

# Love Knows No Gender: Parenting a Transgender Child

by Wendy Cole

## Introduction...

No matter how much you love your child or how open-minded you are, parents are rarely, if ever, prepared to learn their child is transgender. My parents weren't prepared when, at 10 years old, I told them I was a girl, not a boy. As most parents, they did their best at the time. Threatening to "fix" me (if I didn't forget all about being a girl) did irreparable damage to our relationship. Until I was 67 years old, I did everything I could to suppress knowing I was a female and in the wrong body. This suppression included using drugs, alcohol. I'm sharing my story with you because I don't want another child to go through what I went through. Nor do I want parents to be at a loss for how to respond to the child they love.

Most parents are initially surprised and uncertain about how to respond when their child comes out as transgender. I've heard stories like that of a mother whose son, in his early twenties, revealed his true identity as a woman, leaving the family shocked and unsure about what to do next. This is where my firsthand experience and understanding become invaluable, as I offer a compassionate and well-informed perspective from "the other side" of this journey.

By offering support, guidance and a safe space for learning, we can empower parents to lovingly embrace their child's identity and foster stronger family bonds. In turn, this will contribute to a more inclusive society.

I truly believe the universe guided me onto this path in 2015 for a meaningful purpose and it has become my life's mission. My commitment is to openly and authentically share my story in order to touch people's hearts and minds and promote positive change in how others perceive and understand transgender individuals like myself.

## People rarely think about their gender because it just is...

Your child was born this way. It's not your fault. As a parent, you did nothing wrong. And you can't "fix it"! It is difficult, but learning to accept your child without the burden of needing to understand it, is essential. It's important you accept and support them. People tend to resist change and hold onto preconceived notions about transgender individuals like me. I started my program for parents of transgender individuals to help people think about gender and work through situations with their child. I never want any other child to go through the challenges I faced. I use the words "child" or "children" to denote a relationship, not the child's age. It makes no difference

if they're 14 or 45. A child's identity is not a result of their parents' mistakes; it is simply a part of who their child is. This truth cannot be wished away, no matter how much someone may want it to be otherwise.

When parents value maintaining a strong relationship with their child and are willing to accept their child's true self, they will unconditionally embrace this reality. Parents must first believe their child. This takes some time to validate and process this experience. The guidance I provide to parents includes insights from my personal experience and practical tools to assist them in navigating this journey of acceptance. You can do it!

## Unconditional Acceptance Without Needing to Understand...

My life is an example to parents of what NOT to do with a transgender family member, regardless of their age! Here's what I teach parents to do instead:

- Don't deny your child's awareness of their gender! It takes a lot of courage for a person to tell their parents and family, "I'm really a girl," or "I'm really a boy." It's not your child's "choice." It is how he or she feels about who and what they truly are. When you let go of your fears, it will be easier to help them.
- Accept them unconditionally without needing to understand. People rarely question or think about their gender because it just is.
- Get help for yourself as well as your child from someone who has experience and understands being born transgender, as well as the effects on a person's life.
- Prepare yourself to adapt to your child's to new gender role in the family dynamic. Their roles will change over time as they begin to live authentically as themselves and develop and blossom into their new lives. You'll need to see and relate to this person differently!

## Hiding and repressing myself over six decades...

If you do what my parents did with me, you'll subject your child to a life of anger, depression, anxiety, guilt, and fear. I lived like this for six-plus decades. I'm grateful to my "male facsimile" (or "male representative," what I call the person I used to live as) for not making me a drug addict, alcoholic, or killing me, even though I thought of these often. The last time I was in a very dark place was at age 66. You see this never goes away! Until then, I had no idea the official medical diagnosis was changed in

2012. Before that, being transgender (the way I was born) was categorized as a psychological condition with no treatment or cure. Now it is considered treatable with therapy, hormone replacement therapy and surgeries. When I discovered this, I knew I had to transition and finally openly become the woman I've always been repressing.

### **Please don't force your child to live my experience...**

I was never a man, rather a facsimile who had to live as a male. Honestly, the last nine years have been the happiest of my life. It's been great! It has been an evolution...where I have become social, have friends and gone is the anxiety, depression, etc. Early in 2015, my trusted therapist referred me to a psychiatrist who took me off the psych meds I'd been on for around twenty years. Being off the meds and now on estrogen therapy was wonderful. The sky opened up for me. I was so happy. I felt so free with no secret to hide. Both my therapist and new psychiatrist had first met my "male facsimile" before meeting the real me, Wendy. I was gradually getting comfortable with the new person I was becoming. A few years later, I was told they couldn't believe the immediate personality change between my "male facsimile" and Wendy, the woman I am. I was a different person—open, happy, outgoing and social—all things I had not been for 67 years!

Please don't force your child to experience what I had to go through. Learn how to accept and support them without question.

### **It's about correcting how they were born, so they can fully be who they've always been...!**

Something many parents think of is "What will others think?" Or "How will our relatives, the neighbors and friends react to our family and to our child?" Today, you hear the term "transition" or "transitioning." Many parents will think, "My boy is changing to a girl." Let's look at it from a different perspective and more valid truth. It's less about "transitioning" from someone they weren't and more about correcting how they were born, so they can fully be who they've always been! That is such an important shift of perspective for any parent of a transgender child. It's also more affirming to your child for you to adopt this perspective. And it's also a perspective I encourage transgender people to adopt. Once you understand this perspective, talking about what is going on becomes so much easier. And the conversations will come up with others. As a parent, remember, you've done nothing wrong!! It's not your child's choice. It's who they are and how they were born!

### **Roles within the family dynamic will need to change...**

Let's talk about your child's role within the family dynamic. As a parent, be open to your child adopting any gender-specific roles they feel comfortable with and want. Ask your child how they want to affirm their gender identity. A parent of a transgender woman (male to female) took her daughter to a salon and for the first time where she had have her hair cut and styled in a feminine way. She also took her daughter to get her nails done. This was a huge experience for both of them. It affirmed her daughter's identity and brought them closer together. I dreamed of that happening for me at times during my high school years.

- ✓ Your child who is transitioning is seeing themselves differently. It's an ongoing process.
- ✓ As they evolve over the first few years and even longer, things they used to do and their interests change, as do their bodies and physical strength – this is a new person.
- ✓ The person transitioning has new experiences daily that are important to their development. So talk with them and listen when they want to share their feelings – don't try to fix them. Don't ask, "Are you sure?" This invalidates their experience.
- ✓ Invite family members and relatives to change how they see this person and their expectations of this person.
- ✓ Family needs to see beyond the clothes, hair, name and pronouns, realizing this is a very different person evolving.
- ✓ Make it easy for them to move into new gender roles as they evolve. As appropriate, participate with them.
- ✓ Transitioning is for the child alone – don't impose conditions, restrictions, or wishes of others or even your own hopes for them.
- ✓ It's important for family members to be publicly accepting and supportive without question, especially with friends, neighbors and in public.

Consider changing schools when supporting your child to socially transition. This may not be as necessary today, since many kids don't think twice about being transgender. Many completely accept it as just another aspect of life, unlike many adults.

### **Self-acceptance and self-awareness are key for your child...**

It's important to be aware that initially your child has not accepted themselves for who they are, especially within the first year. Even after a year or two of living as themselves, self-

**“My life is an example to parents of what NOT to do with a transgender family member”**

acceptance is still developing. It takes time. For most of their life, they've been living in fear, guilt and shame for having these feelings of being a girl when they're assigned male at birth or vice versa. Self-acceptance, self-awareness and self-esteem are key factors for your child, regardless of age. These enable them to develop and successfully become the person they've always been and knew themselves to be. When a person is born, the doctor says, "It's a boy" or "It's a girl" based on anatomy. But in reality, the doctor doesn't know for certain. Being designated male at birth, in my case was clearly a mistake.

### **Gender is between the ears not the legs...**

Gender is in the brain, it's in the mind and it's with you from birth. Gender is designated at birth based on anatomy formed in the second trimester. In my case, my brain developed as female and my body as male. As your child grows, they develop a sense of their gender and, in most cases, it remains congruent with their physical anatomy. But with people born transgender, they become aware there is something wrong. Socialization from parents, family, school and society begins at birth and is opposite to how your child sees themselves. So, before your child tells you how they really feel, they're struggling with this dichotomy. Because at whatever age, they see there are girls, there are boys and this is how their parents react to them. This is how everybody treats them. They may be thinking, "Oh, God, if I say I'm different, they're going to think something's really wrong with me." That's what your child is feeling. That's when the fear, shame, guilt, and anxiety come in. They have a big secret to hide!

### **Things Parents can do to be supportive...**

- ✓ You love them.
- ✓ Help them tell others, if and when they choose.
- ✓ Be there for them even if you don't understand.
- ✓ Support their gender expression.
- ✓ Welcome their friends.
- ✓ Participate in support groups with them and get guidance for yourself.
- ✓ Connect them with adult role models.
- ✓ Talk with them about their identity and listen even if it's uncomfortable.
- ✓ Use their name and pronouns that match their identity.
- ✓ Insist that other family members treat them with respect.
- ✓ Tell them you're proud of them.
- ✓ Stand up for them when others mistreat them.
- ✓ Show affection when you are made aware of their gender identity.
- ✓ Educate yourself.
- ✓ Speak openly and positively about them with others.
- ✓ Believe they can be happy and successful as adults.

### **The issue is really the parents accepting the child...**

First of all, accept your child without any conditions. Accept them without needing to understand why. Because needing to understand why gets you down into wondering where you went wrong. All of those types of debates are not the issue. The issue is really the child and the parents accepting them for who they are, embracing them for who they are and supporting them. As a result of your support, your child will go through their process so much easier. They'll be more comfortable in their life and grow to be themselves. And telling them they will forget all about this when they have a "normal life" doesn't work! That didn't work for me. And it hasn't worked for anyone else I know. And it won't work for your child! There is nothing more damaging to a person's psychological well-being than to repress who they are and how they feel. I didn't talk with anyone about my feelings for forty-five years! From 1970, when a psychiatrist publicly called me a freak, until 2015. That's no way to live for all those decades, yet I lived it!

### **Speak supportively of your child with others and not in anger...**

When you, as a parent, overhear friends or relatives saying something disparaging about your child or their transition, immediately intercede in that conversation with kindness, not in anger. Explain what you know about how your child feels and how you feel about it. That might diffuse the conversation and hopefully diminish the possibility of that conversation happening again between those people. They might think whatever they want in private, but it might prompt them to actually look for some way of accepting it or at least being more knowledgeable about what your child is going through. I use the word, knowledgeable, as opposed to understanding. Gender is not something that we normally think about. It's not something that people normally question when their gender and their sex assigned at birth are aligned. That's the thing that's different about a transgender child. They were born transgender and they will reach a point in their lives where they are constantly questioning who they are, their value and their self-worth. They will be questioning the validity of how they were born and the validity of their sex assigned at birth. Having parents who are accepting and supportive makes a tremendous difference.

### **Happy real-life experience...**

A few weeks after her surgery, I met a patient of my surgeon at a photo shoot in Manhattan. She was a very intelligent, very bright person who had graduated from Vassar in Poughkeepsie, New York, and went on to be an Oxford fellow. When she came home from England, she announced she was transitioning. Her

**“accept your child without any conditions”**

parents threw her out so her grandparents took her in. They weren't sure what to do and knew nothing about transitioning, but they didn't want her to be out on her own. I met her grandmother at the event and gave her a big hug telling her, "You're absolutely amazing and I'm so glad you are with her." The grandmother said, "Well it was scary at first. We had no idea what to do or what was going on. She helped us by sharing how she felt and we just went with it. And then this whole idea of surgery and changing her sex, as well, was another huge thing for us to get used to." Then she said, "We're so glad we did this because even though I loved my grandson, my granddaughter is amazing. The personality change and who she's becoming is so wonderful. We wouldn't have had this if we hadn't accepted and taken her in."

### Learn how to parent compassionately from "the other side" of this journey...

When parents value maintaining a strong relationship with their child and are willing to accept their true self, they must unconditionally embrace this reality. Calling on my personal experience from the other side of this journey, I have provided guidance, insights and practical tools to assist parents in navigating this journey of acceptance. Think of how helpful it would be to know how to talk with other people about this change in your family.

Most parents are initially surprised and uncertain about how to respond when their child comes out as transgender. This is where my firsthand experience and understanding become invaluable. In my coaching program for parents, I offer a compassionate and well-informed perspective from "the other side" of this journey. By offering understanding, support, guidance and a safe space for learning, I help parents feel empowered to lovingly embrace their child's identity and foster stronger family bonds. You will learn the skills and techniques for building and maintaining a strong, positive relationship with your child as they claim their true gender and learn to live as their authentic self. In turn, this contributes to a more inclusive society and a more inclusive world for all.

If this feels like what you're facing, I'd love to have a conversation so we can see how I can help you.

### Links:

**Calendar Link to schedule conversation:**

[calendly.com/wendycoletm/next-step-strategy-session](https://calendly.com/wendycoletm/next-step-strategy-session)

**Link to Parent Coaching Page:**

[wendycoletm.net/parents](https://wendycoletm.net/parents)

**Parents Guide Book – soon on Amazon (will be announced).**

STEPHENS FAMILY YMCA, in collaboration with Uniting Pride, present

# CAMP KALEIDOSCOPE

**JUNE 3-7**  
**2nd-5th Graders**

**Time: 8:30am - 4:00pm**  
**Fees: \$250**



**JULY 22-26**  
**6th-9th Graders**

Camp Kaleidoscope aims to provide youth in the LGBTQ+ community with daily summer adventures that promote a healthy spirit, mind and body. Participants will meet at the Y each morning and will be transported to a nearby space of retreat where they can meet new friends, learn team building, and experience character growth & development.

**Questions? Contact Alyssa Anderson at [alyssa.anderson@ccymca.net](mailto:alyssa.anderson@ccymca.net).**

