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More Than the Sum of Your Parts: A Theoretical Perspective

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Gender Affirmation and the Journey of the Self

"You don't understand. I'm not going to deal with this!" So begins my phone call with the parent of an adolescent who had come to see me to discuss gender transition. "You have no idea what it has meant to raise this child," the parent continues. "I am a single parent. My child has had a lot of needs and a lot of services. There have been learning issues, social issues, and behavioral issues. We have seen doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, behavioral specialists, learning coaches. We have tried individual therapy, group therapy, inpatient therapy, outpatient therapy, and group homes. Last week there was something about transgender on TV and now you're calling me to tell me there's a whole 'nother problem that I have never heard about at all, and I am telling you I am not going to deal with this! I am not!"

As I listened to this overwhelmed, exhausted, but loving parent, I found myself longing for access to the support that includes her wants and desires as well as the support that gender affirmation needs and deserves. There was a time in legitimizing and defending the importance of gender affirmative care when a popular colloquialism was "Even if this person was on an island by themselves, they would need this care." But we are, none of us, on that island. We are parents and children and loved ones and friends—all relational beings—depending on each other for survival. Finding intervention strategies and treatment plans that meet the needs of gender variant children and their parents is not a simple task since everyone, including clinicians, may have different, potentially competing, agendas. Identifying strategies that support the well-being of children, parents, and their families requires attention to the identities and self structures of the whole system (Israel & Tarver, 1997; Lev, 2004).

We are at a place in our history in which gender identity is more legitimized and medical intervention is more available than ever (Bryant, 2006; Coolhart,

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