

The Parent Process to Acceptance

Every journey is different...

When your child begins to express that their body is wrong; that it does not match the way they feel, each family goes through a different mix of experiences that I like to call "The Journey to Acceptance". This journey, or path if you will, is as different as the ways and ages your child will come out to you; but each seem to share some common emotional processes.

When our child is born, the doctor places him or her in our arms and says something like "Congratulations! It's a Boy" or "Congratulations! It's a Girl". And with that little statement comes a flood of dreams; no matter how hard we try to tell ourselves that "we will have no expectations". We hold our child in the silence of the night and picture their wedding, their gown or their tuxedo, their first prom, their first baseball game, or their first child, our grandchild. I don't think any parent every rocked their baby and said "I am going to turn you into a girl (or boy)". So it is not out of the ordinary to expect that news such as this will rock your world, shatter everything you understood to be "true" in life and make you question every inner thought you ever had.

Like all parents, we begin to take photographs and the best ones are framed and hung on a wall or put in an album; each capturing a moment in time of our family's history. As memories are created, so are dreams, and our family begins to take on a spirit of its own, a gentle combination of our heritage and our individuality. And as our child grows, we do our best to teach them right from wrong and everything else we think they need to succeed in the society they will one day enter as an adult.

After spending several years talking to hundreds of parents that have experienced this radical change in their child, I have come to realize that there are two distinct set of experiences shared by families depending on when the child realizes and expresses they are not "who" we think they are. Some children express this "feeling of wrongness" from the time they can speak, while others wait until sometime after puberty or well into adulthood. While these two sets of experiences can differ dramatically, both seem to have many of the same emotional consequences.

You're WHAT?

If you are like most parents, your initial reaction is **confusion**. You may have never heard of Gender Identity Disorder or the term transgendered so your mouth drops open and you can't believe your ears. Your mind screams "This HAS to be a MISTAKE!" or "what are you putting me through now!". You may say something like "But you are a boy, I know, I gave birth to you" or "You are a girl, I changed your diaper and you have a vagina". It doesn't take long to realize that you are at a complete loss for a logical argument and your insides begin to rampage into a

turmoil. You may feel sickened by this news, after all, this only happens in big cities to people who were abused as kids, not to a child that has been given everything.

If your child is younger, such as pre-school age, you may try to correct them with words such as “No honey, you’re a boy, you have a penis”; and you watch their heart break in their eyes as they fill with tears. The feeling of **helplessness** is overwhelming from their first words. All of a sudden there’s a problem that you can’t fix, heck, you probably can’t understand, and you move on to something that feels familiar and makes your child happy, hoping this will go away.

What do I tell the neighbors?

The confusion doesn’t last long before the **embarrassment** takes over. “Oh Lord, how will I ever explain this?” From this point on, each emotion is coupled with **guilt**; how can I be embarrassed of my child, they are however, who I raised them to be. You may say something inside like “My child has always been different but I have always understood. THIS I don’t understand at all.”

“How can I look at my son in a dress with make-up on?” or “How can I watch my daughter bind her breasts and dress like a man; and all that long beautiful hair is now gone.” You wonder if you ever knew your child at all and what are other people going to think.

If your child is younger, you may argue every time there is somewhere to go about the outfit they “need” to wear. “I can’t very well take him there in a skirt” or “Wearing blue jeans and boots just isn’t going to work”. You hide from others what you are faced with at home because this somehow seems wrong and yet fighting it doesn’t feel right either.

And I can’t stop crying...

The tears seem to come on at the drop of a hat no matter where you are or what you are doing. You can’t sleep right, you can’t eat right, you physically feel sick all of the time. You feel **angry** and **disappointed** that somehow you’ve been gypped; and again, because these negative feelings are directed at your child’s needs, you feel **guilty**. “What about the wedding I planned with her father walking her down the aisle? What about my grandchildren? Is it so selfish for me to want these things? And where did they get that name? How am I ever supposed to like that?” And all of the pictures come down, the beautiful family history captured moment by moment, and those, together with the photo albums, get boxed away and put in the attic until, who knows when in the future.

I feel like my child died...

Most parents who did not see this coming, who never recognized the seriousness of their child’s feeling of wrongness, often describe a feeling of **grief**, much like their child died, and thus, they **mourn** their loss. A huge feeling of **guilt** often

accompanies these emotions, because, after all, their child is still alive; so what then is this overwhelming sense of loss?

What parents don't realize is that they are not mourning their child's loss but the loss of their own dreams and expectations of "who" their child would someday be. They can't picture the "groom" instead of the "bride" (or vice versa); they can't imagine that some of the most important shared experiences, like cuddling, will ever be the same again. They grieve for past experiences that will never happen again and times they pictured for their child's future that probably won't happen either. The life of their child comes to a screeching halt and they feel stuck and unable to move on.

What did I do wrong...

As with most difficulties our children face, we as parents try to determine what we did to cause this unimaginable event. Many moms look back and question "Did I eat something wrong or do something wrong when I was pregnant?" We go back to day one and **question** everything; every activity we did with them, every food we ate or fed to them, every story we ever shared with our child, comes into question. "Maybe if I had played more ball with him..." or "Maybe if I had done more "girly" things with her..."

And when we can't come up with a logical explanation, we think we missed something, and for that, we again feel **guilt**. Like somehow we are responsible for their entire life path and we've given them no basis for making critical life decisions, because if we had done our job right, this wouldn't be happening.

The truth is, we did nothing to cause this to happen and we couldn't have caused this if we tried. This is an anomaly of birth and it has existed for as long as humans have walked the earth.

How can I ever support my child...

Somewhere along the line, parental love takes over all the grief and anguish that we feel and we long to hold and love our child like we did before. We realize that unless we "pretend to get this" we will lose our child forever. So we swallow our negative feelings, we speak their new name and pronouns in private, and we reach out to somehow experience this newness without vomiting.

We witness our child expressing as they say they have always felt inside, and while our stomach churns into a knot, we get through the experience. It is creepy and weird and we can't do it for long, but we walk away realizing that they are still with us, different, but breathing. And because **we don't "get it"** right away, we feel **guilt**, and because we **try to "get it"**, we feel **guilt**, and because **they want us to "get it"** right away and we can't, we feel (you got it) **GUILT**.

And no one around us is even trying to "get it"; they are still stuck in the confusion and questioning stage. But **WE HAVE TO GET IT** or we know we will lose them and that would be worse than death itself.

Do they seem happier?

No, it is not my imagination, they do seem happier. I still don't understand, but they are doing better in school, they seem to have more friends, and they are standing taller and smiling more. And we may ask ourselves, "Is this what was going on all along?" or "Why didn't I notice this before?" Looking back, now we see the signs, little things, like the toys they played with or what they wanted to be every year for Halloween.

Very slowly, **understanding** creeps in and with that comes another overwhelming feeling of **guilt**. "How could I have been so blind? Why did I wait so long to acknowledge my child's true-self?"

There is a place of Peaceful Acceptance...

They say the "time heals all wounds" but they never tell us "how much time" it will take. All I know is that it doesn't happen right away; for many, months or years go by before a parent is at complete peace with their transgendered child. It takes time to make new dreams, but they happen if you let them; it takes time to use the new pronouns and name, but that becomes comfortable too, one day.

Baby steps; this process is about taking one step at a time and working through all the feelings of anger, grief and disappointment. It will happen, but you can't rush it; it has to take place in its own time at your pace and no one else's. I cannot promise you that you will ever reach a comfortable place; that only happens if you allow it (and that is a very conscious effort). Some people never move beyond the embarrassment and guilt; they never reach out and they learn to live with the loss as opposed to creating a new future.

But moving on requires overcoming one hurdle that may be the hardest of all; the decision to love your child more than you hate what others say about them and you. Once I adopted the attitude "People can have an opinion about my life when they pay my mortgage", I felt more at ease to accept my child for "who" she was, not who I thought "he" should be.

And, at this time, there is not a wealth of information out there about what your child is experiencing or what your family is dealing with; the good news is, its getting better. There are support groups, therapists and informational brochures that were not available just a few short years ago. Unfortunately, finding this help can become a journey in itself.

My Final Thoughts

It has taken me a few years to understand this journey, the path my life has taken. During this time, I have learned so much about a condition that I had hardly heard of, and what I knew, I did not understand. But I have come so far, further than I ever imagined or realized was possible.

'Never say Never', has become one of my favorite lines and this has carried into all aspects of my life. I no longer look at my job the same way or how I prioritize my life. I take nothing for granted and I have learned to celebrate life's difficulties rather than fight them.

*We are never too old to learn,
only too stuck in our ways.*

Suddenly, success is no longer measured by how much money I make or how many things I can collect, but rather "how" I love the people around me. I have reached a true sense of peacefulness, one where other peoples' fortunes don't have a bearing on mine; I truly realize that not everything is about me or mine.

It is my hope that by sharing some of the most personal parts of my life, that I may bring comfort to someone else. It has become my mission to help others learn to understand, so I leave you with one final thought...

*When life throws us curve balls,
its not whether we hit or miss them...
but whether or not we swing,
that makes us who we are.*

Terms you may hear and not understand...

Cross Dressers consist of mostly heterosexual women and men (usually men) who enjoy wearing clothes of the opposite sex occasionally or most of the time. Their gender identity does not conflict with their biological sex.

Gender Identity is a person's internal sense of being female or male. This differs from biological/genetic sex. For most people, their gender identity and their sex are congruent, that is to say there is no conflict between the two.

Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is a diagnosed medical condition where a person exhibits a strong and persistent cross gender identification.

HRT (hormone replacement therapy) initiated during the first stage of treatment of GID, involves a testosterone blocker and estrogen for genetic males, or an estrogen blocker and testosterone for genetic females.

Intersexual (formerly known as hermaphrodites) are neither female nor male. They are born with ambiguous genitalia or some combination of female and male characteristics where one of the organs may be internal.

RLT (real life test) is the second stage in treatment of GID and is also referred to as the Real Life Experience (RLE). The transsexual must live in the opposite sex of their birth gender for a period of time.

Sex Reassignment Surgery is formally known as Gender Corrective Surgery (GCS). This involves the creating of a penis (phalloplasty) for female to male transsexuals, or the creating of a vagina (vaginoplasty) for male to female transsexuals.

Standards of Care (SOC) are minimum guidelines established by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association for the treatment of GID.

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe gender variant individuals such as cross dressers, drag queens, drag kings, transsexuals, and anyone who's gender expression differs from the conventional norms of femininity and/or masculinity.

Transition is the process of changing from one gender to the other either through hormones, living full time as a member of the opposite sex of your birth gender, or preparing for SRS.

Transsexuals suffer from GID and experience profound gender dysphoria; their gender identity does not match their biological/genetic sex, thus presenting a mind/body conflict. Many transsexuals are so uncomfortable in their bodies that they wish to undergo hormonal and surgical treatment to alter their bodies to become congruent with their minds.