A stylized umbrella with a white handle and a white outline. The umbrella is divided into several segments of different colors: light blue, medium blue, purple, pink, and red. In the top-left segment, there is a small rainbow flag icon and the text 'FFFLAG' in bold black letters.

FFFLAG

HOW DO I TELL MY PARENTS?

I'm transgender

What is FFLAG?

Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays 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 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

Baron Cashman of Limehouse

Angela Mason CBE

Sir Ian McKellen CH CBE

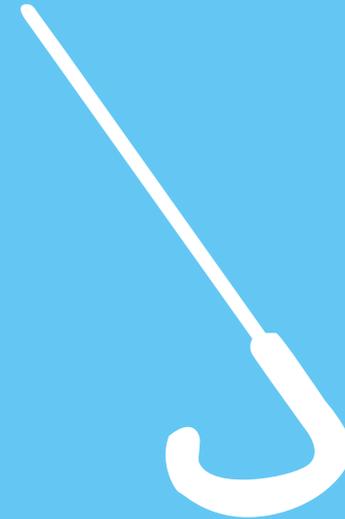
Baroness Massey of Darwen

Prof Ian Rivers

Deidre Sanders

Peter Tatchell

HOW DO I TELL MY PARENTS?



Preface

This booklet 'How Do I Tell My Parents?' will help you find the best ways to approach your parents or carers with your news that you are transgender or questioning your gender identity. This booklet has been put together by combining the experiences of a large number of transgender young people and their parents with the knowledge and experience of FFLAG. If you want to tell your parents that you are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), please see the companion booklet in this series. We know that many of the issues about coming out to your parents as trans are similar for coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual but recognise that there are other important issues too.

In our experience, even if parents' reaction is initially negative, once they get used to the idea, most parents become accepting and supportive of their trans child. There is a glossary of the words and concepts at the end of the booklet that we hope you will find useful.

Some of the words of support offered in this booklet will be more useful to you than others. Once you have read through it we hope that you will feel more confident about talking to your parents, carers or other family members.

I've got something to tell you

You have, perhaps, known for a while that you are transgender and you've probably spent a lot of time thinking about your gender identity. Your parents, on the other hand, might have absolutely no idea that you are anything but cisgender (identifying as the gender you were assigned at birth). Even the closest of families, with parents who think that they know their children really well, can be taken by surprise when they learn that their daughter or son is trans.

The fact that your parents are surprised by your news doesn't mean that they won't adjust. It might take them time, but most parents will come to accept their child for who they really are. Most parents will be proud that their child feels able to 'come out' to them.

It is probably helpful to realise that many parents will go through a whole range of emotions. Some of these might sound a bit negative, but most parents are anxious to do their best for their child.

Please remember that your parents are only human. Give them a bit of space to take your news on board. They will need time to think about and perhaps re-think their views about gender and sex. Many people will not have questioned their gender and assume that everybody's gender and biological sex matches up.

If your parents have trouble understanding your news, you could show them the diagrams on pages 6 and 7 to help you explain.

This comes from FFLAG's 'Guide for Family and Friends: Information for family and friends with a transgender member' booklet, which has been put together by parents of trans young people, who share their experiences and feelings, so this may be a useful or comforting read for your parents too. Copies are available to download here www.fflag.org.uk/my-childs-transgender or we can send you a free copy if you contact us.

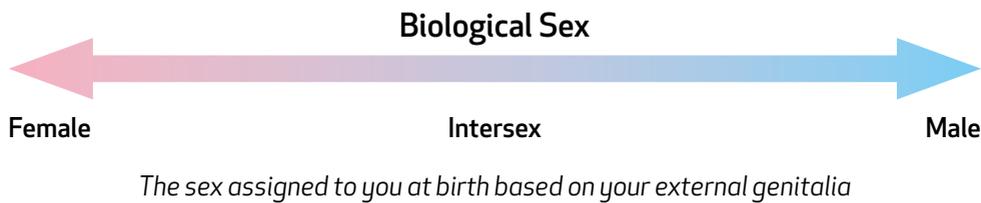
Very often parents just need time to adjust to the new reality of having a child who is transgender.

Understanding the difference between sex and gender

Understanding the difference between sex and gender can help you to understand your transgender loved one. The different elements are illustrated in the following diagrams and it helps to think of each component as a separate spectrum, with each person having their own comfortable place along the spectrum.

Biological Sex

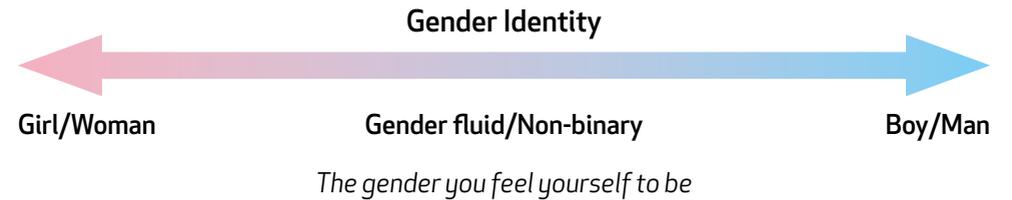
Biological sex is assigned at birth based on primary sex characteristics, the genitals. So the doctor or midwife delivering a baby will look at the baby's external genitalia; if there is a penis and testicles the baby will be assigned male and if there is a clitoris and vagina, female. But some people don't have genitalia that easily fall into either category and other secondary characteristics develop later.



Gender Identity

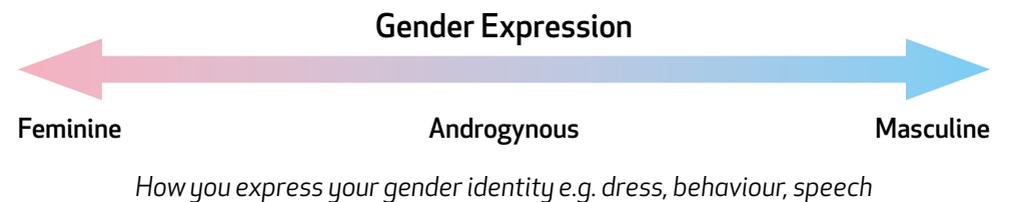
This is the way a person thinks and feels about themselves, whether they feel like a boy or a girl or man or a woman, or neither. In western civilisation we traditionally think of gender as having 2 alternatives – man or woman (a binary system with two options) but this isn't the case in all cultures. For most people their gender identity 'matches' their assigned sex – this is referred to as 'cis' or 'cisgender' from the Latin cis, meaning the same. But other people feel that their gender does not match their assigned sex; they

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.



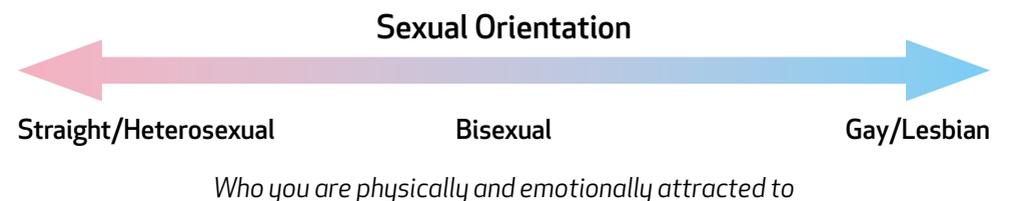
Gender Expression

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.



How to tell them

No two families are the same, so there is no single sure-fire way of telling your parents that you are trans. Emotions, circumstances, situations will all vary from family to family. Just as no two families are exactly the same, so the way you do it and the words you choose will vary from one family to the next. But many reactions are common to all families, and knowing this can be helpful and make you feel stronger.

Very few parents imagine that their children could possibly be transgender. Even those who may have wondered about their child's gender expression may still feel shocked, sad or angry when they know for a fact. Try to understand this. You have, perhaps, had several years to gradually realise that you are transgender. Your parents, when you tell them, will have had no time at all.

"I'd like people to realise that gender and sex isn't necessarily fixed and they are two different things that don't always line up in the same way for everyone. If people could just think about that for 5 minutes I'm sure they could understand it and it would make things so much easier to talk about."

The right time

Choose your moment. Most families have times that are right for talking, and these are usually better than trying to create a moment. Sometimes events make this choice for you. When something is on your mind, it can build up to such a point that it spills out. Let it happen.

"I already knew - but he told his sisters first and then they broke the news while we were all together one evening and that opened the conversation."

Listening to trans people and their parents over the years, we know that there are a few do's and don'ts about the right time to tell your parents.

DO please

Give yourself time to say what you want to say and give them time to hear what you're saying.

Do try and have a clear head (not under the influence of alcohol/other substances or hung-over) when you decide to tell them.

Remember that you will be the same person after you've told them and make sure they know that.

Do give them time to adjust to what you have just told them.

Please DON'T

Don't come out to your parents at big family occasions such as a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah. Other times to try and avoid might be Christmas, Mothers' Day or birthday parties.

All these times are full of heightened emotion anyway, and your news is unlikely to be met with the undivided attention it deserves.

Just occasionally you may want to tell them so that you can hurt them, perhaps when you are upset or in a bad mood. Try not to break the news to your parents like this. If you tell them when you are in a temper, your words won't carry as much weight and there will be lots of negative emotions around. It's not fair on you and it's not fair on them.

People want to tell their parents that they are transgender for many reasons, but mostly these are to do with honesty and love.

"I came out to my Mum in Primark. I'd already come out as non binary before and she was fine with that so I felt quite safe and comfortable. So, I told her while we were out shopping that I was actually a boy and so we bought some boxers while we were there."

The 'right' words

There are no standard words or phrases for telling your parents that you are transgender.

Whatever words come most easily to you are the ones you need to use. It's often enough to say something like:

'I'm transgender' or 'I think I'm trans' or 'I've known for a while that I'm transgender' or 'I've been questioning my gender identity and I've come to realise that I'm transgender'

Let your parents know why you haven't told them before. It might be that you wanted to explore your feelings, or you feared being rejected by them or that you didn't want to hurt them.

"I knew that when I told them there would be upset and I didn't want to cause that - I tried to deal with it, hold it in, but in the end I couldn't. I had to be honest with them."

You have got used to these worries, but they will be new to your parents. Point out to your parents that you are still the same person that you have always been. Say that it is because you love them that you need to be honest with them about this important part of yourself.

Parent's initial reactions to the news that their child is trans can vary from being totally understanding and supportive to anger and disbelief. If their reaction is negative, remember that they probably need time to adjust and to sort their own emotions out.

If in their shock, your parents say things that they do not mean or regret afterwards, try to be understanding. Many parents who initially react badly to their child's news, become really supportive and understanding once they have had time to think about things calmly.

Hopefully once you have shared your news with your parents, you will all be able to talk things through and be supportive and understanding of each other's emotions.

"I came out to my Dad. He works in a boarding house - he said he had heard everything. But when I told him I was trans, he said, 'that's new.' He didn't not accept it, but he wanted the opinion from a professional first. Once I'd seen GIDS¹ and my parents had educated themselves a bit, they were totally on board."

Give it time

However, there's a time to stop talking. This usually comes naturally, often when everything has been said and perhaps repeated. At this point, let the subject go. Let life get back to normal.

It's likely that your parents will bring up the subject again, perhaps in a day or two, or it may take several weeks. Your parents may gradually accept the fact; they may want to talk about it at a later date, perhaps in a guarded way; or perhaps when they are feeling a bit less confused about their feelings. They may try to ignore what has happened or may even pretend that nothing has happened.

"Initial reactions aren't necessarily how they really feel. It's fear of the unknown. Once you've done your research and educated yourself, it isn't the unknown any more."

Your parents may need quite a while to adjust to the news. Be aware of your parent's need for their own 'thinking time'. However, if you feel that what you have told them is being ignored or forgotten, talk to them again using the knowledge and experience you gained the first time.

"I said - in a few years everyone will have accepted it and you (Mum and Dad) are going to be left behind. And Mum said, 'Maybe then you'll respect us for standing up for what we believe in.' I get that it takes time to change - but they're not even trying."

Once you've given your parents some time and if they seem to be ignoring what has happened, it is reasonable to try bringing up the subject again. Ask them if they've any

¹ Gender Identity Development Service <http://gids.nhs.uk/>

questions. Tell them that you have been honest and upfront with them; you are trying to live your life in an open and truthful way; you respect their feelings and hope that they understand your feelings too.

“You’re not losing anyone. I’m still the same person I’ve always been. Don’t mourn the loss of me as your daughter.”

If it’s not working out, or seems impossible, it is time to get some outside support. Get in touch with FFLAG (www.fflag.org.uk). We are there to offer support and information. Our ‘Guide for Families and Friends’ may be a useful start to help your parents to understand trans issues and it shares the experiences of other parents. It may be that your parents would like to talk to other parents who have been through a similar situation. It really can help to share emotions and feelings with others who have had similar experiences.

It might help your parents to join a local parents’ support group. We can put them in touch with one if there is one in their area. We can offer you support too. We can also put you in touch with other supportive organisations. Your feelings and emotions are just as important as those of your parents.

There is endless information on social media with help-lines, on-line counselling and chat rooms, but be selective and careful of the services you use and make sure you stay safe online. You could start with the organisations listed in the ‘Resources’ section at the end of this booklet.

Families differ

In some families talking directly to your parents about your gender identity may not be a sensible thing to do. It may be better to gradually let your parents know that you’re transgender, allowing them to realise at a pace they can take. It may be clear to you that this is the best way for your family.

“My identity was up and down. I came out as lesbian first, then pansexual and then as a trans boy.”

“I came out on Facebook, initially as bi. Then I came out as pan and then as trans.”

In some families, it may take a discussion with someone outside the family to work out the best approach for you.

“My carer was the first person I came out to, during my autism assessment – I knew she would know what it meant. My biggest worry was people not understanding and having to explain.”

It might be easier to talk to a relative or family friend first, either for advice about how to tell your parents, or for help in telling them. By making these decisions, you are bringing under control some of the difficulties you might have been worrying about.

“I knew for a couple of years before I told them. I was out to my friends for a year before I told my parents.”

Writing a letter can also let you think about what you want to say and give your parents time to read and take in the information before you discuss it together.

“I’m going to print off information for my Mum so she can come to terms with it in her own time – and then I’ll tell her.”

You might get an idea of your parent’s attitude to being trans when watching TV or hearing their reactions to trans storylines in the media. If their reaction is negative, remember that it’s probably never occurred to them that their child might be trans. Once they know your gender identity they are likely to react in a more considered way to trans issues on TV and in the media and probably regret some of the negative things they said in the past.

“Coming out to teachers was easier than coming out to my parents – they’ve known me longer (as female) so it was harder for them to get used to it. The teachers didn’t really mind one way or the other.”

Parents' emotions

It might be helpful to know that even the most accepting and supportive parents go through a whole range of emotions. Your parents may feel guilty or blame themselves or they may want to deny the facts. They may be concerned about what others think.

But they may also feel very ignorant of some of the issues they are now facing and feel frustrated and inadequate as parents.

It may be hard for your parents to accept that there is any important part of you that they didn't know about. This can make some parents feel guilty and that they should have known.

"I felt so sad that he had been struggling with this for years and I hadn't been able to support him."

Some parents blame themselves and feel that something in the way they brought their child up has 'made' their child trans. No-one can make their child trans – the same as no parent can make a child cisgender (cis). Being trans or cis is part of who you are and that is right for you as a person.

Some parents simply try to deny the facts. They might have wondered if their child could be transgender, but denied that it could possibly happen to them.

They may assume that being transgender means that you are gay, or not understand at all the difference between gender, sex and sexuality.

"I put on my Instagram story, on Transgender Day of Visibility, that I was a trans boy and my cousin said, 'You go girl!' She didn't get it, although she's a lesbian!"

Do try and understand that your parents might feel very isolated and unsure of themselves and will take time to adjust to this new situation.

"She didn't really understand at first. She didn't see why I had to tell other people. I said 'Mum, I'm going to change, physically, I'm going to change. And change my name.' She didn't really understand at first, but she did gradually."

Parents are often concerned about how other people will react to the news that their child is trans. Some parents fear prejudice or hostility from work colleagues, family members or from their religious community.

"My Mum always accepted it and took it on board. My sister was a lesbian and had been given a hard time. My Mum and Dad tried to protect me. They thought I was a lesbian. But I'm not. I used to wear boys clothes but they wouldn't let me do it everywhere. They wouldn't let me cut my hair really short – they were trying to protect me from the bullying my sister had."

Not a choice

One thing that everyone needs to know is that being transgender is not a choice. No-one chooses their gender identity. No-one chooses to be trans; no-one chooses to be cis.

Being transgender is part of who you are, not what you are. You are yourself. You may be a child; a sibling; a cousin; a grandchild; a student; a work mate; a friend. You also happen to be transgender; it's an important part of who you are, but doesn't define who you are.

Some people still mistakenly believe that being transgender is somehow a 'choice'. It is worth pointing out to them, that given the level of prejudice, bullying, negative stereotyping and outright transphobia trans people still face, why would anyone choose to be transgender? You might also ask them how they 'know' that they are the gender they feel they are; if they think about that, it may help them to understand how you feel.

"My parents blamed other people. They said 'Oh, this is all about J' isn't it.' My friend just gave me the vocabulary – they didn't make me trans."

Some parents believe that if their teenage daughter or son says that they are transgender that it is 'just a phase' and that they will grow out of it. A lot of people question their gender identity or gender expression when they're growing up, and not all of them are transgender. It is absolutely okay to explore how you feel about your gender and to perhaps question what is right for you.

"There's no 'right' time. It's entirely up to you, what's right for you. It's confusing if I tell friends I don't know what I am. So, I don't have to tell anyone anything, if I'm not ready."

There is a choice in whether or not you 'come out' and who you decide to tell. Some people only come out to their friends but not to their family; some to their family but not to their work mates; some wait until their 30s, 40s or 50s and some come out when they are 11 or 12 years old. Some people never come out. You are an individual and will know what is right for you.

"People in my class found out when the teacher called the register. The teacher called [my new name] and I answered. They said, 'Have you changed your name?' and I said, 'Yes, and I'm trans, I'm a boy.' People were amazed. I was the talk of the school for months. I said, 'I'm not a unicorn you know.'"

Social Media

Coming out on social media is obviously an option. Think carefully about the pros and cons of putting out a public announcement. By using social media you will be able to tell 'everyone' at once. You can prepare a statement and explain some things up front – which could save you having to repeat your news over and over.

"If you do it face to face you may be taken more seriously. They might think you're just messing around or you don't really mean it if you do it online. But online can feel safer."

You may get some negative comments, but friends can also rally round and support you.

"In the group chat there was a friend who was like, 'I don't get it' He kept saying, 'I don't get it'

We just said, listen to us. Talk to us and ask us if you're confused. He did – he supports us now. He's working on it, he's really trying – it's the nicest thing."

But it's a big step. You may want to tell a few people first, in person, before making a wider announcement. This can help you to sort out what you want to say when you tell the wider world.

"She came out to everyone on social media – but she texted us just before she did it to let us know, before someone said something. We were in the car, driving to the supermarket. I thought, 'What do I do with this now?' I just texted back and said, 'We'll talk about this when we get home.' And then I felt completely lost."

Now I'm quite pleased with the way she did it. It gave us the space to process it and then come together to support her."

Names and Pronouns

Part of your coming out may be asking people to call you by a different name and to use different pronouns to describe you. People may find this hard at first and they are bound to slip up. If they've made a genuine mistake, try not to make a big deal of it. They will get used to it in time.

"You get teachers who deliberately misgender you and correct themselves, just to be horrible or make a point. There are others who misgender you by mistake and correct themselves – that's ok. Just don't make a big deal of it."

Dealing with School

As well as using a new name and pronouns you may wish to make changes to the way you dress and your hairstyle. Not all people will want to do this and you may choose to make gradual changes or dramatic ones. But if you do want to make changes you'll probably have to inform your school.

"I don't want to bind or medically transition. I don't have to. I can have days when I want to be more feminine, and I can be and still be non-binary. It's not about what you wear. You're not non-binary if you wear trousers!"

"In Spanish I asked 'What do you do if you're not male or female?' and the teacher said 'You can only be male or female, there isn't anything else, that's stupid!'"

Schools have a duty to accommodate your needs and support you if you transition socially. It's likely that your parents will want to be involved in informing the school of your needs. Schools should have policies and procedures in place to support you and make the changes that you need; if you find that your school isn't as helpful as you'd like, you could show them a copy of the Intercom Trust's Schools' Transgender Guidance

www.intercomtrust.org.uk/item/55-schools-transgender-guidance-july-2015

"We had a supply teacher one day and she was calling the register. We have to sit in alphabetical order in our classroom so she was watching round the room as she called out the names so she could see who was who. When she got to me, my old name was still in the register. My regular teacher is good as gold, she just uses my proper name instead, but this teacher was confused and she skipped over my old name and said 'Are you Harry?' (i.e. the boy behind me) I said no. She said 'But you're not XXXX, that I have down here' and I said well.... And then I had to explain it all to her and she was all embarrassed and that's not what you want if you have to face a totally new class as a supply teacher."

"My brother named me - we were going through names and then eventually we found the right one. It won't feel comfortable straight away. My name didn't click immediately. If there is a name you like, try it out for a bit. It won't instantly feel comfortable. It might take a while to get used to it."

Your parents may struggle with the idea of calling you by a new name. They may have spent a long time choosing a name when you were a baby and they may have picked a name with a special family history or meaning.

"He had already chosen a name on his Facebook profile. I think I should get to choose the middle names, then that could be a 'family' name."

Explain to them why it is important for you to have a name and use pronouns that suit who you are and they should respect your wishes. You may be able to involve them in your choice.

"My parents wanted their input into choosing my name. I was ok with that. They hadn't made a bad job of my deadname, so I trusted them."

"With a name, just try it out and if it doesn't work, try another. There's no limit to the number of names people can have. They can't stop you - even if they might try!"

"You can use 'they' as a singular pronoun. I had to have an argument with my teacher at school about that, but it is correct English. We use it all the time in daily speech, if we don't know the gender of the person we're referring to - e.g. 'someone has left their coat behind'. She wouldn't accept it. She marked my work as wrong."

Think on!

Be sure you can trust the person you come out to.

“You can test out how parents react to trans news stories and other things. If they’re ok then you’re probably ok to tell them. But if they’re negative you might want to wait until you’re in a better place yourself, older and more self-reliant.”

If you come out to your parents, hopefully they will respect your wishes on whether/when/if you are happy for them to share your news.

You may want to come out to one of your parents rather than both. That’s fine if it works for you. Just think about how it will be for the parent that ‘knows’.

“My son still hasn’t told his Dad – it’s been nearly three years now. I personally feel it’s really holding him back – it would be so much better if he came out, he would feel better and he could get on with his transition– but it’s not up to me. It has to be when it feels right to him.”

If you come out to one parent, talk through with them when/how the other parent will be told. Keeping secrets in families doesn’t usually work.

If you tell a best friend – be sure they can be trusted. If you want to gradually come out to friends make sure your best friend won’t share your news until you are ready.

Coming out isn’t a once and only event. Over the years and in different situations you will need to make snap decisions about whether or not it is in your best interest, or indeed safe to come out to someone.

Being trans is an important part of who you are. We hope that having read this booklet that you are in a better position to be open and confident about being true to yourself.

Hopefully you will have found this booklet helpful. Some parts of it will be more useful to you than others. A large amount of it is aimed at younger trans people, who we recognise as being more vulnerable to parental questioning and possible rejection. However, in our experience, much of what is in the booklet applies equally to older trans people who wish to have an open and honest relationship with their parents who have been unaware of their gender identity. Equally, it provides a basis for coming out to other members of the family.

It is simply because of the unique position of parents that we concentrate on this particular aspect.

“I have more respect than I can possibly express for all of you who love, love, love and support your children so much. I know you must feel it, but I have seen both sides where the 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

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

Further Resources

Gender Identity Research and Education Society
www.gires.org.uk

Gendered Intelligence
genderedintelligence.co.uk

GIDS Gender Identity Development Service
www.gids.nhs.uk

Intercom Trust's School's Transgender Guidance:
www.intercomtrust.org.uk/item/55-schools-transgender-guidance-july-2015

Mermaids
www.mermaidsuk.org.uk

NHS Transgender Health homepage
www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Transhealth/Pages/Transhealthhome.aspx

The Proud Trust
www.theproudtrust.org

Stonewall
www.stonewall.org.uk

These are some of the national organisations which offer support and information and some have links to local support groups, for you and for your family.

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

Glossary

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

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'.

Coming out/Outing: Coming out is telling other people that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Being outed is having someone else reveal you as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, usually against your will.

Deadname/deadnaming: The act of referring to a transgender person's birth name instead of their chosen name.

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

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

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

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

Non-binary: a person who does not feel comfortable in a social system that recognises only two categories (male and female.) People identifying as non-binary may identify as having no gender, as being in between genders or as a third or 'other' gender.

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

Sexual orientation: term for an individual's enduring emotional and sexual attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (straight) orientations.

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.

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.

Transphobia: prejudice against anyone who is or is thought to be trans.



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