

Gender Questioning and Social Transitioning

Gender questioning children is an evolving area of safeguarding and one that schools and colleges increasingly need to understand. For teachers and school staff, the priority should always be to provide support that is thoughtful, respectful and centred on safeguarding. By following current guidance, maintaining clear communication and creating a safe school environment, education settings can help ensure that all pupils feel supported whilst balancing the needs and rights of the wider school community.

This paper, [based on an article written by Mary Petty](#), explains what is meant by gender questioning, summarises the latest guidance for schools and colleges, including the revisions to [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(KCSIE\) 2026](#), and explores practical ways schools can support pupils whilst keeping safeguarding at the centre of decision-making.

The updated version of Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026 has new sections and updated expectations that include:

- Enhanced guidance on supporting pupils who are questioning their gender – schools are expected to take a ‘very careful’ approach when responding to requests related to social transition (paragraphs 252 to 282)
- New safeguarding requirements for school premises and sports – schools must not allow children into toilets, changing rooms or showers designated for the opposite biological sex, and a new section covers single-sex sports exceptions based on biological sex (paragraphs 95 to 98, 106 and 113)

What is Gender Questioning?

- ‘Gender questioning’ is a broad term used to describe when a child or young person is exploring or asking questions about their biological sex, gender identity or how they perceive themselves. This may happen internally, or they may openly discuss these feelings with parents, teachers or peers.
- A person’s gender is not always the same as their biological sex. By law, the word ‘sex’ refers to whether a person was born male or female, sometimes referred to as their biological sex or sex assigned at birth. The word ‘gender’, on the other hand, may refer to how a person perceives themselves, whether male, female, non-binary or elsewhere on the spectrum.
- A gender questioning child may therefore be questioning whether their gender identity aligns with their biological sex. For example, they may be biologically male but identify more closely with being female and experience uncertainty, distress or confusion surrounding this. For some children and young people, these feelings can contribute to anxiety, emotional distress or [gender dysphoria](#).
- In education settings, a gender questioning pupil may request to socially transition. This could include asking to change their name, pronouns, uniform or use of facilities in school. The KCSIE 2026 draft guidance describes social transitioning as an active intervention which may have significant effects on a child’s psychological functioning and longer-term outcomes. As a result, schools are advised to approach requests carefully, considering the child’s wellbeing, parental involvement and the impact on others within the school community.

Gender Questioning and the Cass Review

- The publication of the Cass Review in April 2024 has had a significant impact on how schools and safeguarding professionals approach gender questioning children.
- The independent review of NHS gender identity services for children and young people highlighted the complexity of many cases. It noted that children presenting with gender-related distress may also experience wider vulnerabilities, including [mental health difficulties](#), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), [ADHD](#), bullying or family challenges.
- A key message from the Cass Review is the importance of **taking a cautious, evidence-informed and individualised approach** when supporting children who are questioning their gender. This approach is reflected within the KCSIE 2026 draft guidance for schools and colleges.

Gender Questioning Guidance for Schools

- [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(KCSIE\)](#) is the statutory safeguarding guidance that schools and colleges in England must follow. The guidance is reviewed regularly, and the KCSIE 2026 proposed revisions include a new section specifically addressing children who are questioning their gender, alongside guidance relating to single-sex spaces and single-sex sports.
- KCSIE guidance draws heavily on the findings of the Cass Review and emphasises the need for a ‘very careful approach’ when supporting gender questioning children. Schools and colleges are expected to have regard to this guidance as part of their wider safeguarding duties.

KCSIE places particular emphasis on:

- Safeguarding and structured decision-making.
- Parental involvement.
- Careful record-keeping.
- Considering the long-term welfare of the child.
- Balancing the needs and rights of all students.

It also states that ‘caution is necessary for children questioning their gender as there remain many unknowns about the impact of social transition.’ It also notes that some children who are questioning their gender may have additional vulnerabilities or complex needs that should be carefully considered as part of any safeguarding response.

In regards to terminology, the guidance advises schools to use the term ‘gender questioning’ rather than describing children as ‘transgender,’ recognising that childhood experiences and identities may develop or change over time.

KCSIE 2026 guidance suggests that schools and colleges should:

- Take a cautious and evidence-informed approach to supporting children who are questioning their gender.
- Consider all of the child’s individual needs and wider circumstances.
- Involve parents and carers in decision-making wherever possible and appropriate.

- Ensure parents are not excluded from decisions relating to requests for social transition, except in situations where doing so may place the child at risk of significant harm.
- Keep detailed and accurate safeguarding records relating to requests, discussions and decisions.
- Encourage parents and carers to seek appropriate clinical advice or support where needed.
- Avoid making rushed decisions and allow time to establish whether a child’s feelings are consistent and sustained. This cautious approach is sometimes referred to as ‘watchful waiting.’
- Consider how any decisions may affect other students, including in relation to privacy, safety, fairness and safeguarding.
- Promote a respectful school culture where bullying, discrimination and harassment are never tolerated.
- Always consider legal duties under safeguarding, equality and health and safety legislation when making decisions in this area.

How Can Schools Support Gender Questioning Children?

Schools and colleges play an important role in supporting the wellbeing of all students, including children who may be questioning their gender. Whilst this can be a sensitive and sometimes complex area, schools should aim to respond with compassion, professionalism and safeguarding awareness.

Requests for Social Transition in School

KCSIE 2026 places strong emphasis on safeguarding processes and careful decision-making when it comes to requests to socially transition. Schools should avoid making immediate decisions in response to requests and instead ensure that concerns are managed through established safeguarding procedures.

Any requests relating to social transition should be considered on an individual basis, taking into account:

- The age and maturity of the child.
- The child’s emotional wellbeing and mental health.
- Parental views.
- Any wider vulnerabilities or safeguarding concerns.
- The impact on other students and staff.

Schools should ensure all discussions, meetings and decisions are carefully documented and recorded. [Designated Safeguarding Leads](#) (DSLs) may need to be involved where there are concerns relating to a child’s wellbeing, mental health or vulnerability.

KCSIE also stresses the importance of parental involvement. Except in situations where there is a risk of significant harm to the child, parents should generally be informed and involved in decisions relating to requests for social transition within school.

Practical Support Within Schools

As a teacher or educational professional, one of the most important ways you can support a gender questioning child is by maintaining a respectful, inclusive and non-judgemental environment. All children should feel safe, listened to and protected from bullying or harassment.

The Department for Education advises schools and colleges to take a cautious, safeguarding-led and case-by-case approach when supporting children who are questioning their gender. Any decisions relating to social transition should be carefully considered, recorded appropriately and made in the child's best interests, whilst also considering the rights, safety and wellbeing of other students.

KCSiE 2026 also suggests that schools and colleges should consider the following practical arrangements and safeguarding measures:

- Where a pupil is uncomfortable using facilities designated for their biological sex, schools may consider whether suitable alternative arrangements can be provided, such as private or self-contained toilets or changing facilities. However, this should not compromise the availability, privacy, safety or dignity of single-sex spaces for other pupils. (KCSiE 2026 paragraphs 105 -116)
- Schools should ensure they continue to comply with legal requirements relating to single-sex facilities, including toilets, changing rooms and overnight accommodation on residential trips. (KCSiE paras 105 -116, 197 - 201)
- In PE and sport, schools should consider issues relating to safety, fairness and physical differences between the sexes when deciding participation arrangements, particularly where activities involve contact or competitive sport. (KCSiE paras 95 -98)
- Requests relating to names, pronouns, uniforms or other aspects of social transition should not be agreed automatically. Schools are advised to consider requests carefully, involve parents in the vast majority of cases and assess the potential impact on the child's wellbeing and psychological development. (KCSiE paras 258 -277)
- Staff and pupils should be treated respectfully at all times, and [bullying](#), harassment or discriminatory behaviour should never be tolerated. Schools should aim to create an environment where differing views can be expressed respectfully and where all pupils feel safe and supported. (KCSiE para 257)
- Schools should continue to accurately record a child's legal name and biological sex where required for official records and safeguarding purposes. (KCSiE para 2280)
- Where flexibility around uniform is being considered, schools should ensure decisions are consistent with safeguarding responsibilities, school policies and the individual needs of the child. (KCSiE para 275)
- Schools must recognise that children who are questioning their gender may require wider emotional support. In some cases, pupils may benefit from [pastoral support](#), counselling services or external mental health support where appropriate.

Additional guidance and further reading

- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools** (September 2026)
- **<https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/gender-questioning-children/>**
- **Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex** – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (June 2026)
- **Essex Safeguarding Children Board**
<http://www.escb.org.uk/> Includes a link to the **SET procedures**
- **Childline**
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111