

# Working with LGBTQ Youth/Gender Independent (GI) Children and Their Families – Practice Challenges for Social Workers & Social Service Workers

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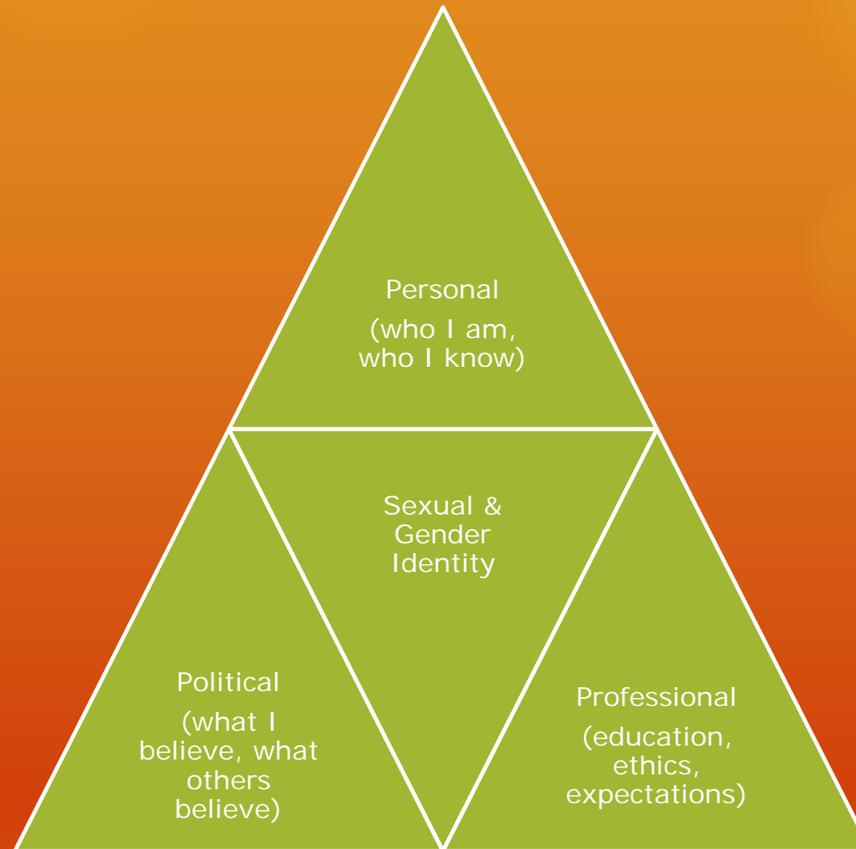
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# Who I am and what I know so far about sexual & Gender identity...

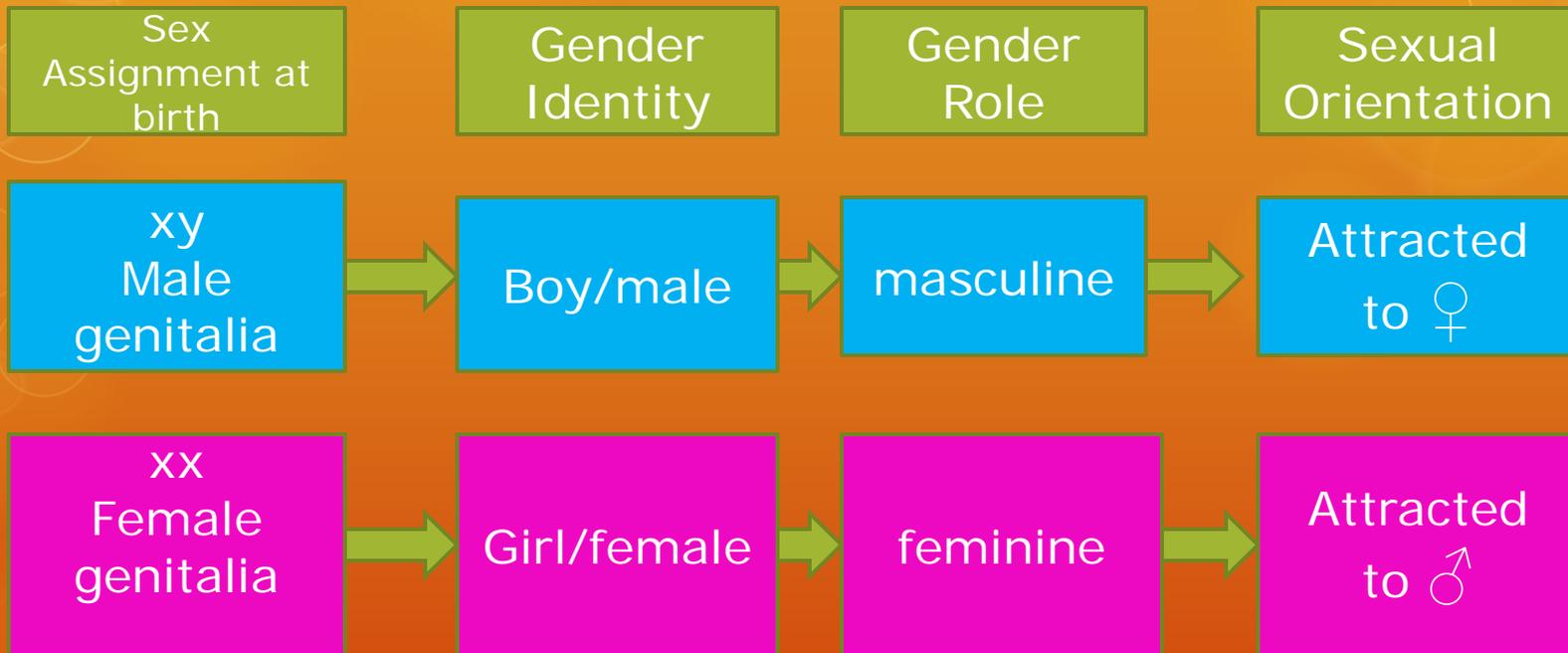
- 16 years of direct practice with LGBTQ/GI students, teachers, parents & families in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
- Anti-homophobia workshops with students across the TDSB, kindergarten to grade 12
- Social work support to the Triangle Program, Oasis Alternative SS – Canada's only high school program for LGBTQ students

# What shapes our own understanding of sexual and gender identity?





# Euro-American Sex/Gender System/model\*



\* Dr. Adam Green, 2007

- Progression through the above model seen as natural and normal; one category must lead to another
- Any actual or perceived violation/transgression of the model subject to stigma, ridicule, shame, criminalization, pathology
- This gives rise to homophobia, transphobia, biphobia
- Model is supported by medicine, religion, education, family, media

# Sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, straight
- Two-Spirit
- Trans\* (gender, sexual); cis gender
- Bio male + feminine, Bio female + masculine (to name a few)
- Gender Expression i.e. who am I and how I wish to express myself

# Some things to think about...

- Sexual and gender identity is not stressful in and of itself... but rather distress is a responses to family/school/community/environmental/ structural issues of homophobia and transphobia
- Some will internalize these social structures and come to believe that there is something wrong with them

# Some things to look for?

- Short of disclosure there is really no clear and obvious signs that a young person is facing a struggle **specific to sexual identity or gender identity**; however as we continue to speak about mental health and well being, keep in mind that coming out/questioning *may* be an underlying component and *may* require support of social workers and social service workers
- In some cases, young people who express a great deal of homophobia and/or transphobia may themselves be struggling with identity issues (i.e. what someone hates about me, they hate more about themselves)

# Gender Independence: What I know so far...

- Over the school year 2009/10 three families contacted me regarding young children whose gender expression was independent of the social expectations of their assigned sex; in short, I met three young boys, aged 4 to 7, who liked all things, as they understood it, 'girly': wearing dresses, long hair, dolls etc.
- At that time, the boys, often assumed to be girls, who would say they were boy, if asked; if others thought them to be girls? Great!
- So from these individual family meetings...

# GIG: Gender Independent Group

## GIG – A Brief History

- The Gender Independent Group began meeting in 2010 as a social/support space for children (K-Grade 4) expressing Gender Independence. It was meant as a space for kids to meet others like them and to just let them be.
- I made a conscious decision to avoid discussions about what the “expression of gender independence means” i.e. Is this about gender identity? Sexual orientation? Etc... For this, the parents were grateful...
- It also became a space for their parents and caregivers to meet, socialize, and discuss and share challenges and joys having a gender independent child.

# What a 7 year old GI kid wants: A more comfy school (excerpt from "A Day in the life of a GI kid")

C: "It would have only bathrooms where boys and girls could both go in. There could be two, one upstairs, one downstairs".

C: "And also it would be a bit better that the teachers do know you...like you should tell the teacher if you're Gender Independent or not. That's what I would prefer."

Why is it important that adults know?

C: "So they don't keep calling me the wrong thing and I feel uncomfy".

# Believe me when I tell you

C: "And also my friend, M. I told him that I'm a girl and he knows now. He helps sometimes. And there's two girls I know from camp that still don't believe me and they go to this school...And that's why I'm not very happy".

[a group of students walk by and C remarks:  
'Those are the two girls']

C: "If a Gender Independent kids says that they're a girl and they look like a boy, you should believe them...you should believe them from then on".

# Gender Independence, Gender Identity, Trans Identity

- Take care to understand the similarities and differences between these concepts and the lived realities thereof; can be related; should never be conflated
- Take care to self reflect how our own experience with gender shapes overtly and covertly our understanding of someone else's experience of/with gender.

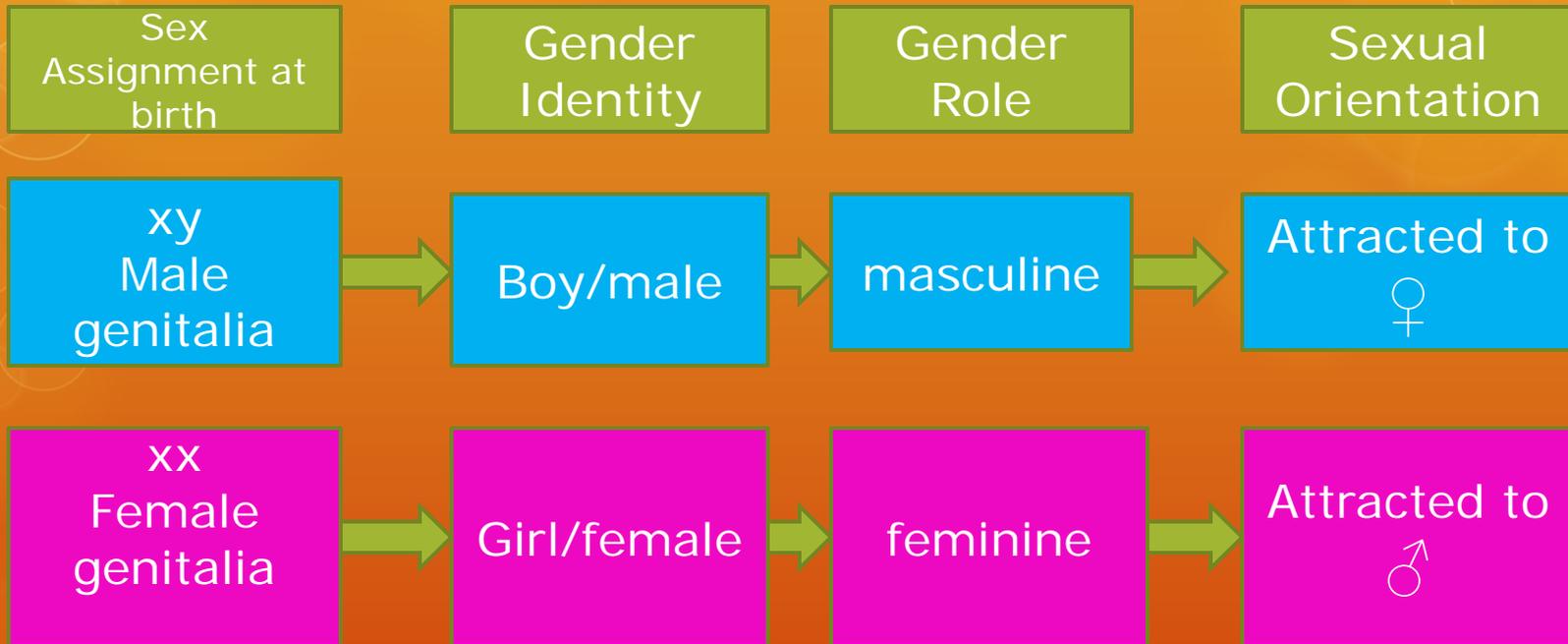
# Implicating Social Work and social service work Practice...

- In what ways does our understanding, experience, studies inform the relationship between gender, gender roles, sexuality, mental well being, and mental health?
- Historically, the kids in GIG would be (and some still are) viewed/diagnosed as problematic with their non-conformity; their parents viewed with suspicion by letting their kids just be;
- From a structural social work perspective and AOP stance, the problematizing would be on the reaction of others to these children and families
- What is social work's relationship to "normality"? How have we enforced it? How have we interrupted it?
- How have you successfully problematized homophobia and transphobia?

# Some things to do

- Directly challenging any and all expressions of homophobia and transphobia will:
  - Demonstrate your support of LGBTQ/GI young people, those with LGBTQ/GI parents, and those assumed to be LGBTQ/GI
  - Affirm LGBTQ/GI identities i.e. they are important and valuable and worthy of being stood up for
  - Support your inclusive pro active practice efforts
- Do not assume everyone is heterosexual and cis gender.
- Maybe do nothing at all...

# Something to revisit



# Thank you

- Questions
- Comments
- Criticisms