

Parents of Adolescents Navigating Sexual and Gender Diverse Identity

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### Abstract

This research explores how counsellors can effectively support parents of gender-diverse adolescents (ages 13-18), especially those navigating emotional distress and confusion in response to their child's non-conforming gender identity. Drawing on theories of adolescent development, family systems, and socioecological models, it examines the relational dynamics between parents and gender-diverse adolescents, with a focus on how counsellors can foster family resilience. The increasing visibility of gender-diverse youth, particularly within Gen Z, has highlighted the need for culturally competent, affirming family support systems. This study reveals how parental reactions, shaped by cultural, generational, and religious factors, can significantly impact adolescent mental health outcomes. Research findings demonstrate how positive parental responses, such as emotional attunement, psychoeducation, and narrative reframing, can reduce mental health risks, while negative responses correlate with heightened distress. The study also signifies the importance of integrating culturally grounded approaches, notably for families navigating cultural dissonance. Recommendations for counsellors include strategies for supporting parents in processing ambiguous loss, involving gender work, and advocating for gender-affirming practices. Future research is required to uncover the long-term impacts of family-centered interventions, particularly in the context of marginalized and diverse populations. Ultimately, this work calls for a more inclusive, contextually grounded understanding of both adolescence and parenting, one that centers on identity, culture, and relational connection.

**Keywords:** Sexual and gender diverse youth, intersectionality, parental contexts, cultural competence, family resilience

## **Parents of Adolescents Navigating Sexual and Gender Diverse Identity**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Introduction**

Adolescence is a distinct and formative stage of life during which identity is explored, negotiated, and shaped. This capstone draws on empirical evidence to examine the developmental challenges faced by adolescents and the social, psychological, and cultural factors that influence identity formation in the 21st century. Specifically, this research focuses on gender-diverse adolescents aged 13 to 18 who are exploring their gender and sexual identities within the LGBTQ+ community, and how counsellors can support their parents in responding with understanding and affirmation.

My interest in this topic stems from my professional work with youth in educational and community-based settings, resulting in relationships of care and compassion with these youth and their families. Through these relationships, I have witnessed the concerns parents express when their children wish to change their name, pronouns, or gender identity, as well as the emotional toll this can take on all family members. I have also seen how adolescents often feel unaccepted, angry, or misunderstood by those closest to them. Drawing on these lived experiences, this study examines how counsellors can guide parents through evidence-based strategies that promote acceptance and reduce family conflict when their adolescent discloses a gender-diverse identity.

This paper offers new insights by proposing a culturally sensitive, family-based counselling framework grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory. It integrates generational and cultural perspectives to help practitioners understand the unique stressors and resilience factors that shape family responses. By identifying effective interventions and applying them within diverse family and cultural contexts, this

research aims to equip counselling professionals with practical tools to strengthen family relationships and improve mental health outcomes for gender-diverse youth. These foundations will be expanded in Chapter 2, which explores how identity development is shaped by generational values, digital culture, and family systems, and in Chapter 3, which provides practical, culturally responsive counselling strategies for supporting parents.

Theories and research on adolescent identity development have established a foundational understanding of this critical developmental period. G. Stanley Hall's early twentieth-century "storm and stress" theory characterized adolescence as a time of inevitable emotional turbulence and psychological upheaval. Freud's psychosexual development theory further reinforced adolescence as a distinct developmental stage marked by significant internal conflict, while Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory identified this period as the "identity versus role confusion" stage, during which young people explore various roles and ideologies to establish a coherent sense of self. These foundational theories collectively support the understanding that adolescence represents a pivotal time for identity exploration and formation, characterized by both opportunity and vulnerability. While these classical theories offer important developmental insights, they are limited in addressing the nuances of gender identity formation in today's diverse and digitally connected world.

However, contemporary adolescent identity development occurs within a significantly more complex social and cultural landscape than these early theorists envisioned. Twenty-first-century adolescents navigate identity formation amid rapid technological advancement, evolving social attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and increasingly diverse cultural contexts. The traditional binary frameworks that underpinned earlier developmental theories may be insufficient for understanding how today's adolescents, particularly those exploring gender-

diverse identities, construct their sense of self. Modern identity development theories must account for the fluidity and multiplicity that characterize contemporary gender identity exploration, as well as the unique challenges faced by adolescents whose identities may not align with conventional developmental models.

The generational context is particularly relevant for understanding current adolescent experiences and family dynamics. Today's adolescents, primarily members of Generation Z, have grown up with unprecedented access to information about gender diversity and LGBTQ+ identities through digital media and online communities. This access has created new possibilities for identity exploration while simultaneously presenting novel challenges for both adolescents and their families. Generational differences in cultural values and understandings of gender can shape how parents respond to their children's identity exploration, often complicating their efforts to provide support as they reconcile their own foundational beliefs.

Additionally, Canada's increasingly multicultural population means that many gender-diverse adolescents are also navigating cultural identity alongside gender identity, often within families where traditional cultural values may conflict with contemporary understandings of gender diversity. These cultural and generational tensions create additional layers of complexity for families seeking to maintain connection while honouring both their heritage and their child's authentic identity. These theoretical foundations inform this study's approach to understanding how parents can effectively support their gender-diverse adolescents, providing a comprehensive framework for counsellors working with families navigating gender diversity.

### **Research Problem Statement**

While theoretical frameworks offer essential insights into identity development, the complex challenges faced by today's families require guidance that bridges theory with practical

application. Adolescence is a key period of identity formation, and for many youth aged 13–18, this includes exploring diverse sexual and gender identities. With greater visibility of gender diversity, especially among Gen Z, many parents face unfamiliar situations that can provoke confusion, emotional distress, or uncertainty. If unaddressed, these reactions may lead to family estrangement and negatively impact adolescents' mental health, contributing to feelings of rejection, judgment, and isolation. Although counsellors are well-equipped to support families, there is a clear lack of evidence-based strategies for helping parents, especially within Canada's multicultural context, navigate and affirm their child's gender identity development. Chapters 2 and 3 will respond to this problem by first examining the literature on identity development and family responses, and then proposing practical frameworks counsellors can apply in real-world, multicultural contexts.

This capstone project responds to this gap by exploring how counsellors can ethically and effectively support parents of gender-diverse adolescents. The issue is increasingly urgent in today's shifting socio-political climate, where cultural, spiritual, and generational values are rapidly evolving. Gen Z youth are coming of age in a digital era shaped by changing norms and expanding understandings of identity (Katz et al., 2021). Many view family roles and structures differently from prior generations, which counsellors must consider in their work with parents. Additionally, increasing immigration and spiritual diversity mean families approach these experiences from a range of cultural contexts. The lack of culturally competent resources further compounds these challenges.

When these concerns go unaddressed, they risk long-term harm to family cohesion and adolescent well-being. Research shows that a lack of parental support is linked to increased

emotional distress, identity-based rejection, and poor health outcomes among gender-diverse youth (Saewyc et al., 2024). Parents may also struggle with fear, confusion, or grief, further straining the parent–child relationship (Caldarera et al., 2021). Without adequate guidance, these tensions may escalate into chronic conflict. This project seeks to offer theory-informed strategies that help parents build understanding, reduce fear, and foster stronger family connections. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions will be explored:

1. How do sociocultural and familial dynamics influence parental experiences with gender-diverse adolescents?
2. What theoretical frameworks best support counsellors in assisting these parents?
3. How can counselling practices be adapted to meet the needs of diverse families in Canada?

### **Rationale/Justification**

This literature review explores current discussions on gender identity, typical parental responses, their impact on adolescents, and ways parents can reconceptualize identity to strengthen the parent–child relationship. Its primary aim is to equip counsellors with relevant knowledge and culturally competent tools to support parents of gender-diverse adolescents aged 13 to 18. Given the growing visibility of diverse gender identities, particularly among Gen Z youth, this review is both timely and necessary. It addresses a significant gap in counselling literature: how to ethically and effectively support parents who are navigating confusion, uncertainty, or distress about their child’s gender identity. By engaging with current research, this study deepens our understanding of identity’s evolving nature and its implications for family dynamics and adolescent mental health.

Historically, identity was framed through fixed categories like race, religion, and gender—often assigned at birth and reinforced by culture and biology. Since the 1960s, social movements such as civil rights, feminism, and LGBTQ+ advocacy have reshaped how identity is viewed, emphasizing that it is socially constructed and fluid (Katz et al., 2021). Gender, once strictly tied to traditional roles, is now widely recognized as self-defined. Many Gen Z youth reject binary notions of gender, instead embracing a wide spectrum of identities that reflect individual authenticity and lived experience.

Recent statistics reflect this generational shift. The Public Health Agency of Canada (Wang et al., 2023) found that 21% of youth aged 15 to 17 reported attraction to more than one gender, and 0.5% identified as not cisgender. In the U.S., Gallup data (Jones, 2023) indicated that 19.7% of Gen Z identify as LGBTQ+, compared to 11.2% of Millennials and 3.3% of Baby Boomers. These numbers highlight the need for updated, inclusive frameworks that recognize how youth today understand and express identity.

As gender and sexuality become central to Gen Z's sense of self, the need for affirming family environments becomes more urgent. Unfortunately, many LGBTQ+ adolescents experience emotional and behavioural health challenges worsened by negative parental responses. Hall (2021) reports that judgment or rejection from parents is linked to depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and even suicide attempts. These risks highlight the importance of equipping parents with tools to affirm and support their children. The next chapter will build on this evidence by detailing specific parental challenges and how counsellors can help mitigate these through informed, empathetic support.

Research shows that with the right resources, parental support can evolve in affirming ways. Therapeutic parent support groups, for instance, offer structured spaces where parents can reflect on their emotions, challenge assumptions, and build confidence in their roles. In a study by Calderera et al. (2021), one parent initially described feelings of shock and fear after their child's gender identity disclosure. Through group participation, they gained emotional clarity, coping skills, and a deeper capacity for unconditional support, leading to reduced anxiety and improved family communication. These findings highlight the value of such interventions in fostering empathy, reducing defensiveness, and empowering parents to advocate for their children. For counsellors, this underscores the importance of guiding parents toward accessible, culturally sensitive resources.

At the same time, the context in which identity development occurs has drastically changed. Katz et al. (2021) argue that identity today is shaped by digital connectivity, globalization, and rapid social change. Adolescents now form identities through online platforms that expose them to diverse experiences and communities. This digital influence creates opportunities for self-expression but can also deepen the generational gap between youth and their parents. Counsellors must understand how these digital and cultural shifts affect both adolescent development and family communication. This influence will be unpacked further in Chapter 2 through the lens of digital identity and family dynamics in immigrant and Canadian-born families alike.

Ultimately, Gen Z youth are navigating a complex landscape of shifting norms, technologies, and expectations around gender and identity. Parents, often socialized in different cultural and generational contexts, may struggle to understand or affirm their child's experience.

This disconnect can result in emotional distress, family tension, or fractured relationships. Without access to affirming support, parents may act out of fear or misinformation, unintentionally harming their child's mental health.

This review seeks to bridge that gap by identifying best practices and theory-informed approaches that counsellors can use when working with parents. By addressing the relational dynamics at play and offering culturally competent strategies, this capstone aims to foster empathy, reduce harm, and promote healthy identity development. Supporting parents ultimately supports youth and strengthens families facing the challenges of our evolving social landscape. With this foundation established, Chapter 2 will explore identity formation more deeply, focusing on theoretical and generational perspectives, while Chapter 3 will translate these findings into practical recommendations for counselling practice.

### **Contribution to the Field of Counselling**

The exploration of how counsellors can support parents navigating challenges related to their adolescent child's sexual and gender identity is a critical and timely area of research in counselling psychology. With increased visibility of gender diversity among youth, particularly Generation Z, many parents feel unprepared, confused, or distressed when confronted with their child's identity exploration. This capstone responds to the need for evidence-based, culturally sensitive practices to support these parents and their families.

A key focus is the implementation and impact of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) education. SOGI 123, introduced in K–12 schools across British Columbia, promotes awareness and inclusivity for sexually and gender-diverse (SGD) youth (*Our Roots*, 2024).

While praised for creating safer school environments, SOGI curricula have also become points of

tension, reflecting broader concerns around parental rights, gender identity, and cultural or religious values.

Public opinion in Canada reveals a range of parental responses to SOGI education. A 2021 national survey found that about 90% of parents supported teaching gender and sexual diversity by the end of Grade 8. A 2024 Research Co. poll showed 52% supported SOGI education, 33% opposed it, and 15% were undecided. Despite majority support, opposition remains vocal. In British Columbia, some parents have protested, citing concerns about age appropriateness and ideological agendas. These divisions suggest that while many families welcome affirming education, others may require guidance in understanding and integrating these messages.

Tensions between parental authority and adolescent autonomy can become especially pronounced when families are navigating a child's gender identity. In a 2019 B.C. legal case, a father's opposition to his adolescent's gender transition, rooted in deeply held beliefs, was ultimately ruled by the courts as constituting family violence (Jones & Kao, 2019). This case illustrates the legal and ethical complexities that can arise when caregivers struggle to reconcile personal, cultural, or religious values with affirming care. It emphasizes the importance of counsellors supporting parents through these transitions with empathy and cultural sensitivity, helping them process their emotions while prioritizing the well-being and rights of the adolescent.

Understanding the nuances of parental reactions is essential to supporting SGD youth, especially in religious families. Some families respond with full acceptance, while others struggle due to cultural or religious beliefs. Research has identified four parental profiles:

positive, moderately negative, low, and high negative. While positive responses were most common, youth with multiple marginalized identities, such as race or ethnicity, were more likely to experience negative reactions. These are linked to increased risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidality, whereas affirming parental support correlates with better mental health outcomes.

Counsellors working with sexual and gender diverse adolescents must be attuned to the wide range of parental reactions, particularly in families shaped by strong cultural or religious values. While some parents respond with immediate support, others may experience confusion, grief, or internal conflict. These differing responses can have significant implications for a young person's mental health and identity development.

The benefits of addressing this research problem are significant. When parents receive culturally competent, ethically grounded support, the ripple effects extend beyond the family unit. Mental health outcomes improve, relationships are preserved or repaired, and communities become more resilient to polarization. As Canada becomes increasingly diverse in terms of family, spiritual, and cultural structures, a one-size-fits-all approach to gender diversity is insufficient. Counsellors must meet families where they are—acknowledging fears, values, and social contexts—while guiding them toward affirming practices.

Additionally, the intersection of school-based SOGI initiatives with therapeutic work remains underexplored. This capstone proposes that counsellors can help bridge the gap between institutional efforts like SOGI 123 and the emotional realities of families. Understanding how school messaging aligns—or clashes—with home beliefs is crucial to reducing alienation and fostering cohesion.

While existing literature offers valuable insights into parental reactions, cultural tensions, and the role of SOGI education, there remains a lack of cohesive, practice-oriented resources that counsellors can use to bridge these intersecting dynamics. This capstone contributes to the field by offering: (1) a culturally adapted narrative-therapy guide to help parents process their emotions and values; (2) an updated ecological framework that incorporates digital and generational influences on identity development; and (3) concrete, actionable strategies for counsellors to support families in aligning school-based SOGI messaging with home environments.

Ultimately, this capstone contributes to counselling psychology by identifying a gap in how counsellors support parents of SGD adolescents and proposing evidence-based, culturally attuned tools for practice. It emphasizes developing strategies rooted in empathy, cultural competence, and systemic understanding, ensuring that both parents and youth feel seen, supported, and connected.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

To guide therapeutic support that meets families where they are, this capstone draws on two foundational frameworks that capture both environmental influences and family-level stress responses: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory. These frameworks collectively support a comprehensive understanding of how parents respond to and are impacted by their adolescent child's sexual and gender diverse (SGD) identity development. The research question prioritizes parental perspectives and well-being, using these theories to contextualize both internal and external influences on family systems while reflecting the diverse cross-section of parents that counsellors encounter in therapeutic settings.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides an essential lens for analyzing both the adolescent's context and the ecology of the parent's world. This is especially pertinent when considering how identity formation occurs within—and is affected by—a web of social systems. Bronfenbrenner's model includes five nested systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, representing interconnected environments from closest relationships to broader cultural and societal influences.

Each system illustrates its relevance to parental responses and identity development. The microsystem includes immediate environments such as family, school, and peers. The mesosystem involves interactions between microsystem elements—how a parent's relationship with their child's school might influence their response to SOGI-based education. The exosystem includes indirect influences, such as parents' workplaces, extended family dynamics, and media exposure. The macrosystem reflects overarching societal values, cultural norms, religious ideologies, and policies that shape how SGD identities are perceived. The chronosystem accounts for transitions and changes over time, such as evolving social attitudes, family events, or new access to information through digital technology.

Recent revisions to this model reflect the evolving realities of contemporary adolescence. The neo-ecological systems theory proposes that digital spaces, particularly social media, now form part of the microsystem (Navarro & Tudge, 2023). These platforms are active agents of identity formation, cultural production, and community building. Adolescents frequently turn to online communities to explore their gender and sexual identities, share narratives, and receive affirmation. These virtual microsystems may provide critical support when family or school contexts are less affirming.

While digital spaces offer important opportunities for adolescent identity exploration, they also present challenges for families and communities. The rapid expansion and largely unregulated nature of online influence have led to increased anxiety among parents, educators, and policymakers. For counsellors working with parents, understanding how these virtual environments shape identity development is essential. These digital contexts interact with broader ecological systems and can either reinforce or conflict with messages received at home, school, or through cultural and religious institutions.

While Bronfenbrenner's theory maps the complex environments influencing parental and adolescent experiences, Family Stress Theory offers insight into how families cope with specific stressors, including the emerging or affirmed SGD identity of a child. This theory posits that every family functions as a system composed of relationships, roles, values, and boundaries, with stress occurring when demands placed on the system exceed its resources.

In this context, SGD identity development can represent a non-normative stressor, especially for families unprepared to navigate such disclosures. These stressors can challenge parental beliefs and disrupt family equilibrium, particularly when intersecting with cultural, religious, or societal expectations. Family Stress Theory highlights how both internal resources (emotional regulation, communication skills, conflict resolution) and external resources (financial stability, social support, access to counselling) mediate a family's ability to manage stress. Not all families have equitable access to these supports, underscoring the need for counsellors to help families develop internal coping capacities while connecting them to appropriate external services.

The quality of the parent–child relationship within the microsystem plays a crucial role in SGD youth mental health. Affirming parental responses have been linked to significantly better outcomes, while rejection or negativity increases risks of anxiety, depression, and suicidality. Therefore, understanding and supporting parental adaptation through Family Stress Theory is vital in therapeutic practice. Counsellors can work with parents to assess their strengths and stressors and collaboratively develop strategies to restore family equilibrium.

By integrating these frameworks, counselling psychologists can gain a holistic understanding of how parents experience and adapt to their child's SGD identity development. Bronfenbrenner's theory helps situate the parent within a network of interrelated systems, including digital and institutional contexts. Family Stress Theory offers a dynamic view of how families respond to identity-related stress and adapt over time. This dual-theoretical approach is particularly effective for counselling psychologists seeking to support families in transition, as it moves beyond individual pathology and focuses on relational and systemic resilience.

By framing this research through both ecological and stress-oriented lenses, this capstone contributes a nuanced, contextually sensitive foundation for understanding how counsellors can ethically and effectively support parents of SGD adolescents. It provides a basis for analyzing literature, interpreting findings, and developing practical, family-based interventions that are both affirming and sustainable.

### **Positioning Statement**

I am a young, cisgender, straight, second-generation Persian Canadian woman from a lower-middle-class background and of the Bahá'í faith. As a Bahá'í, I understand myself as a soul created with inherent nobility. This belief shapes my purpose: to cultivate personal

transformation and contribute to the well-being of humanity. It serves as a guiding force across all areas of life—family, education, work, and relationships.

I approach this research through a constructivist-humanistic paradigm, acknowledging that individuals make meaning through their experiences, relationships, and cultural contexts. This perspective aligns with my belief in the essential worth of all people and my commitment to fostering empathy and understanding.

This topic emerged from my growing exposure to gender identity discourse in educational and community-based settings, especially after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before 2020, I hesitated to participate in discussions on sexual and gender diverse (SGD) identities. At the time, the discourse often felt polarized, and I feared unintentionally reinforcing division. Acknowledging my discomfort, I chose to listen and reflect until I felt ready to engage with authenticity, curiosity, and a commitment to unity.

As gender identity conversations became more normalized—at university, work, and in grassroots youth programs—I began engaging more openly. These discussions helped me grow in courage and humility, and I developed a deeper interest in understanding perspectives that challenge binary views of gender and advocate for fluidity.

A pivotal moment occurred during my second year at City University when a faculty member stated that gender should not exist. I found the comment provocative and illuminating. I responded by suggesting that gender fluidity may reflect a deeper societal struggle to achieve equality between men and women. I now see gender fluidity as a response to two factors: (1) the disempowerment caused by rigid gender norms, and (2) an overemphasis on physical identity

markers—such as gender, race, and sexuality—as bases for value or inclusion. These dynamics can create confusion about identity, potential, and belonging. I suggest that the shift away from the gender binary will likely continue until humanity recognizes the inherent power of the human soul and fosters a new understanding of men and women that contributes to the oneness of humanity.

My academic and community work has led me to reflect more deeply on historical inequalities, gender expectations, and the ways these impact adolescents today, especially as they navigate a flood of identity-related content in an increasingly complex sociocultural landscape.

In exploring how counsellors can support parents of SGD adolescents (ages 13–18), I aim to identify approaches that help parents recognize their child's humanity and strengths beyond identity labels. I hope this research contributes to optimism and empowerment among parents, strengthens family relationships, and offers meaningful tools for counsellors in therapeutic and educational settings.

Throughout this process, I remain aware of the values, assumptions, and tensions I bring to this work. Rather than removing bias, I aim to acknowledge it and engage with it with humility. I will strive to stay grounded in my commitment to justice, unity, and the innate nobility in each parent being supported.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Gender:** Socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities existing along a fluid, non-binary continuum (Brill & Pepper, 2022).

**Gender-affirming care:** Social, psychological, behavioural, and medical interventions supporting individuals whose gender identity differs from assigned birth gender (Brill & Pepper, 2022).

**Gender fluid:** A type of nonbinary gender in which someone's presentation and identity changes over time between masculinity, femininity and androgyny (Katz et al., 2021).

**Gender work:** How work is defined, organized, and valued based on gendered power relations and cultural meanings (Scarborough et al., 2019).

**Gen X:** Refers to people born between 1965 and 1979 (Twenge, 2023).

**Gen Z:** Those that were born between 1995-2012 (Twenge, 2023).

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+):** This abbreviation stands for communicating precision in identity markers, intending to represent all sexualities, sexes and genders (Katz et al., 2021).

**Millennials:** Those who were born between 1980-1994 (Katz et al., 2021).

**Nonbinary:** Refers to neither identifying as male nor female (Katz et al., 2021).

**Sex:** is assigned at birth and defined by either XY chromosomes or XX.

**Sexual and Gender Diverse (SGD):** Refers to sexual and gender-diverse individuals.

**Transgender:** An umbrella term for gender identity/expression differing from sex assigned at birth expectations.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 1 established the foundation for this capstone by outlining the research problem, rationale, and guiding questions related to how counsellors can support parents of sexual and gender diverse adolescents. It emphasized the need for culturally competent, ethically informed counselling practices that reflect the diverse realities of Canadian families. A key gap was identified in the literature: the limited exploration of counsellors' roles in addressing home–

school tensions linked to SOGI-related education. Two theoretical frameworks—Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory- were introduced to provide a systemic understanding of the internal and external influences shaping family dynamics. My positioning was presented through a constructivist-humanistic lens, grounded in personal values, cultural background, a commitment to empathy, justice, and the inherent worth of all individuals. Key terms were defined to support clarity and consistency. Collectively, these components offer a structured framework for the chapters that follow, which explore literature, practical strategies, and methodology for counselling parents of SGD adolescents.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Adolescence, particularly between the ages of 13 and 18, is a developmental period marked by profound identity exploration and transformation. At both micro (personal and familial) and macro (societal and cultural) levels, adolescents undergo significant change, and for many, gender identity becomes a central focus of this journey (Branje, 2022). The formation of a coherent and healthy identity is closely linked to the quality of relationships within an adolescent's immediate environment, especially those with parents and peers. However, parents may experience confusion, anxiety, or concern when their child begins to question or redefine their gender identity, emotions that can disrupt family dynamics and affect the adolescent's well-being. This literature review investigates how counsellors can support parents during this critical time by addressing their concerns and equipping them with tools to foster connection, communication, and resilience within the family system.

To explore these questions, a comprehensive review of relevant academic literature was conducted. Peer-reviewed articles, professional guidelines, and foundational texts were gathered from databases such as PsycINFO and Google Scholar using search terms including “sexual and gender diverse,” “parental support,” “adolescent identity,” “Gen X,” “struggling parents,” and “adolescent child.” Sources were selected based on their relevance to Canadian counselling contexts, their focus on youth aged 13–18, and their discussion of parental experiences and therapeutic interventions. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included to capture a diverse range of perspectives and research methods, prioritizing publication dates ranging from 2018 to 2024.

Guided by this body of literature, the review takes an ecological and developmental approach to understanding the interplay between adolescent identity formation and family dynamics. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory, it begins by examining key psychological and sociocultural frameworks that explain how identity develops during adolescence. It then considers how interconnected systems—such as family, school, media, and broader societal norms—influence both adolescents and their parents. Generational and cultural influences are explored to show how evolving social conditions shape parenting attitudes and responses to gender-diverse youth. Finally, the review identifies ethical and evidence-informed strategies to help counsellors support families, with particular attention to the unique experiences of immigrant and refugee parents navigating gender identity within a Western context.

### **Historical Underpinnings of Adolescence**

Over the past several decades, the concept of adolescence has undergone significant redefinition. This section explores how adolescence has been conceptualized, particularly within the last fifty years, emphasizing its nature as a culturally and historically shaped construct rather than a universal developmental stage. The work of Stanley Hall and the societal aftermath of World War II will be examined to illustrate their influence on Western understandings of adolescence. In contrast, anthropologist Margaret Mead's research provides a valuable cross-cultural perspective, highlighting the diverse ways adolescent experiences are constructed globally.

The concept of adolescence as a distinct developmental stage is largely a Western construct, propelled by psychologist Stanley Hall in the early 20th century. In 1904 (Stirrups,

2018), Hall coined the term “adolescence,” describing it as a period of “storm and stress” marked by emotional turmoil and behavioural challenges. His influential framework led to the widespread belief that adolescent turmoil is universal. The idea of a teenage identity gained further traction in post–World War II Western media (Cosgrove, 2013), as youth culture became defined by distinct tastes in music, fashion, and behaviour. During this period, rising affluence, suburban expansion, and extended schooling fostered adolescent independence and peer culture (Osgood, 2023). Economic stability and access to paid work enabled teens to engage in consumer culture, while schools and suburban spaces encouraged the formation of autonomous youth subcultures.

In contrast to Hall’s portrayal of adolescence as a universally turbulent stage, research from cross-cultural perspectives reveals significant variation in adolescent experiences. Margaret Mead (Choudhury, 2009) challenged Hall’s view of adolescence as a universal period of turmoil by studying different cultures. Her research, particularly in Samoa, suggests that while adolescence exists globally, experiences like identity development, autonomy, and peer conflict are not universally turbulent. In some cultures, independence and autonomy are stressed, while in others, interdependence and family obligations are prioritized. These differing cultural expectations can lead to distinct cognitive and emotional developmental trajectories. In Samoa, adolescence was stress-free, highlighting that behaviours such as rebellion and identity crises are culturally, not biologically, determined. Suparna Choudhury further argues that cultural contexts, including values, education, family, and peer norms, shape adolescent brain development, particularly in self-regulation, identity, and decision-making. Understanding these cultural variations in adolescence also requires examining how generational values influence the environments in which adolescents develop.

To address the research question concerning parents' challenges with their adolescent child's sexual and gender identity, it is essential to consider the generational influences shaping parents of Generation Z youth. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Oerther & Oerther, 2021) emphasizes that individual development is shaped by multiple environmental systems, including the family and broader sociocultural contexts. In particular, the macrosystem—comprising cultural and societal values—reflects generational influences that affect parenting approaches. This section highlights the generational values of Gen X and Millennial parents within the macrosystem as a foundation for understanding the challenges they may encounter in navigating Gen Z adolescents' gender and sexual identity development.

### **Generational Impacts on Parents**

Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979, matured within a dynamic macrosystem shaped by rapid technological advancements, evolving family structures, and shifting cultural norms. As the first generation to bridge the analog and digital worlds, they internalized both traditional values and new paradigms of individualism, adaptability, and self-reliance (Twenge, 2023). These traits were cultivated in part by growing up amid rising divorce rates, dual-income households, and increasing economic uncertainty—factors embedded within their microsystem and exosystem, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. These changes also reshaped the family unit, as reflected in Family Systems Theory, which views family behaviour as interconnected and responsive to systemic influences.

The emphasis on autonomy and independence that characterizes Generation X also shapes their parenting style today, as they seek to balance providing structure with granting freedom to their Gen Z children. Their upbringing during the post-civil rights and gender equality movements, including cultural influences like the Free to Be movement (Martin, 2012),

fostered a strong commitment to inclusion and gender equity (Siras et al., 2007; Margolis & Choi, 2021). While this cultural legacy supports many Gen X parents in promoting acceptance, deeply ingrained binaries and traditional frameworks can still present challenges in fully understanding non-binary or fluid gender identities, particularly amid generational differences within the family system.

Following Generation X, Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, came of age in a time of expanding pluralism, digital innovation, and evolving societal values. Their ecological environment—particularly the macrosystem—was marked by growing ethnic diversity, access to global information, and rising acceptance of individual autonomy. As digital natives, they were immersed in online platforms that shaped communication, socialization, and identity exploration (Twenge, 2023; Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2019). This constant exposure to diverse perspectives fostered open-mindedness and flexibility, values that influence their parenting style within the mesosystem of home, school, and peer interactions.

Millennials tend to encourage their children to explore identity freely, reflecting values shaped by cultural emphasis on choice and pluralism in Canada. Despite their broad endorsement of gender equality, many Millennials were still raised within a binary understanding of gender. Research by Bibby et al. (2019) highlights this cultural context. According to Family Systems Theory, unresolved systemic beliefs within parents can cause intergenerational friction, especially when their Gen Z adolescents assert more fluid or non-normative identities. Bronfenbrenner's model helps contextualize these tensions as parents must reconcile their upbringings with the evolving macrosystem their children inhabit.

While Millennials generally embrace inclusive values, research indicates that gaps in understanding and biases related to gender diversity still persist. Scarborough et al. (2019) highlight these ongoing challenges, which reflect the broader cultural and systemic influences shaping how Millennials parent their Gen Z children. This dynamic is particularly relevant as Gen Z adolescents experience identity formation in an era that is more openly queer and gender-expansive than previous generations.

### **Gen Z**

Building upon the generational shifts discussed earlier, Generation Z is growing up in a social context that embraces greater fluidity, diversity, and intersectionality. Unlike their Gen X and Millennial parents, Gen Z adolescents experience identity formation within an environment deeply influenced by digital connectivity, social justice discourse, and multicultural pluralism. Intersectionality plays a central role in shaping how this generation conceptualizes gender identity, with intersecting influences such as technology, social media, ethnicity, race, and religion (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2019). These factors are not only integral to general identity development but also critically inform the evolving understanding of gender.

The increasing emphasis on gender diversity among youth reflects a broader cultural shift—from the normalization of open dialogue around sexuality to the growing recognition of gender as fluid and culturally constructed (Katz et al., 2021). Canadian pluralism and the expansion of individual rights have paralleled this trend, aligning with what Time magazine in 2014 predicted as the rise of transgender rights becoming a defining civil rights issue.

For Gen Z, gender identity often supersedes other identity markers, particularly in online spaces where pronoun sharing and inclusive language are common. Surveys confirm that a

majority support gender-neutral pronouns and nonbinary understandings of gender (Katz et al., 2021). Interviews with Gen Z youth reveal a sense of freedom to explore diverse identities, supported by their pluralistic upbringing and technological fluency. As social psychologist Philip Hammack notes, this cultural moment is a "state of flux" characterized by creativity, authenticity, and expanded expressions of human difference (Hammack, 2019). This generational shift reflects that very flux, as Gen Z redefines identity through inclusivity and expansive self-expression.

Building on this generational shift, Gen Z youth also recognize the gaps in gender discourse across age groups. Many express a desire to educate older generations, who may not have had access to the same conversations about gender, race, and identity during their adolescence. This advocacy reflects a broader intergenerational dialogue, where Gen Z not only asserts their own identities but also helps bridge understanding within families and communities shaped by earlier, more binary paradigms.

### **Theories of Identity Development**

Understanding the unique cultural, technological, and social forces that shaped Generation X and Millennials provides essential context for examining how these parents approach gender and identity with their Gen Z children. However, to fully appreciate the developmental challenges faced by today's adolescents, it is equally important to explore the theoretical frameworks that underpin identity formation. The following section delves into key theories of adolescent identity development, offering insight into how Gen Z youth navigate self-discovery in an era defined by digital connectivity, intersectionality, and rapid social change. By

integrating the ecological and familial influences discussed earlier with developmental theory, this section illustrates how identity is both personally constructed and contextually shaped.

Identity formation is a fundamental aspect of adolescent development, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood through the exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals. According to Waterman (1982), identity construction is a central framework for understanding personality development during this stage. A coherent identity provides adolescents with a sense of inner continuity, linking who they were as children to who they aspire to become in adulthood. For Gen Z youth, these key elements of identity development, as formulated by Waterman, unfold within a landscape shaped by powerful cultural forces. These forces include technology, social media, and increased exposure to ethnic, racial, and religious diversity:

1. A clear sense of self-definition
2. Commitments to personal goals, values, and beliefs
3. Active engagement in fulfilling these commitments
4. Exploration of alternative identity options
5. A sense of self-acceptance
6. A feeling of personal uniqueness
7. Confidence in one's future

Relevant for understanding adolescent development today are Erik Erikson's classification of four ego identity statuses—identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion. Identity achievement (Waterman, 1982) involves committing to values and goals after a period of exploration, while moratorium reflects ongoing exploration without firm commitments. Foreclosure occurs when commitments are made without prior questioning, and

identity diffusion represents a lack of both exploration and commitment. These identity processes—based on the dimensions of crisis and commitment—are highly applicable to Gen Z youth, whose development is shaped by a complex social environment marked by pluralism, technological immersion, and exposure to diverse ethnic, racial, and religious identities. For Gen Z, identity exploration is not only about internal values but also about navigating online identities, social expectations, and evolving norms around gender, sexuality, and culture. Intersectionality plays a central role in how these adolescents experience identity formation, influencing which questions they ask, what commitments they consider valid, and how they interpret their place in an increasingly fluid world. The dynamic interplay between Erikson's developmental stages and contemporary influences underscores that identity formation is both timeless in structure and contextually unique for each generation.

Adolescence is a crucial period of growth and self-discovery, during which individuals undergo significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes that shape their identity. According to Siegel (2013), the teenage brain plays a pivotal role in this process, not as a source of chaos, but as a stage of critical brain remodelling. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and self-reflection, undergoes major development during this time. Heightened neuroplasticity allows adolescents to explore their identities and strengthen new habits and beliefs. For Gen Z youth, this neurological sensitivity is further amplified by the constant stimulation of technology, social media, and digital connectivity.

Gen Z are navigating identity in a world that presents an abundance of perspectives, lifestyles, and ideologies, making their emotional intensity and desire for novelty even more pronounced. Peer relationships remain essential, often shaped both online and offline, encouraging experimentation with different roles, groups, and beliefs. Gen Z's openness to

questioning authority, traditions, and societal norms reflects a broader cultural shift toward personal authenticity and pluralism. While adolescents often struggle to align their individual growth with societal expectations, their peer influences—especially through digital communities—play a formative role in shaping their evolving sense of self.

In addition to brain development and external influences, tools such as mindfulness and self-reflection are increasingly important for today's youth. Siegel (2013) emphasizes practices like journaling, creative expression, and open dialogue as ways to help adolescents better understand themselves and develop a coherent sense of identity. These practices are particularly relevant for Gen Z, who often use digital platforms for self-expression, activism, and community-building. Encouraging these forms of constructive reflection can help counterbalance the overstimulation and comparison often found in online environments.

Importantly, Siegel reminds us that identity does not become fixed during adolescence but continues to evolve throughout life. For Gen Z, whose experiences are shaped by rapid cultural and technological change, identity formation is a dynamic process that requires ongoing support. Rather than fearing adolescent exploration, adults—whether parents, educators, or mentors—should embrace it as essential to long-term well-being. By recognizing the unique context in which Gen Z is coming of age, and by providing understanding and guidance, society can support a healthier and more resilient transition into adulthood. Taken together, these developmental, cultural, and neurological insights highlight the complexity of identity formation for Gen Z adolescents—and provide an essential foundation for understanding how gender identity, in particular, emerges and evolves during this stage.

## Theories of Gender Development

Research on gender development examines how gender patterns emerge and evolve, highlighting factors such as family dynamics, educational environments, media influences, and peer interactions that shape individuals' understanding of gender across the lifespan. Recent studies emphasize the early emergence of gender-stereotypical behaviours and the role of social environments, such as family, educators, and media, in shaping children's understanding of gender. A systematic review by King et al. (2023) found that even by ages 3 to 5, children demonstrate internalized gender stereotypes, associating specific traits and behaviours with either boys or girls. These findings underscore how early gender perceptions significantly influence later social attitudes and the reinforcement of gender norms.

Building on this early understanding, research confirms that childhood gender conceptualizations lay the groundwork for later identity exploration. Children as young as two to three years old begin forming gender stereotypes, which become more explicit by preschool age (King et al., 2023). For example, they may associate “softness” with femininity and “hardness” with masculinity. According to Šabić et al. (2022), early educational environments play a pivotal role in either challenging or reinforcing these stereotypes, depending on the beliefs and behaviours of preschool teachers. These early experiences and environmental influences significantly shape how children develop and negotiate their gender identities over time.

As children age, gender stereotypes expand to include domains such as sports and occupations, with rigidity peaking around age five and gradually becoming more flexible by age eight. These early influences, deeply shaped by family socialization (Crawford, 2020) and educator modelling, impact adolescent gender development by laying a foundation for what roles

and expressions are deemed socially acceptable. These early influences operate primarily within the microsystem—the immediate settings of home, school, and peer interactions—and are shaped by interactions with influential adults and peers.

For Gen Z, gender identity development continues to unfold within a more complex and pluralistic ecological landscape. Digital media and peer networks represent components of the exosystem and macrosystem, exposing youth to broader societal discourses, diverse identities, and cultural shifts regarding gender. These systems, along with the chronosystem, which encompasses the dimension of time and sociohistorical context, highlight how gender identity is shaped by both immediate environments and long-term cultural change. While traditional gender norms may still be reinforced through everyday interactions, Gen Z's widespread engagement with online communities offers space for more fluid, affirming, and exploratory expressions of identity. Bronfenbrenner's theory underscores that gender development is not isolated to individual psychology but is the product of ongoing interactions within layered and evolving social systems.

### **Supporting Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth: Parent and Social Contexts**

While adolescent identity formation occurs within a dynamic ecological context, the response of parents, shaped by generational and cultural frameworks, is a critical influence within this system. Generational and cultural factors significantly shape how parents of Gen Z youth respond to their children's sexual and gender-diverse identities. Many parents, particularly from older generations such as Gen X (Bibby et al., 2019), may perceive Gen Z's openness around gender and sexuality as a radical departure from the norms they were raised with. This perception often stems from a shift in cultural values—from traditional conformity to individual

authenticity—and can result in misunderstandings or resistance. Cultural background further compounds this dynamic, as intersecting identities such as religion, ethnicity, and political orientation play a pivotal role in shaping family responses. For example, one queer Gen Z participant (Katz et al., 2021) described the emotional strain of hiding his identity from conservative Catholic parents, illustrating how cultural and religious norms can restrict open expression. In racialized or immigrant communities, additional layers of cultural expectation, such as maintaining family honour or upholding community values, can intensify the pressure on both youth and their parents.

These generational and cultural tensions often manifest in complex emotional responses from parents. Research outside clinical settings (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019) shows that many parents experience complex emotional reactions when a child comes out, including fear, grief, or uncertainty, particularly when their cultural or generational worldview is challenged. Supportive parents may also face barriers, including transphobia within their cultural or religious communities, social stigma, and limited access to gender-affirming care and knowledgeable professionals. These challenges are often shaped not only by the age of the child but also by cultural narratives around gender roles, family structure, and communal belonging. This intersection of generational, cultural, and ideological influences underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive, multi-layered support systems that can help families adapt, understand, and grow through these evolving experiences.

### *Western-Eurocentric*

In the context of Canadian family life, particularly among Western-Eurocentric households, many parents of transgender and gender-diverse youth experience an initial surge of

emotions, concerns, and beliefs upon learning of their child's identity (Warner et al., 2021). These reactions are shaped by personal, cultural, and generational influences, deeply impacting both parental well-being and the mental health of their children. This section explores key themes observed in the experiences of Canadian parents raising gender-diverse adolescents: the mental health implications for youth, lack of support and resources, variations in parental acceptance, and ongoing fears related to safety and societal rejection.

In this context, parents and caregivers play a central role in their adolescent child's emotional resilience. This is particularly true when that child is navigating a marginalized identity. When parents are unsure, hesitant, or unsupportive of their child's gender identity, this can have negative consequences. As Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2019) note, although some parents actively seek information and attempt to educate themselves, their interactions with professionals and extended family members often lack affirmation. Katz-Wise et al. (2022) further show that unsupportive or conflicted parental responses are correlated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among transgender youth. These findings highlight the necessity of support systems not just for youth but also for the parents themselves, who are often navigating complex emotional landscapes without adequate guidance.

Parental reactions to a child's gender identity often fall along a complex and emotional spectrum. Despite growing awareness, only about 33% of transgender and gender-diverse youth report strong parental support (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019; Katz-Wise et al., 2022). The remaining majority experience what has been described as "negative neutrality" or even "outright rejection." These parental responses are not always driven by malice; many stem from a lack of education, resources, or fear about the child's future. Misgendering, for instance, is

sometimes unintentional and part of a parent's gradual adaptation process. However, in emotionally charged moments, misgendering can also become a form of control. In one account (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019), a mother admitted to threatening to use her child's birth name and incorrect pronouns as a form of retaliation during a conflict:

“So now, since yesterday, because every time she calls me names, it makes my heart ache... I told her, ‘You want to call us names? Well, if I start calling you [dead name] and saying ‘he’ again, do you like that?’”

Parental responses to a child's gender identity often defy simple categorization. They range from complete rejection to full support, with many families existing somewhere in between (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019). In families where one parent takes on most of the emotional labour, their ability to support the child's transition or clinical needs may be strained. Additionally, a lack of familiarity with gender diversity often prevents parents from recognizing and validating their child's identity. The emotional barrier, in some cases, is not a lack of love but an overwhelming fear of the discrimination, violence, and social exclusion their child might face. One parent shared: “I'm nervous, no matter where she goes. Because people are aware, and people can be really cruel.” Understanding this complexity is crucial for counsellors seeking to support families through education, empathy, and strategies that foster gradual acceptance and healing.

These challenges are compounded in Western-Eurocentric households, where cultural norms around gender, family roles, and public image often shape how parents interpret and respond to their child's gender identity. Alderson (2020) highlights that Canadian parents frequently struggle with reconciling their child's identity within frameworks that emphasize

binary gender roles and social conformity. Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) further argue that affirmation—not neutrality—is essential for a child’s mental health, and that a gender-affirmative approach must be developmentally appropriate, interdisciplinary, and culturally sensitive. Without such a framework, both youth and their parents remain vulnerable to stigma and emotional isolation.

One significant policy development in Canada is British Columbia’s SOGI 123 initiative, which provides inclusive educational resources to support gender-diverse students and reduce discrimination (Saewyc et al., 2024). While the program aims to foster safer and more affirming school environments, it has generated polarized responses—supported by many families but opposed by others due to political, cultural, or religious concerns (Ferfolja et al., 2023; Research Co., 2024; Yeung, 2024). These debates illustrate how educational policy can profoundly influence parental attitudes, either encouraging greater acceptance or reinforcing anxiety and resistance (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019). For counsellors, awareness of such policy contexts is essential for understanding the systemic and sociopolitical stressors families may face and for tailoring interventions with cultural and regional sensitivity.

In summary, the varying levels of parental acceptance and the lack of accessible, affirming resources significantly affect the well-being of both parents and gender-diverse youth. A comprehensive, culturally responsive support framework is essential for assisting families in moving toward understanding, affirmation, and resilience.

### *Refugees and Immigrants*

Immigrant and refugee families often face unique challenges in navigating the cultural differences between their values and those of their adolescent children, particularly regarding

gender roles and sexuality. For these families, parents struggle to set boundaries in a rapidly changing world and are often unprepared to respond to their children's exploration of diverse identities (Spindel, 2020). Cultural clashes can lead to significant tension, especially for gay or transgender youth, who may wish to explore their identities but fear rejection or misunderstanding. This dynamic frequently results in communication breakdowns, with parents either unaware of their child's identity or reacting with anger or distress if it is disclosed.

These tensions play out in diverse ways within families, depending on their adaptability and values. While some immigrant parents find ways to adapt, others struggle deeply with balancing cultural traditions and their child's social integration in Canada. For example, Aasiya (p. 80), a 16-year-old from Iran, has open-minded parents, and they welcome a Christian boy from Kenya into their home, showing how some families foster intercultural understanding. In contrast, Farah (p. 79), a 16-year-old from a Somali family, experiences strong cultural expectations around modesty and gender segregation, prompting her to hide her relationship with a Southeast Asian boy. These examples illustrate how cultural values in the microsystem (family and religious communities) can conflict with the evolving norms of the exosystem (schools, peer groups), creating identity-related stress for both adolescents and parents.

In both Western and immigrant communities, religious beliefs can play a pivotal role in shaping how parents respond to their child's gender identity. For some, faith-based values may lead to internal conflict or non-acceptance, particularly when teachings are interpreted through heteronormative or binary frameworks (Hanna-Walker et al., 2024; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019). However, spiritual worldviews can also provide sources of compassion and guidance (Spindel, 2020). In culturally diverse contexts like Canada, parents may navigate both spiritual

obligations and societal expectations, creating unique challenges for acceptance. Counsellors must remain attentive to how faith intersects with gender, recognizing both the harm and support that religious constructs can offer families.

These contrasting stories reflect a larger issue: the lack of culturally attuned support systems for immigrant families navigating gender and identity. Due to the prevalence of heterosexism and cissexism in many countries of origin, immigrant parents often arrive in Canada without prior exposure to affirming models of gender and sexual diversity (Spindel, 2020). In many cultural contexts, parents are not seen as sources of support due to the intense stigma and fear of bringing shame to the family, sometimes to the point of risking violence. This fear can silence both adolescents and their parents, leading to isolation and emotional strain.

The psychological and relational impact of these layered stressors can be understood through Family Stress Theory. Family Stress Theory helps explain how the accumulation of stressors, such as intergenerational conflict, cultural dissonance, and social stigma, can overwhelm a family's coping resources. Even when parents wish to support their children, they may lack access to guidance that respects both cultural values and their child's identity. Cultural norms often leave them feeling afraid or ill-equipped, especially when they anticipate ostracization from extended family or religious institutions. The emotional toll on both parent and child can be profound, particularly when youth internalize the disconnect between their sense of self and family expectations. These complex challenges highlight the urgent need for culturally responsive, accessible, and affirming resources that address the intersecting systemic, cultural, and emotional stressors immigrant families face.

## **Approaches For Struggling Parents**

Accepting a child’s sexual or gender diverse identity often involves a complex and ongoing emotional journey for parents. Their experience of accepting a child’s sexual or gender diverse identity is often described as a process of grief, requiring time and adjustment (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019). This section draws on scholarly sources to explore approaches that support both struggling parents and their SGD-identifying adolescents. It focuses on family-based interventions for transgender and gender-expansive youth, outlining parental goals, identity-related challenges (e.g., religion, gender, race), and key themes in parental experiences such as loss, coping, and the evolving understanding of their child’s identity. This discussion first examines the needs of sexual and gender diverse adolescents before turning to the emotional and identity-related challenges faced by parents.

### *Needs of Sexual and Gender Diverse Adolescents*

As mentioned earlier, parents play a crucial role in their response and relationship to their sexually and gender diverse-identifying adolescent. The journey of an SGD identifying adolescent may be complex enough in other areas of their life—at school, with their extended family, peers, friends, educational and career prospects, and current or future relationships with significant others. In *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Families and Professionals* (Brill & Pepper, 2022), five key themes are outlined as essential to supporting the well-being of sexual and gender diverse youth: emotional mindfulness, education, unconditional love, reconnecting with core parenting values, and fostering ongoing closeness and connection.

Understanding the core needs of gender-diverse youth is essential for fostering their well-being and resilience. Echoed and reinforced by recent research (Saewyc et al., 2024), these core needs paint a nuanced picture of both progress and continued vulnerability for gender diverse

youth. While some youth have reported improved family connectedness and access to affirming resources in recent years, particularly trans girls, the majority still face disproportionate challenges. These include significantly higher rates of violence, discrimination, and material deprivation compared to their cisgender peers. This reality underscores the profound importance of affirming and emotionally attuned parenting.

All sexual and gender diverse youth benefit from parents who are emotionally present—able to manage stress, calm racing thoughts, and stay attuned to their child’s needs (Brill & Pepper, 2022). Often, parental stress stems from understandable fears: *Will my child make friends? Will my child be safe? Who will love my child?* While these questions reflect deep concern, they must not overshadow the child’s immediate need for love, affirmation, and connection. Practicing emotional mindfulness means acknowledging these fears while still showing up as a safe, supportive presence in the child’s life. Saewyc et al. (2024) support this, noting that strong family ties are among the most powerful protective factors for gender diverse youth. Trans girls with strong family connectedness were found to be 97% less likely to experience suicidal ideation than those without such connections. This data illustrates that parental support isn’t just helpful—it can be lifesaving.

It’s also important to acknowledge that many parents may need time and support to process their emotional responses, including feelings of grief, confusion, or fear. These emotions are valid but must be separated from the support their child needs in the moment. Emotional mindfulness means holding space for one’s process while still offering consistent love, safety, and presence to the child.

Beyond the home, school environments significantly influence the development of sexual and gender diverse adolescents. Saewyc et al. (2024) highlight that school connectedness is a

strong protective factor, but gender diverse youth still report feeling less safe and supported in school compared to their cisgender peers. This reinforces the need for parents to actively advocate for safer, more inclusive school settings.

Being present and engaged in a child's life includes taking an active role in their educational experience. Whether it involves attending meetings, challenging discriminatory policies, or simply listening to their child's concerns, such advocacy communicates to the child that they are valued and protected.

Many gender diverse youth thrive when their parents make a conscious effort to educate themselves about gender identity and expression. Brill & Pepper (2022) emphasize that this "gender work" helps parents move from confusion or resistance to affirmation and advocacy. Parents who seek out information, reflect on their assumptions, and engage with inclusive communities often report becoming more confident, loving, and connected caregivers.

These journeys of growth are supported by the research from Saewyc et al. (2024), which points to decreasing rates of severe rejection, such as youth being kicked out of their homes, but also reminds us that gender diverse youth remain twice as likely to experience family rejection as cisgender youth. The goal, therefore, is not just to reduce harm but to actively build environments of affirmation and celebration.

At the heart of healthy adolescent development is the need for emotional closeness and unconditional love. Unconditional love is not passive—it calls for active reflection and growth. Parents may find themselves asking: *How do I need to grow in order to unconditionally love my child, even when they are not who I expected? What needs to shift in me so I can focus on easing their path, minimizing their trauma, and helping them live a joyful life?* These questions serve as guideposts for supportive parenting. They encourage a shift from fear to empathy, from control

to acceptance, allowing parents to center their child's well-being and create a home grounded in safety and love. This is particularly vital for sexual and gender diverse youth, who may feel alienated or marginalized in other areas of life. Daily acts of presence—small gestures of curiosity, appreciation, and affection—help ground the child in a sense of security and belonging.

These moments, as Brill & Pepper note, are not only powerful for the child but transformative for the parent. Saewyc et al.'s (2024) findings reiterate that these relationships form a protective bedrock against mental health struggles, reinforcing that resilience is not an individual trait, but a relational one built within supportive systems.

While there has been measurable progress in improving outcomes for gender diverse youth, much work remains. By understanding their child's multifaceted needs—for emotional support, safety, affirmation, and advocacy—parents can serve as powerful agents of resilience and healing. Through emotional mindfulness, education, and unconditional love, parents help create the conditions in which their children not only survive but thrive. Understanding adolescent needs provides a foundation for appreciating the complex emotional landscape parents navigate as they support their child's identity.

### *Needs of the Parents*

Just as the needs of sexual and gender diverse adolescents are multifaceted, parents also face complex emotional and identity-related challenges that influence how they respond to their child's coming out. Factors such as religion, gender, race, and culture shape parental reactions and coping mechanisms. Malpas, Pellicane, and Glaeser (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of 32 quantitative and qualitative studies on family-based interventions for transgender and gender-expansive youth. Their findings reveal key themes, including the shift from

pathologizing to affirming therapeutic approaches, the critical role of psychoeducation and family support, the impact of identity-related factors like sexual orientation and gender, and the necessity of community resources and intersectional care.

Supporting parents through their emotional journey is key to fostering healthy family dynamics. Malpas et al. (2022) and Coolhart, Ritenour, and Grodzinski (2018) highlight themes of grief, transformation, and the need for culturally sensitive, family-centred care. Malpas et al. trace a shift from behaviour-focused to affirming systemic approaches, while Coolhart et al. explore the ambiguous loss parents experience during a child's gender transition. Both studies show that with support, parents can move from disorientation to acceptance and deeper connection. These insights underscore the importance of affirming care that evolves with the family's emotional process.

Ambiguous loss and grief are central emotional challenges for many parents. Both studies validate the experience of grieving the child parents once knew, though this is not universal; some parents perceive transition as transformation rather than loss, mirroring and affirming therapeutic models. Emotional complexity and coping recur as parents navigate a spectrum of reactions, from resistance to affirmation, aided by psychoeducation, peer support, and storytelling. These approaches help parents move beyond "stuck" emotional states and frozen grief. Critically, both studies emphasize the importance of striking a balance between validating parental feelings and centring the youth's identity, all within a framework that is sensitive to culture and intersectionality.

Understanding the diverse emotional landscapes parents navigate is essential for effective counselling support. Coolhart et al. (2018) identify six clinical observations essential for

counsellors working with parents: parents' varied emotions, common mental states, gender dynamics within parenting, becoming equipped to cope, the power of storytelling, and naming ambiguity as an external force. Counsellors should recognize that some parents experience ambiguous loss, some do not, and many may fluctuate between these states. Validating and normalizing such feelings helps parents acknowledge their authenticity and supports emotional processing. Gender dynamics within parents also influence coping; for example, mothers of transgender male youth may experience more ambiguous loss, yearning to hold on to memories of their child's assigned gender, while fathers may rely more on intellectual processing. By attending to these nuances, counsellors can more effectively support each parent's unique journey toward connection and acceptance.

Storytelling offers therapeutic value, enabling parents to share and hear narratives of the "missing" child and form connections with others undergoing similar experiences. Understanding the ambiguous loss theory can alleviate self-blame and shame, common among parents who fear inadequacy. Counsellors should remain attuned to the individual and family's needs, promoting self-care and emotional resilience. Through such support, parents can better understand and navigate their emotions, ultimately empowering them to remove barriers and advocate effectively for their child's transition.

Building on the themes of ambiguous loss and resilience, it is essential to recognize how cultural and spiritual practices shape coping for immigrant and refugee families, offering unique pathways to healing. Many of these families carry the weight of collective grief and trauma from displacement, violence, or loss (Spindel, 2020). Cultural and spiritual traditions emphasizing transcendence, forgiveness, and communal meaning-making often become vital sources of

healing. Clinicians might support these families by reconnecting them with culturally grounded practices such as prayer, meditation, storytelling, or creative arts, which foster both individual and collective healing while reinforcing family identity and continuity. Exploring how such culturally rooted strategies may assist parents of sexual and gender diverse youth can offer pathways to compassionate navigation of emotional complexity and ambiguous loss, helping families grow in strength and connection.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When working with minors, ethical practice requires informed consent from both youth and guardians, in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Tri-Council, 2022), including clear communication about study risks, benefits, and data use while ensuring voluntary participation. Given the vulnerability of gender-diverse youth, who often face discrimination, stigma, or family rejection, both clinical and research contexts demand strict adherence to harm reduction and confidentiality principles (Saewyc et al., 2024). The *Canadian Psychological Association* emphasize cultural competence, especially when supporting immigrant or refugee families navigating tensions between traditional values and their child's gender identity (*Canadian Code*, 2017; Spindel, 2020). Affirmative and family-centered approaches that validate diverse experiences, avoid pathologizing identities, and acknowledge grief, ambiguous loss, and intersectional realities are essential (Coolhart et al., 2018; Malpas et al., 2022; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019). Ethical support for SGD youth must promote dignity, autonomy, and inclusion while attending to the broader cultural and systemic factors shaping family experience.

### *Methodological Approaches*

The literature on SGD youth and family dynamics predominantly employs cross-sectional survey designs and retrospective interviews to document parental reactions and youth outcomes (Hanna-Walker et al., 2024; Katz-Wise et al., 2022). While these quantitative approaches effectively capture prevalence rates and correlational patterns, they offer limited insight into the dynamic processes of family adaptation and intervention effectiveness. Most studies focus on measuring what happens rather than understanding how change occurs, creating a significant gap in intervention-focused research that could inform clinical practice.

Critically absent from the methodological landscape are longitudinal intervention studies that examine culturally adapted therapeutic approaches with immigrant and refugee families. The predominant research paradigm treats cultural and religious concerns as barriers to overcome rather than resources to integrate, reflecting a methodological bias that limits the development of truly inclusive interventions (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2019). This capstone addresses this methodological gap by proposing a narrative therapy framework that incorporates cultural values as strengths rather than obstacles, offering a methodological contribution that bridges the divide between descriptive research and actionable clinical practice.

### *Weaknesses*

This literature review reveals several notable limitations across the cited sources, particularly regarding cultural specificity, generational scope, and intersectionality. *Generations* (Twenge, 2023) and *Gen Z: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* (2021), while informative, are U.S.- and U.K.-centric and lack applicability to the Canadian context. Their demographic focus is narrow, often overlooking the diverse cultural and familial

dynamics present within Canadian immigrant and refugee populations, leaving counsellors without guidance for families whose experiences differ significantly from Western individualistic norms.

*Attitudes and the Stalled Gender Revolution* (2019), while addressing shifting gender norms, employs outdated categorical frameworks and fails to consider how race, class, and cultural background intersect with gender. This omission risks counsellors applying one-size-fits-all approaches that may alienate immigrant parents or fail to recognize how economic stress compounds family tensions around gender identity, particularly problematic given that intersectional stressors significantly impact SGD youth mental health outcomes.

Foundational works like *The Transgender Teen* (2022) have contributed significantly to early understanding but now lack depth in addressing parental stress within diverse cultural contexts. Without this cultural specificity, counsellors may misinterpret parental reactions as purely rejecting rather than recognizing complex grief processes shaped by cultural loss and adaptation. Similarly, *Family-Based Interventions with Transgender and Gender-Expansive Youth* (2022) and *Experiences of Ambiguous Loss* (2018) recognize parental grief but do not adequately incorporate perspectives from racialized, immigrant, or lower-income families, potentially leading to interventions that inadvertently increase family conflict by ignoring cultural strengths and support systems.

This capstone addresses these critical gaps by developing culturally responsive intervention strategies that honour diverse family values while supporting SGD youth, ensuring that counselling approaches work effectively across Canada's multicultural landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Adolescent gender identity formation has evolved across generations alongside societal shifts and growing understandings of gender. Generation X challenged traditional norms in a rigid cultural context, while Millennials experienced greater ethnic diversity and digital connectivity, broadening conversations on equality. Despite progress, gender-diverse youth still face discrimination and systemic barriers. Generation Z embraces fluid and authentic gender identities more openly than previous generations.

Parental support remains a vital protective factor, with clinical approaches shifting toward affirming, family-centred care emphasizing emotional connection, psychoeducation, and cultural sensitivity. However, gaps remain in resources for parents, especially those navigating intersecting identities of race, culture, and socio-economic status. These challenges underscore the need for inclusive, culturally responsive, and evidence-informed practices that support gender-diverse youth and their families across Canada.

### **Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices**

#### **Introduction**

Due to current gaps in resources, this research analyzes how counsellors can best support parents of adolescents aged 13–18 who are emotionally distressed and confused by their child’s non-conforming gender identity. In an increasingly intersectional society shaped by diverse experiences of gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity, counsellors require frameworks that help parents foster harmony and resilience within their families, particularly as children explore and affirm their gender identities. Building on the literature review, this chapter revisits the research problem and purpose, synthesizing findings through sociocultural and developmental lenses to inform counselling practice. Key themes include the generational and cultural shifts shaping parental experiences, the role of counselling interventions in promoting family well-being, and the systemic barriers families often encounter. The chapter concludes with evidence-based recommendations for practice, considerations for future research, and reflections on the study’s contributions to counselling knowledge and professional practice.

#### **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore how counsellors can support parents of gender-diverse adolescents experiencing emotional distress and identity-related confusion. The findings of the initial research questions are encompassed through these three concise themes, guiding this inquiry:

1. How do sociocultural and familial dynamics influence parental experiences with gender-diverse adolescents?

2. What theoretical frameworks best support counsellors in assisting these parents?
3. How can counselling practices be adapted to meet the needs of diverse families in Canada?

Generation Z's identity development is shaped by digital connectivity and evolving social norms. Gen Z youth come of age in a time of pluralism, social media, and intersectionality (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2019). Online platforms have normalized conversations about gender, allowing youth to explore identities more openly. This aligns with Katz et al.'s (2021) view that Gen Z sees gender as socially constructed and fluid, reflecting developmental models by Waterman and Siegel that are expanded by sociocultural contexts. However, these shifts often create intergenerational tension, as parents may struggle to understand evolving gender norms.

Parental reactions vary widely and are shaped by cultural, religious, and generational values that operate within Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, amplifying stress according to Family Stress Theory. Affirming parenting reduces mental health risks among gender-diverse youth, while rejection or misgendering increases them (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2019; Hall, 2021). These cultural and religious values, embedded in the broader social context, create additional layers of stress for families as they navigate societal expectations alongside their child's identity development. The concept of ambiguous loss (Malpas et al., 2022) is particularly relevant here, as it frames parental grief and confusion as natural, rather than pathological responses that are intensified by macro-system pressures. These findings emphasize the protective role of family connectedness while acknowledging that broader cultural contexts compound the emotional challenges parents face in adapting to their child's identity. Narrative reframing and culturally grounded practices become essential tools for helping parents view transition as transformation rather than loss, while also addressing the systemic stressors they encounter.

Counsellors play a vital role in supporting families through these emotional and relational complexities. Effective counselling must be trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and narrative-based. To help parents normalize ambiguous loss, counsellors can validate parental grief while reframing it as a natural response to significant change, explaining that mourning expected futures while celebrating their child's authentic self can coexist. Cultivating emotional mindfulness involves teaching parents grounding techniques, such as deep breathing exercises during tense conversations, and helping them recognize emotional triggers before reactive responses occur, enabling them to remain present and supportive even in moments of fear or uncertainty (Brill & Pepper, 2022). In practice, narrative therapy involves guiding families through exercises where they identify and challenge harmful stories (such as "my child is lost to me") and co-create affirming narratives that celebrate the adolescent's courage and authenticity while honouring the family's journey together (Coolhart et al., 2018). For example, counsellors might facilitate conversations where parents share stories of their child's resilience, helping them see transition as an act of self-preservation rather than rebellion. These specific approaches promote resilience, healing, and deeper family bonds by providing concrete tools parents can use to navigate ongoing challenges.

For immigrant and refugee families, counselling approaches must be further adapted to address unique cultural challenges. These families often experience heightened cultural dissonance when supporting gender-diverse youth. Sensitive, strengths-based interventions can honour cultural traditions while promoting child-centred advocacy (Spindel, 2020). In addition to direct support, counsellors must also engage in systemic advocacy to address structural barriers such as transphobia and limited access to affirming care (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2019). This is particularly crucial for Canadian counsellors working in diverse communities, where systemic

advocacy involves connecting families to culturally competent providers, challenging discriminatory policies, and building bridges between cultural communities and LGBTQ+ support networks. Cultural humility and awareness of systemic oppression are essential to fostering meaningful support and empowerment in these contexts.

Given the sensitivity of this research, it is important to acknowledge how my own identity and values informed my interpretation. My positionality as a young, cisgender, straight, second-generation Persian Canadian woman of the Bahá'í Faith shaped how I understood grief, resilience, and relational growth. My values—particularly around unity and human dignity— influenced the emphasis on spiritual and cultural aspects of adaptation. This perspective also attuned me to silences in the literature, especially around cultural diversity and non-Western approaches to family support.

Several limitations emerged in the reviewed literature. Many studies relied on self-report or qualitative data, limiting insight into long-term family dynamics. Much of the research originated from the U.S. or the U.K., focusing on white, middle-class families, which reduces its applicability to Canada's multicultural context. Immigrant, refugee, and low-income families remain underrepresented. Structural barriers to affirming care, especially in rural or underserved regions, also persist. Finally, many studies are grounded in Western individualist frameworks, with limited exploration of spiritual or communal healing practices. These gaps significantly limit counsellors' ability to provide culturally responsive, evidence-based interventions for Canada's diverse families, highlighting the urgent need for more inclusive research that reflects the country's multicultural reality.

In response to these gaps, this study offers a culturally grounded lens on gender identity development and family adaptation. It reinforces and expands existing developmental theories by emphasizing the fluid, relational, and contextually embedded nature of both adolescent identity formation and parental adjustment. It positions resilience as a collective family process shaped by systemic and cultural influences.

These insights contribute to evolving counselling frameworks that prioritize cultural humility, systemic awareness, and family-centred care. By bridging generational, cultural, and relational perspectives, this paper provides a more inclusive and compassionate roadmap for counsellors supporting families of gender-diverse adolescents in Canada.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study underscore the crucial role that parents play in the well-being of sexual and gender diverse (SGD) adolescents. Counsellors are uniquely positioned to implement family-centered, culturally responsive, and emotionally attuned practices that address the emotional complexity of supporting a gender-diverse child. The following section outlines evidence-based recommendations grounded in the literature and supported by empirical research discussed in Chapter 2.

A significant emotional challenge parents face is navigating their child's gender identity, which often evokes conflicting feelings. Parents of SGD adolescents frequently experience ambiguous loss, grief, confusion, and fear when expectations about their child's future are disrupted (Coolhart et al., 2018; Malpas et al., 2022). Counsellors should normalize these emotions using concrete tools such as: "Many parents describe feeling like they're grieving the child they thought they knew while celebrating the child who is emerging. This is called ambiguous loss, and it's completely normal. You can love your child deeply while still feeling

sad about changed expectations." Providing grounding techniques like the "5-4-3-2-1 mindfulness method" during emotionally charged moments can reduce distress and increase emotional regulation, helping parents hold space for both grief and love.

Building on this foundation, counsellors should support parents in developing emotional mindfulness through practical strategies. When parents acknowledge their fears without becoming overwhelmed by them, they are better able to emotionally attune to their child's needs during difficult conversations (Brill & Pepper, 2022). Saewyc et al. (2024) found that strong family ties were associated with a 97% reduction in suicidal ideation among trans girls, highlighting the life-saving potential of this approach. Simple adaptations—such as incorporating culturally meaningful practices like prayer or meditation from the family's tradition—can help parents center themselves and remain emotionally present across diverse cultural contexts.

Counsellors should use specific narrative-reframing exercises that help shift family narratives from loss to growth. Storytelling prompts such as 'Tell me about a time you felt proud of your child before and after their transition' help parents identify core traits—like courage, kindness, or humour—that remain unchanged, fostering both healing and renewed connection (Malpas et al., 2022). This reframes the transition from a story of loss to one of transformation and rediscovery.

As parents begin to recognize this continuity, they often shift from confusion to active advocacy (Brill & Pepper, 2022)—a process known as *gender work*. Counsellors can support this shift by connecting families to local resources, including Trans Care BC, PFLAG Vancouver, and the Rainbow Refugee Society. These supports are especially critical in cases where youth

report rejection at home, emphasizing the need for proactive, strengths-based interventions that build parental capacity for acceptance.

For immigrant and refugee families, the parenting journey is often further complicated by cultural dissonance. Counsellors must approach these families with humility and respect, using interventions like family storytelling circles to explore shared values such as loyalty, protection, or authenticity. Framing discussions around how cultural traditions can be used to affirm and protect their child offers a culturally responsive bridge between past beliefs and present realities.

Beyond the family unit, systemic advocacy is also essential. Parents benefit from concrete support in navigating educational and healthcare systems, such as templates for writing to school administrators, accessing SOGI 123 resources, or requesting gender-affirming care. Given the high rates of school-based discrimination reported by gender-diverse youth (Pullen Sansfaçon, 2019; Saewyc et al., 2024), counsellor-guided advocacy empowers parents to challenge systemic barriers on behalf of their children.

Finally, effective counselling recognizes that parental responses are not uniform. Gender, cultural background, and family dynamics all shape how support is offered and received. Mothers of transmasculine youth may benefit from grief-oriented support groups, while fathers may prefer skills-based workshops that focus on practical strategies (Coolhart et al., 2018). Using intersectional assessment tools, counsellors can avoid assumptions and better understand how religion, race, and immigration status intersect in shaping each family's unique experience.

As a future member of a Canadian counselling body such as the BC Association of Clinical Counsellors (BCACC), I would prioritize a culturally humble, trauma-informed, and inclusive approach when supporting families of SGD adolescents. This includes respecting client autonomy, recognizing systemic barriers and intersecting identities, and avoiding assumptions

about parental readiness. I would strive to use evidence-based practices, maintain competence in gender-related issues, and create nonjudgmental spaces that promote healing, relational safety, and resilience. Embracing these principles not only respects the complexity of family experiences but empowers parents to become active allies in their child's journey toward authentic selfhood. Compassionate, comprehensive counselling is essential for promoting the well-being of SGD adolescents and their families across Canada's diverse contexts.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Building on this capstone's framework and findings, future research should explore the experiences of parents of sexually and gender-diverse (SGD) adolescents across diverse cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts. Intersectional approaches are essential to understanding how overlapping identities shape parental responses and support needs. Longitudinal studies could track how acceptance evolves and how counselling interventions influence family dynamics and adolescent well-being.

Given this study's reliance on secondary sources, future research should include participatory designs that center both parents and youth. Qualitative or mixed-methods studies can deepen insight into emotional processes and reveal culturally grounded coping strategies. Normalizing grief, including ambiguous loss, remains critical to supporting parents through identity-related transitions. Future inquiry should also examine how family therapy models, such as Bowen family systems theory, apply to families with SGD youth. Concepts like intergenerational anxiety and emotional triangles—tensions among parents, youth, and counsellors—offer insight into how anxiety is transmitted and managed (Titleman, 2018). Research should explore how these dynamics influence therapeutic outcomes.

Additionally, culturally responsive adaptations of these models are needed, especially for immigrant and refugee families. For example, narrative interventions could incorporate traditional family storytelling practices, with sessions held in familiar community spaces like cultural centers or co-facilitated with respected community leaders who can bridge cultural and therapeutic perspectives. Psychoeducational materials might include translations in families' primary languages alongside visual aids that reflect diverse family structures and cultural contexts. Evaluating these concrete adaptations—such as integrating prayer or meditation practices from families' traditions into mindfulness exercises or using culturally relevant metaphors in therapeutic conversations—in diverse communities will enhance inclusive practices and support identity-affirming, resilient family systems.

## **Conclusion**

This capstone explored how counsellors can best support parents of gender-diverse adolescents navigating emotional distress, identity confusion, and relational challenges. The study addressed a critical gap in the counselling field by examining how sociocultural, generational, and systemic factors shape parental experiences and influence their capacity to support their child. Through the integration of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Family Stress Theory, this inquiry emphasized the need for systemic, relational, and culturally grounded approaches that validate both the adolescent's identity and the parents' emotional journey.

The take-home message of this study is that supporting parents of gender-diverse youth requires more than affirming language or singular interventions—it demands a compassionate, family-centered framework that honours grief, cultivates resilience, and embraces cultural

complexity. Emotional mindfulness, narrative reframing, and psychoeducation around ambiguous loss are essential tools for transforming confusion and resistance into advocacy and connection. When parents are supported through specific, actionable strategies that address their unique emotional journey, they become powerful protective factors in their child's mental health and identity development.

This research reinforces and extends existing findings by showing that parental adaptation is not a linear process, but one shaped by intersecting identities, systemic pressures, and evolving cultural norms. Counsellors are uniquely positioned to facilitate this adaptation by offering trauma-informed, culturally responsive care and advocating for systemic change. In doing so, they not only support individual families but also contribute to broader efforts toward inclusion and equity in mental health services. The insights presented in this chapter contribute to the growing field of counselling psychology by underscoring the importance of relational healing, cultural humility, and family resilience in the care of gender-diverse adolescents.

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