



Helpful Tips for Caregivers of Transgender Youth

Empowerment and Resiliency

PROVIDING A SAFE SPACE

For non-binary and transgender kids and teens, family can be a vital source of support. Positive relationships with their caregiver(s) or parent(s) can be the single most critical factor for positive outcomes for these youth. Transgender and non-binary youth especially need a sense of validation, caring, closeness, warmth, safety, and comfort from their families in order to more favorably weather the discrimination they face outside the home. Parents should make home their children's safe place--a positive and accepting soft place to land, regardless of their age.

Every family is unique. Various dynamics--religion, race, culture, or financial status--impact the choices each parent makes. However, parents must weigh the effects of their parenting approach on their child's long-term psychological well-being. Trans kids and youth will forever remember the approach parents chose to take in relation to their gender.

Parents and caregivers of trans* youth have the incredible opportunity to demonstrate unconditional love. Parents should make it clear that neither they, nor their love, can be lost by the child being their authentic self. In this way, the child can be assured they don't have to be something they are not to win their parent's love, then they can relax and feel sustained by that love.

Refusing to accept a trans* child as they are and behaving in an unkind, punitive, or disrespectful manner communicates a lack of value. Practices that are damaging and increase the risk for trans*children include, but are not limited to:

- Abuse (physical or verbal)

- Exclusion from family events
- Blocking access to supportive friends
- Denigration or ridicule
- Shame, silence, or secrecy
- Refusal to use preferred name and pronouns

PROVIDING SUPPORT

Supportive parenting behaviors help children weather the challenges related to their gender identity and contribute to their long-term well-being. These practices include, but are not limited to:

- Gather information and educate yourself
- Create a supportive family environment
- Require respect within the family (including siblings)
- Allow child to naturally express their gender
- Support your teen in making decisions about their future
- Maintain open and honest communication
- Share with extended family and friends (with your child's permission)
- Assemble a team of supportive medical and mental healthcare providers
- Insist on safety and inclusion at school
- Search out role models and mentors
- Welcome your child's friends into your home

Each and every trans* person's journey is unique. Parents of trans* and non-binary children are being told that their stories--and the way in which they relate to their children--are wrong. It is difficult to adjust to this new reality. Parents often don't know what to do and are fearful that they are either making the wrong decision or, in some cases, "missing the boat" such as opting for puberty blockers in a timely manner, for example.

A common misconception is that a person's journey with gender is linear. There is no definitive start--destination--end progression for most trans* individuals. Instead, it is a lifelong, sometimes chaotic journey. Many parents would much prefer a checklist and progress reports. But life continues in the midst of transition.

Transition typically occurs in two categories: social and medical. Social transition includes changing one's name and/or pronouns, gender expression (i.e. hair, clothes, nails, etc.), and sharing their new identity at school and/or work. Medical transition can include the use of puberty blockers beginning cross-hormone treatment, gender confirmation surgeries, and amending legal documents to reflect new name and/or gender marker.

Parents should understand that the child and, most especially, the teen should take the lead in their own transition and coming out. They are in the process of acquiring their own identity and this is only one aspect of their life. Their life continues in the midst of social and medical transition. Not everything in their life is about being trans*--just as not everything in a cis-gender person's life is about their gender identity.

There is NO ONE RIGHT WAY to transition one's gender identity! Parents should be mindful that transition is not a project to be managed. It's not about "winning" and there is no finish line.

Making Space for Grief or Ambiguous Loss

Parents may long for the time when their family life will just "return to normal." It's important to understand that "normal" is a false construct. Life will never go back to what they remember as normal. There's never a time, no matter how far into transition, that their child won't be trans*.

It is perfectly understandable that this new reality causes grief for parents. But having clarity about what you're grieving is important. Be honest with yourself and ask, "What has died?" Your child is alive right in front of you, so you're not grieving the entirety of the child. You must come to terms with not seeing the child you had anymore. Chances are, your child's personality and heart will not change. Your child can be much more alive than ever, now that they are free to live as their authentic self. So acknowledging what is lost is important. There's a difference in grieving hopes and dreams than the loss of a person. Both of the following statements may be true for parents: "I am very sad I will not recognize you in the same way" *and* "I am so happy you are still here!"

When a child or teenager comes out as transgender, future planning sometimes gets interrupted. It is common for parents to lower their expectations as they grapple to

come to terms with a new reality. Parents should resist the temptation to rescue their transgender children from the discomfort and potential danger of being in the world as their true selves. They don't need to be bubble wrapped. Resist the seduction of fixing all their problems as a response to their discomfort and challenge them to meet your scholastic and parental expectations regardless of their struggle with identity. As a parent, it can feel unbearable to see your child in pain and suffering but by maintaining your expectations to perform in school (grades) and at home (chores) you will create resilience and a tolerance to adversity that will serve them well as adults.

As a parent, you are allowed to have needs--but own them as your needs. You get to own your part of this journey, but it's important for your emotional needs not to overshadow those of your child. Create for yourself an emotional holding space. As a parent, you are receiving the emotional spillover from your child (imagine a teacup overflowing onto the saucer). It's important to allow for some of your own emotional spillover as well. You need someone to hold space for you as a parent, whether it's a trusted friend or a professional therapist.

Making Space for Joy

As a transgender child or teen is supported in their gender identity, positive changes in their demeanor and personality begin to emerge. These signs of life should be encouraging for parents and an assurance that their support is bearing good fruit in their children. Although the journey is long and often fraught with setbacks, over time, parents should be able to sleep more soundly knowing that their child is making positive steps toward a bright future.

Being transgender is only one part of your child's life, and it is only one part of your family's story. Imagining the possibilities that may ensue as a result of a happier, healthier child is really important. Just as a child is navigating their path toward a happier life, your family has the potential to be stronger than ever. The parent plays a critical role in making this future a reality so that you all may look back and see the goodness that came from your journey. Instead of saying, "...your hard life" replace that phrase with "...your sweet and beautiful life."

A Note about Religion

Acceptance of gender diversity can vary tremendously across different religious communities. Faith or spiritual communities can provide a vital source of solace and support for transgender youth and their families. Inevitably, however, some use religion as a sword instead of the shield it was designed to be.

Religious-Based Condemnation

Hearing that being your true self is sinful and going against the teachings of your religion damages one's sense of inherent worth. Negative messages such as they are not loved just as they are or will punish them for living as their authentic self, greatly increases their health and mental risks.

Each of the major religions has a tremendous range of teachings. If you are unaware where your religious organization stands on gender diversity, find out. Ask to have a conversation with the pastor or other ministry leader. If you are told anything other than your youth is perfectly created and both welcomed *and* affirmed to be their authentic selves, you might need to seek out a different faith community where your family will be more included and better supported.

Supportive Religious or Faith Communities

They exist! You do not have to choose between your faith and your child. If being a part of a faith community is something that is important to you and your family, choosing one that will sustain the spiritual growth of your transgender child is extremely important. Even if it means deconstructing some binary beliefs you've been taught in the past, it is worth the effort to reconcile your faith with your love and support of your child. There are resources to help you find a supportive faith community.