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10 things every parent of a transgender child needs to know

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There are few professionally published resources for mothers of transgender and gender nonconforming people. As children transition, so too must their families, and no one feels this change as acutely as mothers, who often both bear their children and act as their primary caretakers. The bond between mothers and their children is one that is frequently referenced, but too infrequently spoken of honestly.

What do mothers really think about their transgender and gender variant children?

This past year, we watched as Shiloh Jolie-Pitt came out as John in the public arena. Family reports indicate the child has gone by the name John since a young age, and media photos have documented Jolie-Pitt's preferred male attire, haircuts and mannerisms since toddlerhood. Supported by celebrity parents who are known to be LGBT savvy, John Jolie-Pitt presents us with the very public manifestation of the new vanguard of transgender children: out, unapologetic, self-assured and supported by their families. If 2014 was, as noted by Rolling Stone, a year of increasing transgender visibility, 2015 may shape up to be the year of the transgender child.

Trans people have been public before, but what really began to spark change and increase visibility for trans children was the Barbara Walters "20/20" special back in 2007. A year later, the book I co-wrote with Stephanie Brill, *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals* came out, and forever changed the national conversation about transgender children. Medical clinics supporting the highest level of ethical and professional care for youth have begun in cities such as Washington, Chicago, LA, San Francisco, and Boston. Groups such as Oregon's TransActive Gender Center, and the national TransYouth Family Allies have paved the way for other parents, allies and advocates, to organize and start their own groups.

We commend the Jolie-Pitts for their unequivocal support of their child, and their willingness to allow a certain amount of media scrutiny as a result of their acceptance. No doubt there will be allegations of child abuse leveled against them, for simply allowing their child to express his affirmed gender. Sadly, those of us who work in the field understand too well that the results of not allowing a child to express who they know themselves to be, in any arena, can result in tragedy.

We see this over and over again, most recently last week, when Ohio teen Leelah Alcorn took her own life by walking into traffic. Alcorn's family, conservative Christians, did not

support their child's gender expression and have been reported as sending her to "reparative" therapy, which attempts to refute and shame children into suppressing their affirmed genders. A post from Alcorn on Tumblr, which she planned to appear after her death, stated, "My death needs to mean something." Although deaths such as Alcorn's can act as dramatic lightning rods in the media, not all social change happens through tragedy. Sometimes it takes people willing to take a stand, push forward in the face of prejudice, bullying and discrimination.

Sometimes it takes innovation and advocacy. And sometimes it just takes seeing the smile on a child's face when she meets others like herself, and knows she's not alone. We see those smiles of happiness over and over again at our playgroup, the Unicorn Project. While it may be too late for Leelah, it's not too late for the kids who attend similar playgroups, camps and conferences across the country.

Thanks to kids like John Jolie-Pitt, and families who are willing to step forward in support, trans children will have many more role models this year. And as both parents and mental health professionals, we know just how important this is. We can't wait to see what other positive changes come from what we hope will be the year of the transgender child.

Here are my recommendations of 10 things every parent needs to know about their transgender child.

1. What should parents do if they think their child is gender non-conforming or transgender? First, just continue to love your child and support your child for being themselves. Second, don't panic. Third, educate yourself about what this all means, and consult with other parents who have been in your shoes. Join an online support group or attend a meeting with other parents of transgender or gender variant kids. Read some books. Try to locate a therapist who has experience working with families like yours. The therapy might actually be as important in supporting the parents, as well as the child.

2. How can parents tell if their child is transgender? Clinicians look for several specific markers of gender variance. These include young affirmed girls who wish to pee sitting down, wear traditional girls clothing, want to grow their hair out, use items like tablecloths to make dresses and hairwraps, play more with other girls, and choose more traditionally defined "girl's toys" over things like trucks and superheroes. These affirmed females will also usually insist they are girls (not just want to be girls) and may feel very distressed by their boy body parts. Affirmed males will usually be very tomboyish, want short hair, play mostly with other boys or feel more comfortable with more traditionally boyish clothes (including underwear) and toys, and even pee standing up. They may say they are boys. However, not all trans children express their gender in a similar fashion, and these are only guidelines. If parents notice a combination of these factors in their child, and it doesn't appear to be a "phase"—i.e. it does not pass—they might consider consulting with a knowledgeable gender specialist.

3. What resources exist to help families with transgender children? There are online support groups and list-servs, some monthly drop-in groups in certain cities and towns, organizations like PFLAG and Gender Spectrum, and several national gender conferences, including the

annual one put on by Gender Spectrum, that are wonderful resources for families. Connect with other families in your area and start your own support group if none exist. Many families have found that finding a knowledgeable, supportive therapist experienced in working with trans kids and their families is a wonderful thing.

4. How is the world changing for transgender children? Transgender children need no longer feel isolated and afraid in many families and communities. Because of brave families who have paved the way, sometimes this is a non-issue in some school districts and communities of faith. Children are no longer hiding, but are able to come out as trans at a much younger age than even five to 10 years ago. When children are allowed to be themselves and grow up feeling loved and supported, they become independent, productive, emotionally stable young adults. Isn't that our goal as parents?

5. What kinds of things do the stories of parents of transgender children have in common? The most common element is that though parents truly struggle to understand something that is unusual to them at first about their children, because of love, they choose to believe in their kids, and not let society dictate to them that something is "wrong" with their children. Many have become advocates for all children across the gender spectrum and often for the entire transgender community. They have gone from shock and fear, to acceptance, to becoming leaders in their communities. That is the power of a parent's love.

6. What do the parents of transgender children find to be the easiest? The most difficult? I'm not sure anything could be said to be easy, because we as a society are still learning about this issue. What can be the most difficult is being able to let go of the child you thought you had, let go of the dreams you may have had for that child, and begin using a new name and different pronouns. Once these difficult tasks are given some time, things may begin to get easier.

7. The role of unconditional love. There is no greater possible source of love in your life than your children. Your children base their world upon your love and acceptance of them. Unconditional love can be the key to bringing you back to the present moment and keeping you there.

8. How do parents accept their child's affirmed gender identity? Know that acceptance takes time. Use your unconditional love for your child as a means of developing your own self-understanding: how do I need to grow to allow me to unconditionally love my child, even when my child is not as I expected they would be? What needs to change in me so that my focus can be on helping to smooth the way for my child, to minimize the trauma they experience, to make their life as easy and as joyful as possible?

9. What steps do parents take to share their child's transition with relatives and their wider communities? Many parents of transgender and gender non-conforming children may feel anxiety about whether and how to disclose their child's affirmed gender identity. From family and friends to neighbors, co-workers and even strangers, disclosure is something parents will have to make decisions about while balancing their child's privacy, safety and emotional wellbeing. The more you learn to speak with confidence and pride about your child, the

easier it will be for others to accept your child and your parenting choices.

10. How can parents prepare their transgender and gender-nonconforming children for the path ahead of them? Spending time helping your child develop coping mechanisms is an essential part of raising a gender-variant or transgender child. It is important to teach them resiliency in the face of adversity, and it is critical to help them develop a strong sense of self-esteem. There are numerous books and resources for parents about enhancing self-esteem in their children. Research these techniques and use them on a daily basis.

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