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Your Teenager, Gender Reassignment and You

What happens when You Embark on Gender Reassignment Surgery?

by Max

Article appeared in Polare magazine: August 1994 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



... let [your teenager] know that not only have they got space in which to absorb and process your changes but this space is filled with your love for them.">

Okay you've been living in your desired gender for a year or more (possibly several), taking the hormones, growing whiskers, breasts, whatever it is that your particular hormone induces in you. You have a child who says they love you and accept what it is that you're doing. In fact they'll go to the extremes of defending you, even against non-accepting family members. But what happens when (and this is on the basis of having contact with or living with your child) you embark on gender reassignment surgery?

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Example: Overall what is occurring with my daughter is that she refuses to discuss the issue fully. She talks to me only on a superficial level about what I'm doing and is in denial about there being an issue that needs discussing at all. In regard to my operation, my daughter initially denied I'd told her that I was going to Queensland to see a specialist regarding my chest operation. I had in

fact told her about a month earlier. When I got back from Queensland I told her that I was going back in three weeks for the operation and she promptly refused to discuss it. According to her it wasn't going to make any difference. She said I looked pretty flat anyway. This being with a shirt and strapping on. I found out the next day from her boyfriend that she was upset by what was about to happen.

Since then I've had the operation and have spoken to my daughter on the phone a couple of times. She sounds as she usually does, accepting of the whole thing. As they say, "the proof is in the pudding". And so I will watch carefully her response when I show her the result of my operation.

As is known, the teenage years are a naturally difficult time for young people. They are busy trying to discover themselves and their own morals. The choices as to their career looms over them as does the decision of what to do the next afternoon/evening/weekend with their friends. Their priorities in life are totally different to ours, but can also be very similar. The common denominator is self-obsession. They also need a roof over their heads and money in their pockets, like all of us. If it wasn't for self-obsession and a determination to become who we believe ourselves to be then we wouldn't have stepped outside of the boundaries of who we were raised to be. We would still be who we were, not the people we have become.

Throughout the teenage years, parents bit by bit give their children control of their own lives (naturally this varies according to the combination of the parent/child relationship and personality types), whereupon the final result being, the new "matured" offspring deals with the parent on a new level. One that incorporates their acceptance of the broader vagaries of life. We, on the other hand, in a more realistic perspective, in that we are no longer their mother, the life giver, the nurturer of their formative years (or father) can only expect that coupled with puberty (which I'm sure you are aware, appears to last until one is about twenty-five) our change of gender is quite a large pill to swallow.

During this period of puberty, the child needs to be assured that what has been the most stable and fundamental factor of their formative years (be you initially mother or father) now is not the time for change within the parent, especially the major and drastic changes such as we have made. For the child, death of their parent is very difficult to accept and yet this is what we ask of them when we ask them to accept our new gender. They need to come to terms with mortality before we can reasonably expect them not only to accept the death, but all the loving idiosyncratic ways of the original parent wrapped in the representation of the new self.

So what do we do? Yell and rant at them? Coddle them in cotton wool by telling them whatever they want to hear? No. We have to be persistent by talking to them about our decisions. (In the event of them not seeing us as afresh for the first time (as the new us) or for a very long time, as this is a major shock to them.) Our children, naturally enough, need time to absorb the impact of their emotions. Quite often we have prepared ourselves for a shock - mental preparation - and yet, when the confrontation occurs find that we are far from ready. An example of this could be the break-up of a relationship.

Emotionally we crack and become either blubbing messes and/or raging torrents of anger (hopefully expressed in words not actions), until we purge our systems of these emotions.

The outburst of emotions comes from one who is at an age (especially if they've been through some years of gender reassignment) who should be in touch with their emotions. This "in-touchness" can only come from maturity and the desire to work through problems by talking honestly about them with our loved ones, our counsellors and more importantly ourselves. Teenagers have a tendency to either vehemently vent their anger or to withdraw into themselves, both being a form of denial.

It would then be selfish and inconsiderate for us to expect our children to be as immediately emotionally and mentally responsive as we'd like. Through experience, our children have at least, by their teens, learnt rationality. With our heightened sensitivity (brought about by our hormones) we can afford to help guide our children into further discussion regarding the further changes we make.

And if they're not living with us? Phone them once a week/fortnight - remember not to "crowd their space" by ringing too often, they may come to resent it and you. Alternatively you can write to them. If you're getting little or no response from them this way and they're still at school maybe you could write in confidence to their school counsellor explaining the situation. It's quite possible the school counsellor may already know of the situation and without breaking the child's confidentiality with them can let you know how your child is dealing with your life's choices. You may find the counsellor a very good ally.

In the meantime, don't pressure your teenager, it only pushes them away. But do let them know that not only have they got space in which to absorb and process your changes but this space is filled with your love for them.

Max, the author of this article, has been transitioning for four years and his daughter is eighteen years old. She has recently come back to live with him after having spent the last two years living consecutively with both Max's older and younger sisters.

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.