



Helpful Tips for Caregivers of Transgender Youth

Communicating with Your Youth

Communicating with your Transgender Child

Don't put pressure on yourself to always say the right thing at the right time. Rarely can the perfect response make the situation better anyway. What makes it better is connection. Keep connection, not perfection, the goal of communication.

The first act of communicating your support to your non-binary or transgender youth is to use their name and pronouns, without exception, as soon as they request it. But don't get too attached to names or labels. They may shift and change. Just support them as they go through the process of figuring themselves out.

An important message for a youth to hear from their caregiver (and should be repeated over and over, even if the youth rolls their eyes).

"Nothing about you is a disappointment to me. Your gender and/or sexuality is not a disappointment to me. It is a part of you. It is good. You are my child. I love you and I have always loved you. I do not understand all of this but I am willing to learn and I am seeking out information. I love you and we will get through this together, no matter what." (Shared by Colt Keo-Meier, Ph.D. anecdotally as a message his father repeated to him everyday upon his coming out)

Tools for Communicating

Every parent and child communicate in a way that is unique to them. Relationship, personality, and style all affect communication. A good practice is to talk openly and often even about little things so that when hard conversations arise, you already have

an open line of communication. Still, it can be hard to have difficult conversations, especially about one's gender identity.

Teenagers are unlikely to initiate conversation, and if they do, it will most likely not be at a convenient time or place. Parents should be ready to listen when the opportunity arises. Asking open-ended questions and listening empathetically will encourage conversation.

Parents of trans* children and teens who are more reserved and hesitant to open up should look for creative solutions, like:

- **Beginning a journal** that can be passed back and forth with questions and answers. Simply leave the journal in each other's room with ample time to think through a response before passing it back. This takes the pressure off of knowing what to say in the heat of the moment.
- **Having conversations in the car** (nighttime is best) so that neither party is too distracted and eyes can be forward facing.
- **Suggesting an activity.** Children and teenagers sometimes open up while busy with an activity (cooking, board games, taking a walk) so that the pressure to talk is off a bit.
- **Talking one-on-one.** It can also be helpful not to outnumber the child by both parents sitting down at once for a talk, which can seem like "ganging up" even when that's not the intention at all.

Caregivers should appreciate the fact that they can't "understand" because they have never been in their youth's shoes. It's ok to give up on trying to ever fully "understand." Because one doesn't have to fully understand to love and support their youth. It's important for caregivers to try and suspend their perspective and place themselves on "pause" so that they can effectively listen to their youth's point of view.

Your youth is the best expert on their own experience. Listen to them much more than you listen to other parents or "experts." Let them help educate you. Most likely, especially if they are teenagers, they've been researching a while and can share their wisdom and resources.

Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening requires parents to embrace vulnerability. Parents are the adults in the conversation and should not expect the child to appreciate your efforts. Parents should at all times keep in mind the impact their words and reactions have on their children.

Empathetic listening does not include:

- ✘ Giving advice
- ✘ Interrogation
- ✘ Explanation
- ✘ Pity or “feeling bad for”
- ✘ One-upping
- ✘ Fixing
- ✘ Correcting
- ✘ Minimizing

Never use “Why?” (there's no answer, and it puts them on the defensive.)

Never use “If you would...” “Just...” or “At least...” (this comes off as accusatory.)

Instead of “What's wrong?” or “Cheer up!” ask instead, “How are you feeling?”

Empathetic listening responses do include:

- ✓ “I see...”
- ✓ “I hear...”
- ✓ “It sounds like...”
- ✓ “I imagine...”
- ✓ “It looks like...”
- ✓ “It must be...”