

Towards Understanding the Challenges of Parenting a Transgender Child

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Abstract

Parenting a gender diverse child who does not subscribe to the socially accepted gender binary and is considered anormative is not an easy task. As a child transitions into their preferred gender, it is a phase of evolution for the parent too. They go through the stages of guilt, social intimidation and denial before adjusting to the new gender reality of their child. They have to traverse through the deep, socially ingrained norms and personal limitations like lack of awareness and correct information. Renegotiating their way into affirmative parenting in order to provide unconditional acceptance to the transgender child and sustain them through their journey is a challenging task

Introduction

Growing up in a family with two male siblings, Neela, (6 years old) was always interested in playing football rather than playing with jewellery items and dolls. She preferred tool kits and racing cars over dolls and tea sets and so no one in her family found it unusual. She played only with boys and befriended boys more than girls. From very early in life, she persistently displayed a dislike for anything feminine; toys, dresses, mannerisms, gestures etc. In her mind, she was also a boy just like her two brothers and therefore used he/him as the choice of pronoun while addressing herself. When pushed by her parents, she would often reply that she was a boy who looked like a girl.

Her parents felt that Neela was going through a phase where she followed everything her brothers did. They were not worried about Neela's masculine gender expression, communicated through clothing, hairstyle and behaviour^[1] because they believed it to be temporary phase. They felt that their daughter was being a tomboy. Neela felt like a misfit in an all girls' school and begged her parents to send her to the same school as her brothers. Neela's gender dysphoria became public during a big party organized by her parents for her sixth birthday. A special cake was ordered and a beautiful dress was bought for Neela for the big day. But Neela was so angry with her parents for organizing a girl's birthday party. She was so hurt that she tore the pink dress and locked herself in a room, refusing to come out. Her parents were visibly embarrassed. She was

slapped by her father. Stricter measures followed and she was forced to appropriate feminine mannerisms. It was clear to her that her family rejected her feelings. No one understood her plight.

The above given vignette provides a preview into the life of a transgender (FtM) child who was born as a girl but identifies as a boy. The vignette highlights the gender dysphoria or the acute discomfort arising out from the incompatibility between the biologically assigned gender and the gender experienced by the child (Fisk,1974). Parenting a transgender child is a taxing process since it involves not only catering to the special needs of a child but also entails attitude reconstruction both at the levels of society and self for the parent or the caregiver.

Parenting may be defined as the process of raising children as independent, competent and healthy individuals into adulthood who are capable of positively contributing to the society. The process of parenting is a constantly evolving series of progressive behaviours with which parents prepare their children to develop life skills and become capable of managing potential challenges. It is a culturally specific phenomenon, customised according to one's socio-psychological and emotional needs, and individual parenting styles thereby making it a herculean task.

The quality of care provided by a parent has a significant impact on the physiological, socio-psychological and emotional development of a child. Even as they move into adulthood, their

childhood experiences are responsible for shaping our personalities and behaviour (Freud, 1922). Because of the enormous amount of conscientiousness invested into it, parenting without a doubt comes with a set of strong expectations and socio-cultural norms. A gender diverse child who does not subscribe to the socially accepted gender binary is considered anormative.

This unacceptability forced upon the transgender by an intolerant and unfair society ranges from discrimination and abuse to denial of fundamental human rights and exclusion. Herein comes the role of the family which can offer a support system to buffer the negative social interactions and stigmatisation faced by the gender diverse individual. There is sufficient research which indicates that strong and robust interpersonal relationships within the family help in providing support and offer a psychological buffer to help children develop into capable and healthy individuals, confident of facing potential challenges. Being firmly rooted into the family instils a sense of security and psychological well-being. (Ryan et al, 2010; McConnell et al, 2016) Healthy parental bonding is known to encourage resilience in non-binary children. On the other hand, dysfunctional family dynamics lead to development of poor self-esteem and feelings of helplessness in gender diverse children. (Olson et al 2016; Umberson & Montez, 2010)

Psycho-Emotional Stages of parenting a transgender child

Embracing a child who identifies as transgender is a tough row to hoe. Ironically the child is ready and prepared to embark upon a new gender creative journey but the parents are not. Parents or caregivers undergo a profound sense of loss and grief upon losing their son or daughter as they knew it. They also experience sadness for losing an imagined but curated future for their child. They are apprehensive and fear social stigma and marginalization which their child would most likely be subjected to.

Parents are unforgiving to themselves for not being able to raise a “normal” child and are overwhelmed with this guilt. Social Intimidation

in terms of transphobic attitude of the mainstream society and the prejudice faced by the persons of transgender community adds to the fear of parents with children who identify as transgender. They are afraid of the precarious life which comes along with their gender declaration. To cope with this guilt and anxiety inducing life situation, they refuse to acknowledge the affirmed gender of their child and thus end up in denial of reality. Parents need to navigate through their felt emotions and reactions and come to terms with accepting the gender variant child. Transgender support groups and gender counselling for the parents of trans children helps them overcome their apprehensions and misconceptions. An open communication and unconditional positive regard for the child who is exploring their affirmed gender is of utmost importance. Parents who are able to provide validation to the child’s gender identity act as the biggest source of support for the transgender child to live authentically. There is sufficient research to imply that children who receive warm and loving relationships at home fare better with mental health issues and experience psychological hardiness. (Aranbus,2018; Ehrensaft,2011; Gray et al,2016;Norwood,2012)

Fig 1: Psycho-Emotional Stages of parenting a transgender child (Developed by the researcher)



Advocating for Transgender children

DSM V has de-pathologized the non-conforming gender identities. Gender Dysphoria, thus can be operationally defined as a marked incongruence between one's perceived gender and gender assigned at birth.

We must at this point, understand that gender variance is not a disease. It is a deviation from

the pre-existing, heteronormative model of gender binary that the society approves. Till the time transgenders are seen through the disease framework, they will continue to suffer discrimination, abuse and stigmatization.

It is imperative that parents with gender diverse children connect with other families having similar composition. This will not only end their isolation and provide a support network but also help in educating other parents of gender non-conforming children to share their lived experiences and offer emotional scaffolds. Community Outreach programs can help to support and cater to the special needs of parents with transgender children. Online platforms, engagement with social media can be used to create a narrative and serve as avenue for providing specialized services and resources.

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Conclusion

Parents of a transgender child are fearful of their child being discriminated and stigmatised by the mainstream society and hence reject the perceived gender of the child. Lack of parental and familial support adds to the distress and helplessness felt by the child.

Therefore, it is imperative that parents rise above their fears and pay attention to the needs of their child. Affirmative parenting which recognizes the expressed gender, understands the gender dysphoria experienced by the child and offers unconditional love and support to the gender diverse child is a pre-requisite to the creation of an environment where differences are celebrated and not rejected.

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