

National Association of Social Workers



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Early Childhood Development – Your Options – How Do I Know If My Child Is Transgender?

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What Is Transgender?

Everyone has a gender identity. Gender identity is our internal sense of being male or female. For most people, our basic awareness that we are male or female matches our physical body. When we're born, people decide if we're male or female based on our genitals. But for children and adults who are transgender, their basic sense of being male or female – their gender identity – does not match their body. So a transgender person may have a male body, but feel inside that they are female. Or a transgender person may have a female body, but feel inside that they are truly male.

Can a Child Be Transgender?

Children and adolescents can be transgender, just like adults. In fact, a small percentage of all children are transgender. Children understand gender differences from a very early age. And transgender children strongly identify with the other gender, often from age two or three. Because we don't talk about transgender people with children, adolescents or even adults, children who are transgender lack basic information about who they are, and struggle with feeling like they were born in the wrong body. And adults typically react as if there were something wrong with these children, as well.

In truth, there is nothing wrong with these children. But since very few people understand that it is natural for a small percentage of the population to be transgender, people don't know that you can have male genitals and still be female or have female genitals and be male.

Transgender children who express their "real" gender identity can become extremely unhappy and depressed when adults try to prevent them being their true selves. Being

transgender is not the cause of their distress. Instead, not being understood and feeling like there is something wrong with them causes them to suffer. And pressure to change their core sense of who they are causes emotional suffering, as well.

What Makes a Child Transgender?

Many parents are concerned that something they did made their child become transgender. This is not true. Nothing that a parent or anyone else does can change a child's gender identity. Being transgender is not caused by divorce, neglect, wishing you had given birth to the other sex, using fertility drugs to conceive, encouraging your child to play sports too often or not enough, or other parental thoughts, behaviors or experiences. We don't know exactly why some people are transgender. But science is showing that transgender children are most likely born that way, right from the start. Even before children can verbalize their sense of gender, they start to tell us who they are through their play and choices for clothing, hair styles, and toys. Once they are old enough to talk, transgender children strongly insist that they are "really" a boy, or "really" a girl.

Why Can't My Child Be "Normal"?

Transgender children and adults have always existed throughout history in a wide range of cultures. In our society, until recently, few parents spoke openly about having children with gender identity "problems."

In the past, parents with transgender children tried to force their children to conform with their expectations of what is "appropriate" behavior for males and females. From very early ages, these parents would try to make their children behave according to their child's biological gender. Although these parents were trying to help their children fit in with their peers and with social norms, their transgender children were severely traumatized by being forced to deny and change their true nature.

Over time, medical and mental health providers have learned how best to support transgender children and their families. Parenting approaches have changed, and more parents and doctors understand how to support children with special needs. We now understand that all children need the love and support of their families and the adults in their lives to thrive.

How Should I Respond?

Research shows how parents and caregivers should respond to having a transgender child. The most important thing parents can do to promote their child's well-being and to reduce their risk is to love and accept them. This means allowing them to live in ways that make them happy — just as you would with any child. For example, let your transgender child play with the toys they enjoy. Let your transgender child dress and wear their hair in the way that is most comfortable for them.

Supporting your child's transgender behavior is not easy. But research shows that by loving and accepting your children as they are, you can help them lead happier, healthier lives – and literally save their lives.

In families where parents highly pressured their children to conform to gender expectations, young people were five times more likely to report symptoms of depression, nearly four times as likely to attempt suicide and to use illegal drugs, and twice as likely to be at high risk for HIV infection, compared with those who parents did not pressure them to conform.

How Can I Know if it's a Phase?

Most people have a sense of their gender identity between ages two and four. If your child expresses a transgender identity since early childhood, it is unlikely they will change their mind as they age. Their sense of themselves will only deepen. For example, a 12-year old child who has consistently stated that he is a girl since age three will most likely remain transgender throughout life.

Where Do I Get Help, Support, and More Information?

Parents and family members of transgender children need information and support to raise a child in a way that others don't always understand. However, you are not alone. There are thousands of families doing the same thing and facing the same challenges as your family. Here are some resources to help you get started.

Resources for Families and Providers

Gender Spectrum: Education, resources and support to create a more gender sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens. <http://www.genderspectrum.org/>

Family Acceptance Project: Research on LGBT adolescents and young adults and their families. Developing family education materials, and assessment and intervention materials for providers. <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>
