

FFLAG



A GUIDE FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS

Information for family and friends with a transgender member

What is FFLAG?

FFLAG is a national voluntary organisation and registered charity.

FFLAG is dedicated to supporting parents, families and their gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans loved ones.

FFLAG offers support through its website, email answering service, helpline and local parents support groups in their efforts to help parents and families understand, accept and support their lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans members with love and pride.

FFLAG members are parents, carers and families of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people. LGBT people and families still face homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in our society, which brings in its wake prejudice, bullying and alienation.

FFLAG supports the full human and civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans individuals.

FFLAG speaks out and acts to defend and enhance those human and civil rights.

Patrons

Lord Cashman

Angela Mason CBE

Sir Ian McKellen CH CBE

Baroness Massey of Darwen

Prof Ian Rivers

Deidre Sanders

Peter Tatchell

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Preface

This Guide for Families and Friends is a guide to help you to understand and support someone close to you who is transgender.

It has been put together by combining the experiences of parents of transgender children and young people, with the knowledge and experience of FFLAG and practical information from organisations that advise and support transgender people.


Some of the experiences and support will be more useful to you than others. Dip into the guide and use whatever information is most helpful to you.

Please also check our website www.fflag.org.uk which is updated with new information and sources of help as this emerges.

No two families are the same

Your child may have just told you that they are transgender. You might have been wondering if something has been worrying them for a while, or the announcement might have come as a bolt out of the blue. Perhaps they have yet to 'come out' but somehow you know that they are trans and want to offer your support.

Most parents/carers assume that their children will grow up in the gender identity that matches the sex they were assigned at birth. The following diagrams will help to explain the relationship between sex and gender so that you are better able to understand your child's feelings.



We know that each family situation is different but most parents find it helpful to know how other parents and carers have coped in a similar situation. It is often helpful to know that your emotions and concerns are shared by other parents/carers who have a transgender child.

Many parents want to know why their child is transgender. For most people it is a concept they have not considered before. It can be hard for you at first just trying to comprehend, as well as trying to support your child. You are probably coping with some complex emotions of your own as well as wanting to understand what is going on for your child. The most important thing to remember in understanding your child's gender identity is that it is not a choice. No one chooses their gender identity. No one chooses to be cisgender¹; no-one chooses to be transgender. It is simply a part of them – an important part, but nevertheless only a part of that person.

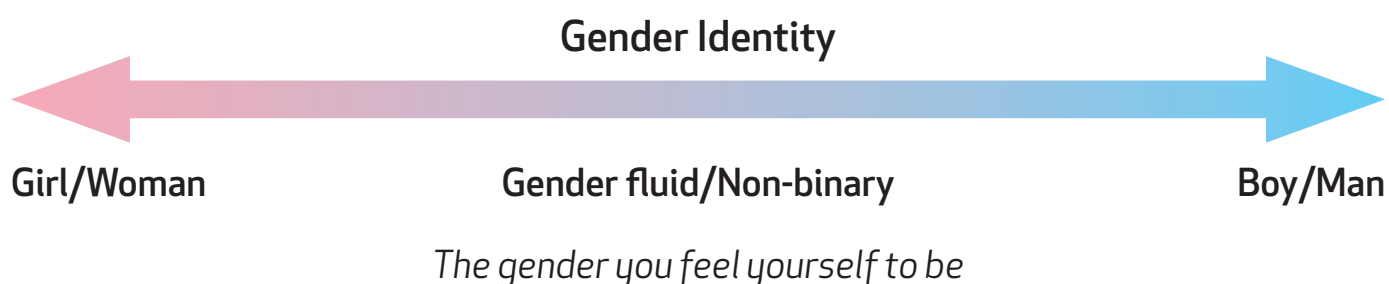
The belief that some people hold that being transgender is somehow a 'choice' is mistaken. No-one can 'make' someone transgender – in the same way that no-one 'makes' a person cisgender.

Some children express a gender identity that does not match their biological sex at a very early age. This isn't just a case of wanting to dress up or play with toys that have traditionally been associated with the opposite gender, which many children do, but a persistent desire to identify and express themselves as a different gender. Others may come to understand how they are feeling later and be able to explain this to you quite clearly, because they are older.

It might be that your daughter or son approaches you saying that they 'think' they are transgender or a younger child may say more simply that they feel unsure of who they are. They may be questioning their gender identity and wondering if they might be trans. It is a mark of their trust in you that they are willing to share this. Please accept their questioning and let them know that you will support them whatever their gender identity.

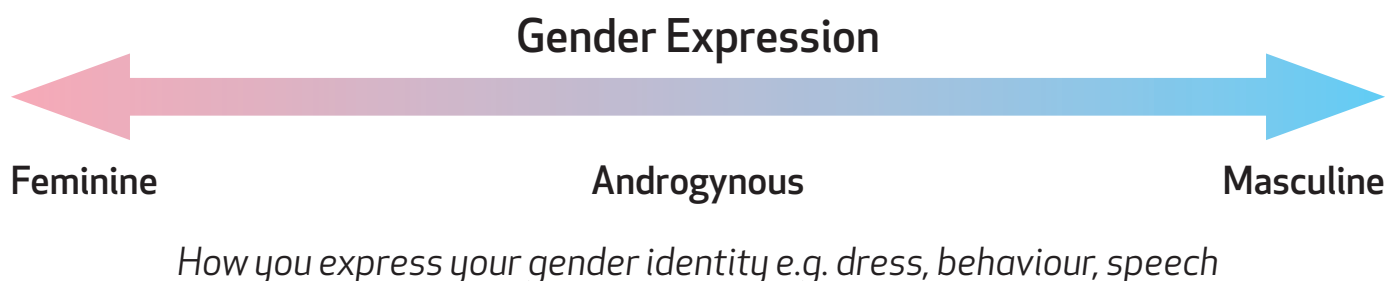
¹ Cisgender: someone whose gender identity and gender expression 'matches' with the biological sex assigned at birth. See also 'understanding the differences between sex and gender p 6 and 7.

are trans or transgender. Some people don't identify with being a man or a woman but feel they are somewhere in between or neutral; this is sometimes referred to as non-binary. Some people's gender identity fluctuates, sometimes feeling like a man and sometimes feeling like a woman, or somewhere in between and the term gender fluid can be used to describe this.



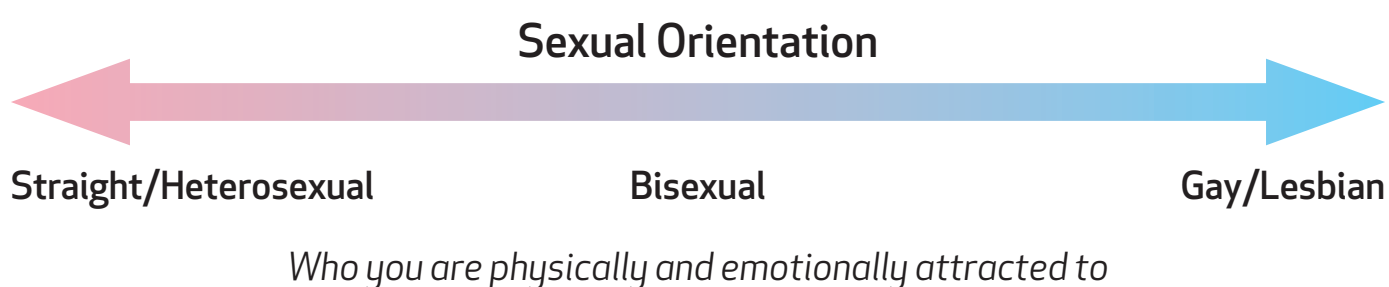
Gender Expression

Whatever our gender identity we all have preferences in how we express this. If we think of this as a spectrum, with extremes of masculinity and femininity, as on the diagram opposite, most people will have a comfortable place along this spectrum, regardless of sex or gender. There are masculine men, masculine women, feminine men and feminine women and people with more neutral or androgynous preferences. Gender expression can be seen in the way people choose to dress, wear their hair, speak or through their gestures.



Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation has no relation to assigned sex, gender identity or gender expression. It is who you are attracted to and want to form romantic and/or sexual relationships with. Anyone, whether cisgender or transgender, can have any sexual orientation.



Supporting your child or family member

Some transgender children express their gender identity very early on and will let you know they identify differently to their biological sex as young children, long before puberty. Others may have been aware that they feel 'different' but only with the onset of puberty come to the realisation that they are transgender. Some people do not make the decision to acknowledge that they are transgender until adulthood, so you may be hearing this news from a parent, sibling or grown up child.

As so very many trans people have told us 'Coming out to your parents is really scary!' Even in the most loving of parent/child relationships, there is that moment of doubt about how your parents may react. Stories of parental rejection or negative reactions from friends or family will be familiar to them. That your child or family member has told you that they are transgender is a huge step in building an open and honest relationship for the future.

They will probably have spent a long time, possibly years, taking on board the fact that they are transgender. They will probably have absorbed some of the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotypes that unfortunately are still around. They will have become familiar with 'teasing' and trans bullying and the way that transgender people are portrayed in the media. The teasing and bullying might not have been aimed at them, but they will have taken on board some of the negativity. So no wonder it's 'really scary' to tell your parents you're transgender.

"When my daughter, as a teenager, decided to come out, I was shocked that she found it so difficult. Our family is our 'bubble of love' and there is an unwritten rule that all problems are discussed without judgment. I have always brought my children up to believe that love is love and is beautiful in all its forms. Now she is much happier and we continue in our bubble of love."

Although you might be surprised/shocked by your child's news, try and remember how vulnerable they are feeling. Remember too, that they are still the same person that you have always known and loved. Being transgender is part of who they are, not what they are. They have shared an important part of who they are. Please accept their honesty and openness and move forward together as a family in that spirit.

“More than anything I was so proud of all that he had achieved despite struggling with this throughout his adolescence and so happy that he had felt able to tell me.”

Parents' reaction

Many parents or carers, even those who don't consider themselves prejudiced or judgemental, are likely to find themselves, if only temporarily, knocked off balance by an announcement that they have a transgender child.

There are a whole range of emotions that are common to many parents who have just learnt their child is transgender. These emotions can be everything from a sense of loss, guilt, denial, worry, isolation through to relief and affirmation.

Some parents feel a sense of loss when their child comes out and that is entirely natural.

“The future that I had imagined for my child had suddenly disappeared and I didn't know whether I was allowed to remember 'him,' the little boy I had loved so much.”

Guilt is another emotion that many parents experience. Sometimes this guilt is because parents think that they are somehow to blame for their child being trans. Some parents ask “Where did I go wrong?” This is only an issue if being transgender is thought to be a ‘problem’. It cannot be emphasised enough – no one can make a person trans.

Parents can also feel guilty because they didn't know about their child's transgender identity. They feel that as a caring and loving parent they have perhaps let their child down by not knowing about that important aspect of their child's life.

“Even if you are an open person and open with your child they may find it difficult to tell you – it’s not about how you are; it’s about the type of person they are. They may not be as open as you.”

Some parents simply try and deny the facts. They might have wondered if their child could be transgender, but denied that it could possibly happen to them. Other people might have a trans child, but not them!

When parents learn that their child is transgender many worries come to the fore. They may worry that their child will be ignored or rejected by their friends or other family members or may be bullied at school. They may worry about their child finding a partner and having a loving relationship. They may worry about the changes that may happen to their child’s appearance and the possible medical interventions they will undergo. Sometimes parents are saddened by the thought that they might not become grandparents.

“When my son came out I was really upset by the idea that his face would be changed and he wouldn’t look the same – that seems so unimportant now and everybody’s appearance changes throughout life anyway.”

Many of these worries will not seem as pressing once you have got used to the idea of having a trans child. If you have a positive and supportive attitude to your child’s news, family and friends are likely to take their lead from you. Whilst trans bullying is a reality, schools and colleges should have anti-bullying policies in place to address this as should most workplaces. Your trans child is just as likely as their cisgender friends to find themselves in a loving and fulfilling long-term relationship. Many transgender people have children: different families: same love.

“As a parent of a trans female person, I see the way ahead as full of potential difficulties. Anything I think of now may not turn out to be a problem or difficulty in actuality, but it still feels that way.”

Many parents talk of their sense of isolation when they learn that their child is transgender. They might be totally accepting of their child, but still have concerns that they find difficult to share.

“They may lose friends and you may lose people from your own life, but that’s ok – you only need a few people who really care and accept you.”

To some parents finding out that their child is transgender comes as a relief. They might have known that their child was worrying about something. Perhaps their child had been withdrawn, anxious or depressed. As a loving parent, your imagination can go into overdrive worrying about what is wrong with your child. So learning that your child is transgender can come as a relief compared to other difficulties and problems that could beset them. Having a child who is transgender is not a problem unless someone makes it a problem.

“Your child is an expert on who they are. My child is still the same person and I didn’t ‘lose’ them. A lot may change but they are still ‘them.’”

There are people in every walk of life who are successful, happy and fulfilled – and who also happen to be trans. There are lots of role models out there, and the list of names of those role models grows all the time. Your child’s gender identity will not stand in the way of them achieving whatever goal they set out to achieve.

“When my child first came out as trans I was scared that they would suddenly change. Now after 18 months on the waiting list I’ve had time to come to terms with the idea and I’m impatient for them to get some help and professional advice.”

Emotions are alright

Don't smother your emotions. Some parents will say that they have come to terms with it and that they accept this is the way their child is, even when feeling upset and confused inside.

It is better to tell your child or family member that their news was a surprise/shock that you were totally unprepared for. Say that you still love them and that nothing has changed that, but that you still need time to adjust to the reality.

"No matter how accepting and liberal you think you are, you may still feel 'What's going on? This is really strange.'"

Get in touch with a parents' support organisation where you will be able to talk through your emotions. It may be that you don't particularly want to talk, but just to listen to other parents' experiences. You can also go to your GP and ask to be referred for counselling where you can let out your feelings to a professional, who will not judge you. It's important to look after your own emotional wellbeing – you will be better able to support your child.

"I was lucky enough to be able to access counselling through my work and let out some of my feelings to a neutral person who wouldn't judge – or remember and hold it against me in the future."

Joining a parents' support group can really help. You can share your worries, listen to others parents' experiences and know that you are amongst people who understand at least part of what is going on for you. Expressing your feelings with someone outside the family who, nonetheless, understands will really help.

"I didn't want to go to the family support group at first; I felt this was a private issue and I didn't want to talk to people I didn't know about it. But my partner persuaded me and I'm so glad he did – it's given me practical information and emotional support – and I've made some new friends."

Even if there isn't a group in your area, talking to another parent or sharing your feelings via email can make all the difference! Visit www.fflag.org.uk to find your nearest group or to speak to another parent 0845 652 0311.

Religion and Culture



Discovering that a child is transgender may be particularly traumatic for parents who come from a faith background. It may cause conflict with deeply held views and can lead to great soul searching and questioning of your fundamental beliefs.

Strong religious communities provide definite answers to important life questions and also stable relationship structures. It may be difficult if your faith community does not support your family; but many will find continued strength and support. The Church of England has spoken out in support of trans people and is exploring ways to include them in services and celebrations. If your local faith community does not provide support you may be able to find support online: for example Diverse Church for LGBT+ Christians also has a parents group.

Different faiths and cultures around the world respond very differently to trans issues. Whilst, in the West, we tend to accept the binary system, for many cultures gender is accepted as much more complex and fluid. It may be a comfort to explore some of these ideas, such as the two spirit tradition of Navajo Native American people or the Mahu of Hawaii – amongst many others.

Language

If your child decides to transition they may ask you to use different pronouns (he, she, they) and to call them by a new name. Ask them which pronouns they prefer, use them and, if you slip up, apologise but don't make a big deal of it. Using your child's preferred name and pronouns is a simple but profound way of supporting them. Respect their choice and the fact that this might change as they continue to explore their gender identity and expression.

Most parents and families spend hours choosing a name for a new baby. Some families have names that are passed down from generation to generation, or choose special names to honour people in their lives. Many cultures have important traditions around the naming of babies. So, it is understandable that it may be upsetting when someone changes their name, and in the process, might appear to be rejecting family or culture. Parents may wish their child to make a slight alteration to their given name – but some trans people want a complete change. However a name change is a very important part of social transition so try to put your personal feelings aside. You may be involved in the new choice too.

“My daughter asked me what my choice would have been if she had been identified as female at birth. We talked about family names and explored the meaning of names together and I was able to feel involved in her choice.”

Language used by the trans community changes and evolves and people will have an individual take on how they identify and prefer to describe themselves. We have included some current common terms in the glossary – but the key thing is to be respectful and if you are not sure, ask.

Moving forward

Once your child has told you their news they will probably want to plan their transition and explore what that will mean for them. Depending on the age of your child you may be involved in this process to a greater or lesser practical extent. There is no one way to transition and there is no timescale or time limit – in reality some things move very slowly; the first thing you may want to do is see your doctor and ask for your child to be referred for specialist help. The NHS website has good guidance for families of transgender people.

Listen to your child and make sure you understand how 'out' they want to be. Breaking the news doesn't have to happen all at once and can be done through social media, They may wish you to help them break the news to family or friends, but make sure you only do so with your child's agreement.

“If children come out using social media it can be hurtful to the parents – but in fact much easier for the child. It's a safe space for them, easier than face to face and although there may be some negative comments they also get peer support from their friends.”

Transition is a gradual process and there are choices to be made along the way, both in the way and the extent to which a person wishes to transition. This may include social transition, medical interventions and legal matters, but each person will find their own path.

Social transition may include using a different name and/or pronouns, new hairstyle and clothing choices. For younger children you may be involved here, informing the school and classmates and parents of your child's wishes.

Schools have a duty to accommodate the needs of your child and should have a policy and procedures in place; there is an example of transgender guidance for schools in the 'Further Resources' section.

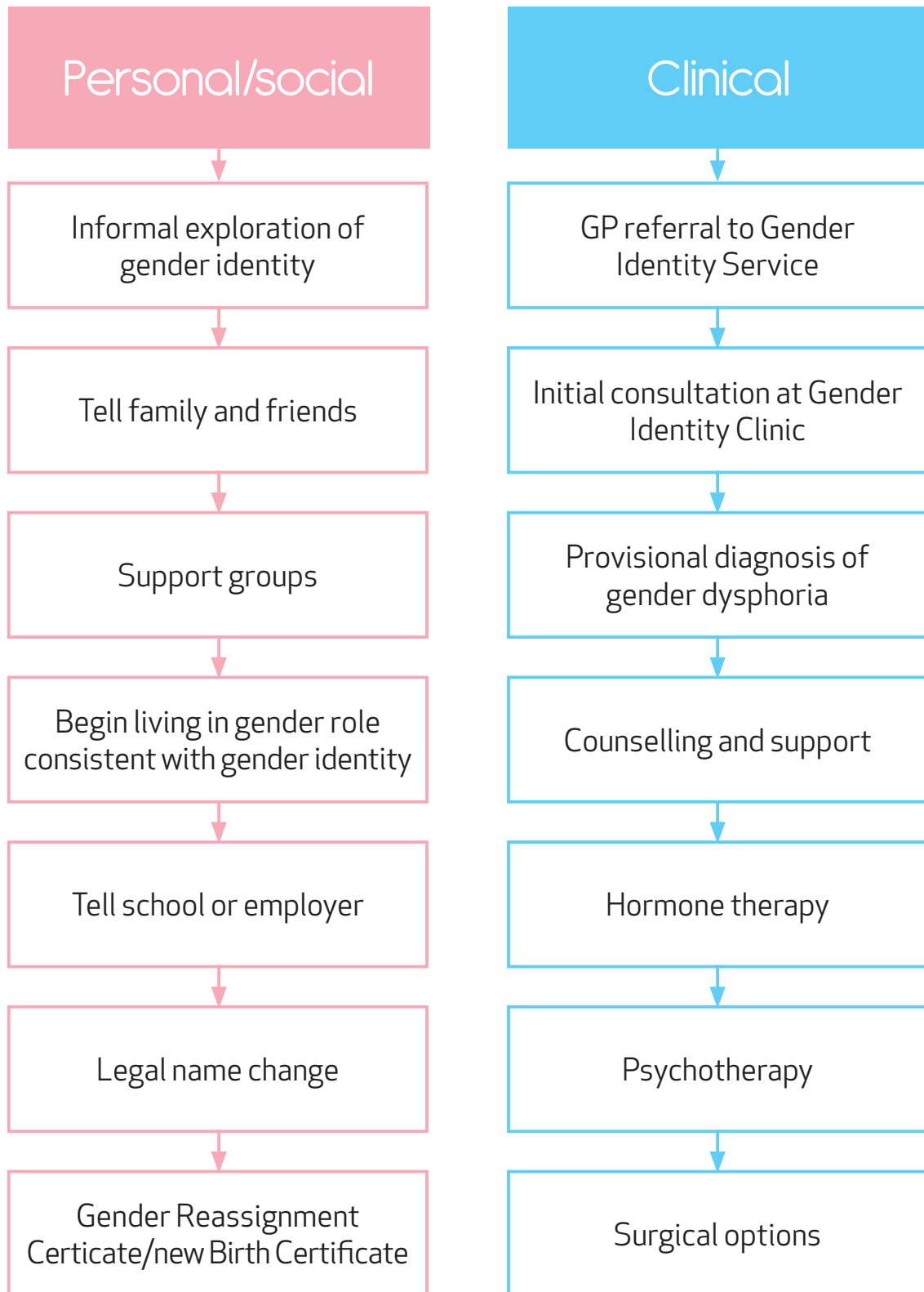
“Initially school allowed my child to do PE at home, but then refused, saying they would just have to pick which sex they should do PE with, without understanding how uncomfortable it would be for them with a female body, to do PE with boys or how difficult it would be to do PE with all girls, when they felt male.”

Medical transition will not be offered to young children pre-puberty. Adolescents may be offered hormone blockers to pause the progress of puberty once it has started and in adulthood there are cross- sex treatment(s) and surgical options, but this will happen gradually. You should expect a long waiting time for appointments at specialist gender identity clinics and medical and surgical interventions are only offered after a period of assessment which itself takes several months.

Legal transition may include changing passport and other identification documents to reflect new name or gender; changing name and gender marker on qualifications and other school documents and obtaining a gender recognition certificate. There is advice online about legal transition.

Possible pathways through the gender reassignment process

The pathway is tailored to the needs of the individual. Each step is optional and is taken only after careful consideration and discussion.



Conclusion

We hope that this booklet has given you some insight and understanding. Some experiences will be more and some less relevant to you. A large amount of it is aimed at parents of transgender young people, but the information is also relevant to other family members, carers or parents of an adult. We have concentrated on the parent/child relationship because it is unique. However, the information in this booklet is just as relevant to a sibling, grandparent or other family member or friend who wants to support and understand a loved one.

Being a parent is never easy, but being the parent of a trans child is enriching. Some of the challenges may be a bit different but the love and special bonds between parent and child remain the same.

“I have more respect than I can possibly express for all of you who love, love, love your children so much. I know you must feel it, but I have seen both sides where children are embraced or rejected and knowing there are parents out there who love unconditionally is such a source of comfort to me! Keep up the wonderful, worthy, fabulous fight - after all love is always worth it!!”

Joyce DiDonato

Further Resources

Gender Identity Research and Education Society

<https://www.gires.org.uk/>

Gendered Intelligence

<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/>

GIDS Gender Identity Development Service

<http://www.gids.nhs.uk>

Gires

<http://www.gires.org.uk/>

Intercom Trust's School's Transgender Guidance:

<https://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/item/55-schools-transgender-guidance-july-2015>

Mermaids

<http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/>

NHS Transgender Health homepage

<https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Transhealth/Pages/Transhealthhome.aspx>

Stonewall

<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

Please also check our website www.fflag.org.uk which is updated with new information and sources of help as this emerges.

Glossary

This is a brief guide to the terms used in FFLAG's publications.

LGBT: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender. This is the term most commonly used to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities.

Transgender: a person whose gender identity does not match up with the sex assigned to them at birth. A short form of this is trans.

Cisgender: A person who is not transgender, and whose gender identity and gender expression match up with what their culture expects from a person with their sex assigned at birth. A short form of this term is 'cis.'

Genderqueer: an umbrella term for transgender and non-binary people.

Non-binary: A person who does not feel comfortable in a social system that recognizes only two categories – male or female; people using this term may, for example, identify as having no gender, or are in-between genders, or have a gender that fluctuates, or are a new 'third' gender.

Agender: An individual who identifies as having no gender identity; some people describe as having a gender identity that is neutral.

Gender Fluid: Someone whose gender identity and presentation are not fixed, and vary with time and/or situation.

Transition: When a trans person begins living as the gender with which they identify: social transition could include changing one's name and pronoun, and/or dressing and grooming differently; legal transition could include changing the gender markers on identification documents; medical transition could include taking hormones or having various surgeries.

Gender Dysphoria: the stress arising from the mis-match between gender identity and assigned biological sex.

Pronouns: words that are substituted for nouns, such as he, she, they, him her and them.

The FFLAG booklets are all written by parents who have lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans sons and daughters.



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This booklet does not cover every circumstance. We have done our best to ensure that the information in this booklet is correct as of February 2018. It is possible that some of the information may become inaccurate over time.

