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Impact on Children of a Cross-Dressing or Transgender Parent

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As cross-dressers, transsexuals and other transgender persons become more visible within society, gender issues are now touching the lives of more children. Many people wonder if and when their children should be told a parent cross-dresses or has a transgender identity. There are other questions that arise as well. How do gender identity issues actually affect juvenile and adult children of transgender persons? How does one deal with the attitudes of family members or friends who disagree with a transgender parent telling his or her children? Can nieces and nephews be told? This article addresses those questions, and considers some of the debate associated with this issue.

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As we strive to understand this issue I believe it is important to recognise that a variety of dynamics exists within families today. In some families, children are to be seen but not heard, while in others children may lead a joyful, carefree existence. Parents and parenting styles can differ widely. Some parents have very strict, conservative values. Others, without shame or overbearing concern, freely display intimacy and share who they are with their children. As a result of these environmental differences a child's reaction to transgender issues will reflect the values and ideas of their parents, inherited community and culture. Additionally, the ages at which children mature may vary depending on the preceding factors, and impacts a child's readiness to hear about adult issues.

As a gender specialist the most frequent question I am asked regarding disclosure to adolescents involves age. What is the "right" age? Shortly thereafter I am then often asked about consequences, which I will address later in this article. Typically during sessions I do not immediately respond to these questions because generalized answers do not always benefit individual circumstances. Instead, I ask questions which encourage a parent to think about their child's maturity, social adjustment and dependency. This prevents the parent from using generalized answers to justify disclosing to an adolescent who is not ready to hear about gender issues.

Some of the questions I pose may sound difficult. They are however easy to understand if a parent is willing to invest time understanding their child's maturity and experiences. Is the child able to understand that his or her gender differs from that of opposite-sex individuals? Is he or she able to correctly identify another person's gender when referring to others? Is a child able to construct gender identity abstractly during role play with other children or tangible objects such as toys? In other words, does the child realise he or she can temporarily assign gender identity for the purpose of play, yet also recognise that a person or object reverts to their actual gender once play is over.

If a parent can answer yes to the preceding questions, his or her child may be ready to hear about gender issues. However, there is one issue both parents and children of any age cannot overlook. This issue concerns diversity. Do both the child and parent recognise that it is okay for people to have differences, even though we may not always understand why? These differences can be in presentation, gender, sexual orientation, background, ideas, beliefs and interests. If a person cannot accept that diversity exists with others, he or she really can't expect empathy for his or her own needs. If you are a parent and have not incorporated this principle into your own life, or that of your child, you have some groundwork which needs to be done prior to disclosing gender issues. Recognizing and addressing biases or prejudices is an important part of learning how to interact with others.

In researching this article, I consulted Barbara Anderson, Ph.D., a San Franciscan family therapist and clinical sexologist with over thirty years experience.

She said that children over four years of age are intellectually capable of comprehending facts surrounding gender identity. There are, however many other factors that should be considered in disclosing to children of any age, information about a parent's cross-gendered behaviour.

First, why is the child being told? Is it to serve the parent or in the interest of the child? In the first instance, one parent may want to disclose that the other parent is transgender for the purpose of discrediting his/her partner. or, in the second situation, certain changes may be imminent which require preparing the child by disclosure.

Another reason arises when the child has suspicions that lead to confusion about his or her perceptions. It is unfair to the child not to address this even if the child does not raise the question directly.

A third reason may arise if a parent is about to disclose to the larger public. It is unfair for a child to learn this information from neighbours or peers.

During our consultation Dr. Anderson went on to say that there is no need to disclose to a child the existence of transgender behaviour when it is confined to a private space. Such as, when no one except an intimate partner knows of it and there is little chance of the child happening upon it. If, however, the parent has gender identity issues beyond those of cross-dressing as part of erotic satisfaction, and keeping this aspect of the parent's life from the child interferes with the parent being open and accessible to the child, then disclosure must be considered. In such a situation Dr. Anderson recommends a delay until the child is older, more mature, and the nature of the parent-child bond is firm.

Finally, Dr. Anderson stated that negative consequences of disclosure may take many forms. When in the service of an angry spouse it may polarize the parent-child relationship in a way that disrupts the child's relationship with both parents, leaving the child feeling betrayed and untrusting in future relationships. When disclosure occurs in the context of an unstable parent-child relationship, it may be thrown further out of balance, creating more tension and resentment. When a young child is told, although intellectually able to grasp the fact, he or she may not be able to appreciate the importance of discretion, which may lead to wider unplanned exposure of the information disclose. In rare situations disclosure may precipitate a serious negative emotional response in the child. No doubt ensuing psychological treatment will identify the existence of an earlier disturbance which was ignored or unrecognised.

As Dr. Anderson and I discussed this subject, we both agreed that sometimes parents have a difficult time assessing whether a child is ready to hear about gender issues. Under these circumstances we suggest that the parents consider taking the child for a brief psychological evaluation to determine the child's developmental maturity. If a parent cannot find a gender specialist experienced with children, any child psychologist or family-child therapist might be consulted, as long as this professional person is willing to take either a supportive or neutral role regarding the adult's transgender issues. Also, some large cities are beginning to have support groups for children with transgender parents, contact your local transgender social support organisation for further contacts. Resources for children may also be found on the Internet through transgender support forums. Finally, children of parents who are out publicly, occasionally are interested in meeting other children with similar issues. This should never be forced, only encouraged if both parties are interested.

Notably, the consequences of disclosing to children who are not emotionally mature or prepared to deal with the complexities of adult situations do impact a child's wellbeing. Within my counselling practice I recognise that many people are concerned that introducing gender issues to a child at an early age might somehow sway or alter the child's maturation or development of gender identity. I do not wish to minimize or discount parents who have these concerns, after all a parent's primary responsibility is to safeguard the wellbeing and healthy development of their children. However, having worked with over one thousand transgender persons, as yet I have not encountered any evidence that either adults or children can acquire a transgender identity as a result of regular contact with a person who cross-dresses or has a transgender identity.

Unless a child is predisposed toward cross-dressing or having a transgender identity, the fact that another family member does should not greatly influence or sway a child's development. The exception to the previous observation exists in abuse or punishment situations, where I have noted that the threat of or forced cross-dressing on younger age children occasionally leaves a taboo imprint upon impressionable young minds. Later as adults, children who were threatened with or forced to cross-dress for punishment may do so within the context of erotic fantasies.

People should be aware that in part there is often a taboo or erotic stereotype associated with cross-dressing, transsexuals and other transgender persons. However, this eroticism cannot represent transgender men and women as a whole, much as other stereotypes do not accurately represent most people from other walks of life. Transgender individuals can come from any racial, economic, or religious background. They work in many types of fields; there are transgender physicians, teachers, insurance underwriters and auto mechanics. Finally, most transgender persons have families, and a large proportion have children. This knowledge should be passed on to other family members and relatives who are misinformed or who are afraid of catching "transgender germs".

One important area where gender issues effect children is on a social level. As is mentioned earlier in this article, people of any age can have great difficulty coping socially if they do not understand that differences between people are okay. This is particularly so with school age children, who by their nature are seeking approval from peers. These young persons greatly rely upon the messages mirrored back about their presentation, background, family, social worth and independence. If a parent is openly known to cross-dress or have a transgender identity the child may suffer unscrupulous harassment. This possibility needs to be discussed with the child at the time of disclosure, and a plan established to address any criticism or harassment the child encounters.

Parents need to recognise that they, not children, are responsible for insuring that these situations are dealt with in an appropriate manner. Until a child becomes old enough to speak for him or herself, the parent may need to engage with teachers and other parents to insure their child is not unfairly victimized. However, as a child's communication skills develop, he or she should be taught that throughout life a person is required to stand up against bullies who cannot tolerate differences in others. Finally, as the child builds self-

reliance skills, he or she should be taught how to state that he or she is not accountable for a parent's predisposition or choices. Children of all ages need to be reminded that this is the parent's issue, and they should be encouraged to talk about how this affects each of them.

During disclosure to children, it is important to recognise that presenting new information about cross-dressing or gender issues is likely to affect the children's perception of the parent. In other words, once again the subject of stereotypes arise. Stereotypes are those social dynamics we construct and adopt so that we feel connected to and understand the world around us. Children generally accept a parent's behaviour and identity without a great deal of question during childhood. However, as the child matures and he or she comes to recognise there are differences between parents. In doing so the child then begins embracing stereotypes of what are socially accepted roles for mothers and fathers. The parent who cross-dresses or has a transgender identity challenges these stereotypes.

Unless a child grows up with a family member or close family friend who cross-dresses, or has a transgender identity, the child in all likelihood is not going to be aware that this diversification is a healthy, potential gender identity or behaviour. After all, much of society is misinformed about gender issues, and is unaware that cross-dressing or having a transgender identity is not pathological, mentally disordered or medically diseased. As a child matures and ask more questions about the parent's behaviour or identity, it may be useful to gradually introduce the child to various types of diversity such as other races, creeds, cultures, gender or sexual orientation. This will help the child learn that much diversity exist within the world, and his or her own needs and identity are as legitimate as anyone else's. Once the child begins to understand how diverse our world really is, in all likelihood gender issues will not appear as alien.

Whether a parent is dealing with gender issues or not, a relationship between parent and child can become alienated if the child does not feel that he or she is loved. The best way to make sure the child knows this is to remind him or her from time to time, and do everything possible to insure his or her security is uninterrupted. During disclosure these themes should be discussed, and then briefly reintroduced so that the message is heard. If a parent regularly cross-dresses, or devotes substantial time to transition, significant time should be devoted to supporting the child's interests as well. If this is not done the child may come to believe the parent thinks only about him or herself. The cross-dressing or transition then becomes the issue which undermines the parent-child relationship.

Within counselling sessions I strongly encourage my clients to refrain from discussing gender issues when either the child or parent is in crisis. This is particularly so when the parent is in the process of coming to terms with his or her gender issues, and has not yet established realistic transition goals or discussed with the other parent how gender issues are to be resolved within the family home. If a transgender parent regularly cross-dresses or lives in role, the child in all likelihood will need to be informed. However, as Dr. Anderson mentioned earlier in this article, in some circumstances disclosing gender issues to one's children may be an option but not a necessity. This is so if a parent intends to cross-dress solely during erotic times or in a private manner which should affect other family members. If the child later discovers that the parent cross-dresses, and asks about it, he or she can be told that this is the parent's personal matter and that the child wasn't informed because it didn't affect him or her. When parents are directly asked about gender issues, children should not be lied to as this undermines trust within their relationship.

Introduction of cross-dressing and gender issues into the family has often been the catalyst for parents separating or divorcing. Simply put, in many circumstances it is difficult to maintain a marriage commitment which does not fulfil both adult parties' needs. However, if we operate under the assumption that children are a product of two people's love, regardless of gender-identity, parental responsibility does not end because a parent's life journey and needs have changed. During counselling I encourage parents to recognise that although circumstances may change, nothing prevents two adults from remaining friends and collaborating in their child's welfare. Couples can do this by getting back in touch with the basic friendship that initiated and maintained the relationship.

If change is forthcoming, children of all ages need to see how loving adults handle issues affecting others. They do so by not allowing circumstances to destroy relationships. Whether a couple intends to remain together or not, both parents are responsible for presenting gender issues in a neutral fashion so that these do not become divisive instruments pitting the child against one or even both parents. Failure to present such issues in a neutral fashion can disrupt the child's ability to process and move beyond feelings of betrayal, loss, anger or shame experienced as a consequence of these changes.

The short and long-term reactions of children to a parent's gender issues vary widely for both young and adult children. In some circumstances children grudgingly go along with changes. Others are readily supportive. Some children simply don't care, as long as it doesn't effect them. Those children with objections should be provided an opportunity to discuss their feelings. However, the parent should not allow any child or adult to badger, bully or attack the transgender person's special needs or gender identity.

People often attack others through passive-aggressive behaviour, and children are no exception. Passive-aggressive behaviour takes place when people state they support others needs, and then deliberately and continuously introduce opposition. They do so in an effort to make someone feel bad or compromised. This type of behaviour should be directly addressed with a statement that this type of behaviour is hurtful, destructive to relationships, and will not be accepted.

Fortunately most children are relatively accepting of a parent's cross-dressing or gender transition. This is especially so for those who have grasped the concept of self-parenting. Self-parenting means to be one's own parent after one's biological parents are no longer active, day-to-day protectors and participants. Generally, young adults and emotionally mature adults have grasped these concepts. When they do so they also begin to understand that parents have the right to follow a path separate from their children. Those parents who must transition during a child's formative years, are strongly encouraged to follow through with their parenting responsibilities. This includes insuring that adequate gender role model representation is available to the child, so that the child understands that parenting and even mentoring may come from persons of different gender. Mentors or role models, are those individuals people look up to during life's transitions.

Finally, the vast majority of children are relatively accepting of a parent's cross-dressing or transgender identity. As with any important relationship, children should be reminded that their acceptance is valued. However, in circumstances where a child does not accept the parent's behaviour, give the situation time. There is nothing wrong with a child calling a transgender woman "Father" or "Daddy", until

the young person understands that this label does not match the parent's presentation. Children can be encouraged to use appearance-appropriate labels and pronouns once they can comprehend the distinction.

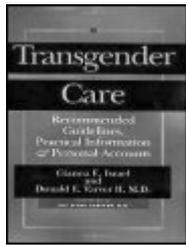
Gianna E. Israel



From Susan's Place: Gianna E. Israel was a therapist and author of many online articles regarding transsexuals and gender transition as well as the 1997 book *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts*.

She also published numerous articles on transgender issues, including a regular column in the magazine, *Transgender Tapestry*, and a series of gender articles which are published on Usenet and in C.D.S. Publication's TG Forum. Her writings on gender issues had a significant impact on the field and had an enormous impact on many people's lives. She spent nearly 20 years providing gender-specialized counselling, evaluations, medical recommendations, and mental health services across the United States. She even offered appointments by telephone for individuals without local support or who found office visits difficult. She was a member of H.B.I.G.D.A. and worked with thousands of transpersons in all stages of transition. She passed away on 21 February 2006 after a long illness and is a sorely missed supporter of the trans community.

A full list of her essays on the "[Differently Gendered](#)" website



Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts
Author: Gianna E. Israel, Donald E. Tarver and Diane Shaffer
Publisher: Temple University Press (1998)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-1566398527.

From Amazon Books: By empowering clients to be well-informed medical consumers and by delivering care providers from the straitjacket of inadequate diagnostic standards and stereotypes, this book sets out to transform the nature of transgender care. In an accessible style, the authors discuss the key mental health issues, with much attention to the vexed relationship between professionals and clients. They propose a new professional role; that of "Gender Specialist".

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide definitive information (in the context of consulting health professionals) on hormone administration, aesthetic surgery, and genital reassignment surgery. Chapter 6 takes up the little-examined issue of H.I.V. and AIDS among transgender people. There is also a chapter devoted to issues of transgender people of colour, as well as a chapter on transgender adolescents. The book contains a wealth of practical information and accounts of people's experiences about coming-out to one's employer or to one's friends or spouse. Several essays spell out the legal rights of transgender people with regard to insurance, work, marriage, and the use of rest rooms. The second part of the book consists of thirteen essays on a range of controversial topics.

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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.