

# Transforming Family:

Trans Parents and their Struggles, Strategies, and Strengths



LGBTQ  
**Parenting  
Network**

A Program of *Sherbourne Health Centre*  
[www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca](http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca)



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When North American transgender and transsexual (trans) people began to seek medical assistance to transition in the 1960's, the accepted practice in newly established gender identity clinics was to advise them to sever contact with their established lives, often including relationships with their own children.<sup>1</sup> While this practice is no longer endorsed, the notion that a child will be harmed by a trans parent lingers. The limited research that focuses on trans parents and their children has often assumed a deficit in trans-led families. Negative perceptions of trans people as parents appear in fertility journals where assisted human reproduction clinicians debate whether it is ethical to assist trans people to become parents<sup>2</sup>. These same transphobic perceptions are repeated in US family court rulings in which trans people are routinely separated from their children.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that trans parents have been poorly represented in the discriminatory accounts of their lives. What is less clear is how trans parents experience this discrimination and how they might understand their strengths as parents.

The *Transforming Family* project was launched to respond to these concerns, filling an important gap in knowledge by documenting the impact of transphobia on trans parents and drawing attention to the strengths that they bring to parenting. The project was led by the LGBTQ Parenting Network at the Sherbourne Health Centre in collaboration with the Re:searching for LGBTQ Health team at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH). Financial support was provided by the Centre for the Study of Gender, Social Inequities and Mental Health at Simon Fraser University and the Community One Foundation in Toronto. Four focus groups were held in November 2010, with a total of 18 trans parents in Toronto.

## Findings

Participants in this study had distinct experiences in relation to the timing of when they became parents. In the first two sections of this report, participants are separated into two groups in order to highlight their unique experiences: section one speaks to those who were already parents when they came out as trans or transitioned; and section two speaks to those who embarked on becoming parents after already identifying as trans or transitioning. Section three, *Navigating a Transphobic World*, and section four, *Parenting Strengths*, include the experiences of all participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, R. & Money, J. (1969). *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*. John Hopkins Press.

<sup>2</sup> Baetens, P., Camus, M., & Devroey, P. (2003). Should requests for donor insemination on social grounds be expanded to transsexuals? *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, 6(3), 281.

<sup>3</sup> Flynn, T. (2006). The ties that (don't) bind: Transgender family law and the unmaking of families. In P. Currah, R. Juang & S. Minter (Eds.), *Transgender rights*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## Parents coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition

Trans parents, their children and partners lack adequate support during transition.

Trans parents overcome substantial fears and come out as trans or begin to transition out of a desire to care for themselves and their children. Despite this they are often accused of harming their families. Transition can be a time of high conflict and if family break-down occurs, it often coincides with a number of other losses for trans parents. While many trans parents find ways to communicate with their partners and their children about their identities, and many partners and children find ways to understand and adapt, most do so without the benefit of community supports and resources.

Societal transphobia is a threat to trans parents' ability to maintain child custody and access.

The majority of those who were parents before coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition had access to their children limited or removed. Whether this occurred through formal legal avenues or through informal practical barriers, at the heart was societal transphobia. Trans parents are pathologized and discredited in custody disputes and they face emotional injury and financial barriers that disadvantage them in their attempts to maintain custody of, and access to, their children. It is imperative that training programs are implemented to address transphobia among professionals working in the family law system. In addition, resources are needed to provide separating or divorcing trans parents with accurate information about the legal issues facing them.

It gets better: trans parents' relationships with their children improve over time.

Through coming out or transitioning, trans parents eventually experienced an improved sense of well-being and often began negotiating new names and roles with their children. Together with the growing social acceptance of trans people, these negotiations allowed many children to develop a new relationship with their trans parent. Trans parents said clearly: It does get better.

## Trans People Becoming Parents

Family planning is poorly facilitated for prospective trans parents

Many trans people do not pursue adoption due to an expectation that they will be unsuccessful. Adoption services must become more accessible to prospective trans parents, including effective outreach to trans communities to counter this perception. Fertility services are inconsistent in their treatment of prospective trans parents; there are varying barriers and levels of support. Some clinicians fail to distinguish between the biological contribution that prospective trans parents might make to the conception process and their lived experience of gender (i.e. a trans woman might freeze sperm before transitioning; a trans man may want to get pregnant with his own eggs). Standard clinical forms and practices must be adapted to accommodate the reality of trans bodies.

Trans people who are new parents have difficulty establishing legal relationships to their children.

Some trans parents are unable to enter their family information into the on-line Ontario Birth Registration system. Existing parental designations do not accommodate the realities of trans people's bodies, as some trans women may contribute sperm to their child's conception and some trans men may opt to become pregnant and give birth. Within the existing system, these parents must choose: to register as their child's legal parent but as the wrong gender; to attempt to remedy the problem by assuming a significant advocacy burden; or to forego parental rights. It is the responsibility of Service Ontario to provide a birth registration process which accommodates all parents.

## All Participants

Transphobia and erasure have real effects on trans parents and their children.

Trans people in general experience public scrutiny, harassment and discrimination. For those who are parents this occurs in multiple settings and can cause pain and confusion for children. Trans parents experience not only active discrimination but also more subtle forms of *erasure*, rendering them invisible and unrecognizable to service providers. Trans parents and their families struggle on more than one front, often with very little support.

Trans parents and their children exercise agency in how they respond to transphobia.

Though trans parents and their children are deeply impacted by transphobia, they are not passive victims, instead actively strategizing to address discrimination. Trans parents protect themselves and their children by making choices to be or not be visible, by advocating for themselves and their children and by educating their children about transphobia. Creatively navigating unfriendly environments, trans parents challenge assumptions about gender through everyday acts of activism.

Trans parents teach important lessons.

Trans parents demonstrate a number of parenting strengths, at times because of, rather than in spite of, their identities and experiences as trans people. As they journey to express their unique selves, they become role models for diversity, acceptance and authenticity. As they struggle and learn the difficult skills of self-advocacy, they pass on vital lessons about strategy, endurance and courage. And as they create options for their children to express their authentic selves, they raise a new gender literate generation, contributing to building, as one participant put it, "the world that needs to be."

## Recommendations

We recommend the following actions to address some of the needs identified by our participants:

- **LGBTQ Community Support Services** should create resources to support parents who come out as trans or transition, as well as their partners and children;
- **Trans Community Trainers** should incorporate the specific concerns of trans parents and prospective parents into existing programs which train service providers on trans issues;
- **Legal Support Workers** should build their capacity to offer legal resources to parents who are coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition;
- **The Family Law System** requires education programs to address both the specific legal issues facing trans parents and to address transphobia among legal professionals including: judges; lawyers; mediators; and family court support workers;
- **Schools and Early Years Centres** require training and resources to effectively welcome trans parents and their children;
- **Adoption Services** should ensure all staff are appropriately trained to work effectively with prospective trans parents and should conduct outreach to counter the perception that trans people would be considered ineligible to adopt;
- **Fertility Services** should adapt existing forms and documents to accommodate the realities of trans bodies. Staff should be trained to ensure that trans clients are treated in a non-discriminatory manner, consistent with their lived gender;
- **Service Ontario** should review the Ontario Birth Registration process to determine if it contravenes the Ontario Human Rights Code and how it can be adapted to accommodate trans parents.

## Contact

For information about this study or for additional resources for trans parents, please contact:



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## INTRODUCTION

When North American transgender and transsexual (trans) people began to seek medical assistance to transition in the 1960's, the accepted practice in newly established gender identity clinics was to advise them to sever contact with their established lives, often including relationships with their own children. Many children were told that their parent had moved away, and even sometimes that they had died. These options were seen as preferable to having a parent who was trans. Prominent researchers Richard Green and John Money wrote in 1969: "Young children are better told that their parents are divorcing and that daddy will be living far away and probably unable to see them."<sup>4</sup> While this practice is no longer endorsed, the notion that a child will be harmed by a trans parent lingers in child custody decision-making, in family planning policy and practice, and in public opinion, and is experienced by trans parents as discrimination, and at times, unimaginable loss.

While previous research has established that trans people face multiple barriers including housing and employment discrimination, denial of health care and social services and harassment and violence<sup>5</sup>, the experience of trans people who are parents has rarely been the focus of research. The limited research that does focus on trans parents and their children has often assumed a deficit in trans-led families. Negative perceptions of trans people as parents appear in fertility journals where assisted human reproduction clinicians debate whether it is ethical to assist trans people to become parents<sup>6</sup>. These same transphobic perceptions are repeated in US family court rulings in which trans people are routinely separated from their children<sup>7</sup>. It is clear that trans parents have been poorly represented in the discriminatory accounts of their lives. What is less clear is how trans parents experience this discrimination and how they might understand their strengths as parents.

The *Transforming Family* project was launched to respond to these concerns, filling an important gap in knowledge by documenting the impact of transphobia on trans parents and drawing attention to the strengths that they bring to parenting.

Though not all participants in this study were transitioning, all were out or visible to some extent as trans or gender non-conforming people. The timing of when each participant had become a parent in relation to identifying as trans, was found to be very significant. Thus sections one and two of this report divide participants into two groups based on when they became parents. Sections three and four include all participants.



<sup>4</sup> Green, R. & Money, J. (1969). *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*. John Hopkins Press.

<sup>5</sup> Namaste, V. (2000). *Invisible lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>6</sup> Baetens, P., Camus, M., & Devroey, P. (2003). Should requests for donor insemination on social grounds be expanded to transsexuals? *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, 6(3), 281.

<sup>7</sup> Flynn, T. (2006). The ties that (don't) bind: Transgender family law and the unmaking of families. In P. Currah, R. Juang & S. Minter (Eds.), *Transgender rights*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## METHODS

This project was informed by the principles of community-based research.<sup>8</sup> The need for this research was identified through first-hand accounts from trans parents, as well as through the community development work of the LGBTQ Parenting Network at the Sherbourne Health Centre and prior research conducted by the Re:searching for LGBTQ Health team at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH). The project was led by a trans parent, in collaboration with these two teams. The goal has been to help trans parents articulate their experiences, strengths, and needs. By sharing this information, we aim to better position trans parents to respond to policies impacting their families.

Ethics approval was sought and received from CAMH. The recruitment of participants took place through Toronto trans community listservs, posters at local community agencies and through informal community networks. Community members who responded to the call for participants were screened for eligibility, which included: identifying as trans; identifying as a parent; and living in the Toronto area or nearby. Eighteen people participated in four focus groups, held in November 2010. Two focus groups were comprised of participants who were parents before coming out as trans or transitioning.<sup>9</sup> All ten of those individuals (five in each group) were trans women (male-to-female). Another focus group was made up of those who had become parents after coming out as trans or transitioning, including one trans woman and two trans men. A final focus group included a mixture of five individuals who had both been parents before identifying as trans, and those who had become parents as trans people. All five of these individuals were on the female-to-male spectrum, several of them identified as gender queer.<sup>10</sup> Study participants reflected a limited range of racial and ethnic identities. The majority of participants identified as White. Three participants identified as White and Jewish. One participant identified as Black and one as mixed race. Focus group questions related to experiences of discrimination, strategies for negotiating and resisting discrimination and participant's perceptions of their parenting strengths. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed and analysis was conducted by three trans-identified researchers. Writing was done in consultation with the larger research team.

### A note about the term “transition”

For various reasons, not all trans people take steps to socially or medically transition. Some do not have enough support to transition, some are not considered medically eligible, and for others, transition is not necessary or desirable and they express their identities in other ways. The references to transition in this report are not intended to erase the experiences of those who do not transition, but to acknowledge this as a major determinant of how many participants' experiences unfolded.

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<sup>8</sup> Israel, B., Eng, E., Schultz, A., & Parker, E. (2006). *Methods in community-based participatory research for health*. Berkeley, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>9</sup> Transition can refer to both *social transition* (a change in gender pronoun, name or physical appearance) and *medical transition* (hormonal and surgical interventions).

<sup>10</sup> Gender queer refers to those who identify their gender outside of traditional gender categories and may not identify as either trans men or trans women. Some gender queer individuals pursue medical transition options and some do not.

## SECTION ONE:

### PARENTS COMING OUT AS TRANS OR BEGINNING A GENDER TRANSITION

#### Coming Out / Beginning Transition

Though the process of coming out or transitioning is challenging for most trans people, there are some unique challenges for those who are already parents at the time of their transition, including the fear of negatively impacting their children. In fact, studies which have explored children's adjustment to a parent's gender transition have largely found that serious difficulty in adjusting is associated not with the parent's transition itself but with abrupt loss of contact with a parent (the transitioning person) in addition to having a parent (the non-transitioning parent) who is extremely opposed to the transition.<sup>11</sup>

[...] Prior to coming out, I said to other people and to myself, there is no way, I cannot do this because I will hurt my children and I couldn't do this to them [...]

**Jennifer, a trans woman with school-aged children**

Many participants describe facing these fears and pursuing transition out of a sense that they could no longer live in their original gender role. Jane, a trans woman with teenage children, described the urgency of transition for her:

I really wasn't going to be alive very much longer had I not taken that step [...] it was more just a fear that I am not going to be here [...] that was the decision making I had to do at that time [...] It really wasn't much of a choice.

Though transition has sometimes been regarded as something that trans parents do *to* their children, parents articulated the connection between taking care of themselves and taking care of their children, describing their transition as something that they ultimately did *for* their children.

I couldn't be there for my kids [...] I had to transition because [...] I couldn't bring myself to be there for my kids if I wasn't there for myself.

**Rebekah, a trans woman with adult children**

<sup>11</sup> White, T., & Ettner, R. (2004). Disclosure, risks and protective factors for children whose parents are undergoing a gender transition. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 8(1), 129-145.

## Coming Out to Partners

Though several participants reported that their partners were aware of their gender identities prior to their marriage, the majority of participants reported that disclosing their plans to transition led to a breakdown of the relationship and became a source of multiple conflicts. These included conflict over *when* the children would be told about their parent's trans identity, *how* they would be told, and *if* they would be told.

I told my wife and she said 'you're not going to tell the children are you'?

Jennifer, a trans woman with school age children

Participants also experienced conflict with their partners over the perceived impact on the children. Jacquelin, a trans woman who transitioned when her children were school age, described the misinformation at the heart of her ex-partner's reaction:

When she heard transsexual all she heard was "sex" and assumed that I would represent a danger to our children. [...] I was desperate to show her that there were normal experiences that could be had. [...] That it was unusual but not, you know, not dangerous.

Jacquelin

Participants needed resources to help them communicate with their partners and to help their partners adjust - resources which did not exist.

## Coming Out to Kids

Participants had a range of approaches to communicating with their children about their transition, employing a number of strategies to help their children adjust. Some waited until their children had reached a particular age while others believed that the children should hear while they were young. Participants were unable to find resources to help them communicate with their children.

Whenever I tried to get some guidance as to how best to discuss this with my children and how best to ease the process for them, the only advice I ever got, and I went to very high levels to look for it, was ‘use age-appropriate language’. That’s it.

Jacquelin

The children responded in a variety of ways to their parents’ plans to transition, ranging from anger and shock to curiosity and acceptance. There was a common sentiment that the teen years were a particularly difficult time for children to adjust to a transition and that younger children had an easier time. At times, this was reflected in the different responses among siblings.

My oldest one [...] refused to talk to me for a couple of years and my second daughter [...] she’s very open minded and we continue to connect.

Rebekah

Lisa, a trans woman with a school age child, reflected on why younger children may have an easier adjustment:

They have to be taught to hate, they have to be taught to feel ashamed of who we are [...] the younger children haven’t been taught to hate yet. All they know is that this is my parent and I love them and I depend upon them [...].

Though coming out to their children was difficult, some participants were surprised by their children’s level of understanding:

I was very impressed by her [my daughter], the way she was able to understand all of the intricacies of what that means in society

Jacquelin describes struggling with the coming-out conversation and getting help from her daughter:

I was hemming and hawing and obviously had something to tell and she said “for God’s sake if you can’t be proud of who you are, what’s the point?” And that’s my daughter you know, bless her heart. I said you know you’re absolutely right.

## Lack of Support and Inadequate Resources

Participants articulated a range of other influences outside of the immediate family which impacted their coming out process as parents. In some cases, family members were uninformed and hurtful.

My father told me it would be better if I were to disappear from my child's life, and pretend that I had died, than for him to have a trans parent.

Kelly

In some cases participants felt their ex-partners' reaction was influenced for the worse by other family members or service providers who became involved with the family.

[The hospital staff] basically told her that I must have been lying to her all this time and had probably been on hormones for years.

Jane

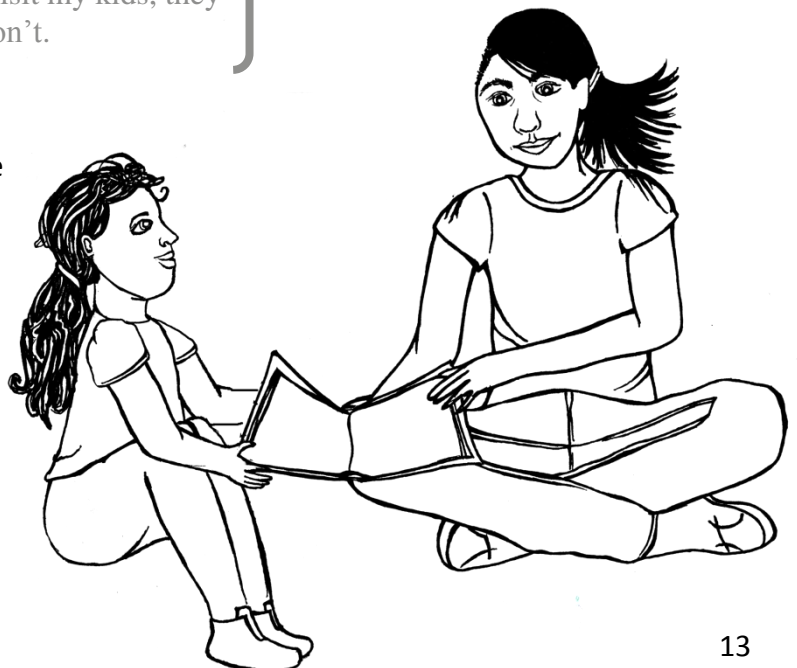
In other cases, friends and family members withdrew support when participants came out, leaving them to navigate a difficult process alone.

My entire support system just evaporated.

Throughout these struggles, many participants reported that their friends and family expressed support for their partners and children, yet not for them:

I lost the support of my dad [...] my siblings at first they supported me but within three days they didn't talk to me anymore. They support my wife, they still visit my kids, they still have a relationship with my family. I don't.

Resources to help trans parents communicate with their partners and their children as well as resources simply to cope with their own transition, were noticeably absent.



## Challenges with Child Custody and Access

In an important 2000 decision,<sup>12</sup> an Ontario family court ruled in favour of a trans woman retaining sole custody of her children:

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The applicant's transsexuality, in itself, without further evidence, would not constitute a material change in circumstances, nor would it be considered a negative factor in custody determination."

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Despite this positive precedent, the overwhelming majority of participants who were parents before coming out or transitioning reported challenges with child custody and access. While some custody battles took place in formal family court settings, there were other means through which participants access to their children was limited or denied. For some participants, this was through discriminatory divorce agreements.

I'm not allowed to go to the school because it's in our divorce agreement [...] I know that it's not fair, but it was put in the divorce agreement because I'm just so weird... right?

Lisa

Other participants described having access to their children limited informally through barriers erected by their ex-partners. A trans woman who transitioned with school age children said:

She attempted to deny access to the children and although she never got legal defenses around that, she put up so many practical barriers, that it's been impossible to develop a meaningful relationship with my children for a number of years [...].

Jacquelin

One of these informal or practical barriers is what has come to be called *parental alienation*. Though this term is not specific to trans parents, Richard Green<sup>13</sup> used this term to describe situations when a child's attitude toward a trans parent is influenced for the worse through ongoing exposure to another parents' transphobia – often the parent the child is residing with. Jacquelin described the sense that her young son was repeating negative sentiments about her transition which he had heard elsewhere:

My son turned to me and said "you know it's like my father died" [...] He didn't come up with that on his own, there's no bloody way he did.

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<sup>12</sup> *Forrester v. Saliba*, [2000] O.J. No. 3018 (Sup. Ct.)

<sup>13</sup> Green, R. (2006). Parental alienation syndrome and the transsexual parent. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 9(1), 9-13.

Green contends that responsibility for alienation does not rest solely with individual ex-partners, and he implicates courts for allowing long periods of time to pass during which trans parents are unable to contact their children. Elizabeth, a trans woman with children ranging from adolescents to adults, reported that their attitudes towards her transition deteriorated in the time she was not permitted to contact them during a trial:

I have letters and stuff from my kids from 2008 where they loved me and they cared about me and it wasn't an issue and then somewhere in between 2009 and today, I've lost all contact with my children and even my grandchildren.

Elizabeth

In general, participants described the sense that they were at a legal disadvantage because of their trans identity.

There was a period in time where [my ex-partner] was very angry about what [my transition] had done to her life. I felt I was at a serious disadvantage [...] if it came down to a court battle, it felt like as a person in transition, there was a risk that I would end up losing out.

Kelly, trans woman with a school aged child

The disadvantage which Kelly refers to is quite real. The societal context of severe discrimination and stigma towards trans people (transphobia) functions to disadvantage trans parents with respect to child custody and access in a number of ways, including by: creating financial barriers for trans parents; pathologizing and discrediting trans parents; and through the emotional injury incurred by trans parents as a result of transphobia. Other studies have confirmed high levels of poverty among trans communities<sup>14</sup> resulting from a combination of employment discrimination and a lack of adequate legislative protections.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the trans parents in this study described an immediate loss of earning power and social status upon transitioning, leading to unemployment for many and an inability to pay for legal fees and child support. Two trans women remarked:

Since I started transitioning I haven't been able to find a job at all.

Farrah

I couldn't even hire my own lawyer because I didn't have access to the funds. [My ex-wife] decided who my lawyer would be and paid the lawyer.

Lisa

<sup>14</sup> Bauer, G., Boyce, M., Coleman, T., Kaay, M., Scanlon, K. & Travers, R. (2011) *Who are trans people in Ontario?* Trans PULSE E-Bulletin, Vol 1(1).

<sup>15</sup> Bauer, G., Nussbaum, N., Travers, R., Munro, L., Pyne, J. & Redman, N. (2011). *We've got work to do: Workplace discrimination and employment challenges for trans people in Ontario.* Trans PULSE E-Bulletin. Vol 2(1).

In addition, trans people are subject to ongoing pathologization within the health and mental health service fields, where, through the diagnosis of *Gender Identity Disorder* in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM), trans people continue to be defined as mentally ill. In one of the early definitive texts written about transsexuals in 1969, parents beginning a gender transition were instructed to request that they themselves *not* be granted child custody or visitation of any sort, reflecting an assumption that this would be harmful for their child and would prevent them from properly beginning their new life.<sup>16</sup> Though trans parents are no longer instructed in this manner, mental health stigma continues to weigh on them. Some participants in this study felt that stigma functioned to discredit them within the legal system, at times impeding a fair process. Farrah, whose case involved both criminal and family court stated:

The officer that dealt with me assumed that my [gender] “confusion” made me incapable of determining my reality and that anything I said obviously wasn’t even close to the truth.

Some felt their ex-partners were deliberately leveraging society’s stigma against trans people in order to bolster their own claims for custody or access. A gender queer parent with school age and teenage children stated:

He’s using the system every step of the way. He is feeding on our society’s desire to have gender normative families and gender normative child-raising.

Alfred

Trans women participants, in particular, described being discredited both as women in general and as trans women in specific, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as *trans misogyny*<sup>17</sup>.

One of the hallmarks of womanhood that we take on is being less credible, taken less seriously. Trans women, because of the way we’re portrayed, in many ways we are seen as absurd or comic, as opposed to credible.

Jacquelin

Though trans people have often been understood to be inherently mentally ill, this is widely refuted by trans communities as well as by professional organizations including the World Professional Association for Transgender Health.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, there is a need to recognize the substantial mental health impacts of hostility and discrimination on trans people. For example, participants in this study spoke about the profound emotional losses they incurred during their coming-out process. For many,

<sup>16</sup> Green, R. & Money, J. (1969). *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*. John Hopkins Press.

<sup>17</sup> Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.

<sup>18</sup> WPATH (2011). *Standards of care: For the health of transsexual, transgender and gender non-conforming people*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. World Professional Association for Transgender Health.

the grief typically associated with separation from a partner was compounded by potentially losing their job, home, extended family, and friends together with their primary relationship. Kelly said:

I lost my identity, my sanity, my job, my marriage, my house, my family temporarily, and more.

Kelly

Participants noted that this grief was compounded by being blamed for their own losses, regarded as the logical result of what they had “done”. Rebekah reported that the profound guilt and shame that she felt was reinforced by others:

We’re told we are blamed. We are to blame. That’s what society tells us, our families tell us that, everybody.

For some participants, permanent and legally binding decisions were made in this emotional context, in some cases impeding their sense of entitlement to advocate for themselves. In fact, some decisions made during family break-up can have serious legal repercussions. For example, separation agreements or mediated agreements, once signed, become legally binding and can only be changed through successful application to the court.

Lisa described how her emotional state at the time of transition, which was brought on by grief and loss, impacted her legal decision-making and future access to her child:

As the years have passed, I’ve recognized that I was taken advantage of because I was transitioning at the same time as getting divorced and 200 people in both of our families that I loved were gone. This happened on the same day. Everybody just ran and one of the things that your lawyer doesn’t tell you as a trans woman and a trans person, is ‘Are you dealing with any special circumstances that mean we shouldn’t do this now?’ There’s just a blanket commentary that you agree to all this and these are the rules forever and ever [...] I left everything [...] I didn’t want [my child’s] life to change because I felt guilty for changing it so much. And the legal system doesn’t really recognize some of the social things that we go through at one of the most traumatic moments of my life. [...] I felt so guilty for doing what I had done. I felt such hatred for myself that I was liable to agree to anything.

Lisa

In light of the legal repercussions, it is significant that no participant mentioned receiving any family law information during their transition process.

What happened was the father had got legal advice prior to the separation and I hadn’t and so I’ve been fighting for years for equal parenting.

Alfred, a gender queer parent

The child custody and access challenges which trans parents face cannot be separated from the social context in which they occur. Widespread transphobia and the absence of positive societal images of trans people is the context in which trans parents may experience shame and self-blame, may not seek or find legal support, may lose their family, friends, and employment and may not feel entitled to advocate for themselves. Transphobia is the context in which angry ex-partners may successfully frame a trans parent as unstable and unfit and may successfully mobilize support for themselves within the justice system. Transphobia is the context in which family courts and service providers may find themselves unable to imagine a trans person as a good role model and loving parent. Transphobia is also the context in which a child may choose to discontinue a relationship with a parent who is trans. Elizabeth, a trans woman who had lost all contact with her adolescent and adult children, addressed a focus group of others who had faced similar challenges with custody and access:

“We all loved our children. We all did everything we could to, you know, protect them and help them to understand that we’re different, but in the end we’re perceived as monsters.”

In closing, family law resources for trans parents are urgently needed, including legal resources for parents coming out as trans as well as anti-transphobia education for professionals working within the family law system.

### Who Will We Be?: Negotiating New Roles with Children

Participants who maintained a level of contact with their children often entered into a process of negotiating their new roles with their children. Though trans parents have often been characterized as selfish for pursuing their gender transitions, these participants articulated the patience and care that went into negotiating new roles, with consideration for the needs of both parent and child. While their gender transitions were still somewhat new, some parents negotiated how they presented themselves to ease their children’s discomfort. In some cases they prioritized their children’s wishes. Tracey described agreeing to dress as a male for her daughter’s Grade eight graduation:

“I said ‘So how do you want me to present when I come?’ and she said ‘as a boy’. And I said ‘ok’ [...] I said to her ‘this is your day sweetie.’”

In other cases parents decided to be firm about their own needs.

“I’ve said ‘you know what, I’m not changing clothing. I’m dressed, I’m comfortable the way I am, you’re going to have to meet me the way I am.’”

**Rebekah, a trans woman with adult children**

After coming out or transitioning, many participants also negotiated with their children about what they would be called. These decisions varied from family to family, and the transition was often smoother for younger children.

It took him a week and now he calls me mommy all the time. That was it [...] some of these things come very easy to young children.

**Lisa, who had a preschool age child at the time of transition**

Jane, a trans woman who transitioned when her children were pre-school and school age, discussed how her two children made different choices around naming:

My older daughter decided she was going to start using my middle name [...] my younger daughter said she was going to call me mom.

In some families, children chose not to change how they referred to their parent, resulting in the creation of new roles such as ‘female fathers.’

For a while I encouraged him to try to pick something different than dad so he wouldn’t ‘out’ me all the time, and he refused [...] I said “alright I’ll be dad” [...] So my gender changed but he didn’t have to give up on having his father, he just has a father who is female. He uses female pronouns, calls me dad, that’s fine.

**Kelly, a trans woman with a school age child**

Some children chose to abandon “mom” and “dad” altogether in favour of new terms for their parent. Elliot recounted these humorous terms, also sharing his own hesitation:

He’s come up with maady, half mommy half dad. No, manmom, which is funnier, I kinda don’t mind manmom, [laughter] or manly mom is even better! [laughter] but you know it’s not really what you want in the kind of ordinary moment, it’s not particularly what you want in public.

Kelly recounted the amusing consequences of her child continuing to refer to her as ‘dad’:

He’ll say “my dad is coming to get me” and there’s this woman there. And the other kids will start arguing [...] “that’s not your dad that’s your mom” and he’ll say “no that’s my dad!” [laughter]

On the other hand, Elliot, the parent of an adult son, described a situation in which this public blurring of gender lines felt potentially dangerous:

My son was intensely uncomfortable that we were going to the same bathroom. It was one of the first times that he’s experienced that and in his anxiety, as we’re walking into the men’s bathroom he calls me “mom”, loudly [...] I was really frightened [...] of getting beat up.

In many cases, there were no neat solutions and parents and children continued to negotiate names and roles in an ongoing way. Elliot, who wished his son would not call him ‘mom’, described the complexity of addressing this:

On the one hand I know how much he loves me, but on the other hand it feels so hurtful [...] but at what point do you begin to demand things from your adult kid? [...] It’s this really complicated power dynamic.

Ultimately, it was important to participants to feel accepted by their children and for some, the use of their chosen names and gender pronouns were symbols of that acceptance. Alfred, a gender queer parent, described his child’s first use of his new name:

He really strongly and bravely introduced me and used my chosen name [...] it was so few words but I felt very accepted.

### “It Does Get Better”: Changes Over Time Between Parents and Children

Despite difficulties, many participants’ relationships with their children improved over time. Rebekah, whose adult daughter stopped speaking to her for several years, described later receiving an apology:

I got a call from my daughter asking me for forgiveness. We cried on the phone. It was incredible. For her it was a big step, for me it was a ‘wow’ moment.

For many participants, it was noticeably difficult to discuss these damaged relationships with their children. Yet participants also reassured one another, offering suggestions for coping and hope for the future. Jacquelin, a trans woman with adult children, summarized the factors that improved her relationship with her children including social progress, their growing maturity and their appreciation of her ability to stay true to herself.



For those who are going through this, it does get better. Ten years later of staying true to myself, the world’s catching up with us right. [...] There’s a new relationship that develops with your children as they get older, and as they grow their own ability to think [...] and now as they’re older and I talk to them, they look to me with respect because they know that I’ve endured even in the face of hardship [...] my integrity remains intact.

Jacquelin

## SECTION TWO: STARTING A FAMILY AS A TRANS PERSON

### “We’re Going to do this, World”: The Desire to Parent

For participants who identified as trans or transitioned prior to parenting, there was often a relationship between their gender identity and their desire to parent. For some, such as Ishai, it was transition which opened up this possibility. For Samantha, being trans was an integral part of what she wanted to share with her child:

My experiences as a trans person have given me some ideas that I was happy to be able to pass on to another generation. I felt that I would be a good parent, and part of that was owing to my experiences as a trans person.

Samantha

I never wanted to be a mom [...] Identifying as trans and as male suddenly made [parenting] feel possible [...] I could see myself being someone’s dad.

Ishai

Some participants spoke about how their desire to parent in the future had informed the choices they made about their gender transition. A number of trans women chose to freeze sperm samples before they transitioned to female. One trans man was reluctantly delaying male hormones in the hopes of becoming pregnant, while another had planned from the beginning to preserve his fertility through his transition.

Though some participants noted that they expected to struggle with transphobia, Dunya, a gender queer parent who was pregnant at the time of the interview expressed determination:

I don’t want to just be afraid of the transphobia and homophobia in the world. I want to walk into it, and do it with confidence and with love and say “we’re gonna do this, world [...] I’m gonna give it a try.”

Dunya

## Paths to Parenthood: Adoption and Fertility Services

Participants did not have direct experience with the adoption system but several shared the sense that they would not be successful in the adoption process and did not pursue the option further. They felt their disadvantage was due to economic barriers and transphobic attitudes and two participants on the female-to-male spectrum described this as a factor in their decision to try to become pregnant themselves, rather than attempt to adopt.

With respect to assisted human reproductive services, only two participants had used these services, though, again, others reported the sense that these services would present barriers for trans people.

A trans man, Ishai, described strategizing around his approach to a fertility clinic, deciding to bring educational material to share with the clinicians. Despite these concerns, he reported a positive experience:

It really felt very open and very pleasant [...] I really don't feel like being trans affected it at all.

In contrast, Samantha, a trans woman, reported a very negative experience using a fertility clinic. She had banked sperm prior to transitioning to female and together with her female partner, intended to use these samples to begin a pregnancy. Clinic staff however, did not distinguish between her biological contribution to the child's conception and her lived experience of gender.

Clinic staff appeared to be unable to understand that they were providing services to two women and neglected to make simple adjustments to their work such as allowing her blood to be taken outside the andrology (male) department and refraining from referring to her sperm samples as "the boys." She describes the lack of effective response when she approached the clinic about these problems:

Our experiences there were really difficult and burdened with transphobia every step of the way through.

The paperwork was never correct. I am actually legally female in every way that matters and yet, on [the clinician's] forms she would always have an M for me [...] I was the "male" partner.

When we pointed out the errors on their forms, with me designated as male, the doctor never apologized, never made any attempts to correct the situation. She actually defended their practices [...] you know, 'nothing personal.'

Samantha

Another focus group participant responded to her story:

Nothing personal! It's not about you, your sense of who you are, your being, your fertility and your future family, nothing personal!

Despite these errors, she reported that this clinic seemed to have many resources at their disposal:

We didn't actually expect to have many problems [...] the clinic had flyers in their lobby about trans clients [...] They said "we've had lots of trans people here."

The particular doctor who we dealt with, just seemed to really have no idea how to use the resources she had to interact with us on our terms [...] Our entire experience there was really uncomfortable and it's not because they didn't have the resources, it's because they didn't know how to integrate their resources.

Samantha

It is necessary for the staff of fertility services be trained to ensure that trans clients are treated respectfully and in accordance with their lived gender. In addition, existing fertility service forms and documents must be adapted to accommodate the realities of trans bodies and lives.

### "No Good Option": Establishing Legal Parenthood

Every participant who had become a parent as a trans-identified person reported challenges establishing a legal relationship to their child within the constraints of current recognized parental designations. The Ontario Birth Registration process was highlighted as a process which did not accommodate their realities as trans parents, and some participants described being unable to accurately enter their families' information into the on-line system. Samantha found that there was no category that reflected her role as a biological mother, a mother who had contributed sperm to her child's conception. She secured her legal parenthood only by agreeing to be listed as the "father/other parent," despite her knowledge of herself as a woman:

The options are biological mother, biological father/other parent, or non-biological parent and none of them really seemed to describe me but I had to fit myself into one of them if I wanted to have a legal claim to my kid and for him to have a claim to me, so yeah, there is no good option within that.

The custody is secure [...] but the state of motherhood is very specifically legally defined and I am not legally my son's mother [...] There is an insecurity that remains based on that, there is custody but there is not motherhood.

Samantha

Ishai, a trans man who had been pregnant, also found that the birth registration process lacked a category for him as a biological father, though a father who had given birth.

I realized that there was no way on-line that I could be anything other than mother, but I was always clear that I was not the baby's mother.

The terms 'mother' and 'father' are culturally loaded terms, signifying a number of competing meanings depending on the context, including a *social* gender role and/or a *biological* relationship to a child. Both Samantha and Ishai used the terms 'mother' and 'father' to indicate their

social relationship to their child, irrespective of biology, calling on others to re-think the use of these terms. In attempting to be recognized as his child's father rather than mother, Ishai assumed a significant bureaucratic burden. He described being expected to go to an office in person to register his child, even though to do so meant travelling to a different city shortly after undergoing a Caesarian section. Further, a process for adequately recognizing his parenting role was still lacking. After fielding phone calls with the Deputy Registrar General, he was eventually successful in being recognized as his child's father, though this required a significant amount of self-advocacy:



We waited close to two hours [in the office] and then they said go home, we'll call you back tomorrow, we don't know what to do with you today, we'll figure it out. Everyone was respectful and clear it was a problem, but no one had thought this through before.[...]

It took us standing in the office with a new born baby, looking like a couple of exhausted bearded guys waving around the Ontario Human Rights Policy on Gender Identity, like, literally waving around the long version of their policy, to get them to the point where they would do that, and also being willing to say "look we don't want to have to take you to court."

Ishai

An exception to the general birth registration process was eventually made, but with no official change in policy. Ishai reflected on the limitations of this success, noting that as long as trans parents are erased from government forms, the burden of recognition remains with families:

If you make enough noise and talk to the right people, this is available to you [...] but it doesn't make them change what the form says initially and it still puts the onus on families that don't fit into the "mother" plus "father/other parent" structure, rather than on them to have a form that actually accommodates our families.

Ishai and Samantha's accounts indicate that the birth registration process must be revised to accommodate the reality of trans parent's bodies and their relationships to their children.

## SECTION THREE: NAVIGATING A TRANSPHOBIC WORLD WHAT HAPPENS, HOW IT IMPACTS US, WHAT WE DO ABOUT IT

### What Happens: Discrimination and Erasure

The world that parents inhabit is in many ways a very public one. Entering this public world of parenting can leave trans parents vulnerable to discrimination.

At the drop in centre that we used to go to when my son was younger, there was this grandmother there who had a hate-on for me like you wouldn't believe. She would take her grandchildren and [motioning with hands] "Don't, stay away from my grandchildren you freak!"

Judy, a gender queer parent of a young child

While some experiences can be described as active discrimination, others are more appropriately conceived of as *erasure*. In a society in which identification documents, check-boxes on forms, and washrooms are almost universally either male or female, in which the first question asked about an infant is "is it a boy or a girl?", the existence of trans people tends to be overlooked as a possibility. Viviane Namaste developed the concept of *erasure*: "[...] a condition which marks transsexuality as impossible."<sup>19</sup> Though not necessarily active or intentional, erasure results in an absence of relevant resources for trans people. Samantha, who had had a child with her female partner, described the lack of relevant information in their birth preparation class and among their midwives. While an individual's lack of knowledge may be understandable, systemic lack of trans content in all professional training programs is a reflection of erasure and has real effects:

None of them seemed to understand that a trans woman would be able to breast feed in a few different ways. There are supplemental nursing systems, and there are also hormone regimens that allow trans women to lactate, and either the midwives and other course facilitators seemed to be unaware of it or they didn't care [...].

Echoing other research findings which indicate multiple areas of concern for trans people, parents in this study described struggling on many fronts.

I'm potentially at loggerheads with school, health centre, the legal system and at work as well [...] I think policy makers and professionals who work with trans families need to know that it's often not one part of the system that your struggling with, it's on every single front [...].

Alfred, a gender queer parent

<sup>19</sup> Namaste, V. (2000). *Invisible lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## How it Impacts Us

Navigating transphobic systems and environments has a deep impact on trans parents and their families.

Jacquelin spoke about the assumption that her transition had harmed her children and the impact on her mental health:

The guilt over my kids damn near killed me on a bunch of occasions. It's been a really rough journey.

Some parents described the impact of facing hostility and trying to meet their parental responsibilities with very few supports:

I feel I constantly have to prove that just because I live my life as I do, it does not disqualify me automatically from being a loving and safe and good parent. It eats away at you and you start to question yourself [...].

Alfred

Children sometimes experienced transphobia alongside their parents:

It would upset my daughter when the extended family would use the wrong pronouns. It upset her when we went to our grand-daughters' funeral and some of the looks that I got from my extended family. It really upset her.

Tracey, a trans woman who transitioned with an adolescent and a young child

At other times, children witnessed more than they were able to understand:

My son would tell me "You know those people in the corner over there are laughing. I don't know why people laugh at you".  
I would try to explain, but what do you explain to a four year old about why other adults are laughing at you?

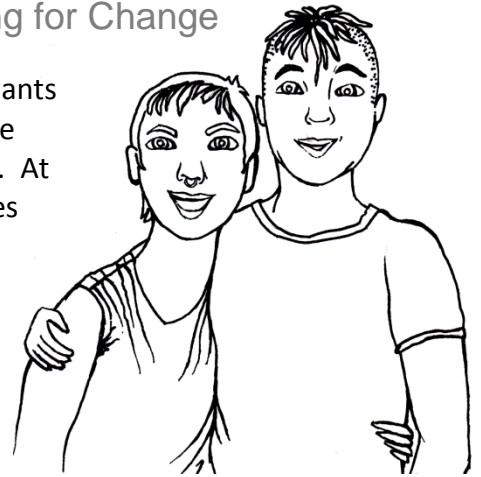
Kelly, a trans woman with a young son

It was not only active discrimination that impacted children, but also erasure and invisibility. Lisa described how her invisibility was a source of pain for her young son:

He cried when he was asked to draw a picture of his family [...] They were only given two colours to colour in, pink and blue. He knows enough to know that something is different with his family but the only time it hurts is when he's taught to believe in the illusion of society as male and female and that's all.

## What we do about it: Protecting Ourselves, Protecting Our Children, Pushing for Change

Though discrimination and harassment had deep impacts on participants and their families, the narratives in this study are not those of passive victims, but of people exercising agency in the face of discrimination. At times contradictory, participants' strategies for protecting themselves and their children reflected complex choices in the context of complex lives.



### Negotiating Visibility

In a world in which trans people are largely erased, to be visible as trans can be a catalyst for change but can also compromise safety. As parents, these participants grappled with the consequences of visibility, both for themselves and for their children. Judy, a gender queer parent with a young child summed up this challenge:

Just by being myself, I can make my space in the world and hopefully make the world a better place. The flip side of that is that just by being myself, I can attract all this transphobic crap from the world that ends up on my kid.

Participants had diverse strategies with respect to visibility. While some used the media to educate and create space for their families, others carefully avoided media attention. While some took a step back from their children's schools during their transition, others increased their involvement. Participants ultimately made the decisions which made sense in the contexts of their lives. Josh, a trans man who faced significant stigma during his transition decided not to be out to service providers when creating his family, conversely, Kelly spoke about her choice to assume the responsibility of being visible:

[Transition] was a really difficult and long fight and so after we finally went through all of that we said 'ok we're not fighting with anybody again for a while [...]' We did enough educating and we're done now.'

Josh

Being openly trans for me is partly about feeling like it needs to be de-stigmatized and feeling like I have the privilege to do that because I happen to come from [...] a privileged environment where I don't experience a great deal of prejudice as a result of being trans.

Kelly

Some participants were not able to choose how visible they were to others. Elizabeth, a trans woman with adolescent and adult children, described her experience of being recognizable as a trans person:

My oldest two daughters [...] I let them walk down the street with me dressed as a woman here in Toronto to see what the reaction is [...] I think they are disappointed with what they see. We're sorta like the canaries in the coal mine.

Elizabeth

Some parents' decisions about visibility were not easy and involved significant sacrifice. Tracey, fearing for her young daughter's well-being after her transition, described the painful decision to withdraw from her young daughters' school and social life:

I decided not to participate in any of her school or her life with her friends [...] it wasn't her transition, it was mine, and she wasn't going to have to deal with baggage or bullying [...] It's a shame that society makes me, who is a wonderful parent, have to make that decision, in terms of what is best for my kid.

Whether participants decided to create visibility or avoid it, they acted from a shared motivation to protect their children from harm, underscoring the necessity of the larger task of creating safety and social change for trans people, towards a future in which these choices are not necessary. Ultimately, creating this safety is not the responsibility of trans parents alone, but of the institutions charged with providing equal opportunities and services to all.

## Taking On Systems: Advocacy and Activism

Some participants responded to experiences of discrimination by taking on the issue as activists. Participants told their stories in university classrooms and at public events, they developed trainings for service providers about trans parenting issues, they filed complaints with the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the Law Society, and some were able to take charge when transphobic incidents occurred. At times they chose to take proactive steps in anticipation of the possibility of encountering transphobia. A trans woman described how she approached her children's school:

I did insist on going to at least a couple parent-teachers conferences. [...] I wanted to make sure the teachers knew that I was in the background and that I wouldn't tolerate any crap.

In some cases, being proactive required knowledge of human rights legislation as well as a sense of being deserving of respectful treatment. Ishai, a trans man, used this approach at a fertility clinic:

We walked in with a really big sense of entitlement. We're here to get the services we deserve, here's who we are, here's what the law says, here's what we're looking for, here's what you're going to do, let's go.

While these steps may work well for some, it is important to note that such a substantial burden of self-advocacy is not feasible for all trans parents as a group. Trans parents have varying levels of access to societal privilege and resources. Transphobia impacts trans people very differently depending on race, class, education, ability/disability, gender identity (trans man, trans woman, gender queer) and many other factors. Organizations and systems must take action to ensure equitable access and treatment for all people, rather than relying on individuals to address existing problems.

### Strategy and Compromise: Imperfect Solutions

While participants dealt with some situations directly, in other situations they diffused problems indirectly, strategizing to get what they needed within ignorant and sometimes hostile systems. For example, many found that established legal parent categories failed to recognize their unique relationships to their children. In the interests of securing a legal relationship to his child, a trans man with young children, chose to provide incomplete information during the birth registry process:

I was listed on the birth certificate [...] it was illegal that I put my name there and that has made me uncomfortable [...]. I don't foresee there being any [problems] but I'm aware that there could be.

Josh

For some participants, their strategies for protecting their children involved a level of personal compromise. Samantha agreed to be listed as the “father” on her newborn child’s birth certificate, in spite of the problems this created for her:

Ultimately I had to put my own sense of self aside and say bottom line is that I want to have a legal connection to my kid [...] It doesn't feel accurate and we still get tons of correspondence from the government which is based on that.

Samantha

Some of the compromises that were made were substantial. Aware of the ongoing pathologization of trans people, Jacquelin, who was transitioning and facing a custody battle, feared that her access to her children might be threatened. She sought out a diagnosis of *gender dysphoria* in order to preempt other more harmful diagnoses:

Being trans [...] in the law's eyes, it made you an unfit parent. I went to a mental health centre to get this official diagnosis so that I could be diagnosed as having one mental illness, gender dysphoria, as opposed to the diagnosis of just crazy and a danger to the kids. So that was to give me protection and to diffuse that particular avenue that my ex was taking.

Jacquelin

Participants also strategized around other people's lack of awareness. For example, parents who were transitioning had no choice but to manage their interactions with institutions, such as their children's schools, who expected mothers or fathers to look a certain way. Jane, a trans woman who transitioned with two children, found it was better to identify herself as her child's *parent* rather than as a *mother* or *father*:

I went to the office for something at her school and I just appeared as her parent. I allowed them to fill in whichever blank they were going to fill in, and that's how I used to deal with it there.  
'Yes, I am this child's parent'

Jane

## Talking to Kids About Transphobia

Many parents felt it was important to talk to their kids about transphobia, at times because their children had witnessed it. Participants were thoughtful about how they broached this topic, often choosing to characterize the people who perpetuate transphobia as "confused," "scared" and people with "issues," rather than as *bad people*.

You don't want to put that picture forward for your child. I don't want to say the world's a cruel and brutal place. I want to say the world is a confused place.

Kelly

After his children witnessed him being harassed by a staff member at a public swimming pool, Alfred found a way to explain gender conformity to his children.

I was able for the first time to explain [...] that he was censoring me for not being or looking the way that he needs to see a female-bodied person be, and that that's why I was getting hassled. And the children got it, they really did get it.[...]

He also noted the importance of having language and an analysis to offer to his children:

I was able for the first time to explain [...] that he was censoring me for not being or looking the way that he needs to see a female-bodied person be, and that that's why I was getting hassled. And the children got it, they really did get it.[...]  
I had the analysis and the strength, from [...] learning that I wasn't the only person who just couldn't fit those roles. [...] knowing that this is not new, we exist through time, and being able to show that to my children [...] I didn't have that in the 80s and early 90s.

Alfred, gender queer parent

Participants also felt it was important to prepare their kids for potential future discrimination. For this, they drew on their own personal experience, passing on their unique knowledge of self-advocacy and offering their children pieces of wisdom for staying healthy in a hostile environment.

I know that my son's going to be teased and I gave him a few ideas about how to strategically go through that. [...] Just to have the strength, the sense of his own identity to say, "you've got a weird looking dad" and for my son to say "yeah, and your point?" [...] If he expresses shame or fear that would actually make matters worse. Just to be proud of who he is and try to be proud of who I am.

Jacquelin

Though the motivation to protect children from harm is common to all parents, participants also commented on the limitations of a trans parent's ability to shield their children. Elliot, a trans man, reflected on the evolving responsibilities of parents with growing children:

When they're little we can create this world for them [...] we can protect them and create this world in which there are all these other possibilities. Then the outside homophobic/transphobic world comes in on them and that's just real. Our job becomes to somehow support them in the process of figuring that out.

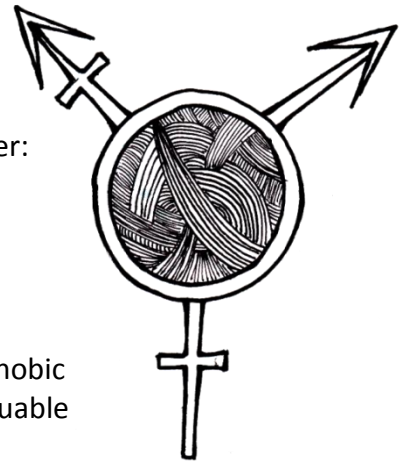
## Everyday Activism

Some of the most poignant responses to transphobia did not involve court challenges or confronting systems. At times, parents created change by acting in small everyday ways, quietly chipping away at stereotypes and prompting others to re-think gender. Josh described his response to questions about his newborn child's gender:

After he was born I'd say:  
'Yeah it's a boy, but you know, that can change.'

Alfred, a gender queer parent, described inspiring a shift in a transphobic parent through his own generosity, at the same time providing a valuable lesson for his child:

I went over to the mother and thanked her for the party [...] you could see her thinking 'oh this person is just a normal nice person' and the penny dropping and my kid from a distance was seeing this change. She commented on it on the way home, saying: "I think so and so's mom thinks you're okay" [...] what a gift we can give to our kids if we were able to stand strong and solid and be who we are, until [...] eventually people with just a little chink of curiosity or openness will see it.



## SECTION FOUR: THE GIFTS WE BRING THE STRENGTHS OF TRANS PARENTS

### “A Gigantic Gift”

#### Trans Parents as Role Models for Diversity, Acceptance & Authenticity

Many participants felt that as trans people, they were in unique positions to be role models for living authentically, a value they felt was important to pass on to their children.

By living my life authentically [...] I teach them a life lesson that is absolutely invaluable:  
To thine own self be true.

Jacquelin

Many felt that their role as a parent was enhanced by the consideration that they had given to their own identity. Kelly shared the hope that exposure to diversity will help her son understand his own identity:

I didn't see the variety of identities and expressions of identity [...] and that made it really hard for me to understand who I was and to find myself in the world. He won't have that problem, because he'll have been exposed to so much [...] that it won't be hard as hard for him to claim his own identity.

Kelly

I think a great thing about being a trans parent is that we've all had to be very self-reflective [...] I think we've really thought about who we are and what we're doing. I think that's valuable.

Samantha

Participants overall felt that as trans parents, they were particularly equipped to support their children to be their authentic selves.

I think the biggest piece we get to offer them is 'be yourself.' Don't be subject to peer pressure, don't succumb to what other people expect of you. Be yourself, I think it's a gigantic gift. Even if it's a hard gift, I think it's a gigantic gift.

Elliot

## Advocacy Skills

After facing situations which required self-advocacy, some participants felt they had acquired skills they could pass on to their children. Jacquelin gave the example of challenging limitations and authority:

One of the lessons we teach is [...] that a lot more things are possible than people will let you think... to question authority.

Alfred, who has dealt with workplace harassment because of his gender identity, felt he gained skills that were useful in assisting his daughter:

I've learned about anti-harassment policies and what organizations are obligated to do [...]. My daughter was being harassed at school [...] and I knew exactly who to go to [...] I felt empowered and as a result, my daughter did. And I think I wouldn't have dealt with that as well as I did, if I wasn't who I am.

Morgan, a gender queer participant, described how she passed on skills to her children for facing transphobia:

I tell them: "you know what, some people have their own issues, it makes them uncomfortable because they don't understand it. This is how I deal with it and hopefully that will work for you too".

Some participants felt that their children had also become advocates for the rights of others because of their experience with having a trans parent.

They've been dealt something that is so different from all the other children that they've taken the responsibility to be active participants in society and I see a confidence there that I can't explain. They will all defend the underdog.

Elizabeth

## "I'm Much More There": Becoming a Better Parent

While parents who transition have sometimes been characterized as selfish, many felt they had become better parents through their transition.

I've changed. I'm a better listener, I'm much more there [...] the kids pick it up.

Rebekah

Participants underscored the need for all parents to be healthy, whole people, describing their improved relationships with their children as the result of this change:

Being true to yourself and accepting who you are, and embracing who you are, you become a much stronger person. You become a different person, and usually a better person.

Some participants' children noticed this positive change.

My oldest one, I remember her saying several months into it that she realized she'd never seen me really laugh up until then [...]. She came up and said: 'I can see that you're happier now.'

Jane

## Vulnerability, Endurance and Courage: Strength from Struggle

In previous literature on trans parenting, some professionals have assumed that the struggles which trans people face will be exclusively negative for their children<sup>20</sup>. Though they acknowledged the impact of struggle in their lives, participants in this study also offered a new perspective on their children's experience. A trans woman described her sense that children can learn about perseverance by witnessing a parents' challenges:

Seeing somebody struggle, seeing one of your parents struggle with their challenges in life and find a way to deal with it [...] I think that's really valuable.

Jennifer described the potential for her children to become more compassionate:

It will allow them to become more understanding and more tolerant. They see what I'm going through and how I handled that, and in that way it's a good thing.

Dunya, a gender queer participant, felt that expressing some uncertainty about their identity taught their child about vulnerability:

I feel like being raw and vulnerable about it and being open and maybe not figuring it out, gave him some confidence, to know that people are just figuring themselves out.

<sup>20</sup> Baetens, P., Camus, M., & Devroey, P. (2003). Should requests for donor insemination on social grounds be expanded to transsexuals? *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, 6(3), 281.

Kelly felt that her struggles helped her son to better explore his own identity:

I think that his own identity is probably a little more clearly articulated than it would be for the average 7 year old. My coming out as trans [...] he had to work to process that. He's done his own work on his identity and that's an advantage.

Several participants felt that they were passing on lessons of endurance and courage to their children, not necessarily by intention, but simply by living their lives.

The thing I taught him, without actually teaching it to him, is courage.

Lisa

### Creating Gender Possibilities, Building Gender Literacy

Current child development literature describes the value of challenging rigid gender stereotypes among children,<sup>21,22,23</sup> yet despite this, child-rearing continues to be a key site where gender norms are taught and reinforced. Perhaps born out of their own struggles against gender norms, parents in this study who had younger children described their creative efforts to intentionally preserve gender options for their children. Josh chose not to share his baby's sex while in utero:

We didn't tell people a sex before he was born so that our parents couldn't jump into pink and blue clothing.

Some developed more expansive ways of teaching about gender and bodies:

Instead of teaching him that boys have penises and girls have vaginas, we just say most boys have penises and most girls have vaginas, and so that teaches him a general pattern while allowing for exceptions.

Samantha

Parents of young children also made conscious decisions to keep options open when it came to dressing their children, naming them, and supporting their choice of activities. Ishai described his motivation for avoiding hyper-masculine clothing for his young son:

It feels important not to thrust "you're a boy" upon him.

<sup>21</sup> Berk, L. (2006). *Child development*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

<sup>22</sup> Bukatko, D. & Daehler, M. (2001). *Child development: A thematic approach*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company.

<sup>23</sup> Puckett, M., & Black, J. (2005). *The Young Child: Development from Prebirth through Age Eight*. York, PA: McGraw-Hill.

Many parents told stories of allowing their children to explore clothing and activities that were typically reserved for one gender.

There were high-heeled shoes and he wanted to put them on. The older boy said “oh no, those aren’t for boys” and I walked over and said “I’ll help you put them on... they’re hard to walk in but you can try and I’ll hold your hand”. We walked around in high-heeled shoes until he got bored [...]

Josh

Some parents felt their open approach to gender was due to their own identity, while others felt that non-trans (cisgender) parents also shared this approach:

I definitely don’t think that would happen if I wasn’t my gender queer self.

Dunya

I can imagine a cisgender person who is trans-aware making all the same choices.

Josh

Additionally, some parents commented on their children’s unique abilities to grasp gender possibilities, a skill which Alfred dubbed “gender literacy”:

The youngest child in our family is extremely, I would say, gender literate [...] She navigates our world very comfortably. She’s quite clear that she’s a girl, but [...] she is exploring things that are non-traditionally girl attributes [...] a wider range of possibility certainly than I experienced as a child [...] and that will extend through her life in such a good way, it’s such a good foundation.

Alfred

Ultimately, parents sought to provide gender options as a healthy foundation for their children - options they had lacked themselves.

### “Making the World that Needs to Be”: Trans Parents as Agents of Change

Reflecting on their roles as trans parents, many described the sense that they were contributing to important societal change. Beyond improving their own well-being, many were committed to improving the lives of others as well.

We must survive as a role model for other people and as a role model for our children. We can't undermine the gift that we've been given [...] whether you think of it as two-spiritedness or giftedness. I think we've been given a gift and it's so important to hold on to that.

Jacquelin

Gender queer parents in particular spoke with a genuine sense of joy and purpose about their ability to create change in the world:

Just by being myself I can make more space for more people to be themselves [...] it's a really great effect that I get to have that I feel really good about.

Judy

It's incredibly important that we keep doing what we're doing and be true to who we are [...]. We're making the world that needs to be, not even the one that we want, but the world that is already here.

Dunya

Jacquelin summed up the strengths and skills that she feels trans parents offer to their children:

Just by existing we teach endurance and facing adversity. We teach compassion, we teach integrity, we teach subtly when it comes to how the world works. One of the lessons we teach, is that true is not what other people say, true is what you say.

## CONCLUSION

The stories we heard from participants in this study are not simple. They are not one-dimensional, tragic stories of hardship, nor are they triumphant tales of overcoming barriers. Alive with complexity, these stories reflect the contradictions and compromises inherent in both trying to change – and living in – a difficult world. Our goal was to capture this complexity in the personal accounts of trans and gender queer parents.

It is clear that there are distinct experiences among trans parents, in part determined by when they came to know themselves as trans in relation to when they became parents. Those who were parents before identifying as trans overcame substantial fears and came out or began their transitions out of a desire to care for themselves and their children. In many cases, family break-down occurred, coinciding with other significant losses. While many found ways to communicate with their partners and their children, and many partners and children found ways to understand and adapt, they did so without the benefit of community supports and resources. Societal transphobia functioned to

disadvantage them with respect to child custody and access. In spite of these struggles, trans parents also told us clearly that it does get better. Many entered a process of negotiating their new roles with their children and in so doing developed renewed relationships over time.

For those who were already trans-identified and then sought to become parents, family planning was poorly facilitated by the institutions they dealt with. In the absence of effective adoption outreach to trans communities, no participant attempted to adopt due to the expectation that they would be unsuccessful. Fertility services were inconsistent, with one service facilitating a supportive experience and another failing to accommodate the reality of trans bodies in their standard clinical forms and practices. Once they had become parents, participants had difficulty establishing legal relationships to their children in the Ontario Birth Registration system which also did not accommodate the realities of trans people's bodies, lives, and family configurations.

Regardless of when they came out as trans or gender queer, participants were vulnerable to active discrimination as well as to subtle forms of erasure which rendered them invisible. While this had real effects on them and their children, they were not passive victims, but actively strategized to address discrimination, and to protect themselves and their children. They embodied a number of strengths as parents, at times because of, rather than in spite of, their identities and experiences as trans and gender queer people. As they journeyed to express their unique selves, they became role models for diversity, acceptance, and authenticity. As they struggled and learned the difficult skills of self-advocacy, they passed on vital lessons about endurance and courage. As they created options for their children to express their authentic selves, they raised a new gender literate generation, contributing to building, as one participant put it, "the world that needs to be."

In light of these findings, it is instructive to reflect back on the damaging assumption about trans parents that appeared 40 years ago in the texts written about them - the assumption that their children would be better off without them.<sup>24</sup> We present this work in answer to the research which has failed to consider the transphobic context in which trans parents must raise their families and the ways that this stigma is sustained through disparaging accounts of their lives. We present this work in answer to the research which has failed to consider the tremendous gifts which trans parents may offer their children, *because of*, not in spite of, who they are. And we present this work in answer to the unimaginable losses which have resulted. This project reflects the efforts of trans parents to engage as researchers themselves and respond to the policies, practices and attitudes impacting them and their families. We hope we have captured the some of the complexities of the struggles, strategies and strengths of trans parents.

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<sup>24</sup> Green, R. & Money, J. (1969). *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*. John Hopkins Press.

## Recommendations

We recommend the following actions to address some of the needs identified by our participants:

- **LGBTQ Community Support Services** should create resources to support parents who come out as trans or transition, as well as their partners and children;
- **Trans Community Trainers** should incorporate the specific concerns of trans parents and prospective parents into existing programs which train service providers on trans issues;
- **Legal Support Workers** should build their capacity to offer legal resources to parents who are coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition;
- **The Family Law System** requires education programs to address both the specific legal issues facing trans parents and to address transphobia among legal professionals including: judges; lawyers; mediators; and family court support workers;
- **Schools and Early Years Centres** require training and resources to effectively welcome trans parents and their children;
- **Adoption Services** should ensure all staff are appropriately trained to work effectively with prospective trans parents and should conduct outreach to counter the perception that trans people would be considered ineligible to adopt;
- **Fertility Services** should adapt existing forms and documents to accommodate the realities of trans bodies. Staff should be trained to ensure that trans clients are treated in a non-discriminatory manner, consistent with their lived gender;
- **Service Ontario** should review the Ontario Birth Registration process to determine if it contravenes the Ontario Human Rights Code and how it can be adapted to accommodate trans parents.

## TRANS PARENTING RESOURCES

### Web Resources

#### The LGBTQ Parenting Connection

The LGBTQ Parenting Network's website provides information, resources and support to LGBTQ parents, their children and communities: [www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca](http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca)

#### Transforming FAMILY - Short Film

A ten minute documentary which documents current issues, struggles and strengths of transsexual, transgender and gender fluid parents (and parents to be) in North America today. This documentary was one of the results of the Transforming Family research project:

<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/socialchange/TransformingFamiliesFilm.cfm>

#### Factsheet on Reproductive Options for Trans People

Produced by Rainbow Health Ontario, this factsheet offers information aimed at medical service providers about reproductive options for trans people interested in hormone therapy or surgeries: [www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/admin/contentEngine/contentDocuments/Reproductive\\_Options\\_for\\_Trans\\_People\\_final.pdf](http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/admin/contentEngine/contentDocuments/Reproductive_Options_for_Trans_People_final.pdf)

#### Families Like Mine

The website of Abigail Garner, author of the book *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*. The site contains resources for LGBT families, including websites, books, and films. The site also has an "Answers from Abigail" online column where Garner answers a variety of questions relating to LGBT parenting and family issues. [www.familieslikemine.com](http://www.familieslikemine.com)

#### TransParentcy

TransParentcy's mission is to support transgender parents, and their advocates by providing information and resources to diffuse and/or dispel the myths about any adverse impact being transgendered/transsexual might have on one's children. Based in the United States, out of Portland, Oregon, TransParentcy was created to fill the void of information and resources for transgender parents and their children. [www.transparentcy.org](http://www.transparentcy.org)

#### Reflection Press

Reflection press provides books and curriculums and resources that use creativity to explore gender diversity, including the Gender Now Colouring Book. <http://www.reflectionpress.com/index.html>

#### Respect and Self-Esteem: Talking About Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with Our Kids

This guide is for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual parents seeking advice on how best to communicate their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to their children. Booklet available free: <http://www.familleshomoparentales.org/html/en/publications.html>

## Books

### *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting*

This collection of writing includes contributions from parents, prospective parents, writers, academics, lawyers, activists, health care professionals and — most significantly — queer spawn, the children of LGBTQ parents. Trans parenting themes include: trans experience in fertility clinics; pregnancy among trans men; and an essay by the adult child of a trans woman.

Epstein, R. (2009). *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting*. Toronto: Sumach Press.

### *Dress Codes: Of Three Girlhoods... My Mothers, My Fathers and Mine*

A memoir written about the experience of growing up as the daughter of a father who transitioned to female.

Howey, N. (2002). *Dress Codes: Of Three Girlhoods... My Mothers, My Fathers and Mine*. New York, New York: Picador.

### *Out of the Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up with Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Parents*

An anthology of essays by the grown children of LGBT parents

Howey, N. & Samuels, E. (2000). *Out of the ordinary: Essays on growing up with gay, lesbian, and transgender parents*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press.

## Resources for Children, Adolescents and Teens

### COLAGE – Toronto District School Board

COLAGE offers a supportive space for kids in the TDSB (grade 3 and up) with an LGBTQ parent/guardian to hang out and share experiences.

For more information, please contact TDSB social workers Ilana David at 416-898-0895, [ilana.david@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:ilana.david@tdsb.on.ca) or Gaela Mintz at 647-215-5918, [gaela.mintz@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:gaela.mintz@tdsb.on.ca)

### Gender Independent Group (GIG) - Toronto District School Board

GIG provides an opportunity for parents/guardians of children who express gender independence to meet and discuss their experiences of navigating the gendered world in which we live. Children are also provided with a safe space to meet, play, and express themselves in an affirming and inclusive environment. The group serves families with elementary school-aged children in the TDSB. Groups are held monthly on Tuesday evenings from 5:00-6:00 p.m.

For more information, please contact TDSB social workers Gaela Mintz at 647-215-5918, [gaela.mintz@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:gaela.mintz@tdsb.on.ca) or Ilana David at 416-898-0895, [ilana.david@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:ilana.david@tdsb.on.ca)

### The Ten Oaks Project: Camp Ten Oaks and Project Acorn

Based in Ottawa, the Ten Oaks Project is a not-for-profit, charitable organization that engages and connects children and youth from LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two-spirit, queer) communities. The Ten Oaks Project provides a summer camp for kids 8-17 (Camp Ten Oaks), and a leadership retreat for youth 16-24 (Project Acorn): [www.tenoaksproject.org](http://www.tenoaksproject.org)

### COLAGE - Kids of Trans Web Page

National US organization based in San Francisco which has developed resources for the kids of trans parents. Webpage includes a video clip, resource manual and information about a speakers' bureau. <http://www.colage.org/programs/trans/>

### Kids of Trans Resource Guide

Downloadable PDF resource guide for the kids of trans parents. Includes discussion of: terms; challenges if parents transitioning; dealing with transphobia; the benefits of having a trans parent; and resources. <http://www.colage.org/programs/trans/kot-resource-guide.pdf>

### Gender Now Colouring Book

A colouring book for children aged 3+ to explore and learn about gender. Useful for children who are questioning their gender as well as those with trans people in their lives. Produced by a children's author who is an ally to trans people. Order on-line. \$14.95 US <http://www.reflectionpress.com/gendernow/coloring.html>

### COLAGE Kids of Trans Listserv

An on-line community for mutual support between the children of trans parents. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kidsoftans/>

## E-mail Groups for Trans Parents

### Trans and Gender Queer Parenting

US based on-line community for parents and prospective parents who are transgender, transsexual, gender variant or genderqueer. All members are prospective or current trans and gender queer parents or parenting or intending to parent with a trans or gender queer person or people. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GQTGParenting/>

### TS Parenting

US based on-line community for transsexuals who are parents. Intended for sharing experiences and exchanging information on legal resources. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TSParenting/>

### APartT

UK based e-mail group primarily for trans parents who are struggling to maintain contact with their children after transitioning. The list also welcomes those who are considering informing their families about their identities as well as those who may have been able to maintain parenting contact. <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/APartT/>

*Transforming FAMILY* is a ten minute documentary that jumps directly into an ongoing conversation among trans people about parenting. It is a beautiful snapshot of current issues, struggles and strengths of transexual, transgender and gender queer parents (and parents to be) in North America today.



This documentary was one of the results of a community-based research project conducted in 2010 by Jake Pyne and the LGBTQ Parenting Network. The project was designed to increase visibility, empowerment and community building amongst trans parenting communities in Toronto.

*Transforming FAMILY* was officially launched at the 2012 Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film and Video Festival.

The film was directed by Rémy Huberdeau in collaboration with the LGBTQ Parenting Network, and with support from: The Community One Foundation and The Centre for the Study of Gender, Social Inequities and Mental Health.

The film is in English, however it has been captioned in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Japanese to date. The film is also available with English audio description.

For more information, and to stream the film, please visit:

<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/socialchange/TransformingFamiliesFilm.cfm>



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(416) 324-4100 ext. 5219 or 5276

To download this report and for more information:

<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/socialchange/TransformingFamilyReport.cfm>



To download this report please visit

**[www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/TransformingFamilyReport.cfm](http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/TransformingFamilyReport.cfm)**

The LGBTQ Parenting Network promotes the rights and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer parents, prospective parents and their families through education, advocacy, research, social networking and community organizing.

This report comes from a community-based research project developed to document the impact of transphobia on trans and gender queer parents and draw attention to the strengths that they bring to parenting. The project was led by the LGBTQ Parenting Network at the Sherbourne Health Centre in Toronto, in collaboration with the Re:searching for LGBTQ Health team at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH). Financial support was provided by the Centre for the Study of Gender, Social Inequities and Mental Health at Simon Fraser University, and the Community One Foundation.



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF



**GENDER  
SOCIAL INEQUITIES  
AND MENTAL HEALTH**