

# Responding to Transphobia

## Tips for Parents and Educators of Youth and Young Adults



Responding to transphobia most effectively occurs when we understand the intersectionality of attitudes that contribute to different forms of transphobia. Often transphobia is intrinsically linked with sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. With this in mind the following document has been organized to cite the transphobic action or phrase, then discuss the source of this form of transphobia before suggesting an example response. With this deeper understanding we hope parents and educators will feel better equipped to turn instances of transphobia into teachable moments, as well as identify other systems of oppression that are present in their home or school environment.

### POTENTIAL CHALLENGES TO ENTERING THESE CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH

#### Challenges to Your Intervention

A challenge in working with youth and young adults is that they have already been exposed to societal narratives and systems of privilege and oppression long enough to internalize them as natural and normal. With this in mind, your counter message of gender equality and diversity is not going to just involve expanding their world view, but also in many cases your concerted effort in having them recognize, and then start deconstructing their internalized sexist, homophobic and transphobic attitudes.

This is normal, and only signals more so how important it is for you to disrupt and challenge these attitudes. The best way to manage youth attitudes toward your intervention is going to vary depending on the individual situation, the seriousness of the offending comment, your relationship to the young adult, and the availability of accountability measures at your school/institution in instances of sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

Remember, speaking up IS the most important part of interrupting harassment when you hear it or see it. Even if all you do is purposefully relay your message and stick to your assertion calmly and deliberately, it is crucial in creating a safer space for all persons. That person may not be ready to assimilate your message into their world view at that moment, but you can be sure they will remember your intervention in potentially saying something similar in the future.

#### Opportunities to Engage with Learning Detached from Peer Pressure and Friendship Influence

Young adults are more likely than younger children to feel a sense of absolute affinity to their friends and peer group as a way to maintain the social benefits of their networks. So while they may be curious to know more and to grow in allied ways they may feel restricted by the attitudes of their friends and believe that challenging these attitudes would be “uncool” or “unacceptable.”

Be cognizant that the attitudes of the most outspoken person in a peer group or friend circle may not reflect the perspectives of the rest. However, due to fear of being perceived as the only one with a dissenting opinion, youth will often not speak up as they feel it will threaten their social cohesion with the group. In this way, providing students with opportunities to engage with topics of sexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia free from an environment that requires them to “go along” with their friends is crucial in helping to equip those same students with the understanding, language, and confidence to potentially act in more allied ways in the future.

### Understanding the Originating Source: Misogyny’s Intersection with Transphobia

It is a reality that we live in a patriarchal society where men and masculinity have been placed in a higher position of power and privilege over women, and femininity. As a result of patriarchy, trans persons often find themselves at the intersection of a rigidly binaried gender system where they stand to gain, or lose certain privileges in taking steps to affirm their gender identity. Yet the ideological underpinnings of patriarchy assume the privileges connected to maleness and masculinity to be ‘natural,’ and intrinsically connected with

the body. Trans persons, by asserting their gender identity regardless of bodily characteristics, threaten the narratives that maintain the continued existence and assumptions of the patriarchal system. Many forms of transphobia are rooted within this system, and function to “keep people in their place.”

For trans women, this means casting shame and rejection on individuals perceived to be male who identify or express as women by subjecting them to the objectification, sexualization and dehumanization that is directed towards women in a patriarchal society. This is often viewed as justified retaliation towards a person who has chosen to accept “reduced status” as a woman, and/or disgust at this person for having “lowered themselves” by “rejecting manhood” and challenging the presumed superiority of masculinity.

For trans men this often means that they are subjected to heightened objectification and sexualization as a way to “put them back in their place” by those who refuse to respect their masculine identity. Trans men pose a challenge to the idea that male privilege is natural and innate, inherently connected to bodies that are assigned male at birth. If trans men can access male privilege, then it is not inherent to being assigned male at birth. Treating a trans man’s body with heightened sexual objectification and even violence is often an attempt to reassert this idea through dominance and control.

## TRANS-MISOGYNY

Whistling, cat-calling, sexualized objectification of the trans person’s body, and statements that reduce the trans person to their sexual desirability.

“If you want to be a girl then I’ll treat you like one.”

“You think you’re a man? Maybe you just need some attention from a real man.”



## EXAMPLE RESPONSE

Whistling, cat-calling, and sexualized or objectifying statements must be taken seriously. All individuals enacting sexist language or behaviour needs to be held accountable to the school or organization's code of conduct or pertinent policy, swiftly and without exception. Sexual harassment is never a joke, and should never be dismissed as such.

Calmly get the students'/youth's attention, and identify the offending action or phrase. Indicate that sexist language, attitudes and behaviours are not tolerated according to your school's/organization's code of conduct or relevant policy. If you feel comfortable doing so, state your personal support for this code or policy, and the necessity for strict adherence. Take action according to the process your school or organization uses to hold individuals accountable to their actions.

### Understanding the Originating Source: Cisnormativity's Intersection with Transphobia

Cisnormativity is a cultural and societal bias, often unconscious, that privileges cisgender identities and gender norms, and ignores or underrepresents trans identities and/or gender diversity by assuming that all people are cisgender, and will express their gender in a way that aligns with perceived gender norms. In other words, cisnormativity not only assumes that all people are cisgender, but it then structures a social world

where this is the only recognized option for human gender identity and expression.

As a review, cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds with the social expectations that exist based on the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., a cisgender man is someone who identifies as a man and who was assigned male sex at birth). Transgender refers to a person who does not identify either fully or in part with the gender commonly associated with the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., a transgender woman is someone who identifies as a woman and who was assigned male sex at birth).

Cisnormativity imposes a strict understanding of gender identity in relation to assigned sex in that the two are believed to inevitably "align." This means that someone who was assigned male sex at birth for example must identify as a man and express in a masculine way. However, the reality remains that gender identity, sex/assigned sex and gender expression are separate, distinct components unto themselves that interact with each other in an infinite number of ways.

Contrary to the assertions of cisnormativity, it is in fact our brain/mind that determines our gender identity, not our bodily characteristics, including our genitals.

This is why Ontario's Human Rights Code protects gender identity as a distinct component of human identity and expression in addition to gender, and sex. To invalidate a person's gender identity and declare that it is not "real" may result in an act of violence that violates their human rights and is *against the law*.

## PURPOSEFUL ENFORCEMENT OF CISNORMATIVITY

"You're not a 'real' girl/boy."

"If you have a penis, then you belong in the boys' bathroom."

"If you can give birth to a baby, then you're a woman. End of story."

"Are you 'all-man'/'all-woman' when naked?"



## EXAMPLE RESPONSES

*“You’re not a ‘real’ girl/boy.”*

- To declare that someone’s gender identity is not “real” unless it matches up with the sex they were assigned at birth is not only inaccurate, but it is violent. Gender identity is based on how you perceive yourself, not on how your body looks. Further, these are two separate and distinct components of human identity. Their identity as a woman/man *is* real. What someone’s body looks like is not your concern. We’re all in charge of our own underpants.

*“If you have a penis, then you belong in the boys’ bathroom.”*

*“If you can give birth to a baby, the you’re a woman. End of story.”*

- Genitals and reproductive capabilities do not dictate an individual’s gender identity. That is why sex and gender identity are two distinct and separate components of human identity, and why they are recognized as such in our human rights code. If you identify as a *boy*, then you can use the *boys’* bathroom. No one *belongs* in a particular washroom. If you identify as a woman, then you are woman. It is not dependent on your ability to do a particular thing.

## HUMOROUS ADDITIONS

- Not sure about you, but when I’m in the bathroom I don’t do a pant check on everyone to make sure they belong in there. In fact, I really hope you don’t either because that would be both offensive and illegal! And it would say a lot more about me than it did about other people if that’s how I acted
- Not sure about you, but I don’t greet all of the women I meet with the follow-up question, “are you able to procreate?” before believing that they are as a woman, mother, sister, wife or whatever.

*“Are you ‘all-man’/ ‘all-woman’ when naked.”*

- Asking or inquiring about someone’s genitals is inappropriate. Period. Genitals do not define gender identity. Other people’s bodies are none of your business. People have all kinds of body parts. What makes someone “all man” or “all woman” is how the person who has those body parts identifies.





"If R. is trans then he's gay. I'm sure of it."

"She's dating that trans dude. What a dyke."



### Understanding the Originating Source: Homophobia and Biphobia's Intersections with Transphobia

Over and above acceptance and support of trans and LGB people, the problem is often a lack of understanding that attraction and gender identity are entirely different and separate components of who we are and how we identify as people.

Being transgender does not automatically mean that you are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Some trans women will exclusively date other women and identify as lesbian; others will date men and identify as straight. Some trans men will exclusively date other men and identify as gay; others will date women and identify as straight. Still others may experience multi-gender attraction and identify as bisexual or pansexual, or prefer to not identify in any particular way based on attraction.

While teachable moments can be used to emphasize these differences, and share this knowledge, homophobic and biphobic language must be met with zero tolerance. The examples used above clearly illustrate the intersection between transphobia and homophobia in their tone, use of explicitly homophobic language and the presence of an attitude of disapproval towards trans people. As such, reactions such as these must be dealt with swiftly and with consequences that adequately hold individuals accountable for their language and attitudes.

### EXAMPLE RESPONSES

*"If R. is trans then he's gay. I'm sure of it."*

- Just because someone is trans does not automatically mean they identify as gay. Gender identity and attraction are two separate components of human identity. Sure R. might like other guys and be gay. Or he might like girls and be straight. Or he might like people of multiple genders and identify as bisexual, pansexual or queer. That will be up to R. to decide. And it is not for us to speculate on.

*"She's dating that trans dude.  
What a dyke."*

- Dating a trans person does not automatically make you gay. And since she's a girl and he's a guy it really seems more straight, if anything. Either or both of the people you're talking about might be attracted to people of multiple genders. Regardless, the only way you would know is if you respectfully asked. At this school/in our home/ at this organization we treat all people with equal respect and dignity, and do not use words such as 'dyke' in a negative way. Additionally, using a term specially used to refer to women who experience attraction to other women in reference to him is incredibly disrespectful of his identity as a man. [outline next steps in accountability process according to your school or organization]

“Gender neutrality isn’t real. You are just using ‘they’ as a pronoun to get attention.”

“You just need to pick one or the other.”



### Understanding the Originating Source: Transphobia’s Intersection with Gender Diversity

The binary system of gender that’s common in dominant North American society is often accepted as a universal truth. However, it is important to recognize that the binary system of gender is an ideological system with an originating source and history that does not reflect the expansive reality of the human experience of gender, or of the gender systems of all cultures around the world.

The gender binary was brought to Canada by European settlers and enforced through a violent process of colonization.

Prior to colonization, there is a rich history of gender diversity on this land in which *Two Spirit* persons in certain Indigenous cultures were honoured and revered as important members of their communities. It was seen as a gift from the Creator to embody both masculine and feminine spirits and be able to see the world from multiple perspectives at once. Two Spirit people were often the mediators, healers, teachers, and dream interpreters in their communities.

With the arrival of European colonizers however, Indigenous communities were forced to hide their Two Spirit people to protect them from violence. They were forced to conform to the gender binary or risk their lives. Today, many Indigenous communities are undergoing a reclamation of their Two Spirit teachings, knowledge and people.

Canada is not the only place with a history of recognizing and respecting the presence of more than two genders. There are histories around the world of three, four or more recognized gender identities.

The gender binary remains a false and confining reality for many gender diverse and gender non-binary individuals. Gender identity is not limited to just two options, but rather covers an expansive spectrum with multiple options that are just as real and valid as identification as a man or woman. People can identify as neither, or both, or somewhere in-between.

### EXAMPLE RESPONSES

- Non-binary gender identities are just as real as your identity as a woman/man. There are more than just two options for gender identity. In fact here in Canada we have a history of more than two genders with Two Spirit persons in many Indigenous cultures. Gender identity exists on a spectrum, and all identities along that spectrum are equally valid. The pronouns that reflect diversity in gender identity are also just as valid, and are to be respected as such.