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The Gift of Transition on your Child

Transition has in it Much Wisdom that Deserves Acknowledgement

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Article appeared in Polare magazine: January 2011 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



One of the most saddening and heart-wrenching beliefs I have heard transgendered parents communicate is the idea that it may be in their children's best interests to withdraw, as a parent, to protect the child from the experience of transphobia.

Like all people, children need love and acceptance. A parent or guardian who supports a child to grow into their own person, allowing them to explore the world with a child's endearing sense of wonder provides an important element of this growth. Kindness and compassion that recognises a moment warranting intervention or perhaps the wisdom of inaction (the latter often being particularly difficult for a parent) also plays an important role.

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These are universal needs which are important to a child's healthy development. They present challenges to a parent which can manifest in many ways. The parent who is transgendered has the same responsibilities as any other parent. At the same time, being a transgender parent presents its own unique challenges and attempting to discuss all of them in this column is not practicable. I would like to focus on transphobia and the impact it can have for a transgender parent.

An engaged parent who is an active part of his or her child's life will almost invariably come into contact with their child's friends and other parents. It is unfortunate that in some circumstances, when those friends and families are aware of your gender-identity, a child may encounter transphobia because of the fixed gender ideals others hold (it is equally true that they might not). This transphobia can extend to the employees of your child's school, the management of your child's sports team or number of other domains.

While the experience of bullying and transphobia can be painful for both an adult and child alike, there are steps one can take to get support if it is being experienced. As a starting point, schools are required to take action when any sort of bullying is taking place. In circumstances where someone feels that a school is not taking your concern of transphobia seriously, the Gender Centre can provide education and training to school staff. It needs to be reinforced that it is never okay for anyone to experience bullying or transphobic violence.

One of the most saddening and heart-wrenching beliefs I have heard transgendered parents communicate is the idea that it may be in their children's best interests to withdraw, as a parent, to protect the child from the experience of transphobia. It is important to acknowledge that this belief is coming from a yearning to protect one's child. Often that same parent has experienced transphobic violence themselves and, well aware of the pain and hurt it can cause, seeks to shield her or his child from this by any means. It is a genuine attempt to support a child which can have long-term ramifications for that relationship.

Children can sometimes develop faulty beliefs about themselves. It is possible that in circumstances where a parent withdraws from a child, the child might mistakenly take on the message, "I am not worthy of love."

It goes without saying that this will have an unwanted impact on a child's development and their attachment style in both childhood and adulthood.

Children who take on this message can grow up with a sense of being "less than" others which can result in all types of creative adaptations that do not serve them in adulthood. It is important to acknowledge (for those who are scientifically minded of course!) that available research does not support concerns that a parent's being transgendered impacts adversely on a child (Green, 1998).

In contrast, remaining an engaged and active participant in your child's life, seeking to support them through challenging times offers a transgender parent a wonderful opportunity.

This opportunity is to impart what I call a "higher order" message, an unspoken gift I pick up on so often in counselling sessions and have the privilege of noticing. What message is this?

It is the message to live one's truth and move towards being the person we really are.

In a world where there is sometimes a lot of pressure to conform to ideals held by others (including gender ideals) the decision to transition has in it much wisdom that deserves acknowledgement.

What a wonderful gift transgender parents give their children as both a role model and an example of being true to themselves. To withdraw from their children's lives potentially denies them this message and in attempting to protect they may end up doing the opposite. Never forget that your being transgendered is potentially a great gift to your child.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc. which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.