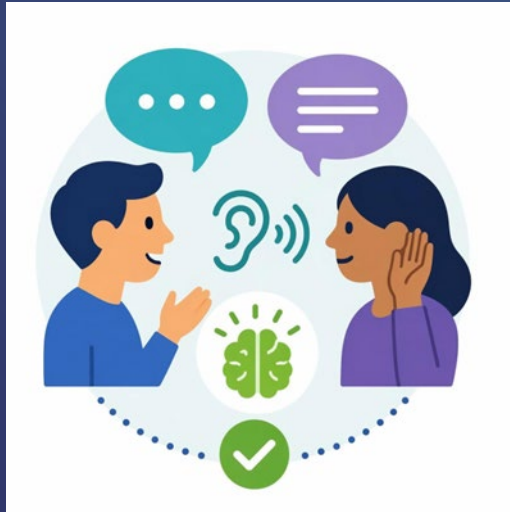
COMPLEXITY	CAUTION	HOLISTIC SUPPORT	BOUNDARIES
<p>Complexity should be expected. Education professionals should expect presentations relating to gender distress to involve multiple interacting factors. School responses should avoid reductionism and consider mental health, neurodivergence, trauma, peer dynamics, and family context.</p>	<p>Evidence-informed caution matters. Where evidence is evolving or contested, schools should act with care and avoid treating disputed questions as fully settled. Staff need not be clinical experts, but they should take a measured, professional approach within their role.</p>	<p>Children and young people need holistic support. Schools should focus on wellbeing, safety, attendance, learning, and access to support. Staff should not diagnose or steer identity outcomes, but provide stable, respectful support and involve other professionals when concerns are significant</p>	<p>Clear boundaries and good communication are essential. Professionals need clarity on what sits within education practice, what requires safeguarding action, and what should be referred onward. Good communication, careful records, and consistency across staff reduce confusion and build trust.</p>

Inclusive practice for schools



DIGNITY & CURIOSITY

- **Lead with dignity & do not assume:** Speak respectfully; ask what support is needed.



ADAPT COMMUNICATION

- **Adapt communication:** Use clear language, check understanding, allow time, and offer choices.



WORK AS A TEAM

- **Work as a team:** Align SEND, safeguarding, pastoral staff, and leaders for consistent support.



FAMILIES & REFLECTION

- **Engage families carefully & review:** Involve parents safely and use reflection to strengthen practice.

What Helps Most ?

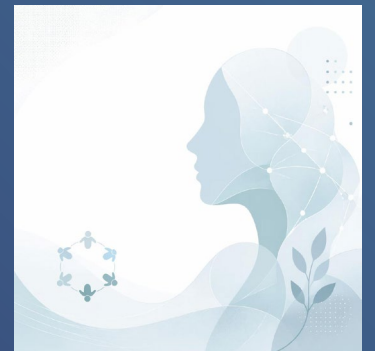
- ✓ Listening more than talking
- ✓ Reflecting rather than interpreting
- ✓ Allowing time
- ✓ Validating feelings without labels
- ✓ Holding hope without certainty



We acknowledge there are a range of experiences,
we aim to understand and not influence identity.

Dr Wenn Lawson, autistic advocate, researcher, and psychologist,

"The non-autistic world is governed by social and traditional expectations, but we may not notice these or fail to see them as important. This frees us up to connect more readily with our true gender."





Key message:

- Young people are individuals, not categories.
- Our role is to support safely, thoughtfully, and without assumption.

“Moving beyond boxes doesn’t mean removing structure—it means responding to each child/young person with care and clarity.”

Useful information

- Signposting for CYP and professional awareness
<https://www.theproudtrust.org/>

- Norfolk LGBT+ Project | Support, Information, Advice



- Homepage - Mermaids (mermaidsuk.org.uk)

[Yellow Ladybugs](https://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk)



- [LGBTQIA+ and neurodiversity: the links between neurodivergence and being LGBTQ+](#)

Please take 2 minutes to
provide us with some feedback



References

- Cass, H. (2024). Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People: Final Report.
- Department for Education (2025). Keeping Children Safe in Education.
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