

TALKING ABOUT



Family Acceptance & Transgender Youth



movement advancement project ▶

INTRODUCTION

Family acceptance is essential when it comes to the health and well-being of young people who are transgender, gender non-binary or gender diverse. Yet many people don't understand what it means to be transgender, so some parents struggle at first and have questions about how best to support their child. When a person is transgender, their gender identity (the sense of gender that every person knows inside) or gender expression is different from their sex at birth. At some point in their lives—and increasingly in their youth—transgender people decide they must live their lives as the gender they know themselves to be. For example, a transgender woman grows up knowing that she's a girl, even though she was born and raised as a boy—and often transitions to live as the gender she's always known herself to be.

Research shows that when transgender youth are loved and supported by their families, they are able to thrive. But when parents reject a transgender child or try to force them to reject the gender their child knows themselves to be, it can contribute to depression, suicidal behavior and other negative health outcomes.

Parents, family and friends of transgender youth can play a vital role in providing guidance to others who know or believe their child might be transgender—and that's where this guide comes in. These messaging guides typically focus on how a wide range of supportive individuals can have effective conversations with conflicted (or moveable) audiences. *Talking About Family Acceptance & Transgender Youth*, however, is designed primarily for use by parents, family and friends of transgender youth. It provides an overview of conversation approaches that can help families and friends build and extend support for the transgender youth in their own lives.

There are four key approaches for conversations that can build support and acceptance for transgender youth:

- 1. Acknowledge and address the feelings of unfamiliarity that many people feel when first discussing transgender people and youth.**
- 2. Emphasize the shared values, hopes and dreams we have for the transgender child in our lives.**
- 3. Discuss why it's important to protect and support transgender youth.**
- 4. Share personal stories of the journeys we took to become supportive.**

In addition, there are important resources from the Family Acceptance Project, Gender Spectrum and PFLAG National that family and friends can use to better understand the day-to-day ways they can support transgender youth. Links to these resources are located at the end of this guide.

APPROACH #1: ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS FEELINGS OF UNFAMILIARITY

Building familiarity with transgender people—in this case, the needs and aspirations of transgender youth—is the foundation for effective conversations. Because relatively few people personally know someone who is transgender, acknowledging that initial unfamiliarity and addressing it is a key first step toward helping them become comfortable participating in these conversations. Parents who have questions or are struggling will be better able to open up if they feel understood and that they can have an honest conversation with someone who won't attack or judge them for their questions or lack of familiarity. For example:

- It can be hard to understand what it means to be transgender, especially if you've never met a transgender person. Transgender youth grow up knowing deep down that their sex at birth doesn't match who they know they are inside. With the love and support of their family, they can transition to living as the gender they know themselves to be, which allows them to grow and thrive.*
- Our son is transgender. When he was born, we thought we were welcoming a daughter, but as he grew up, it became clear that he knew at the most basic level that he was a boy. It was difficult, unfamiliar territory at first, and we had lots of questions. But the most important thing was that he knew we loved and embraced him as the son he knows he is.*

APPROACH #2: EMPHASIZE SHARED VALUES, HOPES & DREAMS

Parents of transgender children want what any parent wants for their kids. Helping other parents and family members recognize this common ground can reduce the unfamiliarity they feel and create a strong sense of shared values and aspirations for their children. For example:

Research shows that when transgender youth are loved and supported by their families, they are able to thrive. But when parents reject a transgender child or try to force them to reject the gender their child knows themselves to be, it can contribute to depression, suicidal behavior and other negative health outcomes.

- *As the parents of a transgender child, when our kid grows up and heads out into the world, we want them to have the same opportunities as everyone else. They still have to work hard and meet their responsibilities, and they should have a fair chance at getting an education, earning a living, and building a good life.*
- *Parents want their children, including those who are transgender, to be happy, to be able to take care of themselves and their families, to be successful, and to be able to contribute their gifts and talents where they can, and to be able to make a difference in the world.*

APPROACH #3: TALK ABOUT HOW FAMILY CAN SUPPORT AND PROTECT TRANSGENDER YOUTH — AND WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT

Unfortunately, transgender youth still experience high levels of harassment, bullying, discrimination and even family rejection. When parents and family of transgender youth talk openly about those concerns, it can provide support to those who are still struggling with their own fears—and it can provide a pathway for understanding concrete ways in which they can be supportive. For example:

- *We were worried at first about what having a transgender child might mean. What would life be like for them, and for us? What kinds of barriers and challenges could they face? And how could we, as parents, support and affirm our child?*
- *As parents, we've come to understand that how we treat our child can make the difference between having a happy, healthy, thriving child—or one at greatly elevated risk of depression, suicidal behavior and other harmful outcomes we never want to see in our child. We may not be perfect, but our first priority is to ensure that our transgender child knows every day that we love and embrace them for who they are.*
- *It has sometimes been a journey, but supporting our transgender child means everything from buying them clothes they feel most comfortable wearing, ensuring that after a haircut they liked how they look in the mirror, using the correct name and pronouns (even though we mess up sometimes), and making sure they could surround themselves with friends who respect their gender. Above all, we're working every day to make sure our child knows that we are all on the same page when it comes to knowing, respecting and loving who they are.*
- *Every young person, including transgender youth, should be able to grow up knowing that they'll be treated fairly and equally. Unfortunately, that's often not the case. Nobody*

should have to live in fear of discrimination, bullying or harassment simply because of who they are.

Schools can be particularly challenging environments for transgender youth. Many transgender students still encounter discrimination and mistreatment. But more and more educators and supportive parents are working together to help ensure that schools are safe, affirming environments where all students—including those who are transgender—have a chance to learn, thrive and prepare for their future.

- *Every student deserves a fair chance to succeed in school and prepare for their future—including students who are transgender. Every student should be treated fairly and equally, and protecting transgender students helps ensure that they have the same opportunity as their classmates to fully participate in school.*
- *Students should be able to learn and thrive in a safe school environment. Our schools should strive to protect all students from bullying, discrimination and mistreatment, including those who are transgender.*

APPROACH #4: SHARE STORIES OF THE JOURNEY TO SUPPORT

Americans are on a vitally important journey toward understanding and supporting transgender youth. But even some family and friends who are strong supporters of transgender youth didn't necessarily start out knowing what it meant to be transgender or how to be supportive. They often discuss feelings of genuine confusion, concern and inner conflict. They don't always know how to affirm a child's gender identity and are often uncertain about how to create a nurturing environment for a transgender, gender non-binary or gender diverse youth before they have come out. And many wrestle with anxieties about what the future holds for a child who is transgender.

Parents, family and friends of transgender youth can play a key role in helping others navigate that journey by sharing their own stories. How did they become aware that a friend or family member was transgender? What inner conflicts or concerns surfaced as a result—and how did they navigate them? What questions did they ask, and how did they educate themselves? How did they create a safe, supportive, affirming environment for a young transgender person—and how did they work within family, schools, churches, and other important institutions to do the same?

Stories of those who have taken this journey over time can give similarly situated families permission to embrace their

own journey. Those stories can also provide a steadying hand on the shoulder of well-intentioned family who nonetheless struggle to understand and support a young transgender person. Every parent's journey story will be different, but the example below illustrates the journey of one parent:

- *When our child, who we had always thought of as our daughter, told us he wasn't just a tomboy, but that he was a boy, it was a big adjustment for us. We had a lot of questions. We did a lot of reading. We talked to other parents. And we talked and listened to our child. Like all parents, we just wanted what was right for our child. When we saw how much happier and healthier he was being able to live as a boy—we realized he just was finally becoming who he was always meant to be. Rather than mourning the loss of our daughter, we're thankful every day for our bright, vibrant son.*

Resources, Support & Further Reading

Family Acceptance Project:

"Supportive Families, Healthy Children"

https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/FAP_English%20Booklet_pst.pdf

Gender Spectrum

Topic: *Parenting and Family*

<https://www.genderspectrum.org/explore-topics/parenting-and-family/>

PFLAG National

"Our Trans Loved Ones"

<https://pflag.org/sites/default/files/Our%20Trans%20Loved%20Ones.pdf>

Example of Family Journey Stories



MAP recently teamed with the Biden Foundation and Gender Spectrum to launch the Advancing Acceptance initiative, which features a video of a transgender teenager, his best friend and their families talking about their own journeys:

Lucas (*Xander's Best Friend*): We've been friends for 10 years in August.

Xander: Lucas has always been there. He's definitely a very big support system for me.

Margaret (*Lucas' mom*): Last year, Hillary and John told us Xander was transgender.

Hilary (*Xander's mom*): When Xander was born, we thought we had a daughter...

Xander: ...but I always knew I was a boy.

Zuni (*Xander's sister*): Which is good, because I never felt like I had a sister. I've always felt like I have a brother.

Lucas: When he was younger, sometimes I could tell that he was more boyish. So when he came out as transgender, it wasn't a huge surprise.

John (*Xander's dad*): I try to teach both of our children to be honest with themselves, to respect their friends, and be very, very supportive of each other.

Margaret: I was concerned when Xander first came out as transgender. I was worried about how we would navigate it with him.

Mike (*Lucas' dad*): It required some learning and stepping back, asking some questions.

Margaret: But the most important thing is that he's a wonderful friend to my son. He's the same person I met back when he was five years old.

Hilary: We want our kids to be compassionate and kind, work hard, and pursue their dreams.

Xander: I want to go to college and study film...

Lucas: ...but for now, we just want to hang out, get through school, play video games. I don't know. Just do what we do.

John: We all want our kids to be treated fairly and equally. Not bullied, not made to feel less than—simply because of who they are.

To see the full video, visit www.AdvancingAcceptance.org or www.lgbtmap.org/video



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To download this and other MAP messaging resources for building effective conversations about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and the issues that affect their lives, visit www.lgbtmap.org/messaging-guides. © 2019 Movement Advancement Project (MAP).