

The Importance of Parental Support

In recent years, research has given us new information about the importance of parental support for young people who grow up to be sexual or gender minorities. For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) youth who are accepted by their families are healthier, have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed or attempt suicide.¹

In an Ontario study, transgender youth who had strong parental support for their gender identity were more likely to report good mental health and self esteem, and more likely to report that they had an adequate place to live.² In addition, when the transgender youth in this study had strong parental support for their gender identity, the likelihood of a suicide attempt dropped by 93%.²

All young people need to know that they are loved by their caregivers for who they are.

1. Ryan, C., Russell, S., Huebner, D., Diaz, R. & Sanchez, J. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(4), 205-213.

2. Travers, R., Bauer, G., Pyne, J., Bradley, K., Gale, L., Papadimitriou, M. (2012). *Impacts of Strong Parental Support for Trans Youth: A Report Prepared for Children's Aid Society of Toronto and Delisle Youth Services*. Trans PULSE. <http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Impacts-of-Strong-Parental-Support-for-Trans-Youth-vFINAL.pdf>

Key Points

- Many parents struggle to understand and accept a child who expresses gender in non-traditional ways.
- Being gender independent is normal and healthy and is not caused by parents. It is not something that children do for attention or to defy their parents.
- The most important thing parents can do is to find support for themselves and their child. You might look for help from parents with similar experiences, or from a non-judgmental counsellor.
- Parents' concerns about safety are real. The organizations on the back of this brochure can help your family strategize to stay safe.
- We can't predict who a child will grow up to be, but listening to what children tell us about their gender can help us to understand what they need from us right now.
- No matter what, your child can be healthy and happy with your support.

Check out the other brochures in this series:

Transition Options for Gender Independent Children and Adolescents

Advocating for Your Gender Independent Child

Resources

To locate supportive health and social service providers in Ontario see:

Rainbow Health Ontario
RainbowHealthOntario.ca
416 324 4100

Gender Creative Kids
GenderCreativeKids.ca

PFLAG Canada
pflagcanada.ca

**Transceptance at
Central Toronto Youth Services**
ctys.org

U.S. Organizations

Gender Spectrum
genderspectrum.org

Trans Youth Family Allies
imatyfa.org

Family Acceptance Project
familyproject.sfsu.edu

Are you worried about your child's gender expression?



Rainbow Health Ontario

Many parents struggle with understanding their child's experience of gender, especially when it is different than they expected.

While some kids are content to dress and do the activities typically associated with boys and girls, others express themselves in ways that the adults around them find surprising or confusing. Some boys love dresses, some girls insist on short hair and balk at the colour pink, and others say that they are or want to be another gender. These kids are sometimes called *gender independent*. Other terms are *gender variant*, *gender non-conforming*, *gender creative*, *transgender* and for some Aboriginal children, *two-spirited*.

When a child expresses their gender in non-traditional ways, people sometimes blame the parents or suggest that the child is mentally ill. However, being gender independent is not a problem and is not caused by something parents do or don't do. It is also not something that children do on purpose to defy their parents. Gender diversity exists across all cultures and is normal and healthy.



Caring for Yourself, Caring for Your Child

Going against the grain in a world that discourages diversity is never easy. Parenting a gender independent child can raise difficult feelings. Parents worry about what other people will think and how their child will fit into their cultural or faith community. Many feel shame or grief because their child is different than they expected and many worry that their child will be bullied. In some families, there may be anger and serious conflict over a child's gender independent behaviours. It is very important to seek help if there is a threat of abuse.

The most important thing parents can do is to find support. It can be helpful to talk with parents who have a similar experience, or with a non-judgmental counsellor. There are also helpful books and videos available and the organizations on the back of this pamphlet can help to locate these resources. If the advice of a helping professional does not feel right, don't be afraid to look elsewhere.

Every child's identity is important to them, and every child needs to know that their caregivers love and welcome them unconditionally. The more support that parents can find for themselves, the better they can provide this support to their child. Talking to others can help you understand what you need, and listening to your child can help you understand what they need from you.

Looking to the Future

Like all children, there is no way to know who a gender independent child will be as an adult. They may grow up to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual. Some may identify as gender fluid, or in-between genders. Some may become more gender-typical over time. Others may come to identify as transgender and may want to transition to a new gender role. All of these paths are healthy. Though most children will not transition, some parents may find it helpful to get more information about this option. Please see our brochure: "*Transition Options for Gender Independent Children and Adolescents*". No matter who they grow up to be, gender independent children can be happy and healthy with the support of their caregivers.

Safety Concerns

All parents want to protect their children from harm. Safety concerns are real and you may need to find safe ways for your child to express themselves. Some families first try this in the home or on a family vacation. Including children in safety decisions can give them tools to communicate and help keep them safer. For information about advocating for your child, please see our other brochure: "*Advocating for Your Gender Independent Child*". Ultimately, parents cannot prevent their child from facing challenges, but they can show them love and help them to feel good about who they are.

