

# About our Transgendered Children

based on *A Primer by Transgender Nation*

From the PFLAG-Talk/TGS-PFLAG Virtual Library -- <http://www.critpath.org/pflag-talk/library.html>

**1: What does it mean to be transgendered?** Transgendered people are individuals of any age or sex who manifest characteristics, behaviors or self-expression, which in their own or someone else's perception, is typical of or commonly associated with persons of another gender.

**2: Are there different types of transgendered people?** Transgendered persons include pre-operative and post-operative transsexuals; transgenderists (persons living full-time in a gender opposite their birth sex with no desire to pursue surgery); transvestites (preferred term: cross-dressers, those whose gender expression occasionally differs from their birth sex); "mannish" or "passing" women, whose gender expression is masculine and who are often assumed to be lesbians, though this is not necessarily the case. Transsexual and transgenderist persons can be female-to-male (transsexual or transgendered men) as well as male-to-female (transsexual or transgendered women).

**3. What causes a person to be transgendered?** No definite answer can be offered to this question. Research suggests there is a biological basis for transgendered behavior but to what degree is unknown. Transgendered people manifest their condition at different stages in their lives ranging from infancy to old age. This leads to the observation that biology creates a capacity while nurture and individual choice may retard or accelerate the emergence or degree of transgendered behavior.

**4. Can transgendered people be treated or cured?** There is no known cure or course of treatment which reverses the transgendered person's manifestation of the characteristics and behaviors of another gender. Transgendered people have at times been subjected to electric shock therapy, aversion therapy (applying physical pain to condition response), drug therapy and other procedures. None of these "cures" have succeeded. Many such "cures" have been painful and dehumanizing for the victims. While there is no cure for transgendered persons, many transsexuals can benefit from counseling with mental health professionals with training and experience in gender identity issues. Professional counselors can help individuals and their families evaluate their situation and provide important support and education for individuals undergoing gender transition.

**5. Is transgendered behavior sinful and against the teachings of the Bible?** An isolated passage in the Book of Deuteronomy (22:5) reads: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God." This passage is part of what biblical scholars refer to as the Hebrew Purity Code, a system of rules for social behavior and dietary consumption intended to "purify" the body and spirit in God's eyes. In the broader context of the Purity Code this is a minor

passage which is accompanied by prohibitions against intercourse with a menstruating woman, wearing clothing made of mixed fibers, sacrificing a blemished animal and remarrying a former wife. Taken together the prohibitions of the Purity Code amount to arbitrary cultural taboos as contrasted with the more profound precepts of the Ten Commandments. Biblical scholars and theologians warn of the danger of selective interpretation of the Bible in a way which upholds some passages while ignoring others and overlooking the broader context. Other authors point out that what "pertaineth unto a man" and what garments "pertain to women" have undergone continual change throughout history. Judged strictly by Hebrew standards the entirety of modern civilization would appear to violate the Purity Code.

**6. Are transgendered people gay?** Most transgendered persons identify themselves as heterosexual after they transition. Some identify as homosexual or bisexual after they transition. Sexual orientation and gender identity are NOT related. However, transgendered people are perceived by most people as homosexuals, and thus are discriminated against in similar ways.

**7. How are Transgendered People Discriminated Against?** Like gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, transgendered people face employment and housing discrimination. They are also denied public accommodations and access to health care for their medical conditions. They are also potential targets for hate crimes: verbal harassment, hate mail, harassing telephone calls and acts of violence committed by the same persons who hate homosexuals and bisexuals. But unlike gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, transgendered people are much more likely to fall victim to discrimination and hate crimes, because most of them possess physical or behavioral characteristics that readily identify them as transgendered.

**8. Are there differences between crossdressers and transsexuals?** The largest subgroup of transgendered persons are crossdressers who are mainly heterosexual men, although there are also women who crossdress. Apart from their occasional crossdressing, they lead lives that are quite ordinary in all other respects. Most crossdressers are married and many have children, so they have much to lose from their transgendered state being revealed. They also wish to remain in the sex they were born, unlike transsexuals.

**9. Why do they feel that way?** The overall psychological term is called gender dysphoria, an intense feeling of pain, anguish, and anxiety from the mis-assignment of a transgendered person's sex at birth. All transgendered people suffer from it, but the feeling becomes more acute for transsexuals and transgenderists, usually in the middle of their lives. These feelings lead many transgendered people into depression, anxiety, chemical dependencies, divorces and other family problems, even suicide. In order to seek relief from their gender dysphoria, transsexual and transgenderist persons transition, or to begin living their lives in their true genders, which are opposite their birth sexes. This means

they literally must "out" themselves to their employers, their families, their friends, everyone.

**10: How can I help support the transgendered person in my family?** First, offer your family member your unconditional love and support. Secondly, educate yourself about transgenderism and transgendered people and their concerns. Thirdly, help your loved one educate and "come out" to other family members and friends who will be supportive.

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## **An Open Letter to the Parents, Family and Friends of a Transsexual**

Since you are reading this, I assume that someone close to you, a friend or family member, has made what must appear to you to be a very shocking and perhaps disturbing disclosure. Your thoughts must be racing at this moment and your emotions are probably in a turmoil. You probably have many questions. If you are concerned about the person, you probably have some fears. In this letter, I will try to answer some of those questions and deal with a few of those fears. I

can speak with authority on this subject, because I am a transsexual.

However, before answering those questions, let me give you some insight into what it is like for a transsexual to make such a disclosure. It hasn't been that long since I told my parents about my intention to change sex. We had always maintained a close relationship. Nevertheless, telling them this "secret" was the most difficult thing I've ever done. It took nearly a year of therapy to be able to do so. Every time I visited home or talked to my folks on the phone, I thought about the time I would have to tell them. I couldn't enjoy my visits with them, because I'd wonder if this was the last visit I'd make.

As transsexuals, we hear all sorts of horror stories about people losing friends, family members turning away, parents disowning their children. At a less intense level, we routinely hear of vicious arguments, recriminations and denunciations of the person by family members. I have to admit, some transsexuals are tactless in the ways they make their disclosures and invite such confrontations. But, nonetheless, these stories race through your mind as you consider sharing this important part of your life with the people you love.

I remember sobbing uncontrollably for nearly an hour after completing the letter tape I sent to my parents telling them of my decision. As I placed the envelope in the mail, I knew it was possible (I couldn't believe it was probable) that they would be so angry or embarrassed that they would ask me not to come home again. The next 24 hours were the closest thing to Hell on earth (and I'm not swearing) I could imagine. Inside my emotions, fears and expectations were running wild. I tried to imagine what the response would be, but I couldn't. I wanted to call and tell them it was just a big joke, but I knew they had a right to know, even if that meant me losing them forever.

I know you are confused, and possibly angered, by your friend or family member's disclosure. What you need to understand is the agony that person

went through to tell you. The only reason they did it is because they care for you, and they believe you need to know.

With that in mind, let's look at some of the questions you must have about your loved one's problem and the solution they have chosen.

### **What exactly is transsexualism?**

Transsexualism is defined as being a persistent discomfort about one's gender intense enough to cause them to seek to change sex. The best way to really understand this feeling is to imagine that tomorrow morning you woke up and found that during the night you had been changed into a member of the opposite sex. Your mind is the same. Your internal image of yourself as male or female is unchanged. However, your body has changed and you will have to live up to the expectations of that gender. If you can imagine that for just an instant, you can understand what it is like to transsexual. Transsexualism then is simply have the internal gender identity of one sex and the body of another. Put another way, it's being a woman's mind trapped inside a male body or a man trapped in a female body.

### **Does this mean that he or she is homosexual?**

Sexual orientation and gender identity are separate issues. Most transsexuals consider themselves to be heterosexual members of the opposite sex. Many of us are celibate. Most of us are very conservative in sexual matters. Some male to female transsexuals will become lesbians, however, that is unrelated to the gender dysphoria. The "sex" referred to in transsexualism means "gender." It does not imply a specific type or prevalence of sexual activity. All that is happening is that the person you know is leaving one gender to join the other. It's as simple, and as complex, as that.

### **Can't you get help for this sort of thing?**

Well, that depends on what you mean by "getting help." If you mean that there might be some therapy which would "cure" the person and make them accept their physical sex, the answer has to be "No." No treatment has been successful in that regard. Gender identity is fairly well established by the time a person is two or three years old. By the time he or she is an adolescent it is solid. On the other hand, help is available in the sense that the specially-trained psychologists can help the person clarify his or her feelings about gender issues. If it is appropriate for that person to make such a change in his or her life, the psychologist can help that person make this difficult, but fulfilling, transition and deal with the challenges, both practical and emotional, that accompany the process.

### **As a parent of a transsexual, was there something I did wrong raising my child.**

The issues surrounding the question of what causes transsexualism are controversial. However, studies of patterns of child rearing and family structure have yielded such contradictory results as to render them invalid. There is no

solid evidence to suggest that parents could prevent transsexualism. Much promising research is being conducted in areas related to biological factors related to discovering the "gender switch" in the human brain. Whatever the cause of transsexualism, it is clear at this time there is no known way to prevent the condition whether by medicine or by parenting practices.

### **You speak of a transition process. What is entailed in this process?**

The transition process is a long, challenging, wonderful, exciting, frustrating, tear-filled, laugh-filled, happy, sad experience. It begins with honesty. You begin to treat your situation honestly. You stop denying what you are and decide to seek help. The help comes initially in the form of a psychologist trained in gender dysphoria. This person becomes your counselor, guide, confessor, therapist and friend. You deal with issues directly and indirectly related to your transsexualism. You don't need to carry old baggage into your new life. I had to deal with some issues related to my relationships with my peers in high school and my social isolation as a male. You also deal with the trials of the transition: the times when you are embarrassed by some rude teenager in a mall yelling out crude things, the times when you worry about your job and what will happen when you tell them about the changes, the times you make a disclosure and someone turns away, the times you cry until dawn because you feel like you're the only person in the world who feels this way. But the counselor is also a person to share your triumphs with, someone who understands and gets excited with you when you are called ma'am for the first time, or when you buy your first Easter dress or when you pass certain milestones such as name change, first job and the beginning of the real life test.

After a minimum of three months in therapy, the transsexual can begin hormone therapy. The hormones begin to feminize or masculinize the body. For males-to-females this means softening of skin, a change in muscle strength, redistribution of body fat, softening of facial features, reduction of sex drive and breast development. The hormones can also mean mood swings ranging from a mild moodiness about once a month to unpredictable extreme shifts of mood. However, since this is expected you learn to adapt, much as a genetic woman learns to adapt to her monthly period. Female to males develop greater muscle mass, skin becomes tougher, voice deepens and facial hair begins to grow. Unlike the effects of female hormones on male-to-female transsexuals, androgen effects are often irreversible. Therefore, beginning a hormone regimen is a serious step for the woman who wished to become a man. These hormonal changes have more effect than simple changes in body structure. You actually begin to feel more like a member of your appropriate sex. You are gradually becoming more congruent with your real self. The next major step is to begin the full-time living test otherwise known as the Real Life Test or RLT (which some people say stands for Real Long Time). The RLT is a one year period of time during which the person must live, work and socialize entirely in their new role. This is the most important part of the transition process. During this time of crossliving you become a woman (or man) socially, legally, professionally and emotionally. For the first time in your life you become one person. You no longer

have a secret real self that is hidden away or must share its existence with the false self. Your life is congruent with your gender identity. I suspect that your friend or family member is close to beginning this period and that is why he or she is making this disclosure. The period immediately before the RLT is a period of disclosures. You have to tell your boss, insurance agents, Department of Motor Vehicles, social security, credit card companies, banks, landlord, and, most difficult of all your family and friends. I hate disclosures. As many as I've made, they don't come easily. I agonize over each one. I've been lucky. Most people have been courteous, kind and actively supportive. My boss offered to help make the transition easier. My parents called immediately to offer me their love and support. Sometimes I was surprised at how kind people could be to someone so different. It was humbling at times. At the end of the year the person obtains a letter from his or her psychologist and a second psychologist certifying that he or she is a true transsexual and will benefit from surgery. The surgery is expensive ranging from \$5000 to \$40,000 depending on the surgeon and the services offered. I won't go into surgical details here. However, the surgery is painful and a period of 6 - 8 weeks is generally needed to recover enough to return to normal functioning. The surgery is major, but it is relatively safe. However, recovery is aided if the person has the support of friends and family. Will you provide this support?

**Will this be the same person I've known all along?**

Yes--and No. Yes, this person will still have the same likes and dislikes. His or her personality won't change substantially. All the qualities that you liked in the old person will still be found in the new one. But to say there won't be any changes would be foolish. For one thing, this person will now relate to you as a member of the opposite sex. His or her mannerisms will be congruent with that sex. Because this person will be treated as a member of that sex certain aspects of his or her personality will change as a result of that socialization. You will probably find, though, that such changes will seem very natural for the person. You will probably find that the person will become more outgoing, become less serious (read depressed), display new talents you didn't know they had, and generally present themselves as a happier, more fulfilled, more confident person. In short, this will be the same person you've known all along, but they will be more than what they were in the past.

**How will this change my relationship with the person?**

That all depends on the relationship you currently have with the person. If you are a wife, lover, or football team member with the person, it will change greatly. As the physical changes occur, these physical relationships will change. However, for parents, brothers and sisters, friends and employers the change will be less drastic. I just returned from my first visit with my parents as a woman. I think we all were surprised at how ordinary everything was. We discussed politics, the church, people we knew, all the things we normally discussed. I talked a little more with my mother about fashion. My Dad seemed to be a bit more protective of me than usual. But overall, things really changed little.

Obviously, the nature of your relationship now will dictate how much the relationship will change, but you may be surprised at how little really changes.

### **How do I talk to this person now?**

Basically, you talk to them as you always did. At first, it will be a bit awkward and you'll get the gender pronouns mixed. You'll forget and call them by their former name. Don't worry about such things. Most of us understand this and won't hold it against you. Just remember that the person is still the same person you always knew. Treat them as your old friend, family member, son or daughter as you always did.

### **Why did this person leave me/us to be the last to tell?**

The odds are if you were the last people he or she told, it probably means you are the one that person cared the most about. As already stated, making this disclosure to anyone is pretty anxiety ridden. It's hard enough to tell anonymous bureaucrats; it's almost impossible at the start to tell people who matter. Most of us have to "practice up" on small disclosures before we make the big ones. Many times we want to get as much business out of the way as possible before telling our loved ones. This way we can focus entirely on the relationship and not be distracted by a lot of trivia related to the transition. So, if you were left till the last, it was probably because you were loved the most.

### **What can I do to help this person?**

Just asking the question is a great start. Just to know that the people you love still care about you can mean the world to you. Going through the trauma of telling a loved one about your gender reassignment is so nervewracking that you are overjoyed if that person is still talking to you afterwards (sometimes they won't). If you are concerned enough to ask how you can help, you have shown a level of support many transsexuals do not receive. In more practical ways you can simply be there for the person. Be ready to listen to them about what they are experiencing. But please don't overload the person with questions right at first. Clarify a few areas which are of greatest concern for you, then let the person disclose the rest at their own pace. If you are a member of the sex this person is entering, offer to help with their socialization in little ways. Offer to go shopping with them, take them to a ballgame, share fashion or makeup tips, include them in girl talk or guy talk. You may find that you are a role model for this person. If you are of the sex they are leaving, it will probably be harder for you. Please, don't view this as an act of betrayal. It's an act of becoming. Express your support for the person and through some small act confirm their gender choice. I was touched when my Dad put his arm around me and called me Terri for the first time. Most importantly, let this person know you love and support them no matter what they are or what they become. The message my mother left on my answering machine after my letter arrived is still etched in my memory: "It doesn't matter to us whether you are Charles or Terri; we love you

regardless. We love our daughter as much as we loved our son." Excuse me for a moment I have to wipe my eyes.

You friend, family member, son, daughter, sister, brother, loved one took a major risk sharing this part of his or her life with you. He or she has expressed faith that you will accept him or her for who they are rather than what they look like. It's a major risk. You have in your power to lighten the burden and ease the pain of living life caught between the genders or you can make that burden a crushing load. The choice is yours. I'm glad the folks I cared about chose to do the former. What will you choose?

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