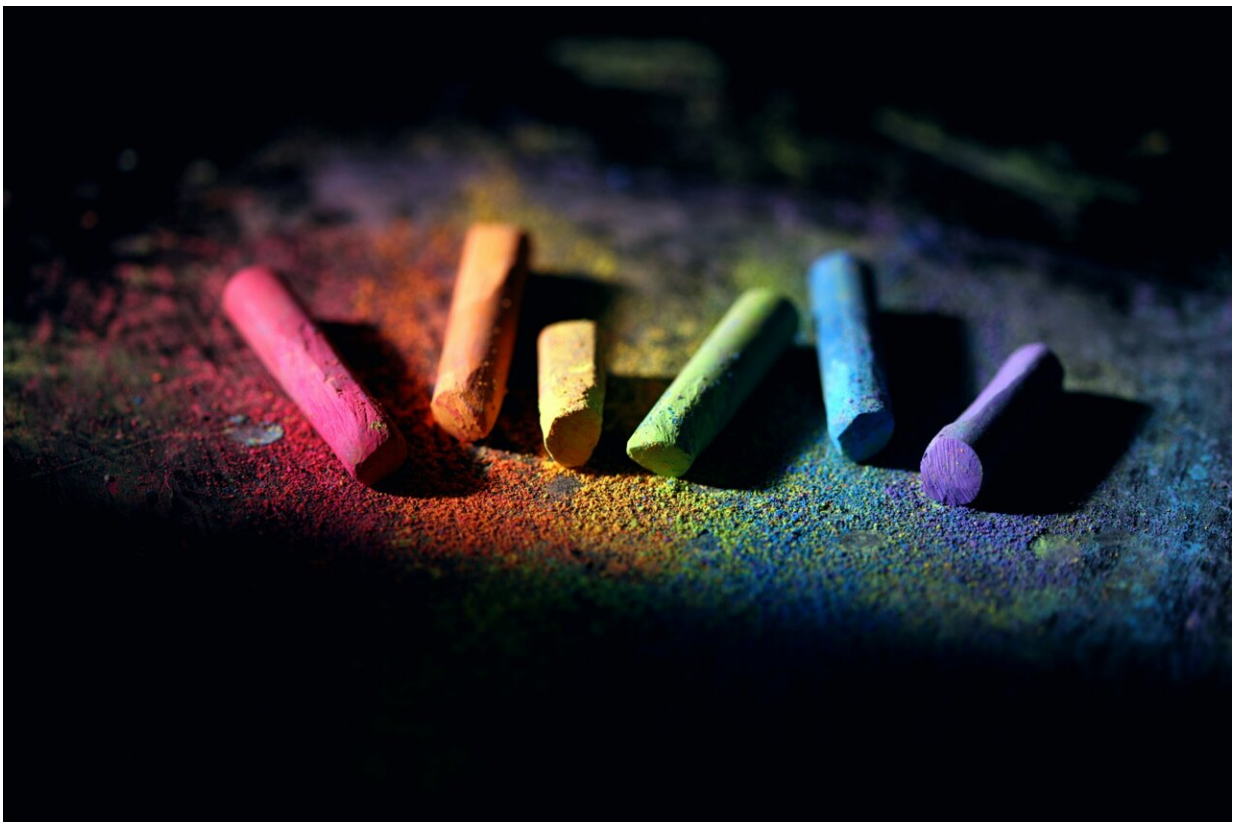


# 'Why can't I wear a dress?' What schools can learn from preschools about supporting trans children

February 23 2024, by Cris Townley

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

A new group of young children has just started school for the first time, with many excited about new friends, uniforms and being at "big

school."

But for trans kids, starting school can be a much more daunting process.

They have likely gone from preschools and daycare where they had the freedom to wear what they want and play what they want, whether that was dinosaurs, dolls or dress ups. The boy who likes to be Rapunzel was probably viewed as "cute" and the girl always playing pirates was encouraged to do so.

But school culture is much more [cisnormative](#). This means schools tend to assume children can be sorted into boys and girls and everyone is comfortable in what category they are in.

You can see this in formal ways, with boys' and girls' uniforms and toilets and in informal ways, with boys and girls making different friendship groups and playing different games at lunch.

This makes it difficult for trans children to feel as [though they belong](#) at school. Trans students often have [lower levels of well-being](#) and [lower educational outcomes](#) than non-trans students.

My research looks at what schools can learn from preschools and other early learning settings such as daycare centers about how to support trans students.

## **My research**

In 2023 I partnered with P-TYE, an advocacy network for parents of trans children. The study, which is currently in [peer review](#), looked at how we can integrate support for trans children across a range of services including education, medical and mental health.

Through P-TYE and wider networks, we recruited 12 families with trans children. The children had an average age of 13 and had been recognized as trans between two and ten years.

Through interviews, I spoke to them about their experiences of childcare and school. Three themes emerged.

## **1. The importance of being 'child-centered'**

Early education services are "child-centered." This means educators are trained to place a child's "belonging, becoming and being" at the center of their curriculum (as per the [Early Years Learning Framework](#)). This includes freely exploring gender and their identity.

One parent told us their trans girl "had an incredible teacher" for preschool "who'd take old curtains and make things [...] these three-tiered skirts that were heavy and they made beautiful sounds and they caressed you when you wore them and [my child] found such joy in these creations."

Another child showed her [foster parents](#) a photo of herself at daycare "in a dress up pushing a pram around with a baby in it. And she's got a handbag on, jewelry and everything. She's about 3 years old in the picture. And she says, this is the first time I knew I was a girl."

In contrast, trans identity in schools often means "breaking the rules." Parents in the study described examples of schools not letting trans students express their identity. "Every day, she was asking, 'why can't I wear a dress to school'? Why do I have to go to the boys' toilets? They're mean to me when I'm in there."

## **2. Not categorizing kids by gender**

Parents in the study also reported how children weren't categorized into genders by pre-school routines. As one interviewee said, "all the kids use the same toilet [...] they [were called the] 'cockatoos' and the 'koalas' or whatever [...] they weren't ever separated by gender."

But at school, children faced daily choices about whether they are a boy or a girl. One parent described how a class had segregated lunch crates for boys and girls. Their trans child stood out with "this pink drink bottle with unicorns on in a sea of dinosaurs."

Children also have to wear the correct uniform, be in the right line for sport and use the assigned toilet and can be [bullied](#) by other students when they try.

One child "survived kindergarten by walking." She told her parent

"I just realized that if I wasn't still, I was less of a target so I just made sure in kindergarten to keep moving and I never stopped moving."

For non-binary children—who don't feel like a boy or a girl—school brings a more complex set of difficulties.

One parent talked about a lucky dip at the school fete with boy or girl gifts. They said this signals to their child "I have to be one of these things or the other" and "tells my kid that they don't fit in the world."

### **3. Support for educators**

Research shows having [teachers who are positive about gender diversity](#) is crucial for the well-being of trans students.

My interviews also suggested responses to trans kids often depend on individual educators and schools. Many preschool educators were

supportive and "totally fine to change pronouns, like immediately." But as one parent told the study, one educator reportedly said, "I'm not going to play this name game" and refused to use a child's new name.

Some school teachers did make a difference. One well-being officer "put out all the uniforms and said, 'which one would you like to wear?'"

At a schools sports day one trans boy was allowed to compete with the boys. As his parent said, "He's never been a sporty kid. He came last and everything, but it made him really happy to to be in with the boys."

Another teacher was "fantastic" but "a bit old school" saying "I've got no idea what to do, what to call her, what to say. I'm really out to sea here."

This suggests both [early education](#) and school teachers need access to [education and resources](#), so whether students get support isn't left up to chance.

## What should schools do differently?

Schools should take the lead from early learning environments and stop "sorting" students based on gender.

This could mean:

- having a range of uniform items children can select from as some schools already do
- more all-gender toilet facilities, where privacy is protected for all students
- preferred names and pronouns should be easy to change in [school systems](#) and teachers should use these.

Teachers also need access to resources and information so they can

confidently have conversations about gender. This needs to be part of a [whole-of-school approach](#) to supporting trans students and their families.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 'Why can't I wear a dress?' What schools can learn from preschools about supporting trans children (2024, February 23) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-schools-preschools-trans-children.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.