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Date of publication: 10 October 2017

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Supporting trans and gender questioning autistic pupils

Research demonstrates an increased prevalence of autistic children and young people who are gender questioning or identify as trans. It is vital that schools support pupils to feel safe and valued in an environment where difference is celebrated.

'Listen' to what the pupil is saying in their behaviours and words. Where these conflict, prioritise their behaviours. Observe and understand how they express themselves. Listen without judgement or labels, reassuring the pupil that their feelings are okay and experienced by others. These are complex emotions for anyone to understand and express, and could be exacerbated by communication and interaction difficulties.

Develop all pupils' understanding of 'self' and who they are in relation to others. Celebrate everyone's unique identity, and ensure supportive work is not solely about gender, but develops the many aspects that make up who a person is.

Promote independence at home so that the child is central to decisions around preferred clothing and activities etc. For some, the term 'gender questioning' is intolerable as they are clear about their gender. Ensure that a pupil's expression is not automatically attributed to autism, e.g. clothing preferences or hair length seen as a sensory need, or behaviours explained as special interests.

Staff may need to advocate for the pupil if barriers are put up due to misconceptions such as the pupil lacking capacity or being susceptible to change. Every pupil's emotions, journey and needs are individual, and **schools must always act in the best interests of the child**. Some children may not feel the same awareness of 'fitting in' socially, and may have difficulties in understanding how others may feel.

Once they have 'come out' to one person they may have unrealistic ideas or timeframes about their journey's progression, especially if pre-conceived ideas 'go wrong', putting pressures on supportive planning.

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Some may benefit from written rules/scripts around what is socially acceptable in different contexts. Established routines for example the 'rules' of public toilets, may need to be retaught in the pupil's affirmed gender. Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations can support this.

Offer all uniform options to all pupils, rather than listed by gender. Be sensitive to the sensory differences faced by some for example the emotional impact of not being able to tolerate chest binders (worn by some trans males to make chests look flatter).

Provide gender neutral toilets and changing options, and ideally ensure these are not just the accessible facilities. For those who may need support with their personal care needs, ensure clothing changes and toiletry products such as deodorants are fitting with the pupil's affirmed gender.

It may be useful for the **pupil to talk to someone else who is trans or gender questioning**. Local LGBT youth groups can help, and emailing or phoning might be preferable to meeting. The partnership working is particularly relevant to working with LGBT youth groups locally.
Be aware that the pupil may be vulnerable so teach about risks from others, including e-safety.

Proactively train all staff around gender diversity, terminology, and challenging stereotypes and transphobia. The 'Genderbread Person' or 'Gender Unicorn' are useful in explaining gender as a spectrum. Know where to signpost pupils and their families to access specialist support. Work with these agencies to reciprocally develop each other's understanding of autism or gender identity.

See below for organisations that may be able to help:

- Gendered Intelligence
- Stonewall

Teach and support the other pupils when a peer has chosen to socially transition. This is easier in a school where the culture and curriculum have been proactively embedded in raising trans awareness. Support the trans pupil to understand and have coping strategies/scripts for when others may ask questions, need time to understand, or accidentally make mistakes with pronouns, names etc.

Ensure that autistic pupils have **equal access to positive messages in Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and Relationships Education (RSE), differentiated as needed, and that the curriculum is LGBT-inclusive**. Ensure that resources and messages can be understood by those who interpret language literally. There are useful books to support this. Some may find the characters or storylines conceptually confusing, or unrelatable to themselves.

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Support the trans pupil in planning for any activities that may increase anxiety for example changing for PE, swimming, residential visits etc. Be led by their wishes wherever possible. Bring the whole school community together in celebrating events such as LGBT History Month and Transgender Day of Visibility.

Be aware of gender-specific language, signs and symbols. Use 'hello everyone'/'great work' rather than 'hello boys and girls'/'good man'. Be especially conscious of language and symbols that reinforce gender stereotypes.

Ensure that support processes in policies are clear and understood. Be explicit that the school proactively teaches about gender and trans awareness, so that everyone is clear and proud of what it means to belong to your school community.

For further support in developing practice in this area, please contact:
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For further guidance a recommended resource is Brighton & Hove City Council and Allsorts Youth's Project's 'Trans Inclusion Schools Toolkit' (2017)

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