

FIRST STEPS

SUPPORTING & CARING FOR TRANSGENDER CHILDREN

Edited and produced by The Gender Centre Inc.
Shared Stories and Information from Parents and
Caregivers

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CONTENTS

Intro	3
Shared Stories	5-20
Tips for Parents	21
Disclosure.....	22-24
Tips for Telling People	25
What you can do for your Child & Yourself	26
How to be an Ally	27
Is this child abuse?	28
Resources (Books, Video, Services)	29-31



INTRODUCTION

Your child is questioning his or her gender. Maybe you're feeling shocked and overwhelmed by the news or fearful for your child's future. Maybe you have no idea *what* you're feeling. There must be a thousand different questions running through your head. This booklet was initiated by the Parents of Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children's Group, hoping to help you and to answer some of these questions.

Dispersed throughout this booklet are the personal experiences and tips of parents who have been through this before and these may ease some of your anxieties. It also contains information on what being transgender actually entails (and what it doesn't), sensible ways to support your child, and how to support yourself during your child's transition.

If you're really stuck, there are even suggested questions to ask and strategies to use in helping your child 'come out' to friends and ex families.

Being transgender or gender diverse is an individual experience. There is no one way, no universal narrative.

Some transgender people seek hormone therapy and may have multiple surgeries. Others do not. This does not make one person any less transgender or their experience any less valid.

Transition means different things to different people, and each individual will do what is needed in order to feel comfortable.

Some transgender people may identify within a binary of gender (male, female), while others may not feel they are part of that binary (non-binary, gender-neutral, etc).

This booklet has been written by parents and caregivers for parents and caregivers. We hope it may help you to support your children who may be questioning or exploring gender.

Gender is internal and personally defined and is determined by the individual alone.

Transgender

An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity and inner sense of being male or female differ from the sex assigned to them at birth.

Cisgender

A term for people experiencing their gender as matching the biological sex assigned to them at birth.

Non-binary

Non-binary is a term that includes people who don't identify as male or female. They may identify as neither male nor female, both, or other.

These are basic descriptions, and people's lived experience holds many more variations and self-descriptors.

Note, too, that sexuality has nothing to do with gender. Sex, sexuality and gender are independent of one another.

"There is no right way to be transgender, the same as there is no wrong way to be yourself" - Elizabeth Duck-Chong



Parent with Empathy

Empathy, the ability to be aware and sensitively respond to another, is the key to connected parenting. When a person is parented with empathy, there is less room for loneliness and accompanying fear, depression, anxiety and despair.

"Sourced reference: The Transgender Teen by Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney"

LAURIE 'S STORY

A year ago, when I finally came to accept that my adored seventeen-year-old was transgender, it was like the bottom fell out of my world.

Night after night, I lay in bed crying, feeling a combination of nausea and abject terror. I was convinced this was the worst thing that could possibly happen to a parent. And I was angry that all the effort I had put in over all those years to ensure my child had a happy life had been for nothing. I had so much to learn.

Four months earlier, when he had first started to make noises about living in the opposite gender, I had rejected it out of hand. I thought it was ridiculous, that he was way too young to make such a “choice”, and I didn’t hesitate to give him a long list of ways in which his life would be completely destroyed if he “chose” to do this.

In hindsight, I’m quite ashamed of my reaction, although I still understand why I felt that way. It took time for me to realise just how wrong I was, on so many levels.

Here are some of things I’ve learned:

What I thought then: being transgender is a choice (and a teenager is too young to make that choice).

What I know now: it’s not a choice. If it were, no one would ever choose it. Why would you consciously choose to add that degree of difficulty to your life? It’s something people are born with, and, they can be absolutely sure of its truth no matter, how young they are.

What I thought then: “You’re too young! Can’t you wait until you’ve finished school?”

What I know now: the younger you know (and accept) that your child is transgender, the better chance they have of adapting physically to their innate gender. Puberty blockers at an early age can save a lot of angst (and expense) later.

What I thought then: your child being transgender is the worst thing that can happen.

What I know now: that’s ridiculous. Your child having a life-threatening illness, or being in a fatal accident, or any number of awful things that happen to families are far worse.

What I thought then: transgender people can never lead a happy, normal life.

What I know now: transgender people can lead perfectly happy, normal lives, especially if they have the love and support of their families and friends.

What I thought then: transgender people (and by association, their families) are freaks and outcasts.

What I know now: anyone, from any culture or walk of life, can be transgender, or be a parent of a transgender child. My first visit to a parent support group profoundly changed my life. I realised that there were countless people just like me, with kids just like mine. The only reason transgender people have been treated like outcasts in the past is because there is so little understanding about what being transgender means.

What I thought then: How can I ever tell anyone about this? It's just too awkward.

What I know now: Well, it was a bit awkward at first. And I was extremely nervous about telling people. But I've been overwhelmed by the support and acceptance we've received from our extended family, neighbours, and friends, and from all the institutions – banks, schools, government agencies, etc. – that we've had to deal with over my child's change of name and gender. I've also realised that it's up to me to set the tone – if I treat it as normal, other people will too.

What I thought then: my child would become a stranger to me.

What I know now: my child is exactly the same person – the same funny, adorable, sometimes annoying, messy teenager – and our relationship is as strong as it ever was.

I'm sure there are many more things I've learned – and will continue to learn on this journey. These are the ones that stand out for me now.

If you are somewhere on a similar journey, I wish you well. It's a difficult and painful road at first, but it definitely becomes easier. One day you'll find yourself, like me, coasting along so easily that it will be hard to remember how rough it was when you set out.

Also, the more so-called “normal” families who can accept their children for who they are, the more “normal” and acceptable transgender will become.

CATHERINE'S STORY

When my daughter was growing up it never crossed my mind that she had any issues with her gender. I have no stories to share of her insisting she was a boy, no struggles to persuade her to wear girls' clothing, no anecdotes about how she was a tomboy or played on the boys soccer team. I have nothing like that to share. My stories are of a beautiful and creative little girl who loved her princess dolls, her My Little Ponies, her coloured hair clips, bows and fairy wings.

It was never on my radar that my daughter could be transgender or that one day when she was in her early twenties my life would be turned completely upside down. I cannot remember clearly how my daughter told me she was a boy, or whether she

used the word transgender. The panic and fear that I felt at that moment, thinking there must be something terribly wrong with my child, has wiped some of my memories of that day. But I will never forget the anguish I saw in my child's face. I knew whatever she was struggling with, was massive.

I didn't know what I should do and I turned to a diagnostic manual for information. At that time it was the DSM IV. I looked up **gender** and I came away worried that my daughter could be suffering a serious disorder and be mentally ill. I saw a psychologist specialising in gender issues and I told her about my daughter and how she had always behaved and dressed like a girl. But I also told her about the distress my child felt during puberty, her anxiety and discomfort with her female anatomy and of her breast binding. The psychologist said she believed my child could be transgender.

For a long time I fell into a deep abyss. I worried about my child's future, how difficult her life would be and how badly she would be treated. How could I ever keep her safe? What had I done to cause this? How had I not known? I fluctuated between denial, fear, depression and guilt. In those early troubled years it was hard for me to see that I could get to the place I am now, or to see that I would gain so much from the journey. I have a transgender son and I am enormously proud of him. I feel positive about his future and all of his potential. He is interesting, inspiring and courageous and I fully embrace him as my son.

The reason I am sharing my story is because I want you to know that it does get better! You will come to a place of acceptance. You will get used to the new name and pronouns. You will feel proud of your child and positive about the future. You will feel confident that your child will find happiness and love. You will learn that your transgender child is a natural part of human diversity.

There are many, many parents with transgender children. You are not alone.

CATHERINE'S TIPS FOR PARENTS

When your older child tells you she or he is transgender he or she has probably agonised over these feelings for years.... believe them.

Use your child's preferred name and pronouns. In the beginning you may find this very difficult but continued resistance could damage your relationship with your child.

Show support and a willingness to understand her or his experience. Whatever your child's age he or she wants and needs your acceptance.

Connect with a parents' support group. When you need support or comfort or reassurance about your child's future, don't look for that from your child.

Not all transgender people are the same. Not everyone transitions, not everyone takes hormones and not everyone has surgery. Some transgender people pass in their affirmed gender and some do not and some don't feel they need to try. There is no right or wrong way to be transgender.

If your child is transgender that does not mean there is something “wrong” with him or her. Learn all you can and be an advocate and champion for your child. .



JEN'S STORY

I'm the proud mother of three great kids, including eleven- year-old identical twins.

My son and daughter made their arrival eleven years ago prematurely, as expected, due to having twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome - a condition commonly experienced by multiple-birth offspring where, in this case, their common placenta was shared unequally resulting in my daughter being significantly smaller than her brother.

Some of you may have noticed something a little odd about my story already. It is normally considered impossible to have identical twins of differing genders - fraternal twins can be brother and sister but not identical twins - as they are the result of one embryo splitting it two - so they share the same genetic material that was contained in that embryo and this determines their physical characteristics.

When I brought my babies home from hospital I was in no doubt I had two identical sons and their birth certificates listed them as male. For the first three or four years of their lives they were my 'lads' - they dressed in similar jeans and sweaters and enjoyed pulling on their gumboots to play in the mud on our little farm. Then one of

them started showing an interest in all things 'girly' and I was okay with that - it was just a phase I thought. So teddy bears, Barbies, and playing with my clothes and jewellery became 'his' thing. At playgroup one of the twins was always in the sandpit with the trucks - the other in the dress-up corner wanting to wear the tutus.

At about six years of age my child first told me he was going to be a girl when he grew up - that he would have a sex-change operation. I have to be honest - it scared me so much to hear that. Not because I loved my child any less, or thought that something was 'wrong' with 'him', but because I feared how others would perceive and treat my precious child. Like most parents I want my child to grow up safe, have opportunities, be loved and cared for - and in that moment all I could imagine was a very difficult life that I didn't want for my child.

At this stage, if I had taken my child to a psychologist or psychiatrist,, I have no doubt my child would have been diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria (she has been diagnosed more recently) - which is a medical term for having significant discontent with the sex and gender a person was assigned at birth. One study suggests that all young children who have Gender Dysphoria don't continue to have it as they get older, that about 25 per cent persist and are consistent in their identification as the opposite gender into puberty and adulthood. As I learn more I am less sure of the validity of that study but - assuming it is correct - my child is one of those children whose identity has persisted .

For the next five years after her first announcement my child lived a double life – dressing in preferred feminine clothes at home and dressed as a boy when elsewhere. Both twins were doing really well at school, and had lots of positive childhood experiences but their interests were very different - and their friendship groups were markedly different. One had all male friends and the other all female friends. I guess we were still waiting for the phase to end... but it didn't.

Last year (2015) my child became more insistent and outspoken about her desire to be recognised as a girl. She has always been very clear on who she is and never shy to be her true self - I have a great admiration for her capacity to be honest and open with others about how she sees things. She can be very determined and has a keen sense of what is just and unjust - which has resulted in her recently announcing she would be acting as her brother's 'lawyer' in all future family disputes - which is quite a daunting proposition for this Mum but her brother is delighted.

As a parent it was an incredibly difficult decision to make - whether to allow her to exist in the world as the girl she knows herself to be, or force her to remain closeted about her identity beyond the safety of our home. Those same fears and concerns that I had when she was six and dreaming of being a girl were present, but in the meantime I'd done enough research on gender identity issues to know that the risks associated with not supporting her were significant - more than 40 per cent of unsupported transgender people attempt suicide. At age eleven it was also necessary to consider difficulties she would face with the imminent onset of puberty, as just the thought of experiencing the physical changes of male puberty were very distressing to my child. Many of those physical changes might require surgery or other interventions later in life if my child later transitioned to female.

Her twin brother supported her fully. He said to me, 'Mum, She's always been a girl on the inside, now she's going to be a girl on the outside, too'.

So last Christmas my child got the best present I could give her - the freedom to be herself. With full support from our family and friends we changed her name, started using female pronouns, let her wear her girl's clothes, and she got her ears pierced (the icing on the cake!).

She returned to her school this year as a girl and she's so happy. The biggest issue we have is that she loves it so much she never wants to miss a day - even when she's sick. Our school and community have been outstanding in their support of my daughter - and her fellow students have been open and accepting. I don't think it was a radical change for anyone as she had been so feminine before - for most of the kids it seems to make sense to them that she's a girl now.

My daughter is now receiving treatment at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne which has a Gender Clinic for children and adolescents. She is currently being monitored to identify when she reaches the appropriate stage of puberty (Tanner Stage 2) to start medication which will basically stall her body from going into male puberty. This treatment is completely reversible should she decide not to continue at any stage. It effectively buys her time before making any more radical choices later in life, such as taking hormones or perhaps having surgery.

There are so many surprises and unexpected lessons you learn while being a parent. Perhaps the one lesson that would have been good for me to learn early on when I held my beautiful identical baby boys in my arms and imagined their future is that I should never assume anything about what would happen next. Life has all sort of unexpected curveballs ready to be thrown. Unconditional love is the key to facing them.

I sometimes wish I had a crystal ball that would show me where this journey will lead us so I could avoid potential mistakes and protect my child better. I'm very clear that my role in this is to smooth the way for my daughter so that she grows up in a world that has a better awareness of the issues for gender variant people, which is why I am happy to share our story.

LISA'S STORY

My name is Lisa, I have two children, the younger being a twenty-year-old transgender man.

I suspected my child was transgender from an early age, the signs were small but enough to concern me. I became more concerned as my child approached puberty, I had the talk, "You know your body is going to change, are you okay with that?". I even taped an Oprah show on transgender kids and showed it to my child to see if that sparked any conversation, but no, it didn't. Puberty was early, around eleven years of age and awkward. By the age of fourteen, my child came out as lesbian. I remember that conversation well because of my stupid response, "Oh thank

goodness. I thought you were going to ask for a penis". I was thinking being lesbian is easier than being transgender. One year later, that stupid statement came back to bite me when my child told me that the issue was indeed gender. Even though I had suspected it for years, I still went into panic. He was about to start Year 10 and I felt that transition would be easier after school, if I could just hold him off it would be safer. Not much was said and I sort of just sat on it for about six months. I ended up with a very unhappy child. He did all the research online as to what to do and where to go, came to us with the information, and so the journey began.

I was so weighed down by fear in the beginning, it was hard to function. My husband seemed to have a better grip on it than I did but his mind didn't think as much about the negative things that occupied mine, "will my child be safe, accepted, treated well, loved". At times my fears almost brought me undone. Standing outside the men's public toilets waiting for my child to emerge safely was almost more than I could take. Reading *The Transgender Child; A Hand Book For Families and Professionals*, really empowered me. I felt as if I had backup, information and a plan. Also the parents' Support Group at the NSW Gender Centre was an amazing wealth of information and support. This helped us to move forward much quicker and with our child, we made the jump. We had a party for our son announcing his new name and pronouns. We made it a celebration for a new beginning.

He returned to school as male and things moved along. I did a lot of ducking and weaving and meetings ahead of time to try and spare my child embarrassment or non-acceptance. It was hard work and at times I felt broken. The last five years have been really hard for him and for us, socially, medically, legally and emotionally but so worth it. We have lost friends and our family have not been as great as they might have been but we have emerged a strong little family. We are close and have met some wonderful people through this experience. Both of my children have grown up to be amazing young adults. I am very proud of them and the way they treat others. From the beginning as a mother I wanted to fix things for my son. It took a long time for me to realise he wasn't broken. The most profound thing he has ever said to me is, "I don't feel I was born in the wrong body, Mum, this is just the way it was meant to be for me. It's my journey and it's okay". Everyone's experience is different as we are all individuals, but the one thing that is the same for everyone is love and support, we all need it.

PENNY'S STORY

My husband was up early one morning, as usual, and about to go to work, when he was confronted by an envelope marked "Mum and Dad – open together" lying on the table. My husband brought it downstairs to me in bed. He reported that our eldest son, aged nineteen, was not in bed and that his car wasn't there – extremely uncharacteristic of him. Now you can imagine how our hearts were thumping. We both skim read it and saw with great shock that our son wanted to become a girl, that

he had felt he was girl from about the age of four or five when he used to dress up in skirts at his babysitter's place with the other girls. We were both stunned to say the least!

We were immediately concerned about his state of mind and welfare. Luckily, we had an idea where he might have gone to give us space and time "to come to terms with this news" (a quote from his letter) – our son had always shown concern for others. My husband drove found him at a local lookout and asked him to come home.

He didn't want to discuss it further – he said that he'd put it all in the letter – he had never been one to talk much about feelings. He said that he had researched it on the Internet and that he'd found a place where he could go for gender reassignment surgery. We just had no idea of what to say, other than that we loved him, and would always do so, no matter what. I did know that one had to undergo counselling before having such major surgery. So we suggested that he start with some local counselling with a youth counsellor.

Unfortunately, this counsellor had little understanding or knowledge of transgender, but we did expect that he would listen to our son and not try to talk him out of it. We told the counsellor that if he thought that our son was positive about this, that we would support him and take it further. During the session with our son, the counsellor said very uncomplimentary things about how he would look as a woman. Our son, not being very confident, decided to "suck it up" and get on with life. I did ask if he wanted to go to more counselling sessions but he said, "I feel better now". The counsellor reported to me that in his opinion, our son needed affirmation of his masculinity and advised that we had no need to worry. So we left it at that, as we had never seen any evidence in our son's behaviour to indicate that he was indeed transgender.

We saw our son try very hard to be proactive in making his life "better" by organising lots of activities with friends, working hard, studying and always being involved in many different activities. He met his wife around the age of twenty-one and when she went overseas to study, he followed her. When they returned a year later their relationship became permanent. Our son did further studies at university and as a result found a very good job in the public service.

After their wedding some nine years later, our son commenced counselling as, unbeknown to us, all was not well. His feelings of being female had been returning from time to time, usually when things were problematic. He had been prescribed anti-depressants but these weren't having the desired effect. Our son has since told us that all through his life he'd always thought, that if he just did this or that to improve his life circumstances, these feelings would go away. But they hadn't.

It was as a result of these counselling sessions that our son phoned us one night to tell us what had been going on and that he had come to the conclusion that he was

transgender. He was trying to decide what he should do about it. He told us that in order for him to be happy in life, he would need to present as his true self. If he decided to ignore this and repress his feminine feelings he would never be happy. He wanted to give it a go as he didn't want to go through life being unhappy – he'd tried everything else.

This was in early 2014. We went into a state of panic again. We thought that he had the perfect life. We thought that he was “over this”. How wrong were we? How naive were we to think this. Why didn't we learn more about transgender years ago?

Our son and his wife visited several times over the next couple of months when we discussed it. We told him that he would always have our unconditional love and support even though we didn't know how he was feeling. My husband said that he really wasn't in favour of what he was about to do. I just wanted to keep our son close for the difficult times ahead. I did not want to alienate him. We were so worried about the whole process and for his future.

There were so many negatives in going through with this move. First, his wife would leave him which meant his financial situation would be under stress. He would be on his own. How would he be treated by others? We had so many concerns. We talked about it constantly for a couple of months. We cried each time he left after his visits. Would this be the last time we saw our son as a man? Many nights were spent lying awake talking about it and having a weep. We had many heated discussions about it too. We even plotted visiting him at the last minute to talk him out of making that visit to the endocrinologist, but thought better of it.

We did some Internet research but probably the information we initially found was not the right sort – lots of info about side effects and the down side of it all. Our son told us about an *Australian Story* episode about Cate McGregor, a high ranking transgender woman in the military, which we watched. We also saw another program about a couple of transgender women in the UK and their stories of transition.

We had a counselling session with a psychologist who specialised in transgender. This was a great day for us as it was the first time that we had discussed our son's situation with anyone. It was a huge relief. I told her that our son had always been our “shining light” as a child, being so easy to raise and always so sensible. Our other two sons had been more challenging. The psychologist's response to our concerns over his decision to transition was that if we thought our son was always sensible, why not trust him now to make a sensible decision?

It was as a result of this psychologist's suggestion that we attended the Parent Support Group at the Gender Centre. At that first meeting, we felt such relief to find other regular people like ourselves with children who were transgender – we felt so comforted – we weren't the only ones! It was fabulous meeting other parents in our situation – **and** seeing that they too had gone through the same traumatic times before coming to a state of acceptance about their children's transgender status. I

hoped that one day I could feel this positive about our son who had started taking hormones.

This was the **best** thing we did to help our child. It has led to our learning more about transgender and feeling comfortable discussing transgender issues with our new daughter and our friends. We were given the book *The Transgender Child* which was very informative. Our daughter has really noticed the change in our attitudes since those early days.

She now feels that we understand and are truly supportive.

There have been some really tough times for our child as she has made the transition into a lovely woman. But I have felt ok with our level of support throughout this – visits, lots of emails and daily text messages, especially once the marriage ended and she was on her own. There was one time early in the journey when she didn't speak to us for few weeks after my husband sent her an article about depression which wasn't received well. But after several emails and many messages left on voice mail, this was sorted out. In fact, emails have been **very** useful as they have allowed everyone to voice their opinions without emotions getting in the way and have also produced more appropriate responses than those blurted out in the heat of the moment. Email gives one time to "sleep" on an answer!

You can't tell an adult child – now thirty-two years old - what to do. You just have to hope and pray that during the many years when you had control over them (if you really ever did) that your indoctrination was successful; that they understood the importance of making informed decisions and going about things the right way. I guess we were lucky in that our daughter always liked to research everything before acting. She chose to go to a counsellor, visit an endocrinologist and psychiatrist all of whom specialised in transgender. She has been very good with blood tests and follow-up visits to the endocrinologist. She also returns to the counsellor when she feels the need. Each time we see her now, we see our real daughter emerging – a much more confident young woman.

Our daughter has returned to work after taking seven months sick leave to transition. Her supervisor has been most supportive in arranging some transgender training for all the staff. One of the girls even arranged a welcome back "lunch with the girls". Our daughter happily reported that everyone at work has been very supportive and accepting.

We know that the journey is not over – there are still ups and downs. But I feel that our family is now better able to meet our daughter's needs.

Even though your child may be an adult, he or she still needs your unconditional love and support. Be accepting, open to new ideas and listen to your children as only **they** know how they feel! They have the right to be happy.

TOM'S STORY

I have had the belief since I was very young, and growing up in a country that wasn't my original home land, that to get through life you shouldn't make waves or rock the boat and should stay below the radar.

Since having children this philosophy has been changed. My wife and children have taught me that there is no shame in being who you are. If you want to dye your hair purple, green, pink or all the colours of the rainbow, you should, without the fear of being judged or bullied or victimised. Unless what you are doing is compromising the safety of others and yourself, then you should be who you are with no reservations.

People need to get a real perspective on life. We need to be able to celebrate life in all its diversity not be fearful of the different or unknown.

I have watched as both my children have achieved above and beyond what I thought were their limits. I have watched as my daughter left home and, despite health issues and minimal employment, made a home for herself and her partner. I have watched my son, in front of a large unknown audience, bare his personal struggles with the life he has been dealt and described how he has come through with his head held high and confidence in himself.

I owe my family a debt of gratitude for opening my eyes and mind and convincing me that, no matter who you are, if you are a good person and have sympathy, tolerance and compassion for every other good person out there, you should be able to walk through life without fear.

Life is too short to think that your way of seeing things is the only way; that society says you have to fit into this box or that box; that you can't be this or that because some book says so.

So I am no longer quiet, behind the scenes, staying under the radar, for fear I'll get noticed. I am ready now to correct where correction is needed.

I have learned that there is no excuse for being ignorant or uninformed when there is accessible information at your fingertips. Relying on second- or third-hand hearsay or what the social media want you to believe, is not the way to form an opinion about anything.

To be true to yourself you have to be who you are.

This last statement I have learned from my son, who has the courage, strength, will and tenacity that I hope to emulate through his actions in being who he is, a very proud transgender man.

MY FAMILY'S STORY - FROM NATHAN TO SKYLER by EFRO

It was on my 16th wedding anniversary, (27/12/14) that I decided (with my husband's blessing) to inform my parents about their eldest grandchild.

So I rang them and my dad he, as always does, wished me a happy "university". I said it feels like I have been in university lately as I am learning something new every day.

We had a laugh, then I asked to speak to my mum, because telling her is going to be so much easier than telling my old fashioned father who came to Australia from Cyprus when he was twenty-one years old.

So my mum comes to the phone, and I tell her she'd better sit down, and then I begin to explain about her eldest grandchild, my son Nathan who is fifteen and as everyone in our family has known has been battling with anxiety and depression on and off for the past five years, which has led to a sleep disorder and not being able to attend mainstream school for the past two years. We have been through the anger, smashing of windows, knives pointed at us, suicidal thoughts and thoughts of killing everyone else so it has been a rough few years, but lately it seems he has calmed down a bit thanks to lots of help from his psychologist.

A few months ago, (October 2014) Nathan wanted to see his psychologist without me which I thought was great, showing he is growing up by dealing with his psychologist on his own. Anyway my parents and family knew all this, what my mum didn't know was that a month ago, after confiding in his psychologist Nathan informed me that he is transgender, he feels he is a girl and wants to dress like one., He then told his father a few weeks after telling me. His father and I knew he was bisexual, (he told us this when he was fourteen) but my parents and family didn't know, so I had to drop that one on them too...

So, after much discussion, my mum was amazingly very calm and asked all the questions I asked when I first found out. Thanks to Google and my meeting with his psychologist, I had some answers. I told my mum that I would leave it up to her to tell my dad. Yes very chicken of me, but, hey, I am allowed to be a bit selfish. I am so very grateful every day for the great support I have from my family and close friends.

When my son told me he is transgender, and doesn't like his male body and wants to be a girl, boobs and all and always wanted to be a girl from very young, I racked my brain wondering what I had missed when he was growing up, (I am still saying "he", because I'm talking prior to coming out. He wants to be called Skyler. We went through a few names but this one seems to have stuck.).

So for many nights I kept searching my memory for signs, I even watched some old DVDs of when he was little, because you always hear about transgender kids

expressing themselves when they are very young. I got nothing, natta!!! *nothing* that stood out at all. Yes, he wasn't sporty, liked creating crafty things, loved playing Lego, magic shows, computer games etc. The only thing was when he was five he really wanted pink sheets, I didn't care but at the time he was sharing a room with his eleven year old half-brother who didn't want pink sheets in his room so we settled on yellow sheets, and everyone was happy.

When Nathan was younger he had a beautiful nature, very empathetic, and would get upset at others' misfortune and try and help anyone who needed it. He didn't want to put anyone out and didn't ask for much. In his younger years, up until Year 5, he always seemed a happy kid, had lots of male friends he played with regularly, putting on magic shows and loving being in front of or behind the camera.

After years of psychology, starting in Year 5 when he finally told us he hated school and wanted to jump out the window when he was in class, we now know he kept a lot of his feelings and thoughts to himself, not wanting to put extra pressure on me, His younger brother has special needs and at the time we were dealing with a lot trying to get him diagnosed, arrange help at school and so on). It was hard for him to explain what he was feeling especially with things he didn't really understand about himself. We did everything we could to help Nathan and he seemed to settle into school again.

Looking back now, Skyler told us that in Year 5, when she was going through puberty, she would look at the girls and get upset because she wanted to be them. But she was six feet tall with a deep voice and a size thirteen shoe! At the time she was the only boy going through puberty in Year 5 and didn't understand why she was having these feelings.

By Year 7 Nathan was not doing well again. Anxiety and depressions had set in, he was more mature than his friends and was always debating with his teachers, passive-aggressively, resulting in lots of phone calls from his school lots of anger at home. This all led to a sleep disorder which meant we could not wake him for school no matter what we did. More specialists and he was diagnosed with delayed sleep phase disorder.

He had taken too much time off school and was told in Year 8 he had to leave school and would need to be home-schooled. His (and our) saving grace was his psychologist.

So here we are, after fifteen years of having only boys, life has thrown us yet another curve ball, especially as I am not a girly girl. Make-up, girly clothes etc. isn't something I have worried about for at least fifteen years and now I am trying to give fashion/makeup advice to my fifteen-year-old transgender child. Yes we have laughed about this, like when I tried to do Skyler's make-up or paint her nails. I am so out of practice.

Since Skyler came out as transgender I have noticed a great change in her. She started smiling more, interacting with others more, especially during the first few months. It was great to see her being so much happier than she has been in almost five years, so that her coming out as transgender was in a way a huge blessing. We finally knew what was wrong and how to help her be content and happy.

Even though it has been less than a year, we know this is going to be an emotional and difficult journey for Skyler and for all our family. There have been tough times when there are more down days than good ones, when she doesn't leave her room, has great dysphoria, depression and anxiety, but we all understand where it is coming from and, most importantly, Skyler understands why she feels the way she does and that thankfully there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

I keep remembering what her psychologist told us, that this is **her** journey on **her** time schedule and all we can do is go along for the ride and support her as best we can.

Courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the long run it is easier. We do not have to become heroes overnight. Just a step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it not as dreadful as it appeared, discovering we have the strength to stare it down – Eleanor Roosevelt, You Learn by Living

KAYE AND CHRISTIE MTF TRANSITION

Most of the life stories that you are reading here have been written by parents of transgender children, my mother attended the Parents Group shortly after I came out to her at the age of twenty-seven. Recently she asked me to write some things and while I can't speak from her position and her own struggles I can certainly talk about the journey we have travelled together.

My name is Christie. I want to tell you why allowing your transgender child to transition is absolutely the most empowering thing you can do for him or her. And you're not alone.

I started my transition as an adult but even so my desire to transition certainly caused a degree of pain for my mother. I began pushing forward with transition at the tail end of my financial dependence. I suspect my mother was extremely worried I might be about to throw my life away and become a destitute freak.

In some ways I held off processing what I was feeling for twenty-seven years for those exact same reasons. I have never had the same opportunities as other children, and there had always been an argument in my own head between each choice I might be making and how it would bring me closer or push me further from financial independence.

Mother Nature hasn't been exactly kind to me. Most kids don't have to face the idea of being incapable of finding a job. But when you are presented with a constant stream of 'unobtainable goals' you don't stay innocent for long.

Here is a list of some of the challenges, which my mother had to endure while caring for me and I had to face and as grew up:

I was born with undeveloped lungs that required medical intervention to save my life before I was even out of the hospital. I developed profound sleep apnoea and needed to have my tonsils removed before I was four years old. I developed asthma at an early age and all through primary school I required medication and needed to keep an inhaler around. Towards the end of primary school I developed Crohn's Disease, a condition which has caused me a world of pain, hospital admissions and social isolation.

One of mum's arguments against my transition was that nature intended me to have the sex I was born with and that I was not a mistake, ("what you're doing is unnatural").

My counter argument was **"Natural for me was dead."** I'm only still here because of unnatural medical interventions. I'm only here because my doctors had parents who supported and encouraged their children and allowed them to be thinkers and dreamers.

Those who know my mother will realise she has a very caring, no bullshit, nature. She is a doer and a thinker, There are never any mind games.

What people can't see is the life long journey of struggles, losses and victories which she has endured as she fought to allow her children, students and friends to be the thinkers and dreamers they could be.

Here I am today, having just completed a degree and ever so close to financial independence presenting my mum with another whammy. **I'm actually female and I'm now going to transition, as it's the most important thing in the world to me.**

I was aware what I was forcing her to process and the enormity of this revelation of my transgender nature. The scariest thing about transition for me wasn't coming to terms with my feelings (I had in some ways done that at a much earlier age), it was what others might think if I pursued this path. At twenty-seven my gender identity, my crippling social anxieties and my continued desire to "fit in" had come together at a crisis point.

I always wanted to be born a female. From an early age I came to terms with being male but I never stopped longing for femininity. I rejected the idea that I would ever be female, I rejected the idea of presenting female as a male. It was in some ways strange that the notion of being female was so comforting and alluring. Throughout my life I had found ways to entertain these notions privately but it wasn't ever something I wanted to share. I was ashamed of sharing the things that brought me the most comfort in life.

It made me a very unreliable person. It made me unable to bond with others. I liked a lot of things that would have raised eyebrows. It might not be surprising that PC gaming became my distraction, my way to making friends and not feeling alone in this world. My enjoyment of gaming was something I could share with friends. It was

something I wasn't ashamed of. It was something that was cool with guys my own age. As my male friends grew into their adult identities I was watching from behind once again and questioning where I was meant to fit in. Sometimes I wondered why I had such a vivid feeling of being left behind in adolescence while everyone else I knew was progressing into adulthood.

At the end of my third year of University I was desperate to overcome my inability to relate to others. This was an internal struggle, not something I could blame on others. I reasoned that I needed to be comfortable with myself and who I was. I knew I would **never** really get past this unless I was presenting and living as a female.

If I had been born female and never had to be ashamed of the songs I liked, the softer things that I was drawn to, I would have had so much more to share with the world. I would have been accepted without question. I would have been proud and without fear of what others might think. At twenty-seven I embraced the way I felt.

I accepted that I loved the idea of being female more than anything else in the in the world.

I made it my mission to find my place in the world. This might be unnatural but it has also been empowering. I finally have an identity I'm not cripplingly ashamed of. I have finally been able to share who I am and feel closer to others in a way I have never felt before. I like to think I'm lucky but luck only goes so far. I have been surrounded by love, acceptance and compassion all my life. I know this doesn't exist everywhere and that there are many people who are bigoted, cruel and fearful.

Love, acceptance and compassion are more powerful than fear, you just have to choose to express them and if you do, you will find people like me.

It took twenty-nine years for me to be brave enough to stand up, I came out on the 12th of February 2015 to workmates who couldn't be more accepting about my gender identity. For them 'this guy is now going to come to work as a girl' but for me the most exciting thing is that I now know that I work with compassionate people who have chosen acceptance over fear.



TIPS FOR PARENTS

You are not alone, there are thousands of us.

- Talk to your transgender child and ask him or her how she or he feels and what he or she needs or wants.
- Learn as much as you can - knowledge leads to better understanding. Read, read, read! There is a lot of information online, some great books available,, and even online support groups you can join that can help educate and support you with what you have to do for your child.
- Ask questions and seek more opinions about your child - medically, legally and socially. Specialists in gender diversity, especially for children under eighteen, are hard to find but often the best place to start. Always do your own research and check things twice.
- Discuss with schools, university or the workplace what you *need* and *expect* them to do to assist your child. You and your child have rights.
- Remember to look after yourself. You may have some sleepless nights and feel weighed down by fear. If so, seek out the help you need to prepare yourself.
- However tempting it is, do not use your child to work out your feelings. Instead meet parents online or in person with similar experiences as it can be a great place to share information and support. Attend support groups/counselling if needed. It helps to talk to others.
- Give your child unconditional love and support. They need you. The statistic of self-harm and suicide are dramatically reduced for those who are fully supported.
- For those with older children, keep the lines of communication open. Phone, text, email and even Facebook message them - even when they are not talking to you. Let them know that you love them and support them and will always be there for them, even if you think they already know that you do. Regular reassurance is important.
- Understand that your child's situation may not be textbook. Gender is an individual and unique experience which may not fit with your or society's expectations. They may or may not require medical assistance, they may or

may not present a certain way. There is no right way to be transgender or gender diverse, the same way there is no wrong way to be yourself.

DISCLOSURE

How To Create a Safe Space

Parents need to decide who is appropriate to disclose to and who is not, when it's appropriate, when it's not, and how to respond to negative reactions.

To gain more confidence:

- Spend time with other families with gender-variant or transgender children as it can be reassuring for all concerned.
- Practise responses to situations and questions you may receive

If you are feeling nervous about speaking about your child's gender, it can seem less overwhelming to divide the people you need to talk to into categories such as these:

- Family
- Friends – yours and your child's
- Neighbours
- Co-workers
- Spiritual communities
- School/camp/classes
- Strangers or casual acquaintances

You may find yourself educating someone every time you tell someone about your child's gender variance. There is a time and place for this type of education. If someone approaches you in a public place you can deflect the enquiry by saying:

"I would be happy to talk to you about this, but this isn't the best time. If you want to get a coffee later, we can spend some time on it."

Most people can be divided into two categories: those who are close to you, and those who are not. People who are close to you can be included in the disclosure from the start, usually through one-on-one conversations.

For people you are not particularly close to, many have sent out a letter. A letter can be sent out as a mass communication without having to hear a person's initial response as it can be emotionally draining.

If your family rejects or ridicules your child:

- This should not be tolerated; allowing this form of rejection to continue gives your child a very strong and damaging message that they are not worth protecting.
- Be very direct in your response e.g. “I love my child unconditionally. I will not tolerate it if you continue to be critical of her and the parenting choices we are making. If you are unable to support her and our parenting, we will not be having contact until that changes.”
- Please remember that even if your immediate family stops seeing other family members for a while, this does not have to be permanent. People change and grow.

Some children decide to disclose selectively and may tell some but not others.

Many families with gender-variant children treat strangers differently from anyone else in regard to disclose or not to disclose. Let your child take the lead with unknown people you are unlikely to encounter again.

If someone visibly reacts in a negative way, stop them and say something along the lines of “I wasn’t actually asking for your opinion” or “Please don’t speak so negatively in front of my child”.

If your child experiences discrimination in sports group or class, then you should go to the person in charge and describe the discrimination your child is experiencing. Discuss with the manager solutions that can ensure your child’s continued participation and safety. Do not accept any solution that discriminates against you or your child.

If you’ve addressed the person in charge and the discrimination is still occurring, then you may need to escalate the complaint up the chain of command. Keep a record of every incident of discrimination and your attempts to address it. This will be useful if you decide to pursue legal action.

It is important to help your child develop coping mechanisms and teach him or her resilience in the face of adversity, give them a sense of safety and healthy self-esteem. Options include therapy, martial arts training, and role-playing response to negative reactions.



Gender Confusion & Discomfort

Research shows that one of the top reasons transgender and non-binary people attempt suicide- as identified by individuals who were unsuccessful in their suicide attempts is related to gender confusion and discomfort. In the past, it was thought that the primary cause of increased psychological distress was the difference between a person's gender identity and their sex assigned at birth suggesting that the distress was innate and unavoidable. However current research shows that feelings of distress around being transgender/non-binary or the possibility of being so are the most damaging and dangerous internalized forms of minority stress .

Sourced referenced from The Transgender Teen by Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney

TIPS FOR TELLING PEOPLE

It is important to check in constantly with your child to know what they are comfortable with when disclosing any information with friends, family, and the outside world. You need to move at the child's pace.

When disclosing to friends and family, most people will follow your lead. Be clear and confident in what you say.

Here are some examples

- "I just wanted to let you know that Sam is transgender and will now be known as Samantha. Also we would like you to use 'she' and 'her' when speaking to or about Samantha."
- "Samantha and our whole family are going through some challenges right now and would appreciate your kindness and support."
- "We are not sure of all the details of the situation just yet, but our hearts are with our child and our heads will catch up. We will fill you in when we know more, until then we ask you to be patient and respectful."
- "We love our child and will support her (or him) no matter how this pans out. We hope you can love and support us through this."

A letter or an email informing friends and family can give them time to digest it before they respond.

My nephew said to me once:

"Even people you love may say some stupid things", so don't take people's first response to heart. Usually as they know more they do better with the information and understanding. Some may not be understanding or supportive and it is difficult to prepare for that. You have to put your child first and deal with the rest later.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR CHILD

DON'T PANIC!

Reassure your child

- Communicate that you love and support your child no matter what. Encourage your child to be the person he or she is.

Help your child connect to age-appropriate trans-positive places and people

- If your child is seeking a connection with other transgender or gender diverse people, contact appropriate services for social and support groups.

Adapt to pronoun and name changes

- Practise and apologise when you make a mistake. It all gets easier with time and shows respect for your child..

Be an advocate

- Be a proud parent. Do not approach your child's diversity with a sense of shame.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

Take a deep breath.

- Remember you are not alone.
- Get support.
- Allow yourself to feel sad but do not let it overwhelm you so you can't help your child.
- If your feelings are overwhelming you, seek professional help.
- Be kind to yourself and recognise that you **will** make mistakes.
- Do not beat yourself up.
- You may need to unlearn and unpack a number of preconceived ideas and beliefs – it helps to talk to people.

HOW TO BE A TRANS ALLY

- Use the term 'cisgender' when referring to non-transgender individuals, rather than words like 'normal' - which imply that transgender individuals are abnormal, weird, ill or broken.
- Don't use transphobic slurs such as 'tranny', 'shemale', 'it', or 'heshe'. These words are often intended to insult and harm trans individuals.
- Ask a person what their name is and use it. Don't ask someone what their 'real' name is. Their expressed name is their real name.
- Always use the preferred pronouns for an individual. If you are unsure which pronouns to use, politely and privately ask the individual what their pronouns are.
- Don't claim someone's gender is false, non-existent, immoral or the result of any illness or trauma. Everyone's experiences are different, and transgender people do not have to prove themselves.
- Don't ask questions regarding someone's anatomy, or question if they have transitioned or will transition in the future.
- Don't ask to see pictures of a person before they transitioned.
- Use a transgender person's desired name and pronouns when talking about them prior to transition unless told otherwise by the individual. This can avoid outing them by accident and also shows you see them as they are.
- Never out a transgender individual to others. Likewise, don't ask others if 'so-and-so is transgender' or whether a person used to be a different gender.
- Don't assume an individual's sexual orientation is due to her or his transgender identity.
- Don't ask someone's sexuality.
- Never underestimate how powerful your support is for a transgender person and for the world.

IS THIS CHILD ABUSE?

Transgender youth are at significantly higher risk of experiencing self-harm, suicidal ideation, discrimination, social exclusion, bullying, physical assault and even homicide. Medical intervention during puberty provides better physical and mental health outcomes for transgender children and their families. Hormone interventions to block puberty are safe and reversible while allowing time for the child to explore if more permanent treatments such as hormone replacement therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery is appropriate for them.

Early intervention and support for families and individuals allows for a better overall outcome. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary to navigate transition and treatment of the child. The children may need medical and health professionals with experience in transgender clients such as GPs, social workers, endocrinologists, psychiatrist, counsellors and/or psychologists. A strong social support system such as family and friends has been shown to be the biggest protective factor in supporting resilience in transgender youth. If you are struggling with it, seek out support from other parents or professionals.

References:

de Vries, A., et.al.. (2014). Young adult psychological outcome after puberty suppression and gender reassignment. *Pediatrics*, 134(4), pp.696-704.

Endocrine Society, (2013). Medical intervention in transgender adolescents appears to be safe and effective. [online] Available at: http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2013-06/tes-mii061513.php [Accessed 26 Feb. 2016].

Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people. (2015). *American Psychologist*, 70(9), pp.832-864.

RESOURCES



Since 1984, the Gender Centre has been developing and providing frontline client centred services to the transgender, gender questioning and gender diverse community of NSW. Our primary objective of the organisation is to advocate, support, educate, house and prevent discrimination based on gender identity.

The centre runs a number of support groups catering to a range of ages and a number of parents of transgender youth groups in the Sydney metro area and Wollongong. The aim of this group is to offer support to parents as they address the range of issues that arise for them in their role as a care giver.

The centre continues to strive for a world that is inclusive and accepting of an empowered transgender and gender divers person, for more information regarding our parents support groups contact the centre on 9569-2366 or jump on our website www.gendercentre.org.au



This website has been created by Australian parents who have struggled to find information about services and support for issues around their children's gender identity. We hope that by making this information easily available that in the future parents and carers will find it an easier journey to find help and support for their kids.

www.genderhelpforparents.com.au



Headspace Wollongong is currently hosting a support group for parents of transgender and gender diverse or questioning children (of all ages).

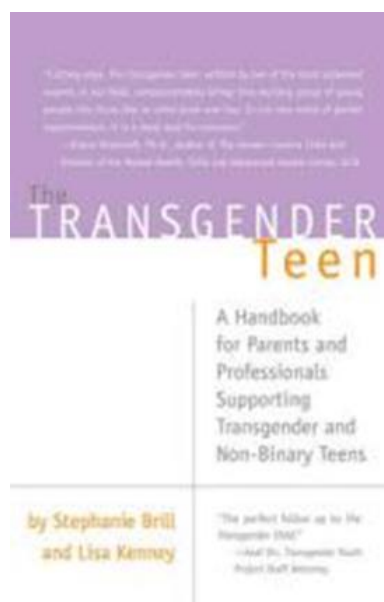
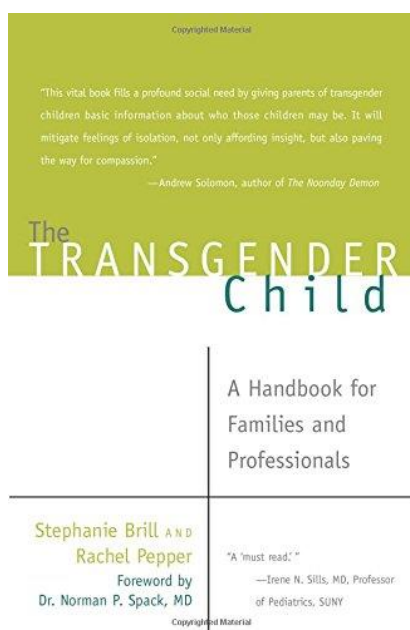
Many parents and carers can feel isolated and alone on their journey of understanding and supporting their child's gender identity.

If you would like to meet other parents and carers share experiences together, hear from guest speakers, and learn more about a range of health, legal and social topics relevant to transgender and gender diverse young people and their families, contact us to find out more.

www.gendercentre.org.au

headspace@gph.org.au

4220 7660

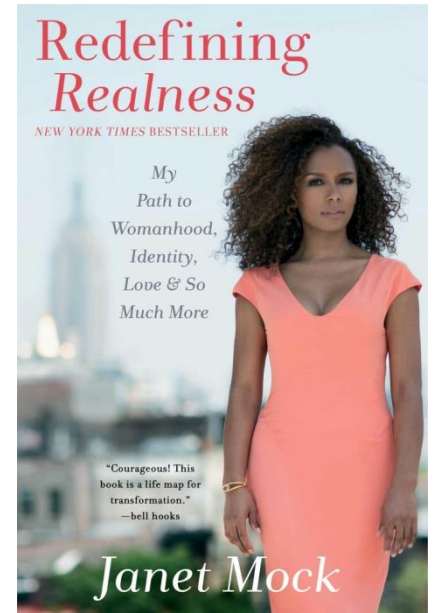


The Transgender Child: & Transgender Teen A Handbook for Families and Professionals: By Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper available from :

www.bookdepository.com www.amazon.com

Janet Mock is the New York Times bestselling author of Redefining Realness. She is a widely sought-after speaker and prominent advocate for trans women's rights. Currently she hosts the weekly culture show "So POPular!" on MSNBC's Shift network and serves as Contributing Editor for Marie Claire.

www.janetmock.com



Videos:

In my Shoes:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDuVbsg0eMo



I am Jazz Documentary

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk_YIBM5JAE

A Day in the life of a trans man



www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Bz5iriQQwQ

Being me ABC four corners

www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2014/11/17/4127631.htm

Shared stories and information from parents and caregivers of the Gender Centre's parents support groups Page | 31