

The Bottom Line

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Feature Story



DIFFERENCE ISN'T WRONG...IT JUST IS (EMBRACING FAMILIES WITH TRANSGENDER AND GENDER VARIANT CHILDREN)

By Kim Pearson

In the GLBT movement, most of us are familiar with the capital "T" representing Transgender folks, but there is also a lower case "t" beginning to emerge as a bright and shining star of education and advocacy in our community. The lower case 't' represents the trans and gender variant children in our community and the families who love and support them.

Due to the flurry of recent media attention, these children have been thrust into the public eye. Unless you are personally acquainted with one of these children/families, how much do you really know about their lives and experiences? How accurate is the information you may have?

What is transgender? Transgender is a very broad umbrella term, which represents many things to many people. For this article we are going to use it to refer to children who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. This would include children who were assigned female at birth but self-identify as male, children who were assigned male at birth but self-identify as female and children who, regardless of their birth assignment, self-identify as either, neither or somewhere in between. The either, neither or in between children are those whose gender identity or expression differ from expectations for their assigned birth sex, and they are often referred to as gender variant, gender queer or gender questioning. Not all children will identify with our socially constructed binary gender system and will continue to be gender variant into adulthood.

As executive director of TransYouth Family Advocates, Inc. (TYFA), I share the story of raising my pre-school gender variant child with audiences all over the country. It goes something like this: When my child was 4, I was under the impression that I had a daughter who strenuously resisted gender typical dress, toys and activities, would not wear dresses, sported a flat top haircut, dressed in boy's jeans, tees, shoes and hats, played baseball (not softball), basketball, army men and most other "typically" male activities. My child even cut off eyelashes, offended by folks saying how pretty they were. The explanation was, "I can be 'cute,' but definitely NOT 'pretty.'" This was truly a gender variant child.

We define gender variant individuals as those whose gender identity or expression differs from expectations for their physical sex characteristics or assigned birth sex.

Unlike my child, who did not verbally express his male gender identity until he was 14, many children are clear about having a cross gender identity from as early as two years of age. In the book *Caring For Your School Aged Child: 5-12*, the American Academy of Pediatrics states: "A child's awareness of being a boy or a girl starts in the first year of life. It often begins by 8 to 10 months of age, when youngsters typically discover their genitals. Then, between 1 and 2 years old, children become conscious of physical differences between boys and girls; before their third birthday they are easily able to label themselves as either a boy or a girl as they acquire a strong concept of self. By age 4, children's gender identity is stable, and they know they will always be a boy or a girl."

Try to imagine yourself as the parent of a 2-year-old son who says to you, "Mom, why do you keep buying me trucks? Don't you know I am a girl and I like Barbie dolls?" What does a parent do with that type of information coming from a 2-year-old? How do you react?

As parents, we are called upon to make difficult decisions every day. Many of us base those decisions on the big picture. What will be best for my child and family in the long run? If you have a child who tells or shows you through his/her actions and reactions that s/he doesn't identify with their assigned birth sex, it becomes necessary to consider the negative effects of denying your child's gender expression, whether you agree or not. This does not refer to children who are "pretending," "play acting" or simply trying out different gender roles or activities. These are children who consistently, persistently and acutely identify with the gender opposite of their birth sex -- children who, over the course of months leading into years, express this cross gender identification to their parent(s). These children, if not given the opportunity to express their gender identity, may be so distressed that they resort to self-harm or even suicide.

In the early stages it is not uncommon for a parent to think that their child may be gay or lesbian, which may or may not be the case. Sexual orientation and gender identity are not the same thing. Sexual orientation is about who you find attractive. Gender identity is your internal sense of masculinity or femininity (not always congruent with biological or assigned sex). Gender identity is who you are, not who you are find attractive. Transgender people have the same sexual orientations that other people have.

There are many ways in which a child expresses gender variance. At what point does a parent know that they need to DO something about it?

The parents of gender variant children, their teachers and even healthcare professionals that TYFA works with often begin by asking, if a child can be taught "appropriate" gender behavior. Pressuring a child to conform to





gender normative standards may result in changed external behaviors; however, it isn't likely to change their sense of who they are. Forcing gender conformity has been shown to cause depression, anxiety, malaise, poor school performance, and even suicidal ideation.

According to the GLSEN 2005 National School Climate Survey, which surveyed 1,732 students, ages 13-20, 26.1% had experienced physical harassment at school due to their gender expression and 11.8% had been physically assaulted due to their gender expression. And the average GPA for transgender students frequently physically harassed was ½ grade lower than students experiencing less harassment (2.6 vs. 3.1).

Once families find acceptance of their child's gender identity there are many questions they may need answered: How and what should we tell our family, friends, school, etc?

What does transition mean, and how can we be sure our child is ready?

What about the changes of puberty?

How do we bolster our child's self-esteem?

Telling your family and friends the truth is a good place to start. It might go something like this: "My child has a medical condition which manifests itself as incongruence between their sense of who they are and their physical anatomy." If the child's gender variance is obvious to others, the sooner the topic is addressed, the better. Being up front opens the door for providing education, and education is the key to understanding and acceptance.

People tend to fear what they do not understand.

Experience has shown us that being matter of fact, positive and upbeat really helps. The attitude and level of confidence a parent displays often sets the tone for how others handle the information. If the information is presented as being problematic, painful, difficult and dangerous, people are likely to respond negatively.

Alternatively, if you state the expectation that your child's future will be happy, successful and bright, then they will likely respond positively. How, when and to whom you disclose this information is a highly individual and personal decision.

Your family, schools and other organizations are not likely to be familiar with your child's condition and cannot do their job of providing a safe and nurturing environment without some help. If you feel well-informed and confident that you can educate others, then you should. For reference materials or help, refer to the list of resources at the end of this article.

Parents of gender variant children and youth who are acutely distressed by the incongruence of their gender identity and their social gender role (i.e. how they dress, name, pronouns, etc.) may choose to transition that child. Simply put, this means letting the child live in the gender they identify with at home, at school and in all areas of their life.

Parents and others may ask, "How can we be certain that transition is the right thing to do?"

Are we ever really certain of anything when making parental decisions? Sometimes the worry is that children will later change their mind. If this happens, you simply revert to their previous gender presentation. With young children there are no medical procedures or medications to take, therefore everything is totally reversible. There may be some discomfort with the fluidity of this type of reversal, but however uncomfortable or embarrassing it may be for the adults involved, it is far more difficult for the children. They need support and validation of who they are.

Many families choose to live "in stealth" and do not see the need to divulge their child's medical information after transition. Some choose to only tell those who "need to know," such as physicians, teachers, etc. Others may tell everyone in order to minimize the risk of exposure. In the end, it is up to you and your child and what you feel comfortable with disclosing.

With adolescents the transition process may be more involved. There are medical intervention options a family may wish to pursue. Modern medicine has made it possible to delay the development of the secondary sexual characteristics brought on by puberty because these changes are often devastating for gender variant children. The medications are called GnRh analogues (puberty inhibitors) and are prescribed by an endocrinologist. The effects of these medications are reversible if the child changes their mind. However, if a child has consistently presented as gender variant from childhood through adolescence, the odds that they will change their mind are practically nonexistent.

Not all children express that they are transgender in time to delay puberty. If puberty has already begun, there may be ways to help minimize the discomfort, such as stopping menstruation. An endocrinologist can help parents make informed decisions about such treatments.

Where is my family with this journey now? Well, our suicidal, gender variant, teen "daughter" is now living a happy and fulfilling life as a young man. My husband and I made many difficult decisions along the way, but the most important decision we ever made was to love our child unconditionally. In 18 months we have transitioned from having a child on the brink of dropping out of middle school – a child who wouldn't speak to anyone outside or our immediate family (not even to order food at a restaurant) and was literally disappearing before our eyes, to a child who is happy, outgoing, and excelling at school. Our son is now a youth advocate who travels all over the country speaking to youth, communities of faith, schools, colleges, universities ... pretty much anyone who will listen. The message is always the same: affirming a child's gender identity expression is one of the most significant things you can do for a gender variant child. Being supportive and paving the way for that child's acceptance at school and in other social situations speaks louder than words. Difference isn't wrong...it just is.

For support and education:

TransYouth Family Advocates, Inc.
imatyfa.org

PFLAG
pflag.org

Laura's Playground
lauras-playground.com/teens.htm

TransFamily of Cleveland e-lists
transfamily.org/emailist.htm

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