

For Transgender People and Their Families

FIRST STEPS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

PFLAG LOS ANGELES

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You may be a young person questioning your gender identity or the family member of a gender non-conforming child. Either way, you probably have lots of questions. This brochure will help answer some of them and put you on the road to understanding and acceptance. It's important to remember that you are not alone. As many as one in 1,000 people are born feeling that their body does not conform to their internal sense of being male, female, or something beyond the binary.

What is gender identity and gender expression? Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female, or something else. Gender expression refers to the way in which a person communicates their gender identity to others through clothing, hair style, makeup, and mannerisms.

What does transgender mean? Transgender is a broad term describing many different people who express gender in many different, sometimes non-traditional, ways. People who are transgender feel a deep, consistent, persistent sense of gender (maleness, femaleness, both or neither) that doesn't match their physical anatomy. In everyday terms, what a person's brain tells them about their gender (male, female, both or neither) doesn't necessarily match their body parts or sex assigned at birth.

What does gender variance or gender non-conformity mean? Gender variant people express their gender in ways that are non-traditional according to societal norms. Society establishes expectations for how people of all ages should act in terms of expressing their gender. Children in particular can be very creative in expressing themselves, and may ignore or override social expectations. Youth who are gender non-conforming (or gender variant) are not necessarily transgender.

What does gender queer mean? While gender is traditionally presented to us as either male or female—mutually exclusive and unchangeable opposites—the truth is that gender is a rich, broad spectrum that comes in as many forms as there are people. The term gender queer refers to people who challenge society's more rigid definitions of what it means to be male, or even more often, female, often mixing various attributes of all genders and sexualities.

Can being transgender be just a phase of childhood? Most youth experience varying degrees of gender variance, meaning they experiment with behavior that doesn't conform to society's gender stereotypes. For example, young boys may dress up or play with dolls, or young girls may refuse to wear dresses and like to play with trucks. A transgender youth, in contrast, experiences a constant, long-term incongruence with their birth gender. Forcing such a child to conform to gender norms frequently causes extreme anguish.

Who are transgender youth? Transgender youth can be found in every culture, ethnicity and religion. There is evidence of transgender behavior throughout recorded history.

Transgender youth come from all kinds of families—two parent households, single parent households, and foster families. There is no evidence that family structure or parenting causes a person to be transgender. It is a natural, human variation.

At what age do people know if they're transgender? People have a strong, solid sense of their gender between the ages of three and five (according to the American Academy of Pediatrics). Some accept this as a young child; others not until years or decades later. External messages received by parents, school, peers and society regarding gender roles and expectations often delay a person's readiness to accept their own gender differences.

Can a parent change a child's feeling of being transgender? Knowing that life may be harder for transgender children, parents sometimes try to change a child's gender identity by punishment, name calling, or making them change clothes or behavior. Nothing you can do can change your child's internal sense of gender. Acceptance and support helps fortify a child for any difficulties that lie ahead.

What obstacles do transgender youth and their families face? The stigma attached to gender non-conformity can make it difficult for youth to safely express and communicate what they are internally feeling. This stigma also makes it difficult for families to accept and support a transgender child's felt gender identity. Messages by family, teachers, and/or friends that suggest a transgender child is "sick," "crazy," or "evil" may cause youth to repress their gender identity and have feelings of shame, guilt, and self-hatred that persist into adulthood. These feelings can cause depression, anxiety, chemical dependency, self-harming behavior, and suicide attempts, which are much greater in transgender youth than the general population.

How can parents, family members, friends, teachers, and other concerned adults help? First they can educate themselves by using some of the resources suggested at the end of this pamphlet. They can find support groups to help deal with their own feelings at organizations like PFLAG Los Angeles, Transforming Family, and TransYouth Family Allies.

These organizations can also suggest strategies for dealing with issues arising at school and in the process of transitioning to the young person's internal sense of gender.

What does transitioning mean? Transitioning is the process by which a person changes from living in one gender to living in another. Transitions are frequently characterized by the vector of the change: male to female or MtF, female to male or FtM. Transitioning does not always involve medical treatment. Changing their dress, using exercise to change their bodies, and adjusting mannerisms and speech patterns can be ways some people transition without medical intervention. Others may pursue medical treatment such as hormone therapy and surgery to align their bodies with the gender they know themselves to be.

At what age can a child transition? Young children can make a social transition, dressing, grooming, playing and living in their felt gender identity. If a youth makes this transition before puberty, hormone blockers can be used to delay the onset of puberty, until the child is sufficiently mature to make decisions about more permanent measures such as hormone treatments and surgery at age eighteen or above. Hormone blockers are completely reversible. In Los Angeles, the Transgender Clinic of Children's Hospital Los Angeles can explain options to parents and guardians.

Can transgender people have happy lives? Yes! Transgender people are university professors, doctors, lawyers, models and many other careers. If they choose they can have loving partners and be parents. The most important factor in a transgender person's well-being is support. If you are the family member of a transgender person, learn to use the appropriate language, respect their choice of name or pronoun, and make your home a welcoming place. Finding support for yourself at PFLAG and similar organizations can help you be an advocate for your loved one. If you are a transgender person, look for welcoming communities like PFLAG, TransYouth Family Allies, and the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, which provides transgender healthcare, economic empowerment, conversation groups, counseling and legal services. These groups can provide the additional support you need whether you have an understanding family or not. Everyday transgender people and their allies are making progress in ending discrimination and securing happy lives for all.

RESOURCES

Books

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals
by Stephanie A. Brill and Rachel Pepper

Helping Your Transgender Teen by Irwin Krieger

Transgender Voices: Beyond Men and Women by Lori B. Girshuck

Organizations

PFLAG National: pflag.org

Text taken from *Welcoming Our Trans Family and Friends*, published by PFLAG National

Children's Hospital: chla.org
Division of Adolescent Medicine, Transgender Services

LifeWorks: lifeworksla.org

Transforming Family: transformingfamily.org

Transgender Law Center: transgenderlawcenter.org

TransYouth Family Allies: imatyfa.org

Visit the PFLAG Los Angeles website for more information: pflagLA.org



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