

What I Learned as a Parent of a Transgender Child

As a pediatrician and mother, I thought I knew a lot about parenting. But I was blindsided by my daughter's coming out as trans, and that first year was riddled with mistakes.

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Sweat trickled down my neck as I stood in the heat alongside my daughter and husband, waiting for our turn to march in the Los Angeles Pride Parade in 2018.

While I had been a spectator at Pride before, I never guessed that one day I would be marching beside my teenager, dark maroon lipstick painting her lips, a barrette pinning back her now almost shoulder-length hair, a "she" pin fastened to her "love wins" shirt. She was beaming and radiant.

I looked over at my husband and held his gaze. We each ceremoniously waved the pink, blue and white striped trans-pride flag with one hand and gripped our daughter's hand with the other.

I had spent more than 15 years examining hundreds of newborn babies wrapped in pink, blue and white striped blankets when I made my hospital rounds as a pediatrician. But I had only recently learned that the trans-pride flag had a similar pattern. This wasn't the only thing I had learned over the last year. Being a pediatrician and mother of three, I didn't think there were many parenting scenarios that could catch me unprepared. But I had been blindsided by my daughter's coming out as trans, and that first year was riddled with mistakes. Following are three of the greatest lessons I learned, which ultimately made me a better mother.

Be an optimist for your child.

Once our daughter came out, the language in our home became predominantly negative. Are you sure? Your life is going to be so much harder and you'll be discriminated against. You are so smart with so much potential, but some people won't see that. You'll have a more difficult time getting a job. You'll have to work harder to prove your worth. You could be the victim of a hate crime.

Even if my husband and I weren't always making these statements directly to our daughter, fear and worry pervaded all of our conversations, creating an overall negative energy in our home. One day we found our daughter moping around on the couch, dismayed about her future, and realized it was all our fault.

We decided right then and there to stop being pessimists. We told her that with her big heart, intelligence and [family support](#), there were no limits on what she could accomplish. We shifted our focus from all the negative trans media coverage and began highlighting the positive, citing examples of trans people living full lives and making a difference in the world. We said that we expect all three of our children to pursue their passions wholeheartedly, and that she was no exception. The more positively we spoke, the more optimistic I became.

Your child is dealing with enough negativity from the media and outside world. Make your home a safe space. Don't be a pessimist. Instead of telling your child they have a long and limited road ahead, tell them their future is bright with no limits on what they can accomplish or who they can be.

There is not one way to be trans or transition.

As a pediatrician, I assumed I knew all about trans identity and its presentation, despite never receiving any formal training on gender identity or transgender health care. I questioned my daughter's trans identity because she didn't have signs in childhood. I've learned that not every trans person presents at the same age or in the same way. [Trans identity](#) can emerge during [childhood, adolescence or beyond](#). Just because the way your child presents doesn't align with your understanding doesn't mean their trans identity is not valid.

Once I accepted my child's gender identity, I had my own ideas of what transition meant. I stepped in and orchestrated various appointments for my daughter according to how I thought her transition should be. While my daughter was eager to begin medical transition, the pace of all the appointments involved was overwhelming at times. Transition can involve social, medical and surgical options, or a combination thereof. Not every trans person chooses every intervention available.

I've spent a lifetime expressing my gender in different ways, like choosing a pantsuit some days and a frilly dress on others. Most days I wear makeup, but some days I don't. Gender identity is not a choice, but how we express our gender is. Don't impose your choices on your child or make assumptions that they will want to explore procedures to help them look or sound more like they are cisgender. The [American Academy of Pediatrics' first policy statement](#) on the comprehensive care of transgender and gender diverse kids outlines a multidisciplinary approach, emphasizing "there is no prescribed path, sequence or endpoint." Ask them what they want, listen and go at their pace while providing support and being an advocate. Leave the doors of communication open.

Make decisions based on love, not fear.

Fear had my husband and I paralyzed with indecision and inaction for months before I reached out to another mother who had also been blindsided by her child coming out as a teenager. I heard her speak at [a Moth storytelling event](#), and was moved and inspired by her journey from bewilderment to acceptance.

She gave me an invaluable lesson that every parent can practice, whether or not they have a trans child. She told me that at every decision point, she would ask herself if she was deciding based on fear or love. If you're asking yourself, "Should I let my child take the next step toward transition?", the fear choice and answer would be, "What if she regrets it or changes her mind?" The love choice and answer would be, "Is this the right decision for the child in front of me now? What does my child need from me today?"

Multiple studies have shown that supporting transgender teens in their identity significantly improves their mental health and decreases their threefold risk of [suicide](#) to the same rate as that of their cisgender [peers](#).

When your children are newborns, you meet their cries minute to minute. Let that parental instinct take over again. Initially, concern over how reactions of elderly relatives and friends would impact my parents also held me back. While my parents are progressive, I worried that gender variance would be beyond their level of understanding given their age and the conservative culture they grew up in. Then I realized that I had an obligation to do what is best for my child over an obligation to protect anyone else.

As a pediatrician, I've always supported parents in making decisions for their kids based on their own beliefs rather than those of extended family or friends. Pretend that there is no fear or hate in the world, and ask yourself what decision you would make. Then do that. Sometimes, it really can be that simple.

Are you the one raising your child, or is the outside world? Choose love as your guiding point. Choose your child.

Having a transgender child has expanded my heart and mind in unimaginable ways. It has brought people into my life that I would not have otherwise met and enriched my understanding of what it means to be human. Most importantly, it has taught me the true definition of unconditional love and what it means to be a mother.

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