

Trans Allyship: Parents

Parents! We see you, we hear you and we would like to give you some guidance on how to be a better ally to your trans child.

Your child has just come out to you as transgender. They could still be really young, a teen or is already a full grown adult, there is no “ideal period” for when a transgender person decides to come out after all. Regardless, it happened. This is likely to have caused you some feelings of distress whether it is confusion at what all of this means, disappointment that your child has somehow kept this from you or even outright anger. This is completely understandable. You may have grown up under completely different societal expectations and conditions, and with limited information at the time (at least compared to now), there is bound to be misinformation that takes the form of what is the “norm”.

Take a deep breath. We are here to help. The aim of this guide is to help parents of transgender children (young or old) with information on what exactly is happening, how to support their child during this time as well as how to support themselves.

First, let's get this out of the way.

You are not to blame for your child's decision to transition.

You did not do anything wrong while your child was in the womb or during your child's childhood. Despite how “weird” all of this may seem, it is actually completely natural. Transgender people exist and have been existing for millennia. Yes, even within the context of Asia Pacific. This is not a “western thing”.

It is, to put it plainly, extremely human.

Then why is my child transgender?

Some studies have shown that there are [genetic causes](#) to it, others have found out that [transgender people's brains are similar to the gender identity they identify with](#) even before any hormone related therapy, so it could be related to the brain. The science on it is still inconclusive on specific factors but it is still being actively researched at the time of writing.

Is being transgender “reversible”?

While the science behind why a person is transgender is up in the air, the science behind trying to “reverse” transgender people is not. Sometimes called conversion therapy, overwhelming evidence has shown that it is extremely harmful when a transgender person is put through this process, [often times leading to death](#).

This seems grim but there should instead be a shift of thinking. There is nothing wrong with your child being transgender, just like there is nothing wrong with your child having freckles or being left handed. And with the right support system in place, transgender children and adults often live complete and fulfilling lives.

How do I help them live complete & fulfilling lives?

You can do this by creating a supportive environment and the first step of a supportive environment is to understand exactly what it means to be transgender. And to that, you need to understand the difference between sex and gender.

Sex and gender are commonly used interchangeably when in reality, they are not the same things.

Sex vs Gender

Sex (like male or female) is a label assigned at birth by a doctor. It is based on different biological and physiological characteristics of a person, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc. To simplify the process however, doctors usually just focus on the outward reproductive organs (like a penis or vagina), assume the other biological characteristics fall into place and assign a label after.

Gender (like man or woman) on the other hand is a little more complex. Society and people after all have certain expectations about how men and women should behave, think or act. Gender identity is how you feel inside about your gender and how you choose to express that gender to society.

People whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth are what is known as “cisgender” (eg: an assigned male at birth person self identifies and presents themselves as a man = cisgender man)

People whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth are what is known as “transgender” (eg: an assigned male at birth person self identifies and presents themselves as a woman = transgender woman).

This is of course only a simplification, your child might be transgender but may feel that they don't fit in with man or woman and might in fact be gender fluid, gender queer and/or non binary. There is also the matter of sexual and romantic attraction which is not tied to gender or sex at all and the difference between gender identity and gender expression (ie: your child may identify with being a woman but may not express themselves in a feminine manner). This all falls under what is called SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity & Expression) and we talk about it in depth here.

Gender Dysphoria

So how does a transgender person find out that their gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth? Honestly, through a lot of unpleasantness and discomfort. Have you ever gone shopping for clothes and when trying on something new felt like the clothes just didn't fit, didn't look good on you or just felt *wrong*?

Well, some transgender people feel this *all the time* (and the unpleasantness can be much more intense) since the “clothes” that felt *wrong* in this case is something as all-encompassing as their entire gender identity. It is a simplified example but this is known as gender dysphoria.

When we initially talked about a supportive environment for your child, the main objective of that environment is to reduce the amount of gender dysphoria that your child is experiencing.

Now that we understand the objective, how do we go about creating this environment?

A Supportive Environment

The Coming Out

Coming out is never easy. It is an anxious, emotionally draining affair. We are taught as people in the LGBT+ community that in order to come out *safely*, we need to have our own safety nets in place and that can usually include financial stability and a backup place to stay. Why? Because we are taught that there is a high chance that by coming out, we might get disowned. This happens way too often.

You reading this article right now is proof that you do not want to be like these parents and that is a very good start.

The next step is to get you and your child on the same page and you do this with a lot of honest communication and genuine apologies.

In order for you to be here reading this article, your child may have already come out to you and unless you are already aware of SOGIE, chances are that you put your emotions on your sleeve as humans do and just reacted. This could have been a positive reaction or it could have been a negative reaction. Regardless, this is where genuine apologies come into play – apologies for shouting, apologies for not understanding it completely, apologies because you *might* have said something wrong. You need to get your child to believe that you want to understand what they are going through and you want to support them through it.

Two Way Street

When all the smoke clears, it is also important to let them know that it is a two way street. Just as you need to have honest communication and apologies, *they do too*.

They need to understand that this is a process that the both of you are going through together, it is not something that you can just learn overnight, but that you are here for it. That you understand that they are going through a lot but then being angry at you for not understanding it quicker will not help the situation.

Patience on both sides is incredibly important.

Honest Communication

Honest communication here purely means asking questions and having no assumptions. Ask them what they need, ask them if there is anything you should read up on (sometimes together), ask them how you can help, ask them how they *feel*. Things that cisgender people usually take for granted or don't think about at all can sometimes cause a transgender person extreme distress, for example using the public bathroom or looking at the mirror.

These are some early questions to ask:

- do they have a preferred name (you can even be a part of renaming your child!)
- do they have a preferred pronoun (such as he, she or they).

- do they want to change the way they dress or express their gender identity
- what transitioning means to them.

Just remember that all of this might change over time as your child understands themselves better – the journey to self discovery never stops after all.

If there is something they said that you don't completely understand, ask them. Or if they seem uneasy at a situation, ask them how they are doing and how you can make it better, sometimes that means avoiding the situation entirely (like a family outing) till they feel ready.

Likewise, they should not assume that you understand everything they are talking about, and should take the effort to ask you as well. Sometimes it will take them multiple explanations for you to completely understand and that is okay. Two way street after all.

Support Ecosystem

No support ecosystem is held up by one party, in this case just the parents. Your child will need support not just from you, but from other sections of their lives too – friends, the transgender community(or the LGBT community as a whole), education institutes, medical facilities etc. In some countries, it might be difficult to find schools or a medical facility that is accepting so it is worth looking at this with your child.

If your child has not seen a therapist and would like to do so, please look for one that is transgender friendly because in some countries, therapists are the ones performing conversion therapy. This also happens with spiritual or religious teachers.

The support ecosystem must also include you as the parent, seeking support of your own. It can be a lonely experience for some parents as they are reluctant or even embarrassed to share this with their friends or relatives. This process might be more difficult for you to deal with if your only outlet is your child. So please seek support whether through friends, family or through a therapist of your own.

Be aware though that consent is also a part of honest communication. Before you disclose the gender identity of your child to anyone else, it is important to ask them for permission.

Have Fun!

It doesn't have to be all doom and gloom, going through this with your child is an incredibly rich and powerful bonding experience so also remember to have fun! If they are open to it, you might want to discuss and perhaps even create a new name with your child. You can also be a part of how their child chooses to now express themselves, and you can encourage conversation through media like lgbt friendly shows, music and performances.

Just understand that sometimes your child will choose to want to experience this on their own – being supportive is also knowing when to take a step back and allowing them to flourish on their own.

Further Reading

We highly recommend reading about the trans experience in its entirety which we have resources for all over the website. Honest communication takes understanding the trans experience and because it can be tiring for your child to bear the burden of explaining everything all the time, reading about it yourself can help ease it.

SOGIESC: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics
Knowing your child's identity completely such as where they fall on the gender spectrum, who they are romantically or sexually attracted to(if at all) and how they want to express themselves

Transitioning is very individual and will not be the same for every trans person, you can however have a better understanding of the transition process with these articles.

Social Transitioning

Medical Transitioning

HRT & Surgery

Legally Transitioning

If your child was not the one to share this article with you, showing them this website is a good way of showing your initiative, but it might also provide them with information that they did not have previously.

Coming out as a transgender person is never easy, and though the support ecosystem consists of other parties, the parents usually make up a huge portion of it. Remember to have honest communication, to simply apologise if you have made a mistake(like using the wrong pronouns) and to be patient.

And thank you. Thank you for taking the time to read this article in its entirety. Parents who are genuinely interested in the experiences of their children are especially rare in Asia. So know that you are taking the right steps in the right direction.

1. National Library of Medicine. *Androgen Receptor Repeat Length Polymorphism Associated with Male-to-Female Transsexualism*, Lauren Hare, Pascal Bernard et al, Oct 2008.

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