



Gender Research Advisory Council + Education

GAC for Minors: “Most Children Outgrow being Transgender” (aka: 80% Desistance)

The most pervasive and damaging stereotype about transgender children is that they are merely going through a phase. This claim is used to frighten parents, therapists, and medical professionals.

The phenomenon of transgender children "growing out of" their transgender identity by the time they are adolescents or adults is called “desistance” by gender researchers.

Here is the Backstory (source¹) about the 80% Desistance Statistic: Past studies of transgender kids estimated anywhere from 64 - 94% of them eventually ceased to identify as transgender. **The 80% figure comes from a 2013 study in Amsterdam conducted by Thomas Steensma and others. The study has been widely criticized for flawed methodology and the author himself has said that measuring desistance was never the intent of the study. The flaws were:**

- **Flaw: Invalid measurement - the authors counted anyone who didn't return to their clinic as desisting. This is not a valid measure in science. “You can't just assume somebody is in a category because you don't see them anymore,”** Diane Ehrensaft, Director of Mental Health at UCSF's Child & Adolescent Gender Clinic.
- **Flaw: 30% of the study sample wasn't transgender to begin with.** They did not meet the full diagnosis criteria - 38 of the 127 kids were originally designated “subthreshold” for gender identity disorder, meaning they did not fulfill all the criteria for meeting the official diagnosis.
- Authors' statements and research intent: “Providing these [desistance] numbers will only lead to wrong conclusions.”
 - The goal of the research was to uncover “predictors of persistence.” This was successful: The study found that transgender children who were older, natal females, and reported more intense gender dysphoria were more likely to stick with their transgender identity than younger children, natal boys and those with less pronounced gender dysphoric traits.
- **The Most Important Finding of This Study: Steensma and colleagues found one very specific indicator of future persistence:** When asked when they were children, “**Are you a boy or a girl?**” those who answered the opposite of their birth sex were more likely to retain their gender identity in adolescence. **The desistors, on the other hand, merely *wished* they were the opposite sex².**

¹ <https://www.kqed.org/futureofyou/441784/the-controversial-research-on-desistance-in-transgender-youth>

² Steensma TD, McGuire JK, Kreukels BP, Beekman AJ, Cohen-Kettenis PT. Factors associated with desistance and persistence of childhood gender dysphoria: a quantitative follow-up study. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry.* 2013 Jun;52(6):582-90. doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016. Epub 2013 May 3. PMID: 23702447.

Inaccurate Data on Desistance as Argument Against Social Transition: Continued citation of older studies and the Steensma work has led to a debate about “social transitioning,” that is, allowing kids to publicly live as their identified gender (WITH NO MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS).

- The argument is that if most kids will desist, then it’s better to take the least disruptive path so if the child ceases to identify as trans there will be “less to undo.”
- “Desistance” research is clinically irrelevant for transgender youth. “Worries about trans children overwhelmingly changing their mind later are unjustified. Desistance research doesn’t offer sound reasons to oppose or delay gender-affirming care.”³
- Why? The criteria for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria was less stringent in the past and so this earlier research included large cohorts of children who would not be diagnosed with gender dysphoria today. “The methodology of those studies is very flawed, because they didn’t study gender identity,” said Diane Ehrensaft, director of mental health at UCSF’s Child and Adolescent Gender Clinic.⁴ “Those desistors were simply proto-gay boys whose parents were upset” that their boys wanted to wear dresses.

Current, Growing Body of Research Refutes Stereotypes of Desistance and Gender

Confusion: The stereotype that most children with gender dysphoria are “confused” and will become non-transgender adults who are gay or lesbian is continuously refuted in current medical, scientific, peer-reviewed studies:

- This body of research is focused on transgender children with supportive families and care providers.
- The research shows that socially transitioned trans children supported by their families exhibit far less psychopathology than previously reported among unsupported youth.⁵
- [Additional research](#)⁶ has shown that children who meet the clinical guidelines for gender dysphoria are as consistent in their gender identity as the general population.
- Solution: Many gender specialists support the concept of “social transition” in pre-pubertal children, that allows them to change their names, pronouns, and style of dress to the gender with which they identify.

³ Ashley, F. (2022). The clinical irrelevance of “desistance” research for transgender and gender creative youth. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 9(4), 387–397. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000504>

⁴ <https://www.kqed.org/futureofyou/441784/the-controversial-research-on-desistance-in-transgender-youth>

⁵ Winters, K. (2019). The “80% desistance” dictum: Is it science? In A. I. Lev & A. R. Gottlieb (Eds.), *Families in transition: Parenting gender diverse children, adolescents, and young adults* (pp. 88–101). Harrington Park Press.

⁶ Olson, K. R., Key, A. C., & Eaton, N. R. (2015). Gender Cognition in Transgender Children. *Psychological Science*, 26(4), 467–474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614568156>