

Supporting Your Transgender or Nonbinary Teen

Objective

To identify how to support your transgender or nonbinary teen through information and supportive discussions.

You Should Know

Many transgender and nonbinary teens want their parents support, but they are unsure how to talk about gender and sexuality with their parents. They fear being rejected, kicked out of the house, threatened, or worse. Researchers have found high rates of depression, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidal ideation among transgender youth. Therapists who work with transgender and nonbinary teens tell us the outcomes for teens with supportive parents are dramatically different from teens who have unsupportive or rejecting parents. The importance of parental support for transgender and nonbinary teens cannot be understated. So, what can you do to support your teen? Here are some ways you can show support:

- Use appropriate pronouns and your teen's preferred name.
- Assist your teen in exploring social transition.
- Work with your teen's school to ensure access to bathrooms and supportive classroom practices, e.g., name and pronouns on school materials.
- Prevent bullying and address it immediately if it happens.
- Access gender-affirming medical and therapeutic services.
- Prevent and address cruelty and harm.
- Allow your teen to be real and authentic – and love him/her unconditionally.

You might begin reflecting on your own sense of loss, addressing family and community relationships, or challenging your own beliefs about gender. You might feel confused, fearful, disbelieving, or even angry. You might be afraid for your child, and worry about keeping him/her safe. You might wonder about medical interventions to support your adolescent's gender process – including puberty blockers, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), or other medical interventions. As a parent, it is important to remain affirming and supportive of your teen while you work to process your own feelings and concerns.

If your teen is depressed or anxious, as is the case with many transgender and nonbinary teens, you might believe your teen is confused about gender because of mental health problems. In fact, it is more likely your teen's depression or anxiety is rooted in his/her struggle with actual or anticipated societal disapproval. In many cases, as your teen comes out, gains acceptance,

and feels hopeful about the future, the depression or anxiety will lessen or resolve entirely. You might consider seeking therapy – for you, your teen, or for the entire family.

What to Do

Has your child come out as transgender or nonbinary? _____

The first thing you might require is information, which includes the concepts of sex, gender identity, gender expression, and what is meant by transgender, nonbinary, and transsexual. Your teen’s sexuality is separate but interacts with gender identity, and sexual orientation occurs along a spectrum. Where can you get information? Write down some resources (e.g., local support groups, online resources, etc.).

Up to this point, what have you done to affirm his/her gender and show your support?

What challenges have you had and how are you addressing them? Be specific.

What are your fears?

What questions do you have for your teen? Be specific.

You might want a deeper understanding of your teen’s thoughts, feelings, and desires. Sometimes teens will drop a “coming out” bombshell, and say little more about it. Communication might break down completely, but it is important to keep the line of communication open. Set up a time to talk with your teen to ask questions and plan for the social transition.

Date: _____ Time: _____

Social transition. For a child born male that identifies as female, the social transition will generally include wearing girls’ clothes, makeup, and jewelry; letting the hair grow out; and asking others to use a chosen female name and female pronouns when referring to her. For a child born female that identifies as male, the social transition will generally include wearing boys’ clothes, using a binder to comfortably flatten the chest, and asking others to use a chosen male name and male pronouns when referring to him. Ask your teen what he/she prefers, and describe below.

Discuss with your teen whether and when to initiate a social transition. Write down a plan.

School Issues. You and your child should meet with school officials to request the use of the new name and pronouns by teachers and staff. The school must accommodate your child's needs regarding gender-segregated facilities (e.g., a unisex bathroom and private changing area in lieu of a locker room). You will also address any safety concerns if a hostile or disrespectful response from peers or staff is anticipated. Describe the specific issues you want to address with your child's school.

Teens often realize the process of transitioning will go better for them when they surround themselves with loving and trusted adults and communicate clearly with their parents.

After completing this exercise, did you come up with other ways you can support your teen?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
