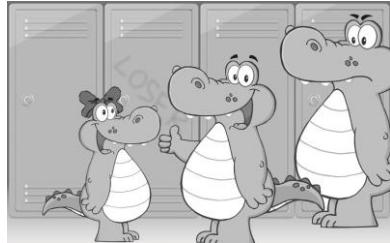


CHAPTER 4

School, Friends, and Bullying

School.

Whether you like it or not, unless you're homeschooled, you can't avoid school if you decide to medically transition. Going to school and doing your best to excel is essential to your development as a person, a good citizen, and your ability to be successful and contribute to society.



Schools are increasingly becoming a "safe space" for trans students as more are adopting policies that protect and support gender diversity. Since you spend a large chunk of your waking hours in school, it's also worth locating some allies, specifically, a person or people on whom you can depend.

So, what's your school like? Is it a safe place to come out? Ask yourself:

- *Do I get a general sense that "difference" is acceptable?*
- *Have other kids come out as LGBTQI? How did it go?*
- *Who would be safe to come out to?*
- *Who would I be comfortable coming out to?*
- *How will I handle negative reactions, if I encounter them?*
- *Is there a way to formally report and address bullying if it occurs?*

If you can answer "**Yes**" to all these questions, you're in a great place! Some schools are liberal and have progressive policies regarding trans rights, but many schools aren't and students and staff can put pressures on teens to conform to traditional



notions of “woman” and “man.” While you can still come out in a setting like this, remember that your number one priority is *your* safety. It could be that your safest option is to come out after you finish high school. It’s not that you shouldn’t live your life openly and proudly as whom you are, but you should be aware that some school situations are not so black and white. Simply surviving until you can graduate may be the only right choice you can make at this moment in your transition. However, if you feel safe, then I suggest rehearsing a few lines that you can say when someone outs or attempts to out you. This way you are prepared with a thoughtful response when it happens. Outing is a form of bullying. If they are mean, the idea is to defuse them by being nice.

Coming out may occupy so much of your mind for a while that you can forget why you’re in school: to learn knowledge and build academic and social skills. The sooner you find a safe haven in your school environment, the quicker you can refocus your energies on school, which will also help you feel balanced and emotionally stable. You may feel like coming out has thrown everything around you into chaos, so it’s probably in your best interest to wait out the high emotions and drama.

Coming out at school: thinking it through.

Change never happens if someone isn’t the “first” to do something new. Some trans students feel comfortable and capable of taking on harassment or rejection to make a statement about their right to transition. Other students attend a school where being trans would hardly cause a ripple. We naturally pick up on the “temperature” of our environments simply by observing how “*difference*” is treated—not just in regards to gender, but other identities also, like sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, language, and more.

While you can never be 100% sure of people’s responses before you come out, if you feel like it’s time to start telling people at school, the first step is the same as coming out to your family: *Plan ahead.*

Testing the waters.

Before you announce that you’re trans to other students try to gauge their responses using some strategies like mentioning a trans news story or television character in conversation to check out people’s reactions. If you

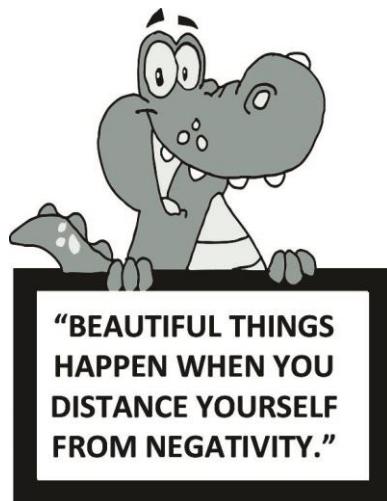
don't want to jump immediately into discussing trans people, you can try bringing up gay, lesbian, or bisexual celebrities or stories. Keep in mind, though, that people sometimes respond differently to differences in sexuality than they do to gender. As marriage equality is now legal across the US and gays and lesbians are becoming more in the mainstream, society is becoming increasingly acceptable of LGB people. But, in some of these same spaces, transphobia may still be acceptable because trans people haven't made the same gains as the lesbian and gay movement. So take your time when testing the social atmosphere for trans acceptance.

Finding your allies.

Have you felt comfortable talking with a particular guidance counselor, teacher, or coach and felt that they might be open to you? Maybe your school has a Gay/ Straight Alliance that can provide you with built-in peers and teachers who will support you. Make a list of your allies ahead of time. Remember, as we discussed in Chapter 2, first come out to people who you are more certain will react with support so you can get some practice and build allies.

Bracing yourself for potentially negative reactions.

Fear and discomfort with gender diversity is so pervasive in our society that it's almost inevitable that at least *one* person in your school will express disbelief, anger, or even disgust when you come out as trans. Ideally, they're in the minority and you have your allies to back you up and reinforce the idea that transition is just a part of life. Perhaps you've tested the waters and have gotten the sense that a negative response will be strong, but you've still decided it's worth it to feel liberated.



This is the point where you imagine “worst case scenarios,” and ask yourself what you'd do in such situations. What if you were teased in the hall? Threatened with violence? Mis-gendered by teachers and classmates who

ignored your requests for correct pronouns? You must be prepared for these situations, so that you can have a strategic response. If things like this happen, is there an administrator who can help you deal with it? Or is it best for you to take your worries to a parent, family member, friend or other trusted adult who can advocate for you?

Let's talk through some of the safe people and spaces that could provide you with shelter.

Coming out to a friend.

Friends are often the first people trans teens come out to. Sometimes, our peers understand us in ways that parents and teachers don't, so it makes sense that you think they might have the best reaction. If you come out to a friend first and the experience goes well, you'll have some practice and support for when you come out to your parents, classmates, or teachers.

Of course, friends can have all sorts of responses—some may be supportive and others might feel confused or upset. They may wonder why you didn't tell them sooner, or feel like they hardly know you anymore. Friendships often hold some of our most intense emotions, and you could encounter some unexpected turbulence. Just like with coming out to your parents, it's worth taking a little time to think through how you'll come out to your friends. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- *Pick a friend who is most likely to respect you by not talking about you behind your back.*
- *Have a back-up plan if things go poorly: a parent, sibling, or trusted adult who you can turn to for advice and support.*
- *Know that friends, like parents, take time to process news. You still have to be patient with them.*
- *Expect your friendship to change—often for the better (you become closer) or possibly for the worse (you grow distant).*

The funny thing about friends is whenever you tell them something new about yourself, sometimes they receive it as a personal reference on themselves, wondering, "*What does this mean about ME?*" It's something we all naturally do—you and I have done this too—because peers, in some sense, are our "mirrors." We observe their actions, new outfits or looks they

try on, and their mistakes and successes as a way of learning about ourselves.

Knowing this can help you understand explain some of your friend's responses. One of their first thoughts may be, "*What does this mean about MY gender?*" Perhaps they've never thought deeply before about how society forces gender roles on us or they've never considered the reality that not everyone identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth. When you come out as trans, they may not understand what that means. That doesn't change the fact that your gender is *real*, but it does mean that friends might pull away because they may not understand at first and need time to think more. They might initially deny or refuse to accept your new reality, or they might probe with a ton of curious questions.

It's important to recall here, the invasive questions we discussed in Chapter 3. Even if they're your friend, you still don't have to give in to their pressured to talk about your body or identity in ways that make you feel uncomfortable. Friends should respect your privacy.

The second thing a friend may wonder after you come out is, "*What does this mean about our friendship?*" Since figuring out you're trans has, in some sense, meant not sharing your "whole" self with others, sometimes friends interpret this as, "You were keeping a secret from me." The reality, of course, is that you needed time to figure out exactly what you wanted to say before you started talking about it, but that doesn't keep close friends from feeling hurt sometimes. That's something, that they need to work through on their own—you don't "owe" it to them to share everything about yourself before you're ready, and it's not your responsibility to process their feelings for them.

Sometimes friendships can't withstand these issues, and they fall apart—but that's an extreme case. If some friends can't handle your trans identity, as hard as it may seem, you will have to move on from those friendships and make new ones. Most often, friends just need time to adjust to the new parameters of your friendship. They need time to adjust to your new name and pronouns. Even if they're upset at first, most friends appreciate when we are honest with them. Friends feel honored when we call upon them for support in facing parents, teachers, or school bullies. Friends generally stick by us because that's how real friendships work.

Coming out to a teacher or counselor.

Adults at school hold a special place in our lives: They're not parents, yet they're responsible for elements of our safety and well-being. Most students have at least one teacher or guidance counselor with whom they've bonded, and experience feelings of caring and trust. They're primed to be our advocates or "go-betweens" when it comes to parents or school administrators. As a general rule, teachers work in the field of education because they care about young people and want you to be healthy and safe.

Keep in mind that teachers are humans, though. They can have a range of reactions. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I'll reiterate again: Plan ahead for unexpected or negative responses. The great thing about teachers is they can be a safe, parent-like adult for you, but because of their role in your life, they're less likely to react as strongly as your parents might. They are a safe way to "practice" coming out to other adults, and they can be your support as you come out in more difficult spaces.

Teachers are also employees of the school, which means that they face pressures from administrators to enforce school standards. If a school's environment and leadership is transphobic, even supportive teachers may feel they cannot vocalize their support of your transition. They may let you know in a more subtle way however, by allowing you to sit after school in their room (providing a "safe space"), being proactive about squashing any gender-based teasing they hear, or steering you towards other adults who are more able to help you. Look for a "Safe Space" sticker from GLSEN¹ that supportive adults often post on their classroom door.

If your school has a Gay/Straight Alliance, it's worth seeing if you can talk to that teacher. They've made it known publicly to the school body that they're



¹ <http://www.glsen.org/>

comfortable with LGBTQI students, so they may be the best adults to support you. Guidance counselors are hired specifically to talk with teens about challenges or changes in their lives. Again, you may want to “test the waters” by bringing up a trans topic with them before you say, “I’m trans,” since some counselors are transphobic. If a counselor feels safe to you, they may help you work through difficult emotions better than a friend. Many counselors are required to keep your conversation “confidential,” meaning they can’t tell anyone about it, unless you’re at risk for harming yourself or someone else.

Beyond your safe space: coming out to classmates.

Coming out to everyone at your school about your trans identity may feel daunting. School can be hard enough with social groups and popularity contests, homework deadlines, and the extracurricular responsibilities of clubs or sports. Throw puberty and hormones into the mix, and people’s moods and actions seem all but impossible to predict. Yet, it can feel downright *necessary* to be out at school—hearing the wrong pronouns and name day-in and day-out can often weigh on you over time. So, coming out regardless of people’s responses, may feel liberating.

Sometimes, we can come out to classmates in one big move: At a school assembly for a Diversity Day, in a school newspaper, or even on the school “news” program or Facebook. But more often, people come out to classmates on an individual basis by word-of-mouth.

Once the cat’s out of the bag, it may feel like a thousand eyes are on you.

Being out can be energizing. You’re feeling whole, authentic, and proud, and you’re making life *a little easier* for other trans students coming up behind you. If your friends have your back, it probably feels like you can take anything that comes your way—even teasing or ignorance. You’ll quickly realize that at some point however that you’re going to meet some haters who just can’t wrap their mind around your transition.

School bathrooms, sports, and locker rooms.

As part of transitioning in school, you (and possibly your parents) will have a conversation to discuss which bathroom to use. You should be aware of the fact that you *can* use the bathroom that aligns with your gender identity. Whether the teacher’s bathroom or nurse’s bathroom is available, you

should only use those bathrooms if it is *your* choice. It is possible that you may hear other things such as, safety, or the parent of another student feels that your choice is inappropriate. The reality though is that, these issues have nothing to do with you. Nor are they your responsibility; they are for the school administrators to handle. They have nothing to do with you. TITLE IX² protects your right to use the locker room and sports team of your choice. It may be a matter of getting the school on board (and possibly educated). Something to remember: It is always good to have an ally (friend) who can go with you into the locker room for emotional support. Knowing that your friend is with you, adds to your inner strength and ability to cross that barrier for the first time.

Facing your haters.

When people are uncomfortable or confused, sometimes they lash out at the source—in this case, you! This might come in the form of shouting insults in the hallway, intimidating you online, making jokes about LGBTQI people, trying to shame you in front of others, taking or damaging your belongings, or even trying to shove or hit you. Often, this stuff is done behind closed doors and away from those who would usually intervene.



One of the most important things to keep in mind, too, is that whoever or whatever is harassing you, it won't go on forever. It's only temporary and there are solutions. When you're in the midst of being badgered, it can feel like the situation will continue forever. The reason for this is because we mistake the *intensity* of our feelings for the *reality* of the situation and forget that it will change eventually. Put a different way, sometimes our feelings of

² TITLE IX <https://www.aclu.org/blog/victory-title-ix-protects-transgender-students>
<http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titleix.php>

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/qa-201404-title-ix.pdf>

If the school receives any federal money—almost every school does—they must abide by the rules of TITLE IX!

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hurt, fear, anger, and sadness can be so overwhelming in the moment that we forget to think rationally that:

- *I'm not going to be at this school forever;*
- *I'm going to graduate one day and get away from here;*
- *They are not the only teachers/students. I can make friends with others.*

Obviously, these things are true, but you can forget them when you're in the throes of hardship. So remember that when you're feeling down in the dumps, it's not forever. You're destined for something bigger and better.

So, what's a trans teen like you to do? Let's do some thinking. From experience, I've found it's best to try to assess what's behind these situations. Here are some things to consider:

You're not alone.

Many trans people who came before you have been in your shoes and walked a similar path, some of whom you have probably read about: Jazz Jennings, Laverne Cox, and Chaz Bono, for example. Even at this moment, there are a growing number of trans teens in your *exact same position*. It's comforting to know that you aren't the only one going through this experience, and it could be helpful for you to try to find some of those other teens to talk to. It's also helpful to find stories of trans adults who have successfully navigated their teen years, and have come out happy and strong on the other side.

"An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind."³

Hitting back at those who've hit you may seem like the most logical step. Someone calls you a name? You call them a worse one. Someone makes a joke about your clothes? You tease them in front of all their friends. Someone trips you when you're walking down the hallway? You push them into a wall the next time you see them.

Reacting to anger with anger or violence is not the proper solution and the consequences are almost always bad. Immediately tell a trusted adult if someone harasses, intimidates, or bullies you. Being mean to or angry with

³ M.K. Gandhi.

other people only leaves you feeling bad inside. It can even make us into bullies when we encounter more vulnerable people in other spaces. Your primary value is to help promote acceptance of people's differences and violence only undermines that.

Compassion can make a world of difference.



One of the best ways to deal with attackers is to try to understand *why* they feel the need to hurt others. Bullies often target people who they see as “*different*” or vulnerable because they themselves feel small inside. This could be because they’ve been hurt by others at some point in their lives or because they’ve inherited a small worldview from their families that doesn’t encompass gender diversity. When they’re afraid, they look for someone else to hurt as a temporary fix, and they may see you as an easy target or victim because you’re so visibly

different. This doesn’t condone their actions *at all*, but it does give you some insight on their behavior, and helps you realize: *There’s nothing wrong with you, because the bullying is really about them*. They are trying to show their power over you. This is the time to show the power of your own alligator skin and how you won’t be pulled down to their level, even though it seems difficult at first. Each day you resist giving in, you grow stronger.

Taking action.

Having compassion for and not reacting to bullies *doesn’t* mean that you shouldn’t fight back or protect yourself. You’re not a doormat. But understanding the psychology of bullying makes it clearer that the best way to fight is not with your fists or nasty words. Using your maturity and reason instead, you can walk away from situations calmly, rather than escalate them. Here’s how:

Take a deep breath.

Just like we discussed in Chapter 2 about talking with your parents, avoiding conflict with classmates or other bullies is best done from a clear-headed mental place. This means pressing the “*pause*” button the moment you hear an insult or joke so that you can *respond from a place of strength rather than react from a place of anger or fear*. Humans are built with a “**fight or flight**” instinct that kicks in whenever we’re threatened. Your initial “**fight**” impulse may be to lash back—but that’s an ineffective way to deal with bullies.



Defuse the bomb.

A heated exchange with a bully is a recipe for explosion. If you stay chill and quiet, their rage has no fuel to grow on. If a bully yells, don’t yell back. Just keep talking in a normal tone. I call this “*defusing the bomb*.” If you think about bomb squads on television shows, how do they act? *Calm and collected*. They’re in control of themselves. That’s exactly how you should act around a loud, angry, or violent situation. If you don’t yell or hit back, their actions are less likely to escalate and turn into something more.

Assert your right to be yourself.

You and I both know there’s nothing wrong with being trans. Let the bullies know—then let it go. *Their ignorance is their problem to solve, not yours*. You don’t owe it to anyone to be their educator. You’re just here to live your life and let others live theirs. You can stand up for yourself by letting them know, while keeping your emotions in check, that you’re still going to be yourself and they should just find someone else to go bother.



Walk away.

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The minute you sense someone else escalating the situation, this should be a sign for you to walk away. This can feel hard at first. If you don't snap and react to a bully's put-down, it may seem like you're letting them "get away with it." It might even feel like you're saying: *It's okay to pick on trans people.* That's not really what you're doing. Rather, you're telling them several things:

- *What you have to say doesn't matter.*
- *I will not be your victim.*
- *I value my time and myself more than your insults.*
-

Whether bullies interpret it this way or not, they're less likely to attack you again if they know they can't get a "rise" out of you or win. Further, our hearts hear the message even when the bullies don't and our confidence and feelings of self-worth are bolstered whenever we take an action that says, "*I'm better than this.*"

Talk to an ally.

Bullying can be emotionally exhausting too. Even when we get good at standing up for ourselves, it's tiring to know that we have to keep doing this. One way to counter feelings of fatigue and frustration, especially if bullying continues or new bullies arise, is to find someone to talk to. Sharing our struggles with a trusted ally can boost our energy to keep forging ahead. If your friends are aware of what's going on, they may even stand by your side the next time your attacker comes around. Bullies most often feel powerful when you're alone and isolated from friends. Having a group of friends around strengthens you.

Consider getting school teachers and administrators involved.

Sometimes, the best way to deal with a situation is to get teachers, counselors, or administrators involved. This is up to you. Most of us can sense when a situation is something we can handle. If you're at the point where you are wondering, "*Is this bullying?*", the answer is: **Yes**. Trust your gut. Taking more formal action against your attackers is not a sign of "weakness," "tattle-tailing," or "copping out." Rather, it's claiming that

you're a valuable person whose freedom and life matter and are worth protecting.

Most schools have policies against bullying and harassment, and some have proactive programs for making the school a "Safe Space." You may find information in your school handbook about how to find these safe spaces and deal with bullying. If you do not have a school handbook, or need help finding information, ask a parent, an outside adult, or a friend to go with you to talk to an administrator about what's been going on. Be sure to keep notes of when, where, and how the bullying happened, so that you'll be better prepared to make your "case."

Sometimes, a school administration is unaccepting or resistant to trans people and our rights. If you've complained about bullying, and the school isn't taking action, this is the time to consider going above them to file a formal complaint. If you feel comfortable, you can approach your school district's superintendent. Set up a meeting to talk about the bullying, how you've asked your school to address it, and how long it's continued. Make sure you bring a list of the teachers and administrators who've neglected to help you. School districts are scrutinized by your state government and the media too sometimes, so some school administrations are proactive about defusing bullying situations before they get worse.

Internet/social media.

When it comes to Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and any other media hot spot, you need to remember one of your tools that we talked about earlier. Like most things in life, you have a choice. The choice in this situation is to ignore what they say. If the comment is on Facebook then block, unfollow or unfriend them. Do not become their victim. Unless you have mistreated someone their opinion of you should not matter. One of the things you can say to yourself when someone is not nice, or they are being opinionated about you is, "your opinion of me is none of my business" (Richard Flint lecture). Take anyone of your favorite musicians or actors. If you listen to any of them talk about

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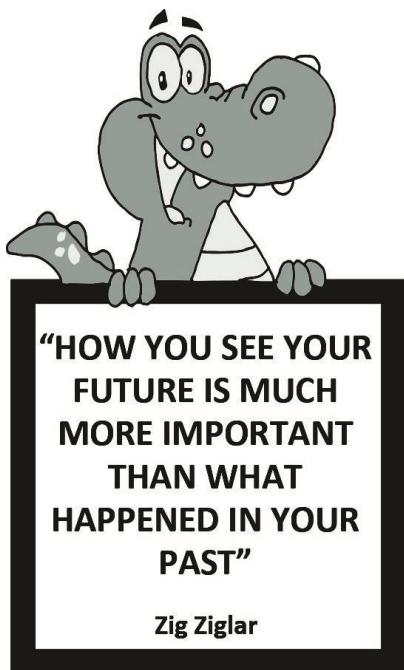
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social media, they are well aware that there are many nasty and horrible comments made about them. They will also tell you that they don't waste time reading those comments and neither should you! So, consider following their example because you can't control other people's behavior. You can only control your own.

Whatever you do, stay in school!

No matter how difficult things may feel at times, don't drop out! It may seem like the easiest way to relieve pressure from your life when other problems are popping up, but your education isn't the thing to sacrifice to feel relief. If you're stressed out, look elsewhere for solutions. Keep walking away from those bullies, invest less time with people who aren't supportive, and/or get exercise. Try whatever works, that's not harmful to your health, to get you to the finish line.



**"HOW YOU SEE YOUR
FUTURE IS MUCH
MORE IMPORTANT
THAN WHAT
HAPPENED IN YOUR
PAST"**

Zig Ziglar

I know it's hard to think years into the future, but one thing is certain: Your life *will be much harder without a diploma*. This is true for everyone, trans or not. Dropping out limits your job opportunities and makes it almost impossible to realize your dreams. Completing your transition is probably one of your dreams, but without a job, it is extremely difficult to transition fully. What is more, your life will likely be hampered more by a low paying job as opposed to one that lets you live the life you want. Don't let bullies take your future away from you.

It's a fact that facing constant hardship can affect one's ability to succeed in school. It can lead to sadness and depression, which can take away our interest in school, sports or activities, even if we used to enjoy them. So check in with yourself right now.

- *Are you missing classes to avoid bullies or people's stares?*

- *Do you feel “out of it” or think, “I don’t care” when you think about schoolwork?*
- *Do you feel so down that you can’t imagine yourself getting your dream job or going to college anymore?*

If you answered “**Yes**” to any of these that means that external factors are affecting your ability to focus on your work, and preventing you from succeeding and making a future for yourself. You have the power to get back on track. The first step is to recognize if you’ve fallen into a pattern of avoiding schoolwork, or seem to be living in a mental “fog.” If you determine that being bullied or the stress of coming out is affecting your schoolwork, here’s what to do.

- *Talk it out with someone—a teacher, coach or guidance counselor—who you trust.*
- *Consider asking if you can talk to a therapist. Asking for a therapist shows your maturity and commitment to self-care.*

At the end of the day, *it is your life* and you have to take responsibility for yourself. There are many means of support out there. Sometimes it only takes one person to help you!