

Is your child transgender? Shore expert explains it all

SETH JAMISON RAINESS 2:17 p.m. EST February 9, 2015



(Photo: COURTESY OF SETH JAMISON RAINESS)

Editor's note: Out at the Shore is the new Asbury Park Press initiative to better reflect the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in Monmouth and Ocean counties. Today we are featuring Seth Jamison Rainess, a transgender life coach who is working on a book that he describes as a "jump-start guide for teens who want to transition." Have a story idea or a comment? Send them to bcanacci@app.com or call 732-643-4218.

Take a deep breath.

Right now you may be feeling confused, angry and skeptical. You may be in disbelief that your child could be transgender. But you should know this: If your child has come to you and disclosed their thoughts about feeling different inside from their outside appearance, you should feel great. After all, this means that as a parent, you've done your job.

First and foremost, your child came to you and was able to talk to you. Please don't forget that!

As difficult as it may seem to keep your feelings in check, it is very important to hear what your child is saying right now. They are concerned only with their own feelings and may not recognize your fears and concerns. They cannot understand how difficult it is for you to view your daughter as your son, or vice versa. It is important to try not to respond negatively because your child may never talk about this with you again.

Is my child really transgender?

While nothing is cast in stone, there are two strong indicators that your child is, indeed, transgender. The first one is the discomfort they feel with certain aspects of their bodies, often their genitals. The second is their desire to be perceived by others as the gender they feel they are.

By the time a child has finally told their parents that they are transgender, they likely feel impatient and want to physically transition as soon as possible. They believe that they have been suffering for years, and are likely not taking into account that their parents are having a hard time accepting that their need to be the other sex.

Why tell me now?

Younger children, being as creative and imaginative as they are, feel that their gender will somehow work itself out. But as your child gets older, the discordance with who they are inside and who they appear to be on the outside often becomes more disturbing. Puberty is often a sore reminder that the feelings won't resolve themselves. An array of emotions can accompany this process including depression, hopelessness, anger, disappointment, and fear, among others.

A child — as for anyone — will find it hard to explain their feelings. They may be worrying that they will lose friends and be cast out by their parents. They may dislike seeing themselves in the mirror because they are disappointed that their outer appearance does not match their inner self. They may feel out of place in the bathroom and try to avoid outdoor activities like going to the beach. They may even try temporarily to please others, but the desire to be their true self will return.

Initial fears

At this point, you are likely feeling cautious and are concerned about the safety of your child. As a parent, there are many things that can go through your mind. One may be a fear of the harassment your child could face, or even that the harassment they already face could worsen. But remember: If a child has support from home, this can help increase their confidence and put them at ease. This, in turn, may help others at school to be more accepting.

You may be fearing the physical harm others can enact. But consider the reality that youth who are not allowed to transition run a risk of depression, self-hatred, and perhaps even substance abuse; these are all indicators of potential self-harm.

You may be fearing that your child is mentally ill. It is possible that, in rare cases, that child has a simultaneously occurring mental illness in addition to identifying as transgender. But remember: being transgender is not, in and of itself, a mental disorder. And if a child believes that they are transgender, they are. A gender identity therapist can help your child clarify whether this is true or not.

But my child is too young!

Gender identity is an inherent knowledge one feels inside. It isn't like wanting a bicycle one day and then changing one's mind. For most children, being transgender is a constant, disruptive

reminder that their body and mind are not in sync. Let this knowledge put your mind at ease about your child possibly going back-and-forth on their convictions because they are too young, or because they are being rebellious or seeking attention.

Finally, you may fear that your child will someday regret transitioning. However, my experience has shown that teens who feel strongly that they are transgender are most likely going to continue feeling this way into adulthood. The vast majority of post-transition people never regret the decision they made. (Side note: You can expect that if your child is under the age of 16, reversible hormonal interventions -puberty-blockers- will be considered. After that age, cross-gender hormones will be the most likely option).

By allowing your child to transition at an early age, they will be able to begin living their life as they feel they should. They can be more focused on their life goals instead of constantly thinking about their body. With your help, they can build a solid foundation of confidence and self-worth.

Is my child actually gay?

You might prefer believing that your child is a non-transgender gay man or lesbian woman because in today's society sexual minorities are accepted more easily than gender minorities. But just as one does not choose to be gay or lesbian, one doesn't choose to be transgender either. Further, sexual attraction and gender identity are different aspects of the self; transgender people may go on to identify as straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual in addition to being transgender.

In the beginning, some children may identify as lesbian or gay before they come to realize that they are transgender. This is partly because our society tells us that gender nonconformity (e.g. dressing masculinely or femininely, or being attracted to the "opposite" gender) is always a part of sexual orientation. If your child "comes out" to you twice — first as gay or lesbian, then as transgender — know that the confusion doesn't lie with them, but with the labels they've inherited from society.

How will the rest of the family react?

Much of the discomfort you may be feeling emerges from society's ideas concerning transgender or transsexual people. You may have been taught that these identities are forms of sickness, or they are perverted or immoral. However, as the parent of a transgender child, you need to free yourself from negative beliefs and start to educate yourself. At the end of the day, your child being who they truly are is what matters most. And when they begin to feel happier, you will begin to be happy for them as well.

Certainly, it would be great for every parent to be immediately accepting and willing to educate themselves on how to move forward with the best interests and happiness of their child in mind. However, this is not the case in many families. There is often one willing parent and one parent

who is obstinate and just cannot face the facts. Keep the lines of communication open with the rest of your family, including siblings and a spouse (if applicable), but continue to do what you think is best for your child.

Initial reactions will not last forever

While it's possible that your child informing you of their transgender identity can put a strain on the family—other siblings may or may not be open to change; maybe a father or mother says they want nothing to do with their transgender child—recognize that this may not stay the same forever. This is not a situation to start blaming either spouse for their initial reactions, because no spouse is responsible for unexpected situations. There are many families in which transgender children end up homeless. Your awareness of such possibilities can help prevent them. Let them impel you to find support outside the family.

How will others react?

It is natural to be concerned about the reactions of others in your family and extended circles. But in the best interests of your child, you will need to get your feelings in check and educate yourself before you discuss their identity with people outside of your household. When you do eventually speak to others, it is important to initially acknowledge their discomfort and tell them you felt the same way in the beginning—but that you've decided to keep an open mind out of love for your child. You can ask them for their support and also state that you will entertain any questions that they have about your child's transition. During this time, you will begin to see that not only is your child transitioning, but you are as well.

Feelings of loss

Address the fact that you may go through a grieving process yourself. In some ways, this is a loss (or a symbolic "death") to you. These feelings emerge, in part, from realizing that certain hopes and dreams for your child's future will not be fulfilled. You wanted a little girl who would grow to become a woman, and now you've found that you're going to have a son (or vice versa). It is important that you take as much time as you need to be able to accept this loss, and take any self-care measures you normally do when grieving.

Let your child know that you are experiencing feelings of a loss. This can help them begin to understand what a difficult adjustment their transition may be for you. But beyond informing them, it is not your child's responsibility to help you deal with this loss. There are support groups for parents facing the same issues that will be able to help you deal with hard emotions and other concerns.

Finding support

The advice you are currently reading is not meant to fulfill all your support needs. Reading online is only a beginning. The good news is that in today's world, there are many viable options for education and help. There is a growing need for accurate and compassionate information for families with transgender children, and the world is responding, albeit slowly. The Internet offers

a plethora of information that can be put to good use. However, use common sense rather than placing belief in everything you read. There are many gender therapists, transgender health conferences, PFLAG meetings,¹ and doctors that offer valid information.

Above all, the most helpful step you can take is to keep an unbiased attitude toward whatever your child may be telling you. Do not be afraid to ask nonjudgmental questions. While it may be hard to hold back everything you want to say, you must remember that if your first response to your child is an objection, then you can expect stubborn behavior when engaging in any future discussions. They may not be willing to discuss this matter again, and will likely feel rejected, or possibly even unloved, by you.

Moving forward

It is essential to realize that there is not an exact answer for every issue that may come up. So it is crucial for you to get the appropriate help from a qualified therapist who will be able guide you concerning your emotions and shed light on the journeys transgender children undertake. In so doing, you will become supportive of your own child and enable them to build self-confidence and become stronger as they forge ahead.

This short guide has been prepared to simply provide an introduction. You will encounter much more information as you move forward, particularly assistance related to your individual child and their needs.

Most importantly, remember this: Don't panic.

You still have a child who is capable of living a happy and productive life, provided you are there as a parent to help support and assist them. It is by no means an easy journey, but one that can definitely be positive if approached with forethought and compassion.

Seth Jamison Rainess of Monmouth County is a speaker, life coach, PFLAG facilitator and social advocate. He also is a transgender man living life unified in body and mind. More information is at www.sethrainess.com.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are fairly simple but do sometimes sound confusing. Imagine now the confusion a child must feel when they appear one way but feel another and those around them are using words and pronouns that do not match their true gender.

Transgender: A transgender person's internal gender identity does not match their body's biological sex (or what some may refer to as "assigned at birth" sex). "Transgender" may be used as an individual identity for someone who wishes to transition their gender socially and/or physically, but is sometimes also used as an umbrella term that encompasses those who desire physical transition ("transsexual" people) and other gender nonconforming (GNC) people, such as genderfluid and genderqueer people or cross-dressers (see definitions below).

Transsexual: "Transsexual" refers to a more specific transgender identity; when a transsexual person's internal gender identity does not match their body's biological sex, they wish to undertake physical measures, with the aid of hormones and/or gender confirming surgeries (sometimes referred to as "sexual reassignment surgeries" or SRS), to correct their alignment between body and mind. This term separates transsexual people from other transgender people who do not need medical intervention to feel whole

FTM and MTF: Female-to-male (FTM) transgender people are born with female biology but know themselves to be male, and wish to be perceived as such socially (including the use of male pronouns like "he" and "his"). Male-to-female (MTF) transgender people are born with male biology but know themselves to be female, and wish to be perceived as such socially (including the use of female pronouns like "she" and "hers"). He wants to have female anatomy and be called by female pronouns.

Gender Identity: Gender identity is an inner sense of being female, male, neither, or both. By the age of 3, children often have a clear sense of either being male or female. Most the time their identity conforms to their biological sex; whether this is the case or the child is transgender, society instills in them rules about one should conform to their birth sex.

Gender expression: Gender expression is the presentation of self to others as masculine, feminine, both, or neither. Some of expression's aspects include mannerisms or movement, dressing and grooming, and possibly certain behaviors or interests. Unfortunately, children whose gender expressions do not meet with what society feels they should be are usually mistreated. Children learn quickly how to try to fit in. However, gender nonconforming (GNC) children will likely continue to act and behave in accordance with their interests despite these attempts, and despite the consequences of running counter to what is expected of them.

Sexual orientation: Sexual orientation is about romantic and sexual attraction; it is not a choice. Attraction lies on a broad spectrum. A person can be attracted to just women, or just men, or both—and these can shift over a lifetime. Sexual orientation has nothing to do with gender identity or gender expression; orientation is about how one finds others attractive, while gender identity and expression are about how one perceives and manifests the self. Everyone has both a sexual orientation and a gender identity.

Genderfluid or Genderqueer: Genderfluid or genderqueer people internally understand their gender identity as falling outside the binary construct of "male" and "female." They may feel, and perhaps struggle to convey to others, that their gender is a mix of both, varies from day to day, is neither or beyond, or something else entirely. They may request that others refer to them with gender-neutral pronouns such as "they."

Pansexual: Pansexual people may be sexually attracted to individuals who identify as male or female; however, they may also be attracted to those who identify as intersex, third-gender, androgynous, transsexual, or the many other sexual and gender identities © 2014 Seth Jamison Rainess

Cross-dressing: Cross-dressing people wear clothing traditionally worn by another gender. They may vary with how completely or often they cross-dress, but are usually comfortable with their assigned biological sex and do not wish to physically change it.