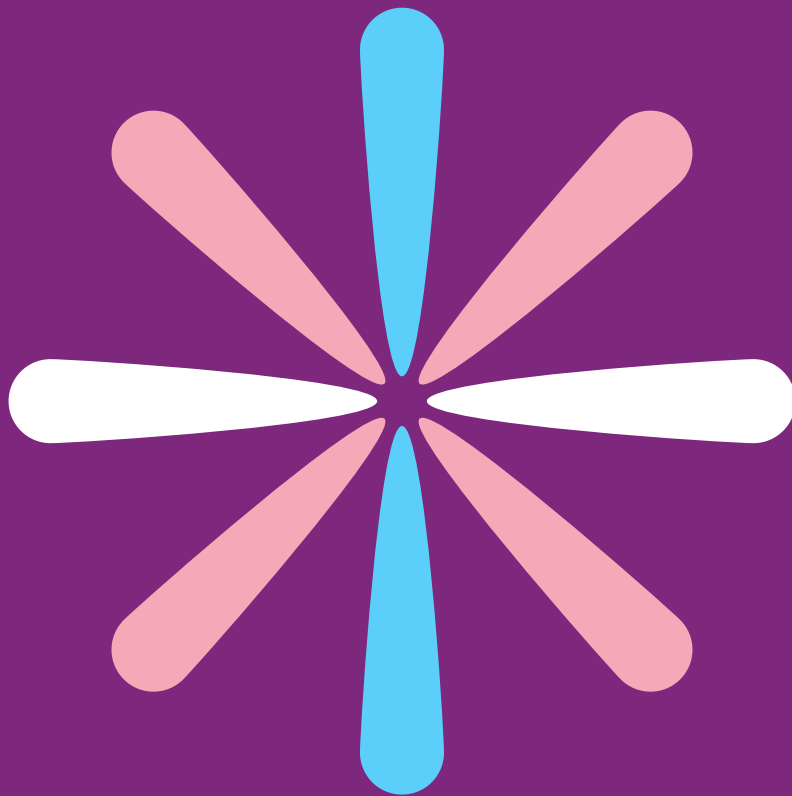
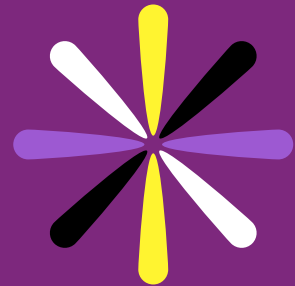


FIRST STEPS

2ND EDITION



THE GENDER
CENTRE
INC

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lisa Cuda is a proud parent and activist, supporting trans and gender diverse people and their families, with over eight years' experience. She has contributed much of her time to improving the lives of transgender youth and their families.

Lisa runs one of the oldest online parent support groups in Australia for families of transgender and gender diverse people. For eight years the APG has been a 24/7 support for families, continuing to help over 885 families across NSW and Australia.

Lisa has worked for Headspace and is the current Parent Peer Support Officer for the Gender Centre. She has been a "Living Book" for TAFE, Trans Day of Remembrance, and Wollongong City Council. She was awarded Wollongong's Diversity and Inclusion Award in 2021.

Lisa is the proud parent of two amazing kids; one of whom happens to be transgender.

"Thank you to the parents and caregivers for graciously taking time to share their most honest lived experiences.

Our kids need safe, loving spaces to explore and affirm who they are. Dive in folks; the love is grand. I hope that you find this booklet helpful in some way, as you take your steps to supporting your child/teen or adult."

Lisa Cuda

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INTRODUCTION*

Your child is questioning their gender, maybe you are feeling shocked and overwhelmed by the news or fearful for your child's future. Maybe you have no idea what you are feeling.

You may have a hundred different questions running through your mind.

This booklet was initiated and compiled by Lisa Cuda, with the submitted stories from parents of trans and gender diverse children - hoping to help you understand and maybe answer some of those questions.

Throughout this booklet are personal stories generously shared by parents and caregivers with lived experience of supporting transgender,

gender diverse, non-binary or gender questioning children ranging from very young, through to teens and adult children. It also contains some sensible advice on ways to support your child and yourself as your child explores and possibly affirms their gender.

Affirming gender means different things to different people. Each individual will do what they feel is needed for themselves to feel comfortable.

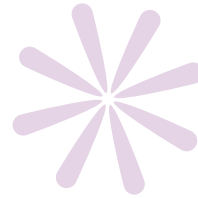
Some people may identify within a binary of gender (male/female) while others may not feel part of that binary (non-binary/neutral etc).

Being transgender or gender diverse is an individual

experience; there is no one way or universal narrative. Some people seek hormone therapy and may have surgery to affirm their gender. Others do not. This does not make an individual's experience any less valid.

Gender is internal and personally defined; determined by the individual alone.





What can you do for your child?

Reassure them. Communicate that you love and support your child no matter what. Encourage your child to be themselves.

Adapt to pronoun and name changes if they arise. Practice and apologise when you make a mistake. We all make mistakes, what counts is the follow up and recognition. It all gets easier with time and shows respect and support for your child.

Be a proud parent. Your child's diversity is nothing to be ashamed of.

What can you do for yourself?

Reach out and seek support. Allow yourself to feel your emotions, but do not let them overwhelm you so you are unable to help your child. If your feelings do become overwhelming, seek the help of a professional.

Be kind to yourself and recognise that you will make mistakes. Do not beat yourself up about them. You may need to unlearn and unpack a number of preconceived ideas and beliefs - it helps to talk to people.

Transgender

An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity and inner sense of gender differ from the sex assigned to them at birth.

Cisgender

A term used to describe people whose inner sense of gender matches the sex assigned to them at birth.

Non-binary

Non-binary is a term that includes people who may not identify as male or female. They may identify as neither, both or other.

These are basic descriptions, and people's lived experience may hold many more variations and self-descriptors.

It should be noted, that sexual orientation is separate from gender identity. Sex, sexual orientation and gender are independent of one another.



OUR STORY *

Our 16 year old daughter Lena is smart, brave, funny, quirky, loves maths and science, playing computer games with her friends and is politically aware. She loves an intellectual debate and will argue a point just for fun. Our 16 year old daughter is also trans. Our daughter is our only child and we could not love her more.

At about the age of 13 Lena started suffering from depression and anxiety - and so began 2 years of visits to psychologists in an attempt to get her support. Up and down. Just before kiddo turned 15 we noticed she'd started playing around with gender - growing and painting nails, shaving legs, growing hair longer. We were pretty unconcerned - "cause that's what kids do these days."

Her depression and anxiety were getting worse again - and we started looking for a new psychologist for her. One morning she got up super early and rushed down stairs - telling me she had to study for a maths exam. When I went downstairs a little later - she had left a hand written note for us on the kitchen bench, telling us she is trans, her new name and pronouns, and not to share the information with anyone.

It felt like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room as I read the note shaking. I sent her a text telling her we could not love her

more, thanking her for sharing with us and we'd talk when she came home from school. I then changed her name in my phone to her new name. And sat at the kitchen table googling "transgender" and being overwhelmed, while listening to my husband finish up a "zoom" board meeting in another room.

Googling was awful. A combination of chillingly scary statistics; hate filled transphobes; and advice pages. How could we make sense of all this. What was good information and what was garbage? I'm a researcher by trade and sifting through this information was confusing, difficult and paralysing. How could we support our beloved child through this?? What was the "right" thing to do for our daughter.

When Lena came home from school - we hugged and cried together and asked lots of questions. We told her we could not love her more - and we would try very hard to get her name and pronouns right.


We asked her what she wanted and how we could support her - she said her focus was to "get hormones when she turns 16 (six months away)" and that she wanted to socially transition at school pretty much immediately. She also wanted see a psychologist who specialised in trans kids.

One of Lena's school friends is a trans girl and her Mum reached out to me and offered to meet for a coffee. It was a truly amazing gift to meet someone ahead of us in the process. The other Mum was kind, patient, and so very generous with her time and wisdom; sharing her family's journey and very practical advice about the medical support our daughter would need - psychologists, psychiatrists, endocrinologists, GPs. The Mum provided advice about changing names, changing gender markers, and surgery. I took loads of notes, in a book which would become my 'Lena support notebook'. The Mum also introduced me to the Gender Centre parent's support group and the Facebook group - which proved to be a hugely valuable resource.

We visited Lena's GP - who provided us again with amazing support and advice. He referred Lena to Westmead Children's Gender Clinic. About a week later Susan from the clinic called to talk to me - and gently told us that Lena was not eligible for the service, as she was through puberty. So began the weekly medical stalking routine: Lena on a range of wait lists to see specialist psychologists - and every week me calling receptionists to see if we'd moved up the list.

We got a list of Sydney based specialists from a Facebook





group - and I called every psychologist on the list. Lena's depression and anxiety was getting worse as we kept trying to get appointments.

I shopped for some gender affirming casual clothes for Lena - mainly leisurewear in traditional "girls" colours - pinks, purples. She wanted new clothes - but didn't want to shop herself.

We met with the school psychologist to talk through a plan for Lena to socially transition at school and this went smoothly - with teachers switching to her preferred name and pronouns pretty quickly. Lena is at an inner city co-ed school who are very inclusive and supportive of difference. We bought her the girls trousers from the uniform shop and she started wearing the girls uniform. She already had a very support group of friends who had helped her select a new name.

Looking back at the distance of 12 months there was so much to do to support Lena from a practical and emotional view point. Doctor's appointments, chasing potential specialists, legally changing Lena's name, changing name at school. As well as having to have conversations with family and friends about Lena. Our family and friends were supportive - the oldies "didn't understand it, but we love our grandkid," and we've not had to

walk away from any of them. At time it felt like I was working two full time jobs - one a paid job and one helping Lena and the family through her transition.

We had overwhelming concerns for our child. The future we had imagined for our child crumbled and blew away. What would her future hold? Would she be safe? Would she be able to get a job in the future? How would she navigate her life in a world so filled with prejudice? Could we get her the help she needed?

We had no close contacts in the trans-world and we had no clear model on which to gauge what the life of a modern trans woman could look like. Which parts of her anxiety and depression are gender dysphoria and which parts were usual teenage angst? So much to lie awake at night and worry about.

We took the approach that our daughter would only see 100% support from us and that we would deal with our doubts, concerns and worries away from her. Both my husband and I arranged to see separate psychologists to work through our own issues. I cannot recommend highly enough the importance of getting psychological support for parents. There is so very much to work through.


A handful of my closest friends

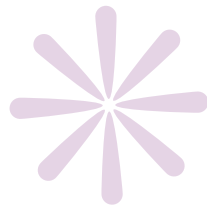
were truly rocks through the early days - days made harder by COVID lock downs. Others were walking buddies, and each weekend we walked and talked for 10-12kms a day through our LGA in lockdown. I cannot thank them enough.

I found the monthly "zoom" parents support groups run by the Gender Centre invaluable for both practical and emotional support - as I listened to other people's stories.

We managed to get Lena psychological support through the Gender Centre - and then onto a psychiatrist and an endocrinologist. All co-ordinated by a fabulous GP.

So 12months on - Lena is in year 11, focused on doing well at school and talking about where she wants to go to Uni. She's taking hormones - getting them three months later than she had wanted, but still fast as far as we were concerned. She has a shiny new passport with her new name and new gender marker and in less than a month we're off to New Zealand on a family ski holiday. Life has returned in a new kind of rhythm. She is still the same child that we have always raised, she has a new name and different pathway in life. We still could not love her more.





LAURIE'S STORY

A year ago, when I finally came to accept that my adored seventeen-year-old was transgender, it was like the bottom fell out of my world.

Night after night, I lay in bed crying, feeling a combination of nausea and abject terror. I was convinced this was the worst thing that could possibly happen to a parent. I was angry that all the effort I had put in over all those years to ensure my child had a happy life had been for nothing.

I had so much to learn.

Four months earlier, when he had first started to make noises about living in the opposite gender, I had rejected it out of hand. I thought it was ridiculous, that he was way too young to make such a "choice".

I didn't hesitate to give him a long list of ways in which his life would be completely destroyed if he "chose" to do this.

In hindsight, I'm quite ashamed of my reaction, although I still understand why I felt that way. It took time for me to realise just how wrong I was, on so many levels.

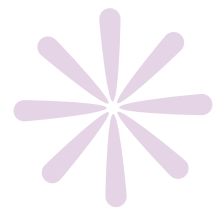
Here are some of things I've learned - what I thought *then*, and what I know now.

I'm sure there are many more things I've learned - and will continue to learn on this journey. These are the ones that stand out for me now.

If you are somewhere on a similar journey, I wish you well. It's a difficult and painful road at first, but it definitely

becomes easier. One day you'll find yourself, like me, coasting along so easily that it will be hard to remember how rough it was when you set out.

Also, the more so-called "normal" families who can accept their children for who they are, the more "normal" and acceptable transgender will become.



My child would become a stranger to me

My child is exactly the same person – the same funny, adorable, sometimes annoying, messy teenager – and our relationship is as strong as it ever was.

Being transgender is a choice (and a teenager is too young to make that choice)

It's not a choice. If it were, no one would ever choose it. Why would you consciously choose to add that degree of difficulty to your life? It's something people are born with, and, they can be absolutely sure of its truth no matter how young they are.

Transgender people (and by association, their families) are freaks and outcasts

Anyone, from any culture or walk of life, can be transgender, or be a parent of a transgender child. My first visit to a parent support group profoundly changed my life. I realised that there were countless people just like me, with kids just like mine. The only reason transgender people have been treated like outcasts in the past is because there is so little understanding about what being transgender means.

Your child being transgender is the worst thing that can happen

That's ridiculous. Your child having a life-threatening illness, or being in a fatal accident, or any number of awful things that happen to families are far worse.

Transgender people can never lead a happy, normal life

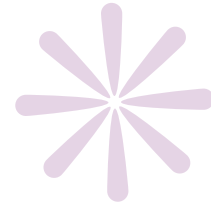
Transgender people can lead perfectly happy, normal lives, especially if they have the love and support of their families and friends.

“You're too young! Can't you wait until you've finished school?”

The younger you know (and accept) that your child is transgender, the better chance they have of adapting physically to their innate gender. Puberty blockers at an early age can save a lot of angst (and expense) later.

How can I ever tell anyone about this? It's just too awkward

Well, it was a bit awkward at first. And I was extremely nervous about telling people. But I've been overwhelmed by the support and acceptance we've received from our extended family, neighbours, and friends, and from all the institutions – banks, schools, government agencies, etc. – that we've had to deal with over my child's change of name and gender. I've also realised that it's up to me to set the tone – if I treat it as normal, other people will too.



JOSH'S STORY

My name is Josh and along with my wife, we're raising two awesome kids. One is cisgender and one is transgender. I love, and am proud of them both.

When my daughter came out as trans, it was no surprise to me, my wife, our son, or our extended family. We had long thought it was a possibility, and had always left the door open for that conversation, and that eventuality. I am so proud of the bravery, insight and honesty my daughter has shown the world when she shared with us who she really is. I hope you feel the same way, regardless of how prepared you were for where you find yourself now.

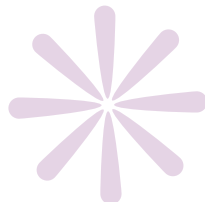
If you are shocked by your kid coming out, then please remember to love them, and support them for who they are now, regardless of your opinions, your beliefs, and your past. I know that sounds

obvious, and maybe a little blunt, but your kid needs you to love them for who they are now, not who they might have been yesterday. It takes an enormous amount of courage to come out as trans, and all you have to do is commend and support that courage with unconditional love and honesty.

Be open. Ask your kid questions. What would you like to be called? What pronouns do you identify with? Are you non binary? They/them? She/her? He/him, or one of many combinations. There's no right or wrong - just accept and understand that what might be now, might change tomorrow. Your kid might take time to settle on a name, and that might change. If you struggle with change, tell them. That way they know you'll get there, you just might be a bit behind where they are at now. You get used to that.

Be honest with yourself. Maybe you're feeling blind-sided, or sad, or angry, all of which might be understandable if you choose to ignore the obvious here - parenting is not about you, it's all about your kid. You need to be there for your kid, unconditionally, and deal with whatever you need to after that. If you're feeling like you need support and someone to talk to - get it. Seek professional help and do what you need to do to be the best parent you can be. If you need to grieve for the past, then do so, but don't let it cloud what you need to be now, and what you'll need to be in the future. I spent a few minutes grieving the past, before realising that there was a whole future I was going to miss if I kept looking back.

Be prepared. You are now going to be having a lot of conversations with people about having a trans kid.



Get educated. Ask questions. Be prepared to get stuff wrong, and be open and accepting of all the mistakes you are going to make when you make them. Don't be too harsh on yourself, or anyone else in your corner.

Be supportive. If you are lucky enough to have a partner, be there for them as much as you can be. Talk about this together. Share the love, the fears, and the victories. Be prepared for the instinctive need to protect your kids to further escalate. Like it or not, your kid now has a target on their back, and accepting that and rising to the challenges to educate and advocate in all walks of life may well be the new norm. If you are not one to fight or challenge the inherent inequalities of life, that's fine too - just be there for your kid.

Be a good dad to all your kids. If you have more than one kid -

keep talking to them too. Take them on the journey and make extra time for them. Having a trans child means a lot of time will be spent focused on that, and it's important not to forget your other kids.

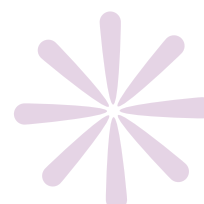
Be patient. Just because your trans kid has made the great leap forwards doesn't mean the rest of the world has, so set aside the time required to chat to the school, their teacher(s), and to navigate the health system your child is going to need to help them stay happy and healthy. You will get the new name of your kid wrong more than a few times. It will take years for people to remember their new name, and not misgender them. You'll get there.

Be kind. Yes, there is ignorance and intolerance around this issue. Around your kid. It is now your job to help counter that. Be

kind and compassionate, and educate those people around you who may be coming from a less educated position. Arm yourself with the facts, and with experiences, and be prepared to walk away from conversations with people who aren't actually interested in listening. In my experience, there's not too many of those out there, but you need to accept that not everyone will be joining you and your family on the next leg of your journey. That's ok, so long as you keep trying your hardest to be open, supportive, loving and kind to the people that matter most.

Good luck.

You've got this.





NAVIGATING NANA THROUGH JASPER'S JOURNEY

First a little bit of background on my beautiful family - I have three daughters: Kylie, Caralyn and Kayla. In 1990 when Kylie was 9 and Caralyn was 7 - Kylie was hit by a car while they were waiting to cross the road. Kylie was thrown back onto the road and fractured her skull causing her to suffer life-threatening brain damage. We spent two years in and out of hospital. Fast forward 15 years and Kylie met Jason, who also had a disability, they thought it would be wonderful to have a child and along came my first grandchild, Christina. She was named after me and I couldn't have been any prouder.

Due to Kylie and Jason's disabilities little Christina lived with me. We had bought a house with a connecting unit so that Kylie could live independently but also close enough to be a mum to Christina. I always wanted Christina to know who her mum was and that I was Nana. Christina came to work with me every day (the benefits of having childcare centres), we traveled the world together and have an amazing bond. If you ask me now if I saw any signs during this time, no I didn't.

Fast forward to Mother's Day 2018 – Christina and I were

having breakfast at the Novotel with my daughter Kayla and her new boyfriend, Michael. A discussion started about Christina's hair when she mentioned, "I want to cut my hair short." I replied, "What do you mean short? Show me a photo."

After looking at a photo I said, "If you cut your hair that short you will look like a boy!" Christina replied, "I am a boy." This was the beginning of Jasper's journey and what a journey it has been!

As a compromise, I allowed him to have his hair cut to his shoulders. I knew nothing about being transgender and found it hard to understand what he was going through. My first reaction was to not talk about it and maybe it will go away. During this time Jasper went to an all-girl's Catholic school. He was due to go to Canada in November 2018 on a student exchange and I thought that maybe going to Canada and attending a co-ed school would make him realize that he was a girl and he was just confused.

Boy was I wrong!

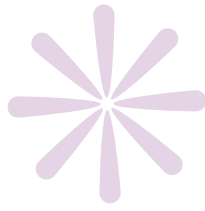
When Jasper came back from Canada he had cut all of his hair off and had been living

as "Jasper." I was devastated! What was I to do now? I couldn't avoid it anymore.

I contacted Headspace and organised for Jasper to see a counsellor there because, not only did he need someone to talk to, I also needed to talk to a professional to make sure I was making the right decisions while navigating such unknown territory. This also meant that it was time to speak to the extended family and introduce Christina as Jasper. Each member of my family went through their own journey of understanding to reach acceptance. Jasper showed great resilience at this time as he respected that each member of the family needed to process information in their own way and their own time.

The counsellor recommended that I attend a support group with adults going through the same journey. I went to my first group, I sat there and kept saying, "Don't cry, Don't cry!"

Lisa who ran the group was amazing, along with the other families and I soon settled. I had so many questions. Will he look like a boy? What will the school say? Will he get a job? Will he have friends? Lisa showed me a photo of her son



and my thought was, "Wow! He looks like a boy!" She smiled and I felt I was in a safe place.

During this time Jasper decided to leave the all-girl's school and go to the local high school. At this stage Jasper was still using the name Christina and I remember driving to the first appointment with the new school and Jasper saying "I am going to ask to wear the boy's uniform." I was struggling with acknowledging that he was transgender and said, "No we need to get into the school, please don't." We made it through the appointment, and he started at the school. He came out to all his new friends at school straight away as transgender and asked to be called Jasper, but not to the teachers because he was not ready and a little scared.

One Friday in the middle of this year it was time to try on year 12 jackets. Jasper had asked a teacher if 'Jasper' could be written on it. The teacher replied that nicknames were not allowed. Jasper then informed the teacher that he identified as a boy and that was his name. Once Jasper realised one teacher knowing, meant all the teachers would know, he began to experience high anxiety.

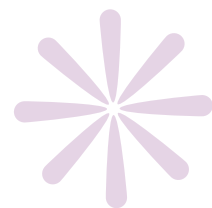
I was contacted by the teacher and then went in for a meeting. The school was amazing they not only made Jasper feel comfortable, but they made me feel it too. I will always be thankful for that. The year adviser would ring me every month to make sure things were going ok.

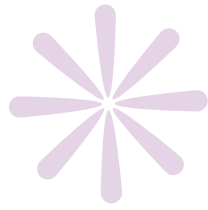
Now it was time to talk about testosterone! We went and saw an endocrinologist. This doctor was great and discussed everything with us in detail. When we walked out of the appointment, Jasper looked at me, started crying and said "Thank you Nana." That was the day I knew I was doing the right thing.

During this time we created a Facebook page called Jasper's Journey. This was created for family and friends to follow along on his journey and keep up to date. Jasper is lucky in regards to family, we are all accepting even the older grandparents. Jasper's amazing attitude helped his family deal with the transition. He was always happy to answer questions, help us understand and not get caught up in things like the accidental 'her', 'she' or 'baby girl' as I had always used to called Christina.

Even with his youngest cousins who were only two, six and eight - he never made them feel uncomfortable as they tried to understand how big cousin 'Tina' was now Jasper.

Jasper is now thriving at life and seems like a happier person since being able to live as his true self. He currently has 2 jobs, a fantastic partner and a man bun (after all those haircuts!!).





RYAN'S STORY

Being a parent is scary and all you want for your children is to see them happy. Sometimes, that means understanding that you were wrong.

Our oldest daughter 'R', now 11 years old, was assigned male at birth. Male or female, boy or girl, we didn't care. We just wanted a healthy baby and as parents we had no measure to work to and were learning as we went - a statement still true to this day.

Two years later, we were fortunate enough to have a second healthy child, 'L', assigned female.

My wife and I had always been loose with enforcing gender stereotypes so when our eldest wanted to grow her hair long like her sister, we had no intention to object. When she wanted to wear pink outfits or

dress like Anna or Elsa, again we had no problems. However, one thing we learned early on is that not everyone is as accepting of or as comfortable with challenging these norms.

Other things we experienced included the impact of the outside world. The subtle (and not so subtle) comments made flippantly, like, "Why Frozen? Shouldn't you be watching Cars?" Or ushering their boys away from the sparkly Elsa and Minnie Mouse shoes, to look at the 'boys' section. You would be surprised how much of an impact these moments have on a three year old, even if only bearing witness to them.

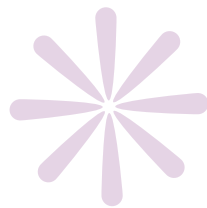
Shortly after our third child was born, we were part of a bridal party and requests were made by the groom for our oldest child (then still identifying male)

to have her hair cut to fit in with the other party members. But we stood our ground with our daughter looking beautiful in a suit with bright hairclips.

Later that year we were at a fair and received compliments on our two girls and their lovely hair. A conversation was had with our eldest asking how she felt being called a girl and the admission that it made her "feel happy" was all we needed to hear.

That summer she transitioned amongst our family and friends.

Like ourselves, most family and friends had little experience with trans and transition. However, we expressed that we weren't asking for their understanding, just acceptance and that we could all learn together.



Perhaps typically, our network was a fair representation of society with the good and the bad on display.

We'd receive texts during the day to advice of a transgender program coming up on TV that would be of interest to us and then the next day we would get phone calls from family who would ask of two of our children but not the third.

The day before attending a sixth birthday party, we nervously called the parents of the birthday girl to discuss 'R's' name change and were shocked at the, "cool, no worries" reply with all at the party making a genuine effort to correctly address our child. Yet, we'd also attend music classes where other parents deliberately dead-named our daughter.

Unfortunately, choices we've since had to make have come at a cost. After challenging comments made by people close to us including relatives, decisions were made to remove people from our network.

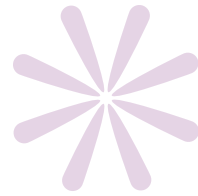
As difficult as this was, what it did was ensure we had people around us who accepted and cared for our family and wanted to be part of it as we traveled such a new road.

One memory I carry with me is when my mother phoned to ask if 'R' would like a pink towel with her name embroidered on it. The smile on her face the day that parcel arrived in the mail is a moment I'll never forget.

The world today is slightly more accepting than it were 5 years ago and though it hasn't

been easy, we can be confident knowing that we've done what we needed to and made the choices necessary to ensure our child is afforded every opportunity her siblings will have.

Having been able to speak in parliament during the Tasmanian birth certificate reforms, one thing I've learnt is there are more people in our position than we could ever have been aware of and we're all doing the best we can. As our daughter gets older, more serious conversations are commencing. Things are bound to get awkward and though we don't have all the answers, we can most certainly find them together.



FIGURING OUT Z *

The endpoint (so far) is that my oldest child, Z (not their birth name) identifies as non-binary and uses she/they pronouns. They are currently about to turn 15. They present as femme most of the time and are slowly figuring out their style.

As a parent this is hard to write, not because Z's gender expression is difficult, but because Z, and their little sister, have already been through so much in their young life and being genderqueer has added another layer onto what has already been a challenging childhood. What most parents want for their kids is for their kids to be happy in themselves, confident in who they are, know that they are loved, and to move forward to adulthood knowing they have a place in the world that is valued.

Being trans, genderqueer or non-binary adds difficulty in being accepted by society for the beautiful, valued and cherished person that they are.

At the beginning of Z's first year in high school, Z came to me and said they were a lesbian, which they were very anxious about expressing, but didn't phase or surprise me. They expressed relief and for the next few months I heard a lot about their "queer mafia" group of friends at school and the excitement of being part of a group who accepted them. Unfortunately, being openly queer at school also led to fairly horrendous bullying from other students.

And then it all got much more complex and difficult. I learned that they had been self-harming

and over the next 18 months we had far too many trips to Emergency because of it. The extended lockdowns for Covid compounded this badly; further isolating Z from friends and exacerbating the bullying. In the middle of that, Z came to me and said they thought they might be trans. Whilst I've had friends whose kids have transitioned and have had no issues at all accepting them as their true selves, I was NOT prepared for the overwhelming emotion I felt on hearing my own child express those words. I felt such fear and self-doubt; how could I have missed the signs. Had I acted in a way to make their dysphoria worse?

But I was most worried that the bullying they were already experiencing might escalate into physical violence;



fear that they would be excluded from their friend groups; fear that extended family would not accept them for who they are and would be vocal about it; fear that my brilliant, creative, sensitive child would be further psychologically scarred for daring to be themselves.

Regardless, to support Z and help them be comfortable in their skin, I helped them begin the process of social transition through haircut, clothing, and changing their name and pronouns at school and with friends and family. And, with very few exceptions, they were welcomed and accepted with their new name and pronouns, especially by their age peers.

Roughly a year after social transition to trans-boy, Z started

to explore their more feminine side and eventually felt able to tell me that they felt they were now non-binary or gender queer rather than trans, and their pronouns changed again to she/they. They kept their chosen name and did not revert to their birth name. Oddly, whilst it took some practice to learn to call Z by male pronouns when they felt they were a boy, it was much harder to change again to more female pronouns when they settled on genderqueer.

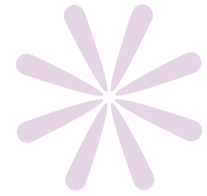
It's been a lot of a roller coaster, both in terms of Z's gender expression and exploration, but also Z's mental health. I think the two are linked as gender dysphoria is certainly a factor for mental health.

I think Z is in a good place now and seems much more settled. There may well be further changes to gender expression and determination in the future. But we will roll with it.

In the end, accepting your child for who they are in the moment is the best and safest way to care for their wellbeing and mental health whilst they are doing their best to find their place in the world.



OUR STORY



Jamie was our first born child assigned male at birth. Looking back, I have to laugh a little when I remember how my husband and I secretly found out the sex but didn't tell any family or friends that we knew. It really wasn't because we wanted a boy or a girl particularly, I think we were just excited and wanted to know something to connect us to this new person about to enter our life.

Jamie was a happy, healthy baby like any other. The first time I started to notice that something might be different with her was around the age of three. I noticed she didn't play like most other males their age. She certainly didn't fit the stereotypical "little boy" mould when she started to bring home girls hair clips and ties she found at her child-care centre, or used the Christmas tree baubles as earrings.

Between the ages of three and four her interests became more clear. Sparkles, rainbows, nice fabrics, pretend hair plaits and not wanting to cut her hair at all, became part of our life. As Jamie approached four, in the fourth quarter of being three, she began to get my scarves or short dresses, and dress herself and her little brother at

home. These items were like long gowns on her and she loved walking around the house in these.

My husband and I were always open and accepting of this. We had noted that she wasn't your typical boy, and thought would most likely be gay. We honestly never thought in these early days about the possibility of Jamie being transgender. Particularly after our second child was born who was also assigned male at birth, we saw quite a big difference between the two.

This activity continued for some months, and I remember quite clearly when the penny really dropped for me. It was in March 2020, a few months after Jamie turned four and when we had the first lockdown from the Covid 19 pandemic. Prior to this both kids were in childcare three days a week while I worked. Once the lockdown started we had a solid two months or so at home every day with the three of us while my husband was able to continue work.

The dress ups in my clothes intensified in this period and it became a daily obsession. There was one particular white slip that she used to love

wearing as the length was great for her, finishing right at the ankle. When I tried to explain that it needed to be washed she become very upset at the thought of not having this item to wear.

I remember so clearly watching her play in our sunny front yard one afternoon in this white slip, with pretend pink and white pigtails, affixed to the hair with an elastic. She was literally dancing around in the sunlight, completely in her element, so at peace and happy in herself. I said to myself, "oh my god, she is not playing dress ups, she actually wants to BE a girl." It really hit me just like that.

My husband and I started doing some research and we were kindly also given Rebekah Robertson's beautiful book *About a Girl* from my Mum. After reading Rebekah's book I saw so many parallels to the early days of Georgie Stone. I was lucky enough to speak with Rebekah to get some advice and be connected into communities like Transcend and the Australian Parents Group. At this point I was also very lucky to speak with Lisa Cuda to get her perspective and also some more information on the gender services in NSW.

I honestly don't know where we would be without the support of these amazing organisations and people.

At this early stage I remember still thinking, we don't know if Jamie will be trans for sure. Maybe she will want to be a very feminine boy? However being trans was now certainly on the radar.

As the lockdown period lifted things became a little more challenging. Jamie couldn't understand why we were saying no to wearing Mum's scarves and dresses out of the house. Jamie had become very attached to these items and did not want to wear any of her own clothes. The distress was clear, it wasn't just a tantrum but real sadness. We had said it was fine to wear these at home, but they did not fit her properly and were not real clothes.

The distress built over the following one to two months, until I said to my husband one day, I think we are going to need to buy her some dresses. He agreed, and later that week before we had done anything Jamie said to me on the Friday night, "Mum, I really need some of my own dresses."

I said "I know you do." and the next morning we went off and bought two dresses, one skirt a bunch of colourful hair ties and bows.

I can honestly say this felt so strange and scary! I have a sister who is gay, and thought I was quite an open person, this felt like a really challenging thing to do for our four year old son!

I took a photo of these items the day I bought them and remember every year on May 16th as it was such a significant step in our journey.

We now had a son, with a very male birth name, being called he/him, and looking completely like a girl.

Her hair was shoulder length and she would only wear her new clothes, sometimes all of them at once! The need to affirm gender at this stage was intense so it wasn't uncommon to leave the house with a dress, two skirts and multiple hair bows!

Thankfully, family and friends were mostly all supportive and I think in some ways the age helped as people saw it as maybe a phase or something sweet and endearing. However my husband and I knew it was much deeper than that.

We waited to see what would happen next...

Three months after the dress purchases, when Jamie was just over 4.5 years old, we had another big step. Jamie began to correct us. "No Mum I'm not a he I'm a she." "I'm not a boy, I'm a girl." While the possibility of this happening was also on our radar through the research we had done and speaking to others with previous experience it was a scary and difficult thing to hear.

We took the advice of others and responded by first saying we would try it at home, then after a few weeks if that still felt right we could try it with family and friends. For Jamie there

was no turning back. She was/ is a she and a girl and has never turned back for one moment to this date.

About one month after this, we were leaving the house for pre-school when Jamie said "Mum I don't want to be called Conrad anymore because it's a boy's name." Another challenging step. I tried to brainstorm with an open mind, all while keeping calm, and getting out the door to start the day! "What about Connie then?" I asked. "No I don't like that." We went through a few options and eventually ended up with Jamie.

Like the pronoun change there has never been a step backward and we still have Jamie the girl at 6.5 years today.

This is an overview of the key moments in our journey as a family. I won't lie. It has been extremely challenging with many restless nights and a lot of fear for what the world holds for our child. Like any parent we just want her to be safe and happy.

I'm comforted by the fact that she is happy and healthy, and tells me, "Mum I will be a girl until the day I die."

I can't imagine her any other way now and I'm at peace with the fact that we listened, and allowed her to be true to herself. We don't know what the future holds, but I know whatever it is, we will listen again and always love her "whether she is a boy, a girl or a pineapple" (something we jokingly say in our family to remind them we love them for who they are as a person, not as a gender or anything else).



CATHERINE'S STORY*

When my daughter was growing up it never crossed my mind that she had any issues with her gender. I have no stories to share of her insisting she was a boy, no struggles to persuade her to wear girls' clothing, no anecdotes about how she was a tomboy or played on the boys' soccer team. I have nothing like that to share. My stories are of a beautiful and creative little girl who loved her princess dolls, her My Little Ponies, her coloured hair clips, bows and fairy wings.

It was never on my radar that my daughter could be transgender or that one day when she was in her early twenties my life would be turned completely upside down. I cannot remember clearly how my daughter told me she was a boy, or whether she used the word transgender. The panic and fear that I felt at that moment, thinking there must be something terribly wrong with my child, has wiped some of my memories of that day. But I will never forget the anguish I

saw in my child's face. I knew whatever she was struggling with, was massive.

I didn't know what I should do and I turned to a diagnostic manual for information. At that time it was the DSM IV. I looked up **gender** and I came away worried that my daughter could be suffering a serious disorder and be mentally ill. I saw a psychologist specialising in gender issues and I told her about my daughter and how she had always behaved and dressed like a girl. But I also told her about the distress my child felt during puberty, her anxiety and discomfort with her female anatomy and of her breast binding. The psychologist said she believed my child could be transgender.

For a long time I fell into a deep abyss. I worried about my child's future, how difficult her life would be and how badly she would be treated. How could I ever keep her safe? What had I done to cause this? How had I not known? I fluctuated

between denial, fear, depression and guilt. In those early troubled years it was hard for me to see that I could get to the place I am now, or to see that I would gain so much from the journey. I have a transgender son and I am enormously proud of him. I feel positive about his future and all of his potential. He is interesting, inspiring and courageous and I fully embrace him as my son.

The reason I am sharing my story is because I want you to know that it does get better! You will come to a place of acceptance. You will get used to the new name and pronouns. You will feel proud of your child and positive about the future. You will feel confident that your child will find happiness and love. You will learn that your transgender child is a natural part of human diversity.

There are many, many parents with transgender children.

You are not alone.

CATHERINE'S TIPS FOR PARENTS



Use your child's preferred name and pronouns

In the beginning you may find this very difficult, but continued resistance could damage your relationship with your child.

Show support and a willingness to understand her or his experience. Whatever your child's age, he or she wants and needs your acceptance.

When your older child tells you she or he is transgender, he or she has probably agonised over these feelings for years... believe them

Connect with a parents' support group

When you need support or comfort or reassurance about your child's future, don't look for that from your child.

Not all transgender people are the same

Not everyone transitions, not everyone takes hormones and not everyone has surgery. Some transgender people pass as their affirmed gender and some do not, some don't feel they need to try. There is no right or wrong way to be transgender.

If your child is transgender that does not mean there is something "wrong" with him or her. Learn all you can and be an advocate and champion for your child.



YASMINA'S STORY

From a very early age, Nicky showed an interest in everything sparkly and at the age of two was demanding to be in dresses, daily. We would receive comments from strangers, family and friends who advised that if we hid the dresses, she would get over it, or that she was just dressing in them because she wanted to be like her older sister (who, at the time, wouldn't wear a dress!).

We moved countries when she was three and a half, and it was the best thing for her. She jumped at the chance for a fresh start and to be herself. Her dialogue changed from "I wish I was a girl," to "I am a girl," and she was very forceful about it.

My husband and I saw a psychologist who advised us to just go with the flow. I changed pronouns immediately as Nicky was becoming very stressed about being misgendered, though my husband wanted to give it a few extra weeks. However, after seeing the immediate change in Nicky, he changed the very next day. For Nicky, there has been no looking back.

Nicky currently has gender dysphoria, but not body dysphoria. She doesn't have a desire to hide that part of her when it comes to swimming etc. This is only difficult as people don't realise she's trans until in swimmers, etc. and then it results in looks and comments. It doesn't faze her at all, which I am so grateful for, but it brings a lot of anxiety to myself when we go swimming or to the beach as I just want to protect her.

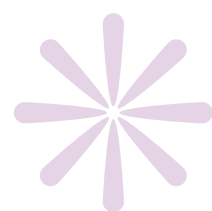
We've been through a lot of tough times. She was essentially kicked out of a local preschool as they wouldn't confirm to other children that she is a girl when the children were calling her otherwise. They excluded her from the girls' birthday party lists. We had kids yelling at her and rolling on the floor to look under her dress. People were telling me I was brainwashing her.

For the most part, starting primary school has been a breeze. She is thriving at our local public school and they have been amazing. However, they refuse to educate others.

As she is still only six, I generally speak to parents before going to theirs for a playdate. I want to absolutely know she is safe and supported. I have only had one negative response.

Nicky is currently in year 1 at a local public school and she is absolutely thriving. She is the happiest she has ever been. She's excelling in her work, she's in a great little soccer team and does competitive gymnastics (female comp). She has told a couple of friends and they've all been very supportive (although at 6/7yo, I doubt they understand!).

I've changed due to having a transgender child. I've found an inner strength I didn't know I had. I'm strong, brave and will stop at nothing to make this world an easier place for children and people who are like my child.





BRADLEY'S STORY

I have a transgender son, who told us at 15. It took us by surprise but now looking back it's clear 'A' had been increasingly miserable since puberty started, ignoring developing breasts and periods. He got quite distressed when we took him shopping for a nice dress and shoes for great grandma's funeral. However, we ended up with men's pants and shirt and a kindly comment from my brother that, "A makes a nice boy!" It was men's clothes again for the Year 10 formal but we still had no idea.

When he told us he was trans I had all sorts of thoughts about what might have caused it, something that had happened or that we had done or not done. But I quickly discovered that I knew less than nothing about transgender people, because what I thought I knew was wrong.

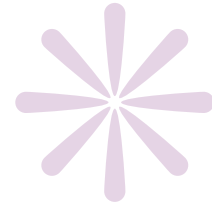
We saw a trans friendly GP the next day and got a referral to a wonderful endocrinologist, then spent the weekend internet shopping for packers and binders. I think it was a bit awkward for A to be doing that as a family but I asked him if we should have done anything differently and he said we did okay.

We were fortunate to get through all the psychiatric appointments quickly and then A started on Testosterone at which point he socially transitioned at school. We saw an immediate significant improvement in A's mental health

Some parents worry about whether they are doing the right thing, but it wasn't our decision to make, it was our son's. After extensive assessment by experts, we now know he made the right choice.

Further along A had Top surgery and this was when life really started. I don't think he could see any future without it, but since then he has moved to Sydney, got a job, a flat and a girlfriend, and is doing better than I was at that age!





PENNY'S STORY

My husband was up early one morning, as usual, and about to go to work, when he was confronted by an envelope marked "Mum and Dad – open together" lying on the table. My husband brought it downstairs to me in bed. He reported that our eldest son, aged nineteen, was not in bed and that his car wasn't there – extremely uncharacteristic of him. Now you can imagine how our hearts were thumping. We both skim read it and saw with great shock that our son wanted to become a girl, that he had felt he was a girl from about the age of four or five when he used to dress up in skirts at his babysitter's place with the other girls. We were both stunned to say the least!

We were immediately concerned about his state of mind and welfare. Luckily, we had an idea where he might have gone to give us space and time to come to terms with "the

news" (a quote from his letter). Our son had always shown concern for others. My husband drove and found him at a local lookout and asked him to come home.

He didn't want to discuss it further. He said that he'd put it all in the letter and he'd never been one to talk much about feelings. He said that he had researched it on the internet and that he'd found a place where he could go for gender reassignment surgery. We just had no idea of what to say, other than that we loved him, and would always do so, no matter what. I did know that one had to undergo counselling before having such a major surgery. We suggested that he start with some local counselling and with a youth counsellor.

Unfortunately, this counsellor had little understanding or knowledge of transgender,

but we did expect that he would listen to our son and not try to talk him out of it. We told the counsellor that if he thought that our son was positive about this, that we would support him and take it further. During the session with our son, the counsellor said very uncomplimentary things about how he would look as a woman. Our son, not being very confident, decided to "suck it up" and get on with life. I did ask if he wanted to go to more counselling sessions but he said, "I feel better now." The counsellor reported to me that in his opinion, our son needed affirmation of his masculinity and advised that we had no need to worry. So we left it at that, as we had never seen any evidence in our son's behaviour to indicate that he was indeed transgender.

We saw our son try very hard to be proactive in making his life "better" by organising



lots of activities with friends, working hard, studying and always being involved in many different activities. He met his wife around the age of twenty-one and when she went overseas to study, he followed her. When they returned a year later their relationship became permanent. Our son did further studies at university and as a result found a very good job in the public service.

After the wedding some nine years later, our son commenced counselling as, unbeknownst to us, all was not well. His feelings of being female had been returning from time to time, usually when things were problematic. He had been prescribed anti-depressants but these weren't having the desired effect. Our son has since told us that all through his life he's always thought, that if he just did this or that to improve his life circumstances, these feelings would go away. But they hadn't.

It was as a result of these counselling sessions that our son phoned us one night to tell us what had been going on and that he had come to the conclusion that he was transgender. He was trying to decide what he should do about it. He told us that in order for him to be happy in life, he would need to present as his true self.

If he decided to ignore this and repress his feminine feelings he would never be happy. He wanted to give it a go as he didn't want to go through life being unhappy – he'd tried everything else.

This was in early 2014. We went into a state of panic again. We thought that he had the perfect life. We thought that he was "over this." How wrong were we? How naïve were we to think this? Why didn't we learn more about being transgender years ago?

Our son and his wife visited several times over the next couple of months when we discussed it. We told him that he would always have our unconditional love and support even though we didn't know how he was feeling. My husband said that he really wasn't in favour of what he was about to do. I just wanted to keep our son close for the difficult times ahead. I did not want to alienate him. We were so worried about the whole process and for his future.

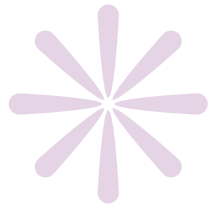
There were so many negatives in going through with this move. First, his wife would leave him which meant his financial situation would be under stress. He would be on his own. How would he be treated by others? We had so many concerns. We talked about it constantly for

a couple of months. We cried each time he left after his visits. Would this be the last time we saw our son as a man? Many nights were spent lying awake talking about it and having a weep. We had many heated discussions about it too. We even plotted visiting him at the last minute to talk him out of making that visit to the endocrinologist, but thought better of it.

We did some internet research, but probably the information we initially found was not the right sort – lots of info about side effects and the down side of it all. Our son told us about an Australian Story episode about Cate McGregor, a high ranking transgender woman in the military, which we watched. We also saw another program about a couple of transgender women in the UK and their stories of transition.

We had a counselling session with a psychologist who specialised in transgender. This was a great day for us as it was the first time that we had discussed our son's situation with anyone. It was a huge relief. I told her that our son had always been our "shining light" as a child, being so easy to raise and always so sensible. Our other two sons had been more challenging. The psychologist's response to our concerns over





his decision was that if we thought our son was always sensible, why not trust him now to make a sensible decision?

It was as a result of this psychologist's suggestion that we attended the Parent Support Group at the Gender Centre. At that first meeting, we felt such relief to find other regular people like ourselves with children who were transgender – we felt so comforted – we weren't the only ones! It was fabulous meeting other parents in our situation – and seeing that they too had gone through the same traumatic times before coming to a state of acceptance about their children's transgender status. I hoped that one day I could feel this positive about our son who had started taking hormones.

This was the best thing we did to help our child. It has led to our learning more about trans being and feeling comfortable discussing transgender issues with our new daughter and our friends. We were given the book *The Transgender Child* which was very informative. Our daughter has really noticed the change in our attitudes since those early days.

She now feels that we understand and are truly supportive.

There have been some really tough times for our child as she has made the transition into a lovely woman. But I have felt okay with our level of support throughout this – visits, lots of emails and daily text messages, especially once the marriage ended and she was on her own.

There was one time early in the journey when she didn't speak to us for a few weeks after my husband sent her an article about depression which wasn't received well. But after several emails and many messages left on voice mail, this was sorted out. In fact, emails have been very useful as they have allowed everyone to voice their opinions without emotions getting in the way and have also produced more appropriate responses than those blurted out in the heat of the moment. Emails gave us time to "sleep" on any complex answers!

You can't tell an adult child – now thirty-two years old – what to do. You just have to hope and pray that during the many years when you had control over them (if you ever really did) that your guidance was successful; that they understood the importance of making informed decisions and going about things the right way. I guess we were lucky in that our daughter always liked to research everything before acting. She chose to

go to a counselor, visit an endocrinologist and psychiatrist all of whom specialised in trans care. She has been very good with blood tests and follow-up visits to the endocrinologist. She also returns to the counselor when she feels the need. Each time we see her now, we see our real daughter emerging – a much more confident young woman.

Our daughter has returned to work after taking seven months sick leave to transition. Her supervisor has been most supportive in arranging some trans workplace training for all the staff. One of the girls even arranged a welcome back "lunch with the girls." Our daughter happily reported that everyone at work has been very supportive and accepting.

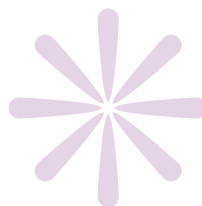
We know that the journey is not over – there are still ups and downs. But I feel our family is now better able to meet our daughter's needs.

Even though your child may be an adult, he or she still needs your unconditional love and support. Be accepting, open to new ideas and listen to your children as only they know how they feel! They have a right to be happy.





LUCAS



Lucas came out as a boy to me a few weeks after his 11th birthday last year. I was very surprised. I had prepped myself for a potential non-binary announcement, a man in my home was absolutely not something I expected in 2021!

For around 2 years prior I was so worried about him because he changed overnight after a very early puberty - he was so withdrawn and depressed. I tried to talk to him but refused. He was so angry and frustrated. He started saying ugly things about himself, about his personality, his intellect, his body. Things he had never said before. He cried easily and a lot. Not cleansing tears but hot, angry, anguished tears.

I was so worried that something bad was happening to him. That he was being bullied or someone was abusing him. He assured me nothing like that was happening. We talked about therapy to help with whatever was going on. He wasn't at all keen. He just wanted to be left alone.

The more I tried to talk to him the more frustrated and withdrawn he became. I thought puberty was hitting him so hard. Too hard.

Growing up he was such an easy-going kid. He didn't have any particular likes or dislikes about anything. Zero interest in his hair, clothes he just wore what was easy (opposite to his sister) - he did always play the dad in games but I thought that was in deference to his big sister who always wanted to be the mum.

Despite my initial shock I believed him immediately. A week later his dad took him to have his long hair chopped off. When he brought him back to my place afterwards I cried happy tears. He was beaming.

There he is.

It's was so obvious then and still is now that he is and has always been a boy. I can't believe we missed it.

It has been 7 months now

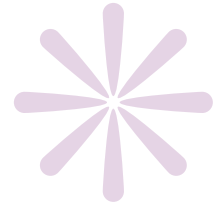
and he primps and preens in the mirror every morning. He takes pride in his appearance. He wears a binder most days but other days he's OK without one. He's happy in his skin. He's out socially and at school. No muss, no fuss. "My new name is Lucas and I use he/him pronouns". Everyone has been so great and supportive. His friends used his name/pronouns immediately and corrected themselves straight away if they stuffed up.

All of my initial fears have dissipated. As the lovely said to me "let's not underestimate our amazing kids."

I feel like I got my baby back once he came out. It's such a relief. Lucas is the same wonderful, sweet, funny, loving kid he always was. We just stopped mis-gendering him.



JEN'S STORY



I'm the proud mother of three great kids, including eleven-year old identical twins.

My son and daughter made their arrival eleven years ago prematurely, as expected, due to having twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome – a condition commonly experienced by multiple-birth offspring where, in this case, their common placenta was shared unequally resulting in my daughter being significantly smaller than her brother.

Some of you may have noticed something a little odd about my story already. It is normally considered impossible to have identical twins of differing genders – fraternal twins can be brother and sister but not identical twins – as they are the result of one embryo splitting it two – so they share the same genetic material that was contained in that embryo and this determines their physical characteristics.

When I brought my babies home from hospital I was in no doubt I had two identical sons and their birth certificates listed them as male. For the

first three or four years of their lives they were my 'lads' – they dressed in similar jeans and sweaters and enjoyed pulling on their gumboots to play in the mud on our little farm. Then one of them started showing an interest in all things 'girly' and I was okay with that – it was just a phase I thought. So teddy bears, Barbies, and playing with my clothes and jewellery became 'his' thing. At playgroup one of the twins was always in the sandpit with the trucks – the other in the dress-up corner wanting to wear the tutus.

At about six years of age my child first told me he was going to be a girl when he grew up – that he would have a sex-change operation. I have to be honest – it scared me so much to hear that. Not because I loved my child any less, or thought that something was 'wrong' with him, but because I feared how others would perceive and treat my precious child. Like most parents I want my child to grow up safe, have opportunities, be loved and

cared for – and in that moment all I could imagine was a very difficult life that I didn't want for my child.

At this stage, if I had taken my child to a psychologist or psychiatrist, I have no doubt that my child would have been diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria (she has been diagnose more recently) - which is a medical term for having significant discontent with the sex and gender a person was assigned at birth. One study suggests that all young children who have Gender Dysphoria don't continue to have it as they get older, that about 25 percent persist and are consistent in their identification as the opposite gender into puberty and adulthood. As I learn more I am less sure of the validity of that study, but – assuming it is correct – my child is one of those children whose identity has persisted.

For the next five years after her first announcement my child lived a double life – dressing

in preferred feminine clothes at home and dressed as a boy when elsewhere. Both twins were doing really well at school, and had lots of positive childhood experiences but their interests were very different – and their friendship groups were markedly different. One had all male friends and the other all female friends. I guess we were still waiting for the phase to end... but it didn't.

By 2015 my child became more insistent and outspoken about her desire to be recognised as a girl. She has always been very clear on who she is and never shy to be her true self – I have great admiration for her capacity to be honest and open with others about how she sees things. She can be very determined and has a keen sense of what is just and unjust – which has resulted in her recently announcing she would be acting as her brother's 'lawyer' in all future family disputes – which is quite a daunting proposition for this Mum but her brother is delighted.

As a parent it was an incredibly difficult decision to make – whether to allow her to exist in the world as the girl she knows herself to be, or force her to remain closeted about her identity beyond the safety of our home. Those same fears and concerns that I had when she was six and dreaming of being a girl were present, but in the meantime I'd done enough research on gender identity issues to know that the risks associated with not supporting her were significant – more than 40 percent of unsupported

transgender people attempt suicide. At age eleven it was also necessary to consider difficulties she would face with the imminent onset of puberty, as just the thought of experiencing the physical changes of male puberty were very distressing to my child. Many of those physical changes might require surgery or other interventions later in life if my child later transitioned to female.

Her twin brother supported her fully. He said to me, "Mum, she's always been a girl on the inside, now she's going to be a girl on the outside too."

So on Christmas 2015 my child got the best present I could give her – the freedom to be herself. With full support from our family and friends we changed her name, started using female pronouns, let her wear her girl's clothes, and she got her ears pierced (the icing on the cake!).

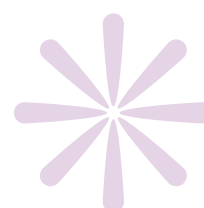
She returned to her school this year as a girl and she's so happy. The biggest issue we have is that she loves it so much she never wants to miss a day – even when she's sick. Our school and community have been outstanding in their support of my daughter – and her fellow students have been open and accepting. I don't think it was a radical change for anyone as she had been so feminine before – for most of the kids it seems to make sense to them that she's a girl now.

My daughter is now receiving treatment at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne which has a Gender Clinic for

children and adolescents. She is currently being monitored to identify when she reaches an appropriate stage of puberty (Tanner Stage 2) to start medication which will basically stall her body from going into male puberty. This treatment is completely reversible should she decide not to continue at any stage. It effectively buys her time before making any more radical choices later in life, such as taking hormones or perhaps having surgery.

There are so many surprises and unexpected lessons you learn while being a parent. Perhaps the one lesson that would have been good for me to learn early on when I held my beautiful identical baby boys in my arms and imagined their future is that I should never assume anything about what would happen next. Life has all sort of unexpected curveballs ready to be thrown. Unconditional love is the key to facing all of them.

I sometimes wish I had a crystal ball that would show me where this journey will lead us so I could avoid potential mistakes and protect my child better. I'm very clear that my role in this is to smooth the way for my daughter so that she grows up in a world that has a better awareness of the issue for gender variant people, which is why I am happy to share our story.





OUR FIRSTBORN

Our firstborn child was assigned female at birth. She was a highly intelligent child, wise beyond her years. She was articulate, dramatic, creative, compassionate, a staunchly loyal friend, a deeply loved and loving daughter, a sometimes impatient but mostly fun and loving older sister to her 3 younger brothers, and a social justice warrior.

From a very young age, she displayed very low self-esteem and body hatred. No amount of love or reassurance could convince her that her young body was perfect or that she was a wonderful, worthy human being. As she got older, she started to display symptoms of anxiety, emotions that she couldn't control, didn't know how to handle. We were told this was often the case with highly intelligent children. She saw several psychologists over the years with mixed results and as she got older, learned some tools to help manage her anxiety.

Puberty was extremely difficult, and her body hatred got worse. She found having her period a lot more traumatic than most teenage girls, and often spoke of a desire to cut off her breasts.

In year 8, teenage friendship drama led her anxiety to spiral out of control, and she sank into severe depression, unable to

get out of bed most mornings. She had thoughts of self-harm, which quickly increased in severity and frequency. She had started purging as a means of trying to cope with her self-loathing, but that quickly became self-harm in the form of cutting and eventually led to two suicide attempts. She was accepted into the CYMHS program, diagnosed with chronic anxiety and depression and put on anti-depressants. I spent many sleepless nights with her in my bed, begging me to take her to hospital where she thought they could make it all go away. CYMHS told us that if I could keep her safe at home, that was the best place for her, especially at the start of a pandemic, when the hospital system was already overloaded and where she could be exposed to Covid-19. So, I did my best to keep her safe at home, listening to her for hours as she told me how much she hated herself, how she didn't want to be alive anymore, how the rest of her life seemed like an eternity of agony, an unendurable black hole. She believed she had no friends, she was unlovable and there was no point to her being alive, that she was a burden to her family, and we would be better off without her. On the nights that she spent in her own room, I would wake up in the morning, not breathing until I ascertained that she had lived through the night.

Eventually the medication kicked in and she stabilised. She still suffered from the self-hatred, the depression, but the suicidality and harmful thoughts had decreased. At that point we were looking at practical things to do to break the cycle, and we made the decision that she needed to change schools. By this point she was only managing to get to school one day a week and would come home exhausted. We decided that an all-girls catholic school was not the right environment for her. She had talked about leaving the school for months, but as much as she hated going there, the thought starting somewhere new was also terrifying. Eventually we made the decision for her and said that she needed to move. When I told her that, she looked me in the eyes and said, clearly terrified and so very, very brave, "When I change schools, I want to do it as a boy."

Suddenly, everything made sense to us – the trauma of periods, the abhorrence she felt for her breasts, even the name she was born with, which she hated... it all made sense. She was supposed to have been a boy. He was a boy, and he had felt this way for years, trapped and not able to tell us. Although it was so hard to hear, and we were scared and anxious about what this would mean for his future, the primary emotion that we felt was hope. That we

now had a direction, instead of clinging blindly to him in the dark, we had a path we could take to actually help him. We went online that day and ordered his first binders.

CYMHS referred us to The Gender Centre, where he was connected with a psychologist who was non-binary and specialised in Gender Dysphoria. The difference, even after the first session was incredible. He had always struggled with therapy, had found talking about himself traumatic – to the point that his previous team had started treating/coaching me, so that I could be his therapist at home. But he came out of his first session with the new psychologist absolutely beaming. On the way home, he told me that he had never felt so seen, so heard and so understood. He grew happier and healthier with each session as he learned to accept and understand himself.

I connected with a trans parent's group on Facebook for support and advice, and also researched on the internet about what our next steps should be. We researched the local high school to get a feel for the diversity and culture, to establish whether the student body were likely be accepting and met with staff to ensure that they had policies and procedures in place to affirm and support him. I reached out to an acquaintance with a child in his year and we introduced them, so they he knew someone on the first day. That piece of kismet was the absolute turning point in his recovery,

for that child introduced him to their group of friends, who turned out to be my son's 'tribe' – a wonderful group of rainbow kids who immediately welcomed him into their fold and freely offered him what he had so desperately been seeking – love, acceptance and companionship from a group of like-minded peers.

The other thing we did that made an enormous difference was move his medical care to a GP who specialises in patients with gender diversity. I can't stress enough how much impact this had, as our regular GP really had no idea what my child needed, and I found myself doing all the research to acquire knowledge that they should have been able to provide. The new GP facilitated an introduction to an amazing trans-friendly Endocrinologist, who was wonderfully supportive and started my son on testogel immediately, and then moved him onto testosterone injections when he was ready. You should have seen his joy when his voice started to break, and when facial hair started to grow! Given the severe breast dysphoria he continued to experience, once his testosterone levels were stable, his GP referred us to a surgeon, to begin the process for top surgery. He had his surgery 6 weeks ago and the day his bandages came off and he saw his chest, he burst into tears and said, "That's exactly how it was supposed to look!" He joked that he was never wearing a shirt again!

He still has a very long road ahead of him. While society is much more accepting, recent

political bullying of trans kids shows that life is still much harder for a trans kid than a cis one, and that there will be many hurdles to face. His anxiety and depression will likely be a lifelong challenge for him. But when I look at him today, and see how far he has come, I am so incredibly proud and full of awe at his bravery and his resilience. He has a part-time job in a cafe, lots of hobbies and is very social. He's aiming for a career in theatre and working towards that.

The last few years have not been easy for me either and I'm sure that I have some secondary trauma as a result of caring for him during his illness. I'm extremely fortunate that we have had a strong support network and our family and most of our friends were accepting and supportive. There have been some difficult periods during his transition, where I doubted myself and worried that what I was doing was not right for my child. Even though I understood and supported his need for surgery 110%, it was still an incredibly difficult and emotional day for me, though he will never know that. There have been emotional periods, where I have mourned the 'loss' of my only daughter and then felt guilty for doing so. Because he is still alive, and he is still the same person he always was, and we're still very close. He just has different packaging. His future might be different to the one that I envisaged for him when I held him in my arms on the day he was born, but he is still here, and that future looks very bright!





TIPS FOR PARENTS



- Talk to your child and ask them how they feel and what they need and want.
- Learn as much as you can – knowledge leads to better understanding. There is information online, some great books available, and support groups you can join to help educate and support you with what you may need to support your child.
- Remember to look after yourself. You may have some sleepless nights and feel weighed down by fear. If so, seek out the help you need to support yourself.
- However tempting it is, do not use your child to work out your feelings. Instead meet parents online or in person with similar experiences as it can be a great place for information and advice. Attend support groups and/or counselling if needed. It helps to talk to others.
- Give your child unconditional love, support and a safe place to explore what is right for them as an individual. The statistics of self-harm and suicide are dramatically reduced for those who are supported by loved ones.
- For those with older children, keep the lines of communication open. Phone, text, email and even Facebook message them – even when they are not talking to you. Let them know that you love them and support them and will always be there for them, even if you think they already know that you do. Regular reassurance is important.
- Understand that your child's situation may not be textbook. Gender is an individual and unique experience which may not fit with your or society's expectations. They may or may not require medical assistance, they may or may not present a certain way. There is no right way to be transgender or gender diverse, the same way there is no wrong way to be yourself.
- Discuss with schools, university or the workplace what you need and expect them to do to assist your child. You and your child have rights.

DISCLOSURE*

As a parent or caregiver, you should always check in with your child as to what they are comfortable with around disclosure, sharing or letting people in. This includes when and what you can share, and to whom.

It is important to move at your child's pace and discuss what is best and safest for them.

Who your child may decide to or not to disclose to or share with is their own decision. Allowing space for your child's autonomy is paramount to their privacy.

For parents this can sometimes feel like keeping a secret, but there is a difference between secrecy and privacy.

It can often feel like you have to educate others; this can be exhausting and it is a good idea to send them things to read and watch so they can learn.

UNDERSTANDING

AND SUPPORT

Sometimes loved ones and those close to us are not supportive. Some may take a while to learn more, understand and become supportive; some may not.

Lack of support can have a negative effect on your child. Providing a safe place for our children can sometimes mean we need to be firm and direct with anyone who is outwardly negative or unaccepting of your child.

“Have their back – hold their hand and help them navigate a safe and nurturing path”

When sharing with friends and family, most people will follow your lead. Be clear and confident in what you say. Here are some examples:

- “I just wanted to let you know that Sam is transgender and will now be known as Samantha. Also we would you to use “she” and “her” pronouns when speaking to or about Samantha.”
- “Samantha and our family are going through some

challenges right now and would appreciate your kindness and support.”

- “We are not sure of all the details of the situation just yet, but our hearts are with our child and our heads will catch up. We will fill you in when we know more. Until then we ask you to be patient and respectful.”
- “We love our child and will support them no matter how this pans out. We hope you can love and support us through this.”

A letter or email informing friends and family can give them time to digest it before they respond. You can include some things for them to read or watch for better understanding.

“My nephew said to me once:

‘Even people you love may say some stupid things’, so don’t take people’s first response to heart. Usually as they know more, they do better. Some may not be understanding or supportive and it is difficult to prepare for that, but you have to put your child first.”

If your child experiences discrimination in sports groups, classes or extracurricular activities, you should consider conversing with the person in charge and describe the discrimination your child is experiencing. Discuss solutions with the person in charge to ensure your child’s continued participation and safety. Do not accept any solution that discriminates against you or your child.

If you have addressed the person in charge and the discrimination is still occurring, then you may need to escalate the complaint up the chain of command. Keep a record of every incident of discrimination and your attempts to address it. This will be useful is you decide to pursue legal action.

It is important to help your child develop coping mechanisms and teach them resilience in the face of adversity. Give them a sense of safety, healthy self-esteem and an understanding of their rights. Therapy can be helpful.

psychological services

victim of crime advocacy

youth and family support

information and referrals

counselling

advocacy

groups

accommodation

street outreach

case management

speech pathology

needle syringe program

HIV and Hep C testing (DBS)

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“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. You can use it as a parenting focus: 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?”

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting transgender and nonbinary children, Stephanie Brill & Rachel Pepper