

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

By Stephanie Brill and Caitlin Ryan, PhD, ACSW

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. But for children and adults who are transgender, their basic sense of being male or female – their gender identity – does not match their body.

Can a Child Be Transgender?

Yes. In fact, a small percentage (*TEA Note: 1:250-500*) of all children are transgender. Children understand gender differences from a very early age, and transgender children often strongly self-identify as another gender by age three or four.

Because we don't discuss transgender identity with our children, those who are transgender struggle with feeling like they were born in the wrong body. Adults typically react as if there were something wrong with these children. In truth, there is nothing wrong with these children.

Trans children who express their 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; not being understood and feeling like there is something wrong with them causes their physical & emotional suffering.

What Makes a Child Transgender?

Some parents are concerned that something they did made their child transgender. This is not true. Nothing 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 research indicates that children are most likely born that way. Before children are able to 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, trans children often insist that they are "really" a boy, or "really" a girl.

Why Can't My Child Be "Normal"?

Transgender children have existed throughout history in all cultures. Until recently, few parents spoke openly about these children. Often they tried to force their children to conform to expectations of what is "appropriate" behavior for males and females. Although these parents were trying to help their children fit in with their peers and with social norms, the children were severely traumatized by being forced to deny and change their true nature.

Over time, parenting approaches have changed and more parents, doctors & therapists understand how to better support transgender children.

How Should I Respond?

The most important thing you can do to promote your 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 a non-transgender child.

For example:

- Let your child play with whatever toys they enjoy
- Let your child dress and wear their hair in the way that is most comfortable for them
- Realize that this is very important to them and your support means everything
- Make it clear to family, friends and neighbors that you support your child's gender expression

Research indicates that by loving and accepting your children as they are, you can help them lead happier, healthier lives – and literally save their lives.

When parents pressure their gender non-conforming children to conform to gender stereotypes, young people are five times as likely to exhibit symptoms of depression, nearly four times as likely to attempt suicide and/or use illegal drugs, and twice as likely to be at high risk for HIV infection.

How Can I Know If It Is A “Phase”?

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

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

Parents and family of transgender children need information and support to raise a child in a way that others may not understand. However, you are not alone. There are thousands of families doing the same thing and facing the same challenges as your family.

Resources for Families and Providers:

🕒 TransActive Education & Advocacy:

Education & advocacy services on behalf of gender non-conforming children & their families to schools, health care providers, social service agencies and community groups.

Speaker's bureau services, in-service training and workshop presentations.

www.transactiveonline.org

🕒 To see social worker Caitlin Ryan's interview for the ABC Television News Program 20/20 story on transgender children broadcast in April 2007, visit:

<http://www.truveo.com/Facing-Rejection/id/2061339241>

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