The majority of people are assigned as either male or female at birth, and will experience themselves as male or female accordingly. For some people, however, the presumed relationship between assigned sex and gender is incorrect. The term ‘transgender’ is now widely used to refer to this diverse group of people.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health recommends affirming and supportive therapeutic responses to transgender people, including facilitating access to gender-affirming medical responses. A growing body of research has demonstrated that affirming responses can have significant mental health benefits for transgender people, such as relief of distress and reduced suicidal ideation. Some mental health professionals, however, may believe that clinical responses should involve directing transgender people to live as the gender typically expected of the sex they were assigned at birth. But to date there have been no reliable studies to suggest that there is any value in such an approach.

As a professional organisation committed to evidence-based practice, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) therefore opposes any forms of mental health practice that are not affirming of transgender people – including children. Any psychologist involved in such practices is likely to be in breach of the APS Code of Ethics.

The Australian Psychological Society recommends therapeutic responses that:  
1) Affirm the person’s gender;  
2) Challenge negative attitudes towards gender diversity;  
3) Discuss referral options for gender-affirming treatments if desired; and  
4) Advocate for the support needs of transgender people.

These strategies apply to both children and adults. Psychologists should always be guided by the client’s expressed needs. Such responses are in line with the APS Code of Ethics and Ethical Guidelines on Working with Sex and/or Gender Diverse Clients, and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health Standards of Care.

References

Australian Psychological Society. (2013). Ethical Guidelines on working with sex and/or gender diverse clients. Melbourne: APS.  