



Gender-diversity in young people

**A short guide to supporting
transgender, gender-diverse and
gender-questioning youth in South Africa**



Dignity, Equality and Freedom

There is **no universal experience of being transgender**, and your gender diverse child does not need to fit any particular definition of what it might mean to be trans. People often understand transgender identity as a desire to transition from one gender to another, i.e. from girl to boy or boy to girl, but in reality, the broad spectrum of gender identity and expression is more complicated. If your child is suggesting they are transgender and using that term, wherever possible **give them the space to self-identify** and describe themselves.

Every family is unique, with different family dynamics, as well as cultural, social, and religious influences. Some families have to consider their child's physical safety in their communities more than others, but all families have to weigh the effects of their parenting/caring approach on their child's long-term psychological well-being. Affirming caring behaviours may be a challenge at first to implement, but **it's critical to take whatever steps you can to indicate to your child that you are with them**. Easy ways to support your child:

- *Listen to your child.*
- *Validate and accept your child's identity and follow their lead.*
- *Don't assume that they will want to transition or wear specific clothes.*
- *Understand that they are the experts on their own feelings.*
- *Assure them that they are loved.*
- *Be your child's advocate - ask others to respect your child's identity.*
- *Require respect within the family.*
- *Support your child's gender expression by using preferred names and pronouns.*
- *Maintain open and honest communication.*

Silence, secrecy, ridicule, religious-based condemnation, reparative therapy, blame and pressure to enforce gender conformity are **ineffective and often dangerous**.

Is my child transgender?

Children are not born knowing what it means to be a boy or a girl; they learn it from their parents, older children and others around them and fit into what is instinctive for them.

Children express their gender in varying ways. Try to avoid gendered assumptions. Whether your child is trans or not, **enforcing binary expectations of gender can be deeply harmful.** When your child identifies as a particular gender, it does not mean that they will fulfil all the assumed stereotypes of that gender. Your child is an individual.

Naturally, there are endless variations in the ways that children express themselves, so the best option if you think your child might be transgender is to **give them the room to express themselves** and ask them what 'being a girl' or 'being a boy' or 'being transgender' means to them.

Create opportunities for the child to speak about their gender identity - the best way to know more about who your child is, is to listen to them, and create an environment in which they feel safe to share.

For healthier transitions, troubleshoot problems together with your child as they arise, rather than dictating their process.



Parents / Carers

You, as a parent/carer, may have to adjust your ideas or visions for your child's future. Some parents/carers struggle with this in particular. Feelings of embarrassment, denial, anger, fear, doubt, grief, and worry are normal, as are feelings of acceptance, understanding, support, pride and joy. Many parents/carers feel a combination of **positive and negative feelings**.

Most of the time parenting or caring for a transgender child is like parenting or caring for any other child, but there are some situations you will face as the parent or carer of a transgender or gender diverse child that are unique to your family and your child. **Parental support is incredibly important.** Things you can do as a parent/ carer:

- *Understand gender by exploring your own gender history.*
- *If damage has been done to the relationship, work to heal it.*
- *Confront your anxieties so that you're not caring from fear.*
- *Talk to other youth and adults who are transgender or gender diverse.*
- *Do not blame yourself, and remember: your child is not ill.*
- *Tell others (while respecting needs and privacy of your child), especially close family and friends.*

Safety at school / varsity

Gender diverse children are at **higher risk of bullying** and mental health problems. School environments can be particularly triggering for these issues. As a parent/carer you bear a burden to ensure, as much as possible, the physical and emotional safety of your child in the face of that general reality. **Follow your child's lead concerning sharing that they are trans.** It may at first only be something they need you to know. Other people including schools do not need to know until your child is ready to disclose. Give them the opportunity to control their own story.



Parents/carers can help prepare transgender children for unwanted questions or comments by helping them come up with respectful replies that maintain their boundaries; this way, they won't be left on their own to come up with a response on the spot.

Some communities may be more difficult than others. Parents/carers need to decide on an individual basis if their child might be in physical danger by expressing their gender in public, and **weigh this physical danger against the emotional harm of not allowing our child to be their true selves** outside of the home. There is a cost to this choice: to your child's sense of self, and potentially their experience of your support and acceptance. Learning when and how to advocate for your child may take some time. When doing so try and be:

- *As informative as possible.*
- *Be prepared for questions which you do not have to answer.*
- *Be clear about what is required of the other person (i.e. correct pronouns).*
- *It may be simple to say "you don't have to understand but you have to be respectful".*
- *Try and partner with the school or teachers.*
- *Ask the school to use gender-neutral terms such as 'students' and 'children'.*

Ultimately, it is important for you and your child to know their rights regarding bullying, harassment, and discrimination in school. It may be useful to **ask if your school/university if it has a bullying policy**. If your school/university does not have one or it lacks coverage regarding gender, you can bring it to the attention of the school and advocate for change. **Most universities have student wellness centres and LGBTI organisations**, which will be able to offer support to your child.

Single-gender spaces are particularly tricky for gender diverse children. Listen, ask questions and follow their lead. If your child will only use a specific facility, then it is essential to discuss with their teacher or school. **It is not your responsibility to educate schools, but it is your responsibility to advocate for your child** and hopefully work with the school to create the best possible outcome.

Healthcare

Most young people will disclose their feelings in their teens, often around the time when puberty is progressing. **They may find the changes of puberty very upsetting**, and a lot of trans teens begin to get very depressed, withdrawn and may even self-harm or have suicidal feelings.

Mental Support: If your child is happy and content, then therapy may not be needed. Keep in mind that you as a parent/carer are also allowed to seek support.

Studies have shown that family support is the single strongest predictor of mental and physical health and wellbeing of transgender youth.

Medical Support: Some children may never seek or desire medical support. It is best to listen to your child to understand what they want, who they are and who they want to be.

Be aware that visiting a doctor can be traumatic for a child struggling with a disconnect from their body. It is important to find a doctor who understands the needs of transgender children. Experienced medical providers may be difficult to find at first, but they do exist.

Medical Transition: Medical transition in young people usually consists of taking hormone blockers after the initial stages of puberty. This merely pauses puberty and stops the young person's body changing in ways they don't want it to.

Most young people who start blockers will progress in time to cross-sex hormones which then reflect their inner self, but this is done in a staged approach with full knowledge, consent and guidance at every step along the way. Some young people progress onto surgery, others don't, and everyone is different.



Key: Research has shown that affirming parenting/caring can significantly affect a child's positive outlook on their lives, their mental health and their self-esteem.

Home Affairs

Should you wish to change your child's sex/gender marker or name this will need to be done at the Department of Home Affairs.

In South Africa, the changing of markers and the receiving of a new ID number is facilitated by the **Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status act 49 of 2003**. You/your child has every right to have their marker changed should they so desire. Be aware though that Home Affairs staff are not as well informed about the Act as they should be this is particularly the case when dealing with youth. **If you experience issues reach out to an organisation for assistance.**

The details of the Act can be found online:

<https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/a49-03.pdf>





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