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The Experience of Parent Facilitators in a PFLAG Support Group for Parents of Transgender Youth and Young Adults

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When a youth comes out as transgender, parent support is imperative (Erich, Tittsworth, Dykes, & Cabuses, 2008; Grossman, D'Augelli, Howell, & Hubbard, 2005; Lev, 2004; Lev & Alie, 2012; Malpas, 2011). At the Family Acceptance Project, Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2010) found a direct correlation between mental health outcomes in LGBT youth and family acceptance or rejection. The more supportive the family, the more positive the outcome; the more rejecting the family, the more negative the outcome. Parents of transgender youth often struggle with the difficult balance between supporting their child while simultaneously managing their own complicated feelings about their child's identity.

This chapter explores the evolution of the Greater Boston PFLAG support group for parents of transgender children, drawing from the parents' experience as both group members and facilitators. The material is partially based on a series of individual interviews I conducted in person or on the phone with 10 participants: one married couple and eight mothers, all of whom are white, of European descent, cisgender, heterosexual, and middle to upper middle class. Eight have children who identify on the trans-masculine spectrum and two have children who identify on the trans-feminine spectrum. Eight are parent facilitators and two are original members of the group. The age range of the parents is 48 to 67; the age range of their children is 15 to 32.

These interviews consistently reflect what the research reveals: even supportive parents evidence an ever-changing kaleidoscope of feelings when facing their child's transition. They can be depressed, angry, fearful, disappointed, shameful, guilty, skeptical, and confused—to name just a few emotions—not only immediately after disclosure (Krieger, 2011), but even years later. Clearly, these families are undertaking their own transition as they work to better understand their children (Lev, 2004; Pepper, 2012).

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