

Supportive Strategies for Serving Transgender, Transsexual Youth and Young People who do not Conform to Gender Stereotypes

Ask what name and gender they want to be known by. It may seem awkward but this indicates you are willing to support them in the gender they know they are. It becomes a “teachable moment” for non-trans young people.

Explain that gender diversity is not a disease or an illness but a natural variation on the diversity of life. Everyone’s gender is a very personal part of their core self, and may not always “match” their physical sex. Our gender is in place very early in life and we cannot force it to change. There is no “cure” for being transgender. The best outcomes come from supporting the child and youth to be who they are, and from creating spaces in their world that accept and value them for their differences.

If it is a young child displaying gender non-conforming behaviour, allow them to continue to do so. There is nothing that a boy must do as a boy or that a girl must do as a girl. Talk to them about safety in age-appropriate language. Sometimes compromise may be necessary, such as agreeing to cross-dress at home but not in public. For other children, this will feel too confining.

Ask if they are depressed or have had any thoughts of suicide. Many trans youth have attempted suicide and too many complete it. Also ask trans youth about substance use, street involvement, safer sex, sex work or trading sex for survival needs. Rejection and alienation drives many trans youth to adopt coping mechanisms or survival strategies that can put them at high risk.

Ask how they feel about themselves. Many young people who are “different” feel shame and despair. We can help them understand that, by being “different”, they have many unique strengths and gifts. We can help them build pride in who they are

Watch for the child who was once gender non-conforming, but then all the gender issues seem to “disappear.” Many children desperately try to fit in and will bury core parts of themselves to try to meet other people’s expectations. Adults often assume the gender differences were merely a “phase” that has passed. Unfortunately, denying parts of who they are will damage a child’s self-esteem and cause problems later.

Remember that gender identity is different from sexual orientation. Many people may assume a young person is gay or lesbian because they do not fit gender stereotypes, which actually reflects how they express gender. Gay and lesbian people may not understand gender issues either, so don’t assume they are experts.

In fact, many young people who do not fit gender stereotypes later identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual; some later identify as trans; some later become more gender

conforming and do not identify as LGBTQ. What is important is to recognize the young person must go through their own process of self-exploration and allow their true self to emerge. They will need lots of information, access to other LGBTQ people and our full support. It is not our role to try to predict or change anyone else's identity.

Educate yourself on the issues and current services and legislation. You are not expected to know everything. Be willing to be honest about your ignorance and make a commitment to learn the answers to the questions.

Don't try to diagnose. Listen to what the child is saying and use this as a springboard for discussion. You don't have to think about medical intervention until just before puberty when it may be useful to consider puberty suppressant hormones for adolescents distressed about the **direction** of changes that puberty brings. Delaying puberty will give the young person time to sort out who they are. The other time to consider medical intervention, such as cross-sex hormones, is with a youth who is clearly wanting to transition (live primarily as their felt gender rather than as their physical sex) in order to better reflect their gender.

Find out if they have told anyone else and if so, what was their response.

Ask the young person how their family, teachers and peers react to them. Find out if they are being harassed, isolated, bullied, discriminated against or experiencing violence. Help them understand that the "problem" is not with who they are, but with other people failing to understand and appreciate people who are "different." Build their resilience by helping them learn strategies to deal with negative reactions by others. Make sure the spaces they are in are safe. Educate and advocate in those spaces for acceptance and safety.

Work with parents and families to learn to accept and appreciate their child's differences. Families may believe they are to blame for their child's differences, or that the child is just being "willful" or rebellious and that the child could choose to be "normal". Families may view their child's differences as shameful and negative. They may think they can force the child to change, perhaps believing this is for the child's own good. What families need to understand is that their child is just who they are and can't change who they are. Families need to know that to pressure the child to try to change who they are is not only damaging to their self-esteem, but also conveys rejection and is likely to lead to high risks and poor outcomes for the young person. Families can learn that acceptance and support is what is likely to produce the best outcomes for their child. Help them tap into their underlying love for their child.¹

Coach parents on how to advocate for their child. You may also be called on to advocate for the child to be able to express the gender they are, or to deal with discrimination, harassment or bullying.

¹ Ryan, C. (2006). Taken from presentation at the "Finding Better Ways" Conference of the Child Welfare League of America. Nashville, TN.

Allow the young person to set the pace of disclosure and “coming out” as much as possible. This is tough but necessary as they need to feel empowered by a process that is often very disempowering. You may need to accompany the child to appointments to help with disclosure and to help them deal with any negative reactions. Remember to maintain full confidentiality with anyone outside CAS of Toronto, including the young person’s family, school and peers. Within the agency, the service team will need to be informed, but the young person should be involved in how and when that information is shared...take some time to plan that process carefully with the youth.

Talk about the potential consequences to the decisions they will be making in a non-judgmental way. There are both positive and negative consequences to each decision and having time to consider each one and its impact is important.

The following questions² can be helpful to ask an older child or youth.

- How long have you been thinking about this?
- What started you thinking about it?
- How do you see your gender?
- Where did you learn about trans people? What did you learn?
- How do you feel about yourself?
- How do you feel about your body?
- Are there people you can talk to about these feelings?
- Does anyone harass you about your gender?
- What do you think I need to get more information about?
- Are you thinking of changing your name and the pronouns people use to refer to you?
- What’s helping you in this process? What’s not helping you?
- How can I help?

Give the youth or child appropriate referrals to break the isolation they will feel. It is critical that they meet other peers and role models like them to help them realize they are not the only one, they are “normal”, and so they can envision a positive future for themselves. Give them lots of education and positive information on sexual orientation and gender identity, and help them sort through their feelings.

Also link up parents to support groups to help them understand that what they are going through is normal, and to help them learn what kinds of things they can do for their child – such as acceptance and positive support. They may need to hear about how their potentially negative or rejecting reactions can dramatically increase the risks and poor outcomes for their child, even if they have the best of intentions.

Call Lorraine Gale at 416-924-4640 ext. 2987, or Krin Zook at ext. 2986 for further options, referrals, resources or for consultations.

² Taken from “Families In Transition: A Resource Guide for Parents of Trans Youth” by Central Toronto Youth Services, 2008. See www.ctys.org under Pride and Prejudice for a copy of the resource.