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Helping Parents Face Their Fears

Irwin Krieger, LCSW

Parents base most of their child-rearing decisions on a mixture of personal experience, cultural norms, and common sense. But for those raising gender nonconforming children and transgender adolescents, these traditional sources do not provide much guidance. Most parents feel unprepared to help their child or teenager explore questions of gender identity.

Parents of prepubertal children who are strongly gender nonconforming or who verbally express a transgender identity have a wide range of responses (Coolhart, Baker, Farmer, Malaney, & Shipman, 2013; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, & Diamond, 2011). Many fear their child is confused and will be subject to harassment. Some worry that if they do not immediately go along with their child's wishes, they will risk harming their child. Similarly, parents of transgender adolescents may think their teen is misguided and fear a life fraught with danger. Others respond to their disclosure with a willingness to be helpful and become strong advocates. In rare cases, there are those who push more strongly for transition than their child does. Some of these parents are uncomfortable with their child's remaining in what they perceive to be a persistent state of uncertainty or having an androgynous presentation. Others may be worried about the kind of negative outcomes they have heard LGBT kids with rejecting families experience.

When parents grapple with a child's expression of transgender identity, a conflict may arise between the child's push for authentic self-expression and the parents' fears for their safety. Ideally, we want to help parents support their child's need for authenticity while also attending to their own valid parental concerns. As Diane Ehrensaft (2011) says, they "have to figure out how to balance the blossoming of their children's true gender self with the natural parental urge . . . to keep those children as safe as possible" (p. 102).

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