

Preventing Trans Youth Suicide

Helping Parentings & Caregivers Support Their Trans Children



Preventing Suicide and Promoting Trans Wellness: Helping Parents & Caregivers Support Their Trans Children

Parents, caregivers and families of trans and gender diverse children and youth play an integral role in the lives of trans children. Parents are often young people's best allies and advocates. Parent support is also recognized as one of the most significant determinants of trans young people's overall mental health and well-being. Strong and healthy relationships between trans children and youth and their families is associated with a significant reduction in experiences of suicidality.

Many parents and caregivers experience confusion and uncertainty when their children come out as trans or gender diverse. That is okay. The information provided below is intended to help you best support yourself and your child.

In the 2019 Trans PULSE Canada survey, 58% of trans and non-binary young people were told by their parents/guardians that they were respected/supported, and half were called by their correct name, pronouns, and gendered language by their parents/guardians. This is an important part of suicide prevention for trans and non-binary youth.

Talking to Trans Youth About Suicide

It is a myth that talking about suicide leads youth to make attempts. Talking about suicide provides the opportunity for communica-

tion. Fears shared are more likely to diminish. The first step in encouraging a person with thoughts of suicide to live comes from talking about those feelings. A simple inquiry about whether or not the young person is intending to end their life can start the conversation. However, it is important to note that youth who talk about suicide frequently may still be doing so as their way of asking for support, in fact talking about it frequently is usually a call out for help and an opening for conversation.

While it should **not** be assumed that a trans young person is suicidal simply because they are trans, it is recommended to maintain an ongoing dialogue with your children and youth about their overall mental health, to show them that they are permitted to both experience and talk about their emotions. You should not avoid the topic of suicide if it comes up. While you do not need to *always* be talking about mental health and suicidality, recurring conversations about well-being are integral to emotional literacy, healthy familial relationships and improved mental health.

Warning Signs of Suicide in Trans Youth: What you need to know

Understanding warning signs of suicide can play a huge role in help you to support or prevent a crisis. Knowing these major warning signs can help in identifying a need for support in someone you know – even if that person is yourself.

Any significant change in behaviour or mood is a warning sign that someone may be thinking about suicide, for example:

- Losing interest in a previously enjoyed hobby or activity
- Disconnecting from friends or family

(not calling as much, not going out)

- Change in sleeping or eating patterns
- Increased and excessive drug and/or alcohol use
- Threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- Talking or writing about dying or suicide
- Admiring people who have died by suicide
- Seeking out ways to kill themselves.
- Using drugs or alcohol more than usual
- Giving away their most valuable possessions
- Planning for death by writing a will or letter

- Feeling more sick, tired or achy than usual

If you notice any of the following signs, get the young person in your life help immediately – if you feel that person is in a crisis situation or emergency please call 911 or your local crisis centre.

Accessing Community & Support

When we spoke with parents and carers in Waterloo one of the things we heard about often was the desire for community. This is also echoed in literature. “As a parent, I’d love to meet other parents of trans youth in a weekend group. I feel isolated in my small town and worry our town won’t be as accepting as people in a city. I’d be willing to drive to a city (and bring my child) to meet other children and parents.”

Parents and caregivers benefit from connections with others who have shared experiences. Many parents and caregivers have found needed support, peer counselling and mentorship from other parents whose children are trans or gender diverse. All parents and caregivers of trans and gender diverse youth should consider seeking out opportunities to connect with peers of shared experience.

Parents and caregivers also benefit from connection to broader trans and gender diverse communities. Many people struggle with stigma and stereotypes about trans people. Many parents experience a sense of loss and grief, alongside a fear for the safety and future of their children. Connecting with trans adults, and recognizing that trans people, at the end of the day, are simply people too, with their own careers, hopes and dreams, is often helpful to parents and caregivers.

Parents and Caregivers: Supporting Trans and Gender Diverse Children and Youth

If you are a parent or caregiver, and a young person in your life or family has recently come out as trans, you may be struggling with a lot of complicated and conflicting emotions. You are likely some combination of scared, surprised, and confused. These tips were created to help guide you in your initial steps, so that you can support the trans loved ones in your life.

What matters most: If your child has come out as trans, what they need most right now is unreserved reassurance. Reassurance that you still love them, that you support them, and that you will always be there for them. While you may need time to process this change, your first step should be to affirm to your child that you love and support them. Many trans children are scared to come out, and this is a big moment for them, for you, and for your family. Consider thanking your child for trusting you with this information and reassure them that they have your support.

When your child or young person first comes out, it is important to:

- 1) Thank them for trusting you
- 2) Tell them you love and support them
- 3) Ask them what they need from you right now
- 4) Confirm what name and/or pronouns they'd like to use

- 5) Tell them again that you'll do your best to learn and to support them

Where Do We Go from Here?

Once a young person comes out as trans, there are a lot of things that might happen. Your child might want to try on new clothes, change their name, switch up their pronouns, or come out to their classmates and peers. There is no single way to be trans, so you should always be patient with your child, and let them tell you what being trans means to them, and what they need from you.

I'm Having a Hard Time Handling This. What Should I Do?

Lots of parents and caregivers struggle when a child or youth comes out as trans. Your emotions, your fears, and your anxieties, are valid. It is a lot to process, and you deserve support. However, it is important that your child or young person knows that you support them. **If you are struggling with their identity, it is *not* their responsibility to answer all your questions, or to manage your emotions.**

Many communities have local 2SLGBTQ2+ organizations that can help support you as you learn to support your trans or gender diverse child. There are also numerous resources, a list of which you can access here, available to you, to help you learn more about transgender people, and how to support your trans child. Organizations like *Canadian Parents for Trans and Gender Diverse Children* can also help you process your emotions, and help you learn how to best support your child.

Key Tips for Supporting your Trans or Gender Diverse Child

- 1) **Respect their name and pronouns:** Many trans and gender diverse children and youth will change their names and pronouns as soon as they come out. While it *is* an adjustment, and that adjustment can be difficult, especially if you helped choose their birth name, respecting their name and pronouns is one of the most important ways to show your support. You do not have to be perfect – and you likely will make mistakes – but trying your best and correcting yourself when you do make mistakes makes a huge difference.
 - 2) **Educate yourself:** While you don't need to know everything about trans and gender diverse people, educating yourself on what it means to be trans, and what resources are available for trans children and youth, and their families, in your area can help you address your anxieties or uncertainty and debunk any misconceptions you may have about trans identity.
 - 3) **Reach out for support:** You don't have to handle this alone. Many parents experience a sense of grief, based on the idea that they've 'lost' their child. You have not lost your child – your child is just growing up a bit differently than you expected. While our emotional responses are valid, it is important to remember that our children are their own people, with their own dreams, needs and identities. By reaching out for support, be it through a parent support group, a therapist, or talking with a friend, you can best process
- 4) **Give your child hope:** The world isn't always easy for trans people, but it is getting better. Many parents immediately worry that their child being trans will result in lots of mistreatment. While mistreatment does happen, trans children need to know that there is hope, that there are communities that will love and care for them, and that they can live happy and fulfilling lives as trans children and adults.
 - 5) **Don't get ahead of yourself:** Trans identity isn't just about medical transition, but medical transition *is* an important step for many trans people. Medical transition can look a lot of different ways and mean a lot of different things. Generally speaking, medical transition for trans children and youth pertains to puberty blockers and hormone replacement therapy. These are medical practices that, respectively, either delay or kick-start puberty. To better understand what puberty might look like for your child, you should consult your family doctor or healthcare provider. Medical transition can seem scary – and it's often just as scary for trans young people. By doing your research, you can better understand what medical transition might mean for your child as they grow up.

your own emotions, look out for your own mental health, and best support your child.

- 6) **Connect your child to their community:** Many trans and gender diverse children feel isolated, and benefit from opportunities to connect with other trans and gender diverse young people. Many communities have drop-in programs, social opportunities, or other activities for trans, gender diverse and 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth. Not all trans and gender diverse children want or need community spaces, but many do benefit from the safety, connection, and community such spaces provide.

Trans, Gender Creative, and Gender Diverse Children's and Parenting Books

It is important for parents, caregivers and other caring adults to learn about trans and gender diverse communities, so we can create safer environments for all children and all families. It is also important for trans, gender creative and gender diverse children to see themselves reflected in the books they read, or that are read to them. And finally, it is important for all children and youth to understand diversity, that not all people or families look alike. A list of recommended books for children and youth is included in Appendix E.

Books to Help Parents and Caregivers Support Their Trans Children and Care for Themselves Too

The Trans Partner Handbook: A Guide for When Your Partner Transitions, by Jo Green

- This book includes introductory information about trans identity, and provides insights for how partners of trans people can support themselves and their partners through transition. While targeted at partners of trans people, many of the concepts and tools in this book are helpful and relevant to parents and caregivers too.

Gender, Your Guide, by Lee Airton

- This book provides an introduction to everything about gender, trans identity and supporting trans people in your life. The book explores what it means to be a trans man, a trans woman, a non-binary person, or anywhere else on the gender spectrum. Intended as an educational tool, this book is one of the most comprehensive and reader-friendly introductions to trans inclusion.

The Gender Creative Child by Diane Erhenshaft

- Authored by an internationally recognized authority on gender diversity and supporting gender creative children, this book is an all-in-one guide for parents and caregivers looking to better understand and support trans, gender creative and gender diverse children.