

Study examines families' journeys to accepting transgender children

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A tiny hair barrette and an anguished moment marked the turning point for one mother in coming to fully accept that her child, who was born a boy, was a transgender girl.

Quinn had expressed a preference for girls' clothing and accessories at a young age, but Jessica and her husband, Steve, would not allow her to wear them outside their home.

One day, picking her up from school, Jessica watched Quinn quickly remove a barrette from her hair and slip it into her pocket, ashamed that her mother might have seen.

"That changed everything for me. I was like 'Oh my god, what have I done?' . . . I had given her the message that I don't accept who she is!"

Jessica was one of 36 parents (29 [mothers](#) and seven fathers) who participated in a University of California-Davis, study, which will be presented at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA), on how they came to make room in their families for notions of [gender](#) that go beyond conventional concepts of male and female.

Through in-depth interviews, Krysti Ryan, a PhD candidate in sociology, found many similarities in the journeys of parents who are supportively raising [children](#) who are "gender diverse," identifying as transgender, agender (no gender), bigender (both genders), gender-fluid (boy on some

days and girl on others), or gender-nonconforming (expressing preferences that persistently diverge from the expectations of their gender).

Ryan found that mothers play a central role as advocates for their children, often becoming experts in issues of [gender diversity](#), but in doing so, reinforce [gender stereotypes](#) of women as the primary nurturers of children. In fact, it is their maternal passion for ensuring their children's happiness, even as their own social constructs of gender are challenged privately and publicly, that enables many mothers to rethink gender altogether.

In total, 33 children between the ages of 5 and 16 were represented in the study—14 transgender girls, 10 gender-diverse males, and nine transgender boys.

Ryan found that parents were quicker to identify [gender differences](#) in children presumed boys at birth than those born girls (between the ages of 3 and 5 among transgender girls or gender-diverse boys, and between 9 and 14 for transgender boys, who were thought to be "tomboys" at younger ages) and initially tried to set boundaries on when and where they could wear girls' clothes or play with dolls because they were concerned about their children's risk of being bullied or shunned.

In keeping with the gendered responsibility of mothers to raise "proper citizens," mothers often explain the rules to their children in terms of social expectations (at school, boys wear pants) or practical reasons (it is too cold outside to wear a dress), according to Ryan.

Most of the parents in the study, the majority of whom self-identified as liberals or progressives, said they initially presumed their transgender daughters were sons who were going through a phase. "Nearly all parents I spoke with initially interpreted their child's gender expression as an

indicator of future sexuality, not gender difference," Ryan said.

Over time, however, mothers like Jessica who warned her transgender daughter not to dress as a girl in school, realize their children are unhappy with these restrictions. As their children showed signs of depression or other emotional distress, the mothers in the study reached a tipping point in accepting their children's gender diversity.

"We were sort of dragged across the threshold of [gender] transition because our child was in crisis," one mother told Ryan. "It hurt; the lights in her eyes were literally dimming.... If it hadn't been [a] crisis I can't say that I would have so thoroughly embraced the idea that my child was [transgender](#)."

Many of the mothers in the study became lay experts on gender diversity—throwing themselves into reading everything they could find on the topic and identifying resources for their children—as a way of responding to social perceptions that they failed to raise a "normal" child.

"As they adhere to the mandates of their own gendered parenting role, mothers work tirelessly to create greater gender freedom for their children," Ryan said.

More information: The paper, "Examining the Family Transition: How Parents of Gender-Diverse Youth Develop Trans-Affirming Attitudes," will be presented on Tuesday, Aug. 23, in Seattle at the American Sociological Association's 111th Annual Meeting.

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