

How to get it right when our kids 'come out' or identify as another gender

Firstly, a reminder that sexuality and gender are two different things.

- Sexuality is who you're attracted to (e.g. lesbian, gay, heterosexual).
- Gender is your identity (e.g. girl/woman, boy/man, non-binary, transgender). Just because someone looks female, doesn't mean they identify as a girl/woman.

Generally a person's sexuality emerges around puberty (American Psychological Association, 2018) whereas their gender emerges around three years of age (Martin, Ruble, 2004).

As the saying goes: "never assume". If your 4-year-old 'girl' says "I'm a boy!" or your 14-year-old tells you "I'm lesbian" take a deep breath and try to put your judgments and worries to one side. How you support them will be critical to your child's wellbeing, now and in 20 years' time!

OUR FOUR TOP TIPS

If you do nothing else, following these evidence-based tips will make a world of difference.

1. Assume this is NOT a fad or stage. Believe them.
2. Whatever you're thinking or feeling, let them know you love them no matter what. Affirm your child and their sense of who they are.
3. Know that there is nothing wrong with your child and nothing about them needs changing.
4. A repeat! Remember that you are their most important source of support. They may have a new journey ahead (as do you) but it doesn't have to be negative.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

Who we are attracted to

If you have a child who has 'come out' (as we typically put it), those four top tips are a good starting point for accepting and loving them, just as they are.

We'd also suggest:

- doing some research (see page 2); and
- letting them know you'll help with anything they need, especially at school, if there are any issues with bullying.

GENDER IDENTITY

The gender we identify with

From here, we'll use the term 'trans' to describe a person who identifies as a different gender to that on their birth certificate, and the term 'cisgender' to describe those whose birth certificate aligns with their assumed gender.

If you have a child who identifies as trans you may worry things will be challenging for them and experience some grief that they are no longer the gender you'd expected. Please be assured that you can work through this, and that it's going to be okay.

Our 'four top tips' definitely apply and the information that follows is based on the very latest research.

TRANSGENDER MISINFORMATION

You'll find plenty of negative stuff on the internet, but just be cautious about what you buy into. It's only since 2010 that predictors of positive outcomes for people identifying as trans have been researched and considered (Riggle, Rostovsky, McCants, Pascale-Hague, 2011). Big sigh!

While you're likely to find information about the high rates of mental health issues for trans young people, it's important to know that this isn't occurring because they're trans. It's likely because of the cumulative impact of discrimination, e.g. bullying, reactions from loved ones and/or isolation from services (Strauss et al, 2017).

THINGS THAT CAN HELP

- Self-acceptance and potentially social transitioning, e.g. adopting the name, hairstyle and clothing of the gender they identify with (Strauss et al, 2017).
- The support and acceptance of loved ones, particularly parents (Strauss et al, 2017). This can reduce the prominence of mental health issues to the same as cisgender people.
- Try and find a support group for your trans rangatahi (young person) so they can meet like-minded peers. RainbowYOUTH has a database of support groups around the country.
- We believe it's important for everyone to nurture their mental health and wellbeing and strongly recommend [The Five Ways To Wellbeing](#) as a start.
- Beyond this, those identifying as trans may also find benefit from reading, music and the arts, having a pet, or something to care for, and fostering a sense of community – e.g. friends who are accepting, along with groups/teams they have fun with.

Biggest thanks to the amazing team at Rainbow youth who contributed to this piece, and care hugely about supporting queer and gender diverse youth in Aotearoa.

SHOWING YOUR SUPPORT

What does this mean and look like?

- Firstly, staying calm and accepting your child as trans. Parents who found this challenging say it's been helpful to realise that being trans is not a choice, but an essential part of their child's identity (Strauss et al, 2017).
- Encouraging your child to simply 'be themselves' – so they can feel happier, more confident and free, as they may have been living with a sense of shame and secrecy (Strauss et al, 2017).
- Using the name and pronouns they'd like you to use (e.g. she, he, they etc), and letting them dress in the way that makes them feel comfortable and being okay with whichever clothes they prefer.
- Reflecting on your feelings and seeking support from friends, family and others (e.g. your doctor, Qtopia, Lifeline, Youthline). This may include finding networks of other parents who have trans kids (either in-person or online).

OTHER PRACTICAL STEPS

- If your child is young, speak to their preschool, kindy or school about how you can collectively support them. Or if your child is older, ask them how you can best support them with school (see Inside Out).
- You will know this already, but broader society may not be as accepting and supportive as you. Know your stuff, link up with others, and know that standing up for the rights of your child takes courage, but can help change the world.

UNIQUE STRENGTHS

It's little wonder that "be proud" acts as a statement for the rainbow community, and as a parent you can certainly take this on too – be proud. Here are just a few of the things that are fantastic things about kids and people from the rainbow community!

- They are often brave and empathetic with big hearts.
- They have open minds.
- They have a deep self awareness.
- They'll stand up for each other and pioneer positive change for others.

CANTERBURY SUPPORT SERVICES

[Q-topia](#)

A support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, takatāpui, fa'afafine and queer youth aged 14-25.

Parents and guardians peer support

A group for parents of gender diverse young people. [Email](#) or join the Portal Support for NZ Parents of Transgender and Gender Diverse Children on Facebook.

[Bounce](#)

Tips, information and inspiration for all things Christchurch youth.

[298](#)

Free health and wellbeing services for our local youth, and a big supporter of people identifying as sexually and gender diverse.

NATIONAL SUPPORT

OUTline NZ

Counselling support online, over the phone or in person. 0800 OUTline

[Youthline](#)

A great source of information for young people and their whānau.

[Takatāpui](#)

A resource and support hub for Māori who identify as sexually and/or gender diverse.

[Rainbow Youth](#)

Support, information and services for our rainbow youth and whānau.

[I'm Local](#)

A Rainbow Youth initiative for those who are living and growing up rurally.

[Inside Out](#)

Aotearoa's big advocates for young people of all sexual orientations and genders.

INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

Schools and other public services are required to be welcoming and inclusive. Just like you, your child's school may need to go on a journey of learning, and these resources may help.

- Inside Out:
 - [Making schools safer](#)
 - [Legal rights at school](#)
- [Education guidelines](#)
- The Education Review Office's [Trustees booklet](#)
- [Information](#) from the PPTA

COOL KIWI STUFF WE LOVE

[The Real](#)

[Fantastic videos](#) you can watch or share with your teen.

[Radio NZ Insight article](#)

Raising A Transgender Child In New Zealand

[Born This Way – Awa's Story](#)

A beautifully honest and touching documentary.

INTERNATIONAL RESOURCES

[First Steps](#)

[Shared stories](#) from parents and caregivers of trans and gender diverse children.

[Family Acceptance](#)

A [research paper](#) exploring the importance of family.

[Supporting transgender children](#)

A research [paper](#) with more in-depth information about transgender identity and some of the strengths and challenges.

[Want to learn more?](#)

Stanford University offers a free online 2-3 hour video-based course on the health of gender diverse children and young people.

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