



# 'Mom, Dad... I'm transgender'

Whether it's something you expected or not, responding to your child's disclosure of gender divergence requires tact, a lot of love and, more often than not, some guidance. We spoke to a mother who has been through it and three clinical psychologists to find out, what now?

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

## THE SIGNS WERE ALWAYS THERE

I was giving Danielle\* a bath when she told me, 'Mom, I feel like a girl.'

She was 5 years old, and she had a boy's body. Later, I found out she'd said the same thing to my mother on a different occasion.

She'd always gravitated towards girls' toys, and loved to play with girls, not boys.

Her father – who lived separately and with whom I shared custody – thought it was unhealthy and asked me to stop allowing her to play with Barbie dolls. I ignored him, of course – what was the harm?

Over time, I thought perhaps she might grow up to be gay; I didn't think much beyond that. But things began to change around puberty. She began to behave strangely, even for a teenager. She covered up her body, wore baggy clothes and took down all the mirrors in the house. For a time, she put on weight. She withdrew.

When she was 16, a friend of hers told me she'd been cutting herself, which is when I decided we needed to see a therapist. My precious child. I could see she was so unhappy but I couldn't understand what was causing it.

She went to therapy for roughly a year, and shortly after her 17th birthday, she sat me down and said, 'Mom, I need to tell you something: I'm transgender.'

'Okay,' I said, completely shocked. 'Give me a few days to think about this.'

I was terrified. I knew nothing about being transgender. Absolutely nothing.

Unbeknownst to me, Danielle had become friends with another transgender child in her father's neighbourhood, and gave me her

mother's number. She invited me to join a support group for parents of transgender children.

I had so much to learn, but Danielle had done a lot of research. She wanted to be sure she was what she thought she was. Still, I was hesitant about where this could all go.

What's more, her father threatened to disown her if she went ahead with transitioning. It broke my heart.

So we decided she would socially transition and start on puberty blockers, with my full support. To delay any longer would only cause her more suffering.

Her school was amazing. She ended Grade 9 as a boy and started Grade 10 in a girl's uniform. I sent an email to all of the parents ahead of time to explain what was going to happen. 'My child was created by the same god as yours,' I told them – and I received a lot of supportive messages.

The change in her was extraordinary. Almost overnight, she became lighter. She laughed; her sense of humour came out; she began to shine. I was really worried about bullying, but her friends already knew and she'd become extroverted, so it never became an issue, thank goodness.

I didn't get the pronouns right at first – I mean, you really have to reprogramme your mind. And when she got annoyed with me, I said, 'You have to be patient with me; it's not easy!' We've had to really learn to communicate. And we've become much closer.

At times I felt lost, bewildered.

*'Almost overnight, she became lighter. She laughed; she began to shine.'*

It really helped to be in a support group with other parents. When we end our meetings, we are always reminded to 'fear less, love more'.

When I saw how happy Danielle was with the transition, we began to discuss surgery. I insisted she finished her matric exams first, and she was fine with that.

Danielle is now 19, and I have an incredibly beautiful daughter. I still worry for her safety – which is why I share our story anonymously – but she is able to pass completely as a young woman, which protects her. She just continues to shine.

*\*Danielle is a pseudonym to protect her identity.*

## 'DON'T PANIC!'

In the science-fiction novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, the titular directory features this phrase on the cover.

'Don't panic!' is also the first thing therapists say to parents whose child has recently uttered the words: 'Mom, Dad ... I'm transgender.' (Or non-binary, or gender fluid/divergent, as the case may be.)

As a parent, you may well feel as if you had been transplanted into a different galaxy, for which a guide would be handy. Not because your child's claim is science fiction – let's be clear on that – but because it may

elicit a strong surge of very human responses: fierce protectiveness, concern for your child’s emotional and physical wellbeing, uncertainty about how to respond or proceed, shock, disbelief, self-doubt and, yes, panic. We humans are complicated beings, and while we can control our actions, our emotional responses can sometimes take us by surprise.

Increasingly, as pockets of society become more open and accepting, transgender children and those questioning their gender identity are finding the courage to confide in their parents. And whereas some parents may take it in their stride (having suspected as much for some time), others may be caught by surprise, and will have questions – many questions – and concerns.

We spoke to three clinical psychologists with experience in family therapy involving transgender youth and their parents, and asked them for their advice.

### WHAT’S THE BEST WAY TO RESPOND?

‘The first thing is not to panic or react strongly or negatively. Stay calm, even if, on the inside, you’re feeling terrified and thinking, “F\*ck, f\*ck, f\*ck!”

‘Say, “Thank you for being brave enough to tell me that. It must have been very hard.” Always acknowledge your child’s courage in confiding in you. Open up a discussion and ask your child to tell you more about it. Give yourself permission to not know everything and not be perfect. It’s okay to say, “This is big news for me,” or “This is something I have some concerns about, and I’d like to think about it. Can we find out more together? What should I read?” Ask your child for information.

‘What you *shouldn’t* say is, “How do you know? Are you sure?”

First, this implies that you doubt what they are telling you, and may elicit defensiveness and/or feelings of rejection. Rather, aim for an ongoing conversation. What you don’t want is your relationship to become tense or shut down, where your child clams up or disappears into their bedroom. This is when the likelihood of depression or self-harm begins to increase.’

– **Judith Ancer, a Johannesburg-based clinical psychologist and clinical supervisor with a special interest in parenting and child development**

‘It’s important not to panic, not to jump to conclusions. But to rather be curious, to ask what this term or label means to your child. Because some young people say, “I identify as non-binary or gender fluid.” Well, okay, what does that mean to your child? Because these terms are flying around... There’s been an explosion of different genders, labels, sexualities... I come across new terms all the time. The way they’re understood and embodied might differ quite a bit from one person to the next. So I think rather than push against a particular term, it’s important for you to say, “Okay, what does this mean for you, and how does it feel?”

‘It’s essential that you don’t cease to see your child. I think that’s when a crisis comes into the relationship, when the parent sees the label instead of the child, and all the fears of what it may mean and how others might react, for example. I think it’s very important that the connection, the communication and the quality of your relationship with your child is safeguarded.’

– **Nadya Wynchank, clinical psychologist and forensic psycho-**

**therapist with a private practice in Claremont, Cape Town; Nadya also works with the gender identity development service at the Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital’s Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and teaches clinical and forensic psychology at UCT and UWC**

### DON’T RUSH TO LABEL YOUR CHILD

‘Some parents, in an attempt to be supportive, may make premature assumptions and push their child towards one label or gender. I think this may be part of the issue with teens who are identifying as trans-masculine. There is a significant rise in the number of teenage girls who are saying, “I’m non-binary or gender nonconforming,” or “I’m trans.”

‘I think that when you try to make people choose between either being a boy or a girl, you push people into gender dysphoria or into a transgender choice without allowing for gender nonconformity. If you don’t force young people to make decisions prematurely, I think a lot of those gender nonconforming girls (and boys) might not choose surgery or hormones. They may just be saying that they are not prepared to be a girly girl the way that Barbie culture wants them to be a girl.’

– **Judith Ancer**

### IS THERAPY NECESSARY?

‘Typically, parents do need support and guidance. Also a space to grieve and process their losses. And I think it’s okay to acknowledge that for a parent there can be a real sense of loss. You’ve raised a child; you’ve held that child since they were a baby. You have memories of your child being a particular way,

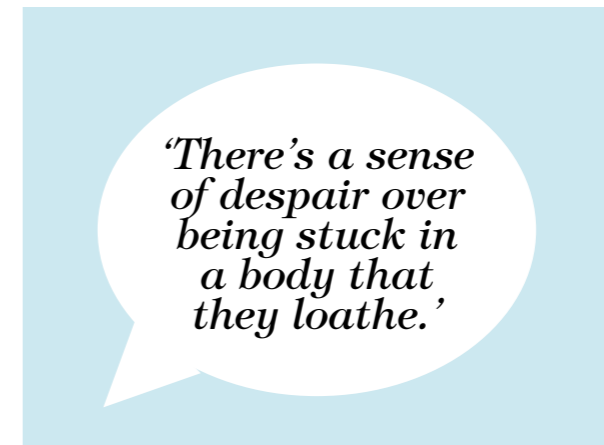
with a particular name and a particular body. We all have hopes and dreams. So yes, I would say parents usually need help with this.

‘For the child, being transgender in itself is not necessarily dysphoric (or the source of psychological distress). Transgender people who feel comfortable with themselves, who’ve made a way of living with it, are not necessarily dysphoric and may not need therapy. But once you’ve got dysphoria, then you’ve got depression, anxiety, discomfort.

‘There’s a fair bit of evidence that some proportion of the depression, anxiety, self-harming and suicidality comes less from the gender dysphoria itself and more from the internalised stigma, the internalised transphobia, homophobia and shame. Your child might need therapy if they’re withdrawn, there’s a big drop in their grades, they’re anxious or they’re self-harming.’

– **Judith Ancer**

‘I would definitely recommend therapy. These young people can really be at risk. About 65% of my caseload at the moment are teenagers or young adults who identify as gender divergent or gender nonconforming. For the majority, the awakening, the process of coming to realise this about themselves and fearing coming out, particularly to their parents, is deeply distressing. I have worked with a couple of people who do not experience dysphoria. They just experience gender incongruence, and they don’t live with this deep sense of suffering, but that’s a real minority. For many of them, there’s a sense of despair over being stuck in a body that they loathe, particularly



*‘There’s a sense of despair over being stuck in a body that they loathe.’*

when puberty happens – that’s often a trigger for a crisis. They are mortified by their body and the way that it is changing. Many suffer from depression and anxiety.’

– **Nadya Wynchank**

### COULD IT BE ‘JUST A PHASE?’

‘You need to be very careful not to dismiss your child’s transgender disclosure as “just a phase”. I don’t think it’s something that parents should ever say to a child, or get too attached to the idea. The evidence doesn’t support this, that gender dysphoria is a phase. It’s a form of denial and it could really harm your child.

‘Usually – but not always – there would have been signs from a young age. A little boy saying, “I’m a girl,” “I don’t want to have a penis,” and so on.

‘I do think there are possibly cases where a girl, say, realises that she’s gender nonconforming, and may explore her gender expression by adopting different pronouns, for example, but then may grow up to become comfortable with female pronouns and just expressing herself as she is. But this is why it’s really important for parents not to push children in one direction or another. Because what happens when you tell a teenager that they can’t – or have to – do something? Often, they

dig their heels in.

‘The more you push back as a parent, the more likely you’ll either drive your child’s authenticity underground, ending up with a compliant but frightened, unhappy child – or you’ll cause your child to become rigid in their opposition.

‘Every transgender or gender-nonconforming child is unique. It’s impossible to make broad generalisations. Focus on trying to understand what’s shaped their experience of who they are. Open up space, and don’t put any pressure on your child to make a decision. You want to help them not to feel ashamed of who they are.’

– **Judith Ancer**

‘I always say to parents, just listen to what your child is saying, because this will give you so much information about how they’ve come to be in this place, how long they’ve been thinking about it. This can really help to form a picture of how long this has been going on. For example, is it quite a consistent gender identity that they’re expressing? If they say, “No, I’ve only been thinking about it since last week,” that’s a different scenario to if they say, “I’ve known for a few years.”

‘Try to learn more about what’s happening at school. I know parents are often concerned that friends are influencing them, but it’s very rarely the case, in my experience. Teens are just all talking about gender more. So that’s more what we see. And even if it does happen in rare cases, it’s more often that it’ll pass. I’d normally want them to have been expressing some kind of gender identity, like a transgender

identity, for at least six months before referring them to a doctor, for example.'

– **Jordan du Toit, clinical psychologist with a private practice in Melville, Johannesburg, who is passionate about working with teens and members of the LGBTIQ+ community**

## IS MEDICAL TRANSITION A GIVEN?

'Not necessarily. We always start with a social transition. So that could be things like name, pronouns and clothing. Often that can be enough for kids for quite a while. Sometimes, forever. They might realise that, actually, "I'm fine; I have my new name; I have everyone using the right pronouns," and then we often stop there. And that's where I find that parents can be so helpful – I really encourage parents to just use whatever name your child wants you to use. It'll take you some practice to get used to it, but that's the most supportive thing parents can do. I've found teens less rigid about wanting a hormonal or surgical transition if they're feeling really supported to just explore and play around with their identity.'

– **Jordan du Toit**

'There's a fear among parents that once my child embarks on this journey, it's a one-way ticket. There is an absolute fear that once you start this process, it will not stop until you reach the end. Parents fear their child may be overwhelmed. But that's seldom the case, and it's absolutely fine to ask questions, to speak to other parents, to gather information, to take time. It's not something you want to rush.

'Personally, I feel most comfortable supporting or endorsing hormone

treatment when I've worked with that young person for a significant amount of time: an absolute minimum of six months but ideally a year. It's usually longer than that. The paediatric endocrinologists I've worked with – which is where you would begin the first stage of puberty blockers – require a referral. They need two clinicians – preferably a psychiatrist and a psychologist – to endorse the beginning of that treatment.

'Recently, I suggested to a set of parents, "Look, go speak to the endocrinologist. Go there as a tourist. You're getting a visa; you're not applying to become a resident. Just go and ask questions, find out everything you want to know about what this process might involve, if it happens.'"

– **Nadya Wynchank**

## WHAT ELSE SHOULD PARENTS KNOW?

'I would advise parents to connect with what their child is telling them, and not to consult Google too much, if possible! Googling can often make parents feel so much more confused about what their child is actually saying to them. It's usually a terrific sign that your child has spoken to you about it. It means they feel safe enough and trust you enough to tell you about this huge thing that they're going through.

'We pretty much never see children say this on a whim. It's always something that is distressing them in some way, whether it's a new development or it's been going on for a long time. Parents, please keep that in mind and try not to get too caught up in what this means for the future. Stay present with your child.'

– **Jordan du Toit**

## SOURCES OF SUPPORT

- To find a clinical psychologist with experience in working with transgender youth and their parents, visit the **Professional Association of Transgender Health South Africa** website at [pathsa.org.za](http://pathsa.org.za) or email [info@pathsa.org.za](mailto:info@pathsa.org.za)
- To join the Joburg-based **Safe Space support group** for families with gender-diverse and transgender kids, email [swift.melinda@gmail.com](mailto:swift.melinda@gmail.com)
- To join the Cape Town-based **family support WhatsApp group**, email [genderwearsa@gmail.com](mailto:genderwearsa@gmail.com)
- To join the Johannesburg-based **Matimba Children and Teenagers Hangout** space, email [akani@matimba.org.za](mailto:akani@matimba.org.za)
- **The Triangle Project:** [triangle.org.za](http://triangle.org.za)
- **Gender Dynamix:** [genderdynamix.org.za](http://genderdynamix.org.za)
- **Matimba:** [wearepurposeful.org](http://wearepurposeful.org)

## DOS AND DON'TS

Clinical psychologist **Nadya Wynchank** shares this guide for parents:

### DON'T

- **Look for something or someone to blame or shame.** e.g. 'As a parent I might've been too absent or too overbearing, which is why my child has turned out this way.'
- **Assume or proclaim,** 'It's probably just a phase.'
- **Make it about you.** You are there to support your child; don't burden them with how hard it is for you. If you're struggling as a parent, seek appropriate support.
- **Push your child away or reject them** simply because you don't understand what they are experiencing.

### DO

- **Connect with other parents of trans or gender-divergent kids.** There are support groups and online spaces where you can seek advice and support from parents who have walked a similar path.
- **Use the correct pronouns** for your child and acknowledge when you slip up.
- **Carry out your own research,** read up on the subject from reliable sources, educate yourself.
- **Look out for signs of bullying.** If you're concerned, reach out to a trusted teacher, school counsellor or NPO that offers education and/or advocacy in schools.
- **Keep your child in focus.** They are still your child, and they need to feel loved and supported now more than ever, whether you 'get it' or not. ❖