

Transgender 101

for Parents and Guardians

Learning that your child is transgender or gender nonconforming can turn life upside down. Many children struggle in silence with their gender identity for quite some time before coming out. When they do find the courage to come out, they may immediately want to jump into transition, which can leave parents and other loved ones feeling confused and fearful. The tools and resources that follow can be helpful in navigating this challenging time.

Glossary of Terms

Transgender

A person whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender. When you use the word, use it as an adjective, not a noun. For example, “she is transgender” or “she is a transgender person,” NOT “she is a transgender” or “transgendered.”

Cisgender

A term referring to a person whose sex assigned at birth matches their gender. Most people are cisgender.

FTM/trans man/transgender man/transmasculine/AFAB

These are terms used to describe individuals who identify as men, but were assigned female gender at birth. FTM stands for “female to male.” Most trans men use he/him pronouns.

Gender dysphoria

A condition where someone feels distress about or a severe disconnect between their sex and gender. People often transition to alleviate this distress.

MTF/trans woman/transgender woman/transfeminine/AMAB

These are terms used to describe individuals who identify as women, but were assigned male gender at birth. MTF stands for “male to female.” Most trans women use she/her pronouns.

Nonbinary

This is an umbrella term for people whose gender does not fit into the male/female gender binary. Nonbinary identities can take many forms and have existed independently in many cultures. Some examples are the Indian Hijra and the Native American Two-Spirit, and any other label which does not fit fully into the traditional categories of “man” and “woman.” Nonbinary people can prefer a range of pronouns, including “he/him,” “she/her,” “they/them,” and “ze/zir.”

Misgendered/misgendering

Refers to when someone calls a transgender person by the wrong pronouns, name, or by the wrong gendered language (like waiter/waitress, etc.). This may not seem like a big deal to cisgender people, but being misgendered can be very distressing to trans people, or even dangerous, depending on the circumstances.

Passing/“to pass”

Refers to when a transgender person is perceived as their true gender or is no longer misgendered. Some trans people do not care about whether they “pass,” but for others it is an important step in alleviating their dysphoria.

Letters from Parents

Looking back, the thing we wish we had when my son came out to us was the understanding we were not alone. That first night, we felt as if we were in a raging river, with no idea how to swim. In the following days and weeks, we were made aware of resources, support groups, and other parents of trans children. The sense of community and support we found have been crucial to our journey. We wish we had known about them sooner.

-D.W., father of a transgender teen

When my 14-year-old child told us he was transgender, it was the beginning of an amazing, frightening, and often lonely journey. We had had no idea where to turn to get help for him. Many calls to potential therapists went unreturned. We were given misinformation by a pediatrician and a counselor who did not have any experience with transgender children. Many of our friends walked away. We felt ostracized and alone, wondering how to best help our child. One therapist who returned my phone call referred us to a potluck dinner for parents of transgender children. It was this networking with other parents that saved our lives, and most certainly that of our child. As a researcher, I had delved into the literature that was available, but I had no idea what resources we could turn to locally. Networking with other parents enabled us to gather information on therapists, doctors, and support groups. Knowing we were not alone, and that our child was not alone, was one of the most important factors in our education and mental well-being.

-J.B., mother of a transgender teen

These are the words I needed to hear after my son came out: “Remember that your kid is still your kid, no matter what age they are. Nothing has changed—they are the same person except they have revealed their heart to you. They let you in on their innermost, personal feelings. Don’t let their coming out or identity be about you because it never was about you. Their identity is not about defiance, a political statement, a fad, or to rebuke religion. Pronouns are extremely important. It’s ok if you mess up at first, just keep trying. The more you use it, the easier it gets. Let your child reveal to you what they need. As an adult, you might think you have all the answers, but you have to remember to trust that your child knows themselves better than anyone else. As a parent, it’s our job to protect and guide them and to create a safe space for them. Lots of hugs and listening are good, too. You hold the key to letting your child have peace in their heart. Show up and love your child, even if it’s uncomfortable as you grieve the child you thought you had. It means everything to them.”

-K.D., mother of a transgender teen

Resources

Following is a partial list of credible resources:

**UPMC Children’s
Hospital of Pittsburgh
Gender and Sexual
Development Program**
chp.edu
412-692-6677

Persad Center
persadcenter.org
Pittsburgh, PA
412-441-9786

PFLAG Pittsburgh
pflagpgh.org
National: pflag.org

Trans Lifeline
translifeline.org

**Washington County
Gay Straight Alliance**
wcgsa.org

**National Suicide
Prevention Lifeline**
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

**Family Acceptance
Project**
familyproject.sfsu.edu

Gender Spectrum
genderspectrum.org

The Trevor Project
thetrevorproject.org

It Gets Better Project
itgetsbetter.org