



A Parent *Responds*

By Anonymous

I was invited to follow Dick Barbieri's review by sharing my experience as a parent of a transgender child. I read of Jodie Patterson's journey raising Penelope early on as my child's dysphoria first became apparent to me. Our stories are powerful tools—I know that as a parent and educator that the stories I learn of other families help me to understand gender identity. I hope sharing is a way for me to acknowledge the path of other families and to pay forward toward greater acceptance and inclusion.

Parenting a transgender child means that my kid, unlike cisgender kids, is perceived to have a *SEXUAL IDENTITY*—in my kid's case beginning at four years old! When people not familiar with transgender communities encounter your child as trans, perhaps they begin thinking about genitalia and orientation. The truth is transgender kids just want to play, pee in comfort and peace, and be called by the right names and pronouns. But people have narrow opinions of what a young kid is supposed to be. These opinions affect the way they and others may mistreat our children. Beliefs about gender are deep and for some it feels like a quantum leap to imagine a child being anything but a narrow version of what they were assigned at birth.

My child was assigned female at birth and had a beautiful name I chose and still love. When I understood that my child could not live life as the girl I imagined him to be, we had to sort through reintroducing him to everyone in our lives.

The first place I felt compelled to 'come out' as the parent of a four-year-old gender non-conforming kid was at our church, as my child refused to be seen in a dress. One. More. DAY! The

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community of older people of color has been our community since my child was a baby. After shopping at a thrift store for boy's "Sunday best" clothing and arriving to the worship space with my son dressed "like a boy," I can't say that familiar parishioners showed an outpouring of affirmation and support. Perhaps shock and surprise have morphed through the years to muted tolerance.

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In my kid's case, his classmates were introduced to his new name and male pronouns. It was the first time in the school's century-long history that a current student had transitioned. It certainly will not be the last. And the school will learn from each child's journey how better to navigate gender with the children they serve.

I wrestled with my kid's clear, persistent, and insistent gender dysphoria privately for several months. I heard unrelenting frustrations:

- a refusal to wear any clothing that looked girlish... even denim pants with a star stitched on the pocket went in the refusal pile

- pretend play through only male characters (Diego not Dora; later Maui not Moana)
- a deep fear of growing up to be a *mom*; dad, maybe, but mom never
- grief at having female anatomy; at having no "weiney"
- an unrelenting desire to have his hair cut and his earrings removed.

Gender, then and now, is very public for my transgender boy. Here are some ways it manifests *publicly* in our lives

- As you've likely heard, public restrooms can be difficult to navigate.
- When my son was called *pretty* when he was being presented as a girl, adults would be trying to compliment him and he would literally scowl at them.
- Camp is hard; ensuring your kid is safe in the space of public restrooms with grown adult cis-men and unknown boys is really scary.

Gender is distinctive because expression can be so public, and you can't easily tell a four-year-old when and how to share their gender identity. Gratefully, I had local health practitioners to support my child *and me* as we made sense of my child's gender journey. First at church, at school, and then in our circle of friends and family I had to share my child's identity and new name.

As a result, things shifted. Friends or family members had to find their way to affirming my child... or the relationship would naturally



wither away. I hear people mention how easily 'the kids get it' but that was not always our experience. My kid lost his two school besties. Once early in his journey with his new name I picked him up and saw one of the besties, a girl. She told me as my son skipped away happily, "I wish 'Johnny' was still 'Jane.'" You know, grief is real. I get that. Parts of me grieve the things that changed. Yet, my child was sooo happy to let down the burden of *masking* himself. The rest of us needed to find a way to accept and embrace this happy boy, or step aside.

Our struggles persist. I recently learned that my child was "deadnamed" last summer at camp, i.e. taunted by a few fellow campers with his birth name—one knew him before and outed him; another used his birth name like a slur. It is nine months later and I just learned of the incident. While some find smooth sailing with social gender-adjustments, others (mine included) find pre-transition struggles continue and new social challenges emerge. While transgender children that live in their affirmed identity generally live healthy lives, it doesn't mean isolation, social aggression, and other challenges do not remain. We all must remain vigilant in supporting our children and community members (especially marginalized ones) so they grow into their own versions of the healthy adolescents and adults they aspire to be.

Parenting my transgender kid also feels empowering and communal. Although we are a family of two, we have found a tribe of sorts, and for us, that feels amazing. There is a vir-

tual and real community of other parents that are navigating together and supporting one another. Each of our experiences and stories are varied, but we are mirrors to one another.

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A friend told me about the book *Far From the Tree* by Andrew Solomon, which explores the many ways parents raising children with identities different than their own—kids on the autism spectrum, deaf children of hearing parents, others. Solomon's analysis of parenting a kid so unlike us is also quite revealing. Where Patterson's *A Bold World* helps me imagine my own power to embrace and tackle the challenges that come with life, Solomon offers the realization that because I don't share my child's gender identity, it is critical that I connect him with others that do so he can be affirmed, create a healthy identity, and build a healthy tribe.

Ideas for Allies:

- Check out Welcoming Schools (www.welcomingschools.org) and Gender Spectrum

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(www.genderspectrum.org) for book titles to read and discuss with the cisgender or gender-nonconforming children.

- Ensure your school, children's classrooms, and local libraries have great gender-inclusive books.
- In restaurants, swimming pools, schools, etc., request that managers provide gender-free restrooms/changing spaces for families and others that need privacy.
- Support local queer-serving youth organizations—many queer youth also face family rejection.
- Invite kids on the margins in and consider blurring the gender lines at social activities—does the party HAVE to be called a PRINCESS party? Can the name be open such that it can include nonbinary/trans/gender non-conforming kids?
- Imagine that some families going through transition will feel isolated, in #NoMansLand, even if others haven't done anything to target us; we need allies to *affirm, embrace, welcome, invite* us so we feel something other than mild tolerance. I imagine some adults fear they may 'mess up,' but just saying 'I'm here... let's connect... how can I be helpful?' is a good start. ●

This author has asked to remain anonymous. CSEE is grateful for their contribution.

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