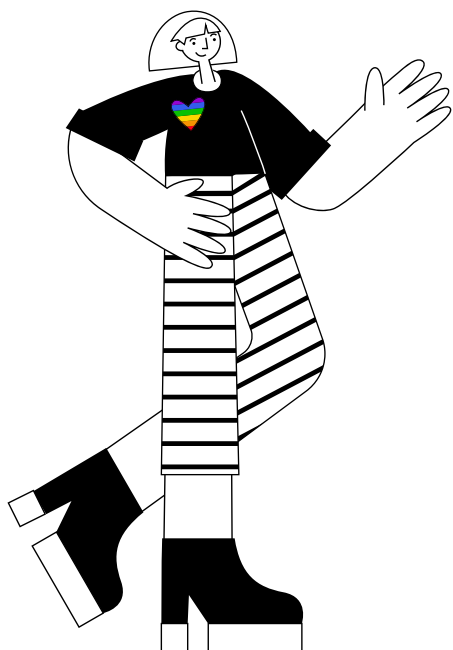




# KIDS AND GENDER

SUPPORT KIDS TO BE THEMSELVES



We all have dreams for our children and who they will grow up to be. You might be hoping for a rugby player, a doctor, or someone who helps out in your community. Will they be a good sibling, kind to nana? Will they fall in love and have a big wedding? Will they look like your mum or your dad? What about grandkids?

Part of these dreams, for lots of parents, is the first question everyone asks you, once they know a wee one is on the way.

## BOY OR GIRL?

You might have grown up with strong ideas about what boys are like and how girls behave. Or you might be chill about your child exploring who they want to be. Gender seems a bit less fixed these days, especially for young people. There's more room for kids to be themselves. Every parent wants to do a great job for their kids. The good news is, you have a massive impact on your child growing up to be happy and healthy.

## THIS TOOLBOX IS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

This toolbox will help you support your kids to be themselves. What does it mean if your son loves wearing a pink tutu? What if your daughter only wants to play with trucks? And what about if your child is sure the doctor got their gender wrong when they were born? These are tricky things to work through as a family, but you can make all the difference for your child by being there for them.





**“RAINBOW”** is an umbrella term for people with diverse sexes, sexualities and gender identities and expressions. This includes people who are takatāpui, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and more!

**SEX** is people’s bodies, chromosomes and hormones. Intersex people have variations in sex characteristics, explained in more detail here:

[CLICK HERE >](#)

**SEXUALITY** is about who you are attracted to. **GENDER IDENTITY** is the internal sense of who you are, and **GENDER EXPRESSION** is how you express this to the outside world. People who are transgender or trans have a different gender than the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-binary people don’t identify with one gender.

Read more about sex, sexuality and gender diversity.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

# BOY OR GIRL?

When a baby is born, your doctor takes a quick look and usually assigns that baby a sex, male or female. From that assigned sex, we assume the gender of our baby.

We don’t actually know yet who our child will be. They will tell us and show us as they grow up.

We are used to seeing some kinds of toys, clothes, haircuts and behaviours as masculine, or more likely to belong to boys. And we are used to seeing other kinds of toys, clothes, haircuts and behaviours as feminine, or more likely to belong to girls.

**But gender isn’t just two boxes marked BOY and GIRL. It’s not even just about anatomy. It’s a mixture of how a child feels about themselves and how they behave.**

All children try out different things, and today, many break the old rules for being a boy or a girl. Sometimes this will challenge your expectations. Your son might prefer dolls and dressing up. Your daughter might want short hair and refuse skirts. Lots of children and young people will explore in ways you might find confusing.

In the past, these kids were teased for being “sissies” or “tomboys.” That kind of teasing is less ok these days – which is good for everyone. There’s more room for children to be themselves.

As parents, you will have worries and fears for your child. You might worry your child is gay or transgender and feel afraid about bullying at school. You might feel like other parents will judge you if your child doesn’t fit into the “norm.”

You might wonder if your dreams for your child will come true.

Let’s face it, this is just one of the challenges for parents as we figure out how to support our kids. Being a good parent is a journey, and we figure out stuff as we go along.





**Give your child unconditional love** and help them explore who they are with open questions.

**Don't sweat the small stuff.** Let your child choose their clothes, toys and hairstyles.

**Enjoy getting to know your child** and celebrate who they really are.

**Hang out and do things together,** even when what your child wants to do is different than you imagined.

**Talk, ask questions and listen** to your child, so they know you are interested in what matters for them.

Watch **Rediscovering Aotearoa: Takatāpui** | LGBTQIA+:



LET'S FIGURE IT OUT -

# BREAKING GENDER RULES!

These days, breaking gender rules is more common for children and young people. Rigid ideas about gender are changing, so there are lots more ways to be a boy or a girl. In some cultures, like Te Ao Māori and the Pacific cultures, it was never that rigid anyway. Your daughter might tell you “this toy is for girls because I like it.” Your son might say “I’m a boy who likes girl things.” Or your child might tell you they are “both a boy and a girl.”

Most of these children want to stretch gender rules to be themselves. They will still be comfortable with the gender and sex they were assigned when they were born.

Other children will be insistent, consistent and persistent in telling you their gender is different from what was assumed for them, and some might show distress or discomfort with their physical body. You might hear them say things about being a boy or a girl that you don’t expect. This often starts at an early age. These children may be trans, and it’s important to open up these conversations and not ignore children when they express this.

Whatever exploring gender means for your child, how you respond is the most important thing. If you stay open to them, they will keep sharing and exploring with you. Supportive parents make all the difference for children who are gender creative, especially when those children are part of the Rainbow community.

You don’t have to be perfect, and you won’t be. Parenting is hard work. You will make mistakes and get things wrong, everyone does. Just keep showing up with love, and seek support for yourself and others in your family so that you can feel as confident as possible in supporting your child.





**Trust your child** and let them talk about what's going on for them in their own time.

**Try not to** make assumptions. This is hard when we think we know our child best.

**Ask your child** questions about how they feel, and what they need from you.

**Get support** for yourself, because you will have questions you'll need to work through.



**Takatāpui** is a traditional Māori term that has been reclaimed to embrace all Māori who identify with diverse genders, sexualities and sex characteristics. It's a very popular term for rangatahi.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

# WHEN YOUR CHILD HAS QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR GENDER OR SEXUALITY

**Great news, they are talking to you about it! They must trust you to support them, no matter what.**

When a child has been thinking they might be part of the Rainbow community, they have often been thinking about it for a while before they tell anyone. They might tell you first, or other people, like their friends.

**Coming out** is when someone tells others about their Rainbow identity. Most people come out to themselves first. Coming out is not a one-off event, but something Rainbow people must do over and over again.

Many trans young people **transition** or take steps over time to affirm their gender. This might include social, legal and medical processes, and is different for each person.



## How many Rainbow young people are there?<sup>1</sup>

It's hard to find accurate information about the number of Rainbow young people. In 2012, about one student in every New Zealand secondary school classroom said they were a girl who wanted to be a boy, a boy who wanted to be a girl, or they didn't know yet about their gender. And about two students in every classroom said they were definitely not straight or didn't know yet who they were attracted to. There seem to be more and more young people talking about being trans, as it becomes safer for them to be themselves.

<sup>1</sup>New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2020) Prism: Human rights issues relating to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) in Aotearoa New Zealand – A report with recommendations. Wellington: New Zealand.





Read more about the [history of Takatāpui and listen to how some whānau have supported their rangatahi.](#)

### [NZ Parents of Transgender and Gender Diverse Children](#)

is a parent-led group where you can find the information, guidance, advice and companionship to help you and your family.

Find support for Pasefika families with Rainbow family members:

- [Moana Vā, Navigators of Pacific Pride](#)
- [F'ine Pasifika Trust Aotearoa](#)
- [Rainbow Fale](#)

### [Indian Origin Pride NZ](#)

supports Rainbow Indians and their families.

### [Diverse Church New Zealand](#)

is a home for Rainbow people of faith.

**You cannot change your child, and not accepting who they are, or trying to change them will only push them away and make them feel awful. Lots of parents struggle, especially at first. Accepting your child might take time. Remember if it's hard for you, it was probably hard for your child to tell you.**

## FIND SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF

Lots of parents wonder if they have done something wrong, when their child “comes out” to them. But it doesn't work like that. There are children and young people who are gender diverse or not straight in every community, every faith, every town in Aotearoa, and everywhere else.

**You can be sure you've done something right though, when your child trusts and opens up to you.**

Most parents have worries and fears when their child “comes out” to them. You might be confused and need time to work out your feelings. It might seem sudden, even if your child has been thinking about it for a long time. You may feel sad if your dreams for your child need to change.

You also might feel proud that your child has been brave enough to tell you who they are.

All these feelings make sense, and you're not the only parent to feel them. Your child is the same person as before, and they need to know you see that. You can feel out of your depth and still reassure your child that you love them. When Rainbow young people have supportive parents, they are much more likely to thrive – but you can't support your child if you're not ok, and it's not up to your child to support you.

**Be patient** and give yourself time and space to let go of any dreams for your child that don't fit them.

**Talk about** fears and concerns with friends and supportive family, not your child. Do you have Rainbow family members or friends, or community leaders you trust?

**Meet up and connect** with other parents of Rainbow children and young people, in person or online. These parents will be thinking about the same things you are, and they will know how to help.

**Find resources** that help answer your questions. Reach out to one of the support organisations listed in this toolbox.

**Be kind** to yourself, you're allowed to make mistakes. Remind yourself how much you love your child.

**Don't lose faith.** There are more and more faith groups and leaders who are open and welcoming towards Rainbow communities, and your local support groups will point you to them.

**Try to avoid** even indirect rejection. Your child will notice. It's fine to tell them you need time to work out how you're feeling, but try to avoid saying things like “why are you like this?” or “are you sure?”

**Watch** or read Rainbow TV shows, movies and books. Check reviews first, as not all media is equal!





## LEARNING THE LINGO

One of the things that can feel confusing is the language these days. Rainbow? LGBTIQ+? Sex, sexuality and gender diversity? Takatāpui? Transgender? Non-binary? Intersex?

Your child may well be coming home with words you have never heard before. Language changes all the time and means different things to different people.

It's definitely ok not to know all the words! You just need to know which words your child wants to use, and what they mean to your child. And you can do your own research, because it might feel weird that your child knows so much more about this than you do. That's ok, you can learn together.

Many cultures recognise more than two genders and have words that do not directly translate into English. In Te Ao Māori, **takatāpui** is a traditional term that has been reclaimed to embrace all Māori who identify with diverse sexes, genders and sexualities.

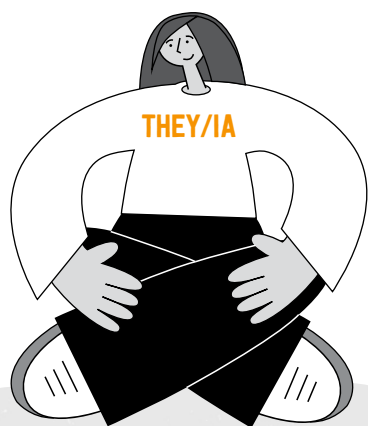
**Fa'afafine** in Samoa, **māhū** in Tahiti and Hawai'i, **vakasalewalewa** in Fiji, **palopa** in Papua New Guinea, **akava'ine** in the Cook Islands, **fakaleiti** or **leiti** in Tonga, and **fakafefine** in Niue are all words for people under sexuality and gender diversity umbrellas, as are **hijra** and **kinnar** in Indian sub-continent countries.

**Ask** about the words they like for themselves, and what they mean. Don't be surprised if this changes – children and young people take time to figure out who they are, and may use different words at different times.

**Ask** about their name. Many trans young people choose a new name as part of transitioning. Calling them a new name might feel hard at first, but you will get used to it, and when you do it, so will everyone else. Also, ask whether your child would like you to share their new name and correct pronouns with others in their life, and who they are or aren't comfy to share this with.

**Ask** about pronouns. He, she and they are all common pronouns in English. Ia in Māori is gender neutral. Practice saying the pronouns your child asks you to – getting this right is important. In fact, it's one of the best ways to show you support your child. If you get your child's pronoun wrong, just apologise, move on, and put the effort into practicing so that you're more likely to get it right next time.

**Ask** your child to show you stuff they read and like. This shows you're curious and want to understand and see them.



**Be There** is an information site with resources and support organisations for Rainbow young people and their families.

**Talanoa: Clearing Pathways** is a resource for Pasefika families with Rainbow young people.

**Let's be TRANSPARENT** is a podcast with a mother and her trans son, talking about what life was like for them after he came out.



Check out the **InsideOUT Kōaro** YouTube channel:





Listen to radio hosts Robert Rakete and Jeanette Thomas talk about **parenting trans children**.



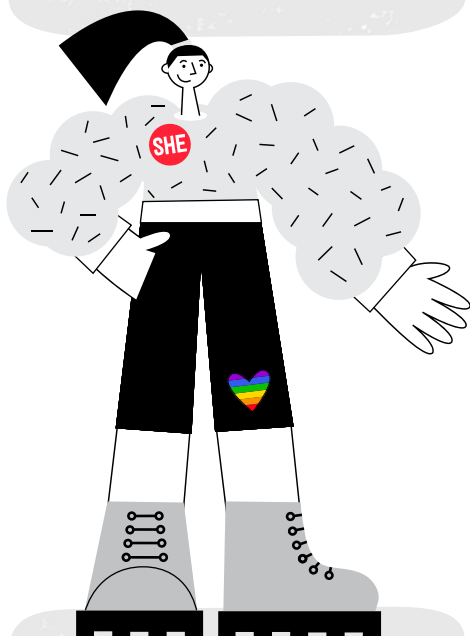
Read a support guide for **parents of intersex children**.



Read Stormclouds and Rainbows, a **support guide for parents of transgender children**, based on interviews with parents in NZ.



Watch the Village Collective video series Moso'oi with **Pasifika mothers raising diverse rainbow children**.



I'm Local has a list of support groups for Rainbow young people by region. Click on the map to search where you are:



# GROWING GREAT KIDS – PARENTS ARE POWERFUL

Just before and after your child has come out to you is an important and vulnerable time. Rainbow young people might feel different or worry about being rejected by people around them. They will be sensitive to attitudes, language and jokes about sex, sexuality and gender diversity.

The great news is, you can make all the difference and buffer your child from any negative responses from the outside world. Supportive families improve the wellbeing of Rainbow young people and reduce risk-taking behaviours and mental health distress. Tell your child you love them just as they are, and nothing can change that.

**Be a champion** for your child. If you show you have your child's back, life will be easier for them at school, in the wider family/whānau, and everywhere else. Challenge negative comments about your child, whether they are there or not. You can't change how other people think, but you can show them what's ok for you and your child. Make it clear you expect love and respect.

**Work out together** how they want to tell other family members. They may want your help, or they may want to wait a while until they have the right words. It's important to follow your child's lead and not talk about them until they are ready to share.

**Show affection** and interest in your child's life. They will be more likely to share any bullying or discrimination with you if they know you love them.

**Start conversations** when you both have time to talk, and no one is stressed. Ask questions and listen, but be prepared to learn by yourself too, your child may not want to teach you.

**Ask about** your child's name and pronouns, respect what they tell you, and practice! You will help your family and friends accept any changes if you role model getting this right, and your child will love it.

**Accept your child** is working out who they are, and this might take time. Don't put any pressure on them to "make their mind up". Believe what they tell you, and don't be surprised if this changes. Figuring out who we are is a lifelong process.

**Spend time** together. Show your child you love them by hanging out and doing stuff you both like.

**Help them find and get to** Rainbow groups, either online or in person. These groups are safe places for young people to get support and form friendships with others who accept them for who they are.





**Out on the Shelves** is an online list of books for young people with Rainbow themes and characters. You can search for books:

[CLICK HERE >](#)

Find out all about your **child's rights at school**, including privacy, uniforms, treatment by teachers and much more!

[CLICK HERE >](#)

Download **Rainbow guides for schools** here. These can help you ask for what your child needs.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

Watch these **Rainbow Youth videos about sex, sexuality and gender diversity.**



Read **navigating healthcare** guidelines for parents of intersex children.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

**Watch and read** Rainbow media. Ask your child about their favourite books, podcasts and shows.

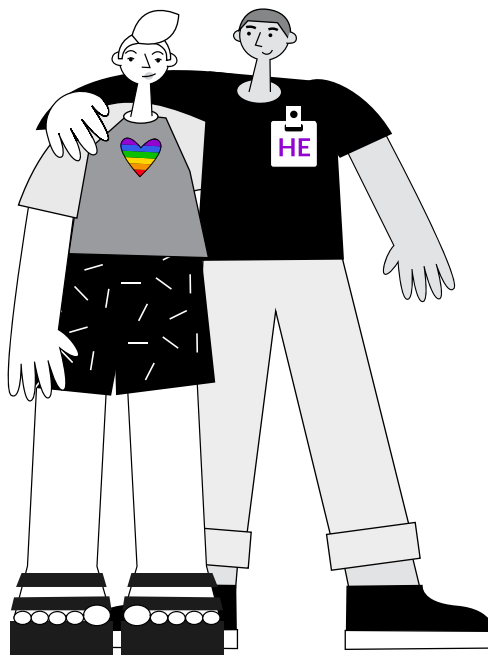
**Get involved** with local Rainbow stuff, from PRIDE to film nights to supporting a Rainbow charity.

**Welcome your child's** friends and partner. Your child may need to form new and different social networks, and you can make that easier.

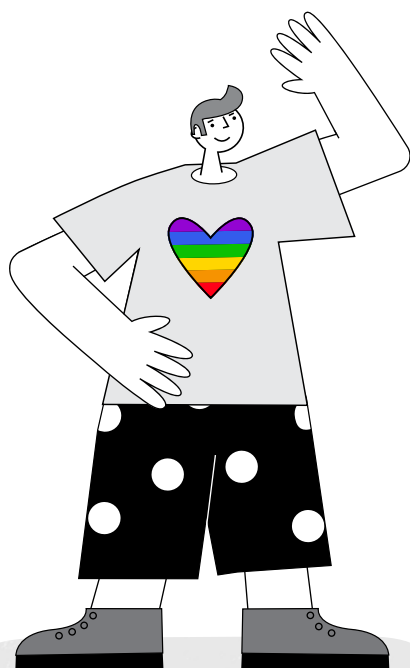
**Ask open questions about school.** Is there anything your child wants your help with? Does the school have good safety and inclusion policies for Rainbow students? Are there any issues with uniforms, bathrooms or sports teams? Do they have a school Rainbow support group? What about sexuality and relationships education?

**Apologise when you get stuff wrong.** This won't be the only time when you feel out of your depth as a parent. It's never too late to keep learning how best to support your child.

**Check in** with your child about health needs, especially as they become teenagers or if they want to find out about gender affirming healthcare. Ask parent support groups about Rainbow friendly healthcare services.







Read **Ben's story**, an 8 year old trans boy growing up in Auckland here:

[CLICK HERE >](#)

Read about the experiences of **NZ families with puberty blockers**.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

Read more up-to-date and reliable information about **puberty blockers in Aotearoa**.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

The **Ministry of Health** has information about **puberty blockers** here:

[CLICK HERE >](#)

## PARENTING TRANS KIDS BEFORE PUBERTY

Some children feel strongly that their gender is different than what was assumed for them at a very young age. If they are insistent, consistent and persistent in telling you their gender is wrong, or show distress or discomfort with their physical body, they may need your support to explore transition processes.

Before puberty, no medical interventions are available or possible, but social transition, even for very young children, will reduce your child's distress.

That just means listening to how your child understands themselves, and helping them make sure that's how the world sees them. Ask your child what they want and help them make it happen. This might include talking to your child's school and your family, to explain the changes and ask for their support.

Don't worry if your child's idea of themselves changes over time – that's pretty common with kids in all kinds of ways. What they will remember is your support, no matter what.

Social transitioning for trans kids before puberty might include:

- Choosing a different name, that feels like it fits them better
- Using different pronouns – ask your child what they would like. The most common pronouns are he for a trans boy, she for a trans girl, or they for a non-binary child (but don't assume)
- Getting haircuts, clothing or toys that feel like they fit them better
- Using bathrooms that affirm their gender
- Participating in sports or clubs that affirm their gender

## PARENTING TRANS KIDS AT PUBERTY

Young trans people beginning puberty may find the changes in their bodies extremely distressing, because they may feel worried others will not accept their gender. It's at puberty when bathrooms, uniforms and being part of sports teams is likely to become more of an issue for your child.

To reduce puberty related distress, puberty blockers are the most widely accepted clinical approach and can be prescribed by a health professional when needed. There's some misinformation out there, but don't worry, accurate information is available too.

Puberty blockers just reduce or delay unwanted changes in puberty, to give you and your child more time to consider gender related feelings and options. They avoid the development of breasts, facial hair, an Adam's apple, body hair and voices becoming deeper, which are hard or impossible to reverse. This means they reduce or prevent the need for expensive and invasive surgeries in the future.

Your child can stop taking puberty blockers at any time.





Read **guidelines for health professionals** supporting trans children, young people and adults here:

**CLICK HERE >**

The **Ministry of Education Relationships and Sexuality Education Guidelines** are here:

**CLICK HERE >**

Read what **Rainbow young people say they want from healthy relationships and consent education** here:

**CLICK HERE >**

Read **how to change your child's name and gender on their birth certificate** here. The rules are different at different ages, until people are 18 when they can apply for themselves.

**CLICK HERE >**

Watch **TransGenerations, where Trans Kiwis, young and old, tell their stories**



## SUPPORTING TRANS KIDS BEYOND PUBERTY

After puberty, your child can start thinking about further interventions if they wish. This is taking additional healthcare steps to affirm their gender and can include further medical and/or surgical treatments. Not all trans people will want every healthcare option, and access to all interventions can also be challenging. Keeping in touch with a supportive healthcare professional to get accurate information is important, and support groups and organisations are also good places to get accurate and reliable information.

**Help your child** research and talk to health professionals about medical transition options. Not every trans person will want medical interventions, but it's good to have accurate information about how long different interventions take, waiting lists and availability, and health impacts.

Relationships and sexuality education is not always available in New Zealand secondary schools in ways that make sense for Rainbow young people.

**Ask your school** about their sexuality education, and whether it includes Rainbow identities. National guidelines say it should.

Supporting trans teenagers may also mean helping them to change legal identity documents such as drivers licenses, birth certificates and passports so their name and gender are recorded accurately. You can get help at a Rainbow community group, parent support group or online.





**Kōrero Mai | Talk to me** is an online portal to help parents and caregivers talk to their kids about sexuality, gender and safety. It includes videos of other parents and caregivers talking about how they support their kids – the real talk – which will help you to think about what would keep kids in your life safe.

**Kids and Gender** was first developed in 2021, by Sandra Dickson from **Hohou Te Rongo Kahukura** with recommendations from **White Ribbon**, **Rainbow Hub Waikato** and Dr Cindy Towns. In 2024, we updated to include law changes and new resources.



The design and layout of this resource was crafted by Jane Byrne of **Little Gem Design**.

## THE HARD STUFF

This resource is for parents and caregivers, to help answer some of the questions you may have about kids and gender.

There's more and more misinformation out there these days, and none of it helps the safety of children who might grow up to be Rainbow.

Talking about sexuality and gender with your kids is not going to “turn them gay”. It's not “grooming”.

But it might make the world feel a bit safer, and a bit kinder, for them. And it might protect them from other people too.

When kids can't talk to their families about who they are, they are much more likely to feel down, be targeted by bullies or creepy people.

What helps keep Rainbow kids safe is getting accurate information, talking with other parents on the same journey, and listening to your child. There are more and more groups and resources available to support children, young people and their families. The best groups will be the ones in your local community, where they know what it's like where you are.

TRY: **OutLine** to ask about rainbow support organisations near you.

Whether you understand about sexuality and gender or not, showing up for your kid no matter what is part of being a parent. They will remember your love and acceptance forever.

You got this! And your child is perfect just the way they are.

