



# **Trans Parenting: Profiles of Parents of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Children**

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lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.



# PFLAG and its Mission

- ✓ The parent, family and ally voice for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.
  
- ✓ Our mission is to promote the health and well-being of LGBT people, their families and friends through:
  - Support to cope with an adverse society
  - Education to enlighten an ill-informed public
  - Advocacy to end discrimination and to secure equal rights
  
- ✓ We provide opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity and act to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.



# The Challenge

- ✓ Discovering your child is gender non-conforming or transgender can **rock your world as a parent.**
- ✓ Our experience shows us that understanding that you are not alone and that other parents are on this journey brings **great comfort.**
- ✓ **More and more families** of transgender and gender non-conforming children are reaching out to PFLAG for support.



# Words Matter: Definitions

- **Gender Assignment:** Based on body parts; how the doctor defines the baby's sex
- **Gender Identity:** Based on internal sense of who we are; it can appear very early, even pre-verbal. Can be clear and stable; can be fluid.
- **Gender Expression:** How we express our gender in dress, movement, gestures, etc. May be mildly different from what others expect of us or it may be so bold as to be considered "variant." Aka gender creative
- **Transgender or Trans:** An umbrella term for any person whose gender identity differs from their gender assignment
- **Cisgender:** When our gender assignment and gender identity agree
- **Stealth:** When a trans person does not want it known that he or she is transgender



# Why? These Youth Are Vulnerable



- **Suicide:** 1 in 2 trans children have attempted suicide before age 20.
- **Harassment:** 90% of LGBT kids experience verbal harassment; 25% experience physical harassment and assault; 65% of those victims never report it; 25% drop out of school because of it.
- **Safety:** 82% of trans kids feel unsafe at school.
- **Isolated:** Very often find themselves bullied at school and shamed at home.
- **Homelessness:** One-quarter of children who come out to their parents are thrown out of their home due to conflicts with religious and moral values. 20-40% of homeless youth in urban areas are LGBT kids.



# Our Gender Expansive Children

Gender expression is a person's way of expressing their gender. Gender expression may be a new term for you, but if you think about it, we all express our gender in many ways. Through the clothes we chose, how we wear our hair, etc. And right around age 2-3, our children start expressing their own ideas about how to present themselves: what they like to wear, what toys they prefer, whether they see themselves as a mommy or a daddy when they play grown-ups.

Sometimes our toddlers express their gender in a way that surprises or concerns us. However your child is expressing gender, it need not be a cause for shame or fear. More and more of our children are expressing themselves outside of the traditional, "accepted" behavior for boys or girls. It is simply how our children show the world who they are and how they feel inside.

## What does "gender nonconforming" or "gender expansive" mean?

These terms describe children who express their gender in ways that are non-traditional, according to current societal norms. Society establishes expectations for how children express their gender. Some toddlers don't fit into those expectations. Societal norms regarding gender roles change over time, so gender nonconformity changes over time as well. Think of the days when girls were expected to only wear dresses and not play sports.

## Can a parent change a child's gender expression?

Because of concerns about bullying, many parents redirect or attempt to modify a toddler's gender nonconforming behavior and expression. And this can seem to work, but mental health experts urge against it. Our children are healthiest when they are able to express their gender naturally. Because of the stigma still attached to gender nonconformity, many toddlers and youth who attempt to express and communicate what they experience internally receive negative messages from family, friends, teachers, society, etc. Those messages can cause many youth to repress their gender expression, which often leads to internalized feeling of shame, guilt and self-hatred, which can be carried into adulthood.

## If a toddler is gender expansive does that mean they're gay or lesbian?

It might. But keep in mind, gender expression is not the same thing as sexual orientation (who you are emotionally and physically attracted to). Toddlers who are gender expansive may grow up to be gay, straight or bisexual, just like the rest of the population.

## Can being gender expansive be just a phase of childhood?

Most toddlers experience varying degrees of gender nonconformity. They experiment with behaviors that don't conform to society's gender stereotypes. We've all seen young boys who go through a phase of playing dress up or with dolls, or young girls who refuse to wear dresses and want to play with trucks. Many of our children outgrow these behaviors and find themselves relatively comfortable in their expected gender roles. But some of our children don't outgrow these behaviors. These children may be gender expansive their whole lives, or they may come to understand themselves to be what we adults call "transgender."

Most toddlers who are gender nonconforming (or gender expansive) grow out of it. Some do not and remain gender nonconforming all their lives. A few will come to understand themselves as transgender.

## Can a person "outgrow" being transgender?

Some people may have fluid (or flexible) feelings about their internal sense of gender (maleness or femaleness). But for people who have a consistent and persistent identity that differs from the one they were assigned, it does not go away with time. In fact, the feelings become harder and harder to ignore or hide as a person grows.



# Shared Stories

## Anissa

Our daughter was only three years old when she informed us she was a she. We showed up at a family's home who wouldn't allow her to come in unless she was dressed like a boy. When I saw the utter destruction of her soul that day, I made the decision then and there, that I will always advocate for her right to express how she feels.

## Julie

As a middle school educator, I watched the teacher next to me line up her class every day by separating boys and girls. The sole gender nonconforming person in the class hid in the back, hung their head, and slouched a little more each morning. Their absences increased, and then I saw the marks on their arm where they had started cutting. Although my room was a safe space on campus, one ally is not enough when a child feels like they don't fit in the rest of every school day.

## Karen

I became a trans ally, not because of a single turning point, but because of mileposts on the journey. Over a period of years, I came to understand that several people I knew "several friends" were gay or lesbian. When I learned I would be participating in a church vote on ordination of those in same-sex relationships, I spent time studying social, theological, and scientific perspectives on sexual orientation. As part of that study, I also started to become aware of differences in gender identity, and understood that neither sexual orientation nor gender identity were matters of choice. By the time I met my friend (who is transgender) and her spouse, accepting, welcoming, and being an ally wasn't even something I questioned.

## Rosemary

When my much-loved eldest granddaughter was 15, she came out to me one day saying that she'd known since she was four that she was meant to be a boy. To me, he was the same grandchild that minute as he was the minute before. His mother could not accept his being trans. His father had vanished when he was 12. I was his only relative living in the state willing and able to help him become the man he was born to be.

## Kirsten

My family lives in a small St. Louis suburb, and I am mom to a five-year-old transgender boy. He is currently as fully transitioned in all parts of his life as a five-year-old can be. Ever since he could talk, he expressed that he was a boy in every way possible, and we always just rolled with his wishes. It was always a possibility in our minds that our gender-creative child might be a boy, and when he officially asked to be called by a male name "for real, until I die" this past Halloween, that's when we began actively seeking information and support as to how to navigate the waters of supporting trans kids and keeping them safe.

## Mia

PFLAG was a foreign term to me in 2010 when I casually passed their fair booth in Yuma, Arizona. It was the rainbow flags that caught my attention. I paused for a moment to scan the banner and was immediately engaged. My younger brother had come out to me just a few years prior and the subject of LGBT rights had become personal. I took a few pamphlets that day and vowed to swing by a meeting sooner rather than later. I remember my first meeting well; I was overwhelmed with unexpected emotion to have found myself surrounded by people who had walked similar paths and had similar experiences. That first day I listened to the stories of members, both gay and straight, and I was really moved. I felt underqualified to consider myself an ally. I felt like it was presumptions of me to think that the LGBT community could need me as an advocate for the cause. The entire process was intimidating at first, but the members were warm and friendly and received me as if they had been waiting for me to arrive. They supplied me with free booklets on being an ally as well as information on gay rights and faith communities. The more time I spent around my PFLAG family the more I felt the need for an outlet - a way to express my emotions regarding this process of becoming an ally. As my family dynamic became more challenging I knew I needed to take a stand. I began blogging on the subject of gay rights hoping that someone, somewhere would find it encouraging hearing another person's experience. It was surprising to me to realize how challenging it could be to simply come out publicly as an ally, and this gave me even more insight as to how hard the process of coming out is for a LGBT person. The reward for taking a stand as a straight ally has been immeasurable. I have connected with some many people and have heard so many stories of the triumphs and trials that others have endured. I have been embraced with open arms by LGBT friends and have built relationships that I would have completely missed otherwise. Taking a stand as an ally has been freeing for me, it has given me a purpose and confidence I did not expect. There is a community of people out there who need our alliance and support to challenge the archaic thinking and change the tempo within our communities.



# Questions

