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Growing Up Transgender: Safety and Resilience

by Seth T. Pardo and Karen Schantz

As they navigate the many social settings in which they grow up, transgender youth are too often left to face formidable obstacles alone, without the external supports that foster both safety and healthy development. Adults often find gender nonconformity unfamiliar territory, and may find themselves unsure of how to respond. How can we help to create the conditions for trans youth to participate in society authentically and safely?

Part 1 of the ACT for (Trans) Youth series (Pardo, 2008) examined transgender identity development and discussed a model that posits gender variability as healthy and natural. In Part 2 we turn our focus to the vulnerabilities our society imposes on trans youth, and how adults and community institutions can help to shape healthy environments for (and with) trans youth. While research on the needs of transgender youth currently lacks depth, we assert that by promoting cultural competence, safety, and resilience, communities can better protect and support their trans children.

Young and Trans in a Binary World

Some people express a fluid sense of gender and/or a gender that does not match their biological sex, and this expression typically begins early in life (Ehrensaft, 2007). While all children experience psychological and social pressures to conform to social gender norms, trans youth experience these pressures in their core sense of self. Growing up trans in a society that enforces rigid notions of gender has implications for safety, sense of belonging, access to adult support, health and wellbeing, and life opportunities.

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On Tuesday, February 12, 2008, 15-year-old Lawrence King was shot while working with 22 other students in the computer lab at his junior high school; he died shortly thereafter. Friends believe King was targeted for his gender nonconformity and sexual orientation. We dedicate the ACT for (Trans) Youth series to Lawrence King and to all gender nonconforming youth.

Bullying and violence. Gender non-conforming youth typically endure an atmosphere of intimidation in their daily lives. Anti-gay bullying often originates from judgments about gender expression rather than sexual orientation (Reis & Saewyc, 1999; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). Harassment may be used as a means of aggressively reinforcing a particular style of masculinity (Tharinger, 2008); and whereas gender nonconforming (tomboy) girls benefit from being the "best athletes" or other stereotypically masculine traits, gender nonconforming boys frequently bear intense harassment and discrimination (Brooks, 2000; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1994).

Results from the 2005 National School Climate Survey of 1,732 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth indicate that 75% of youth hear homophobic remarks often or frequently at school. Nineteen percent report hearing similar comments from school teachers or staff (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). In the same survey, 17% reported physical harassment and 12% reported being physically assaulted because of their gender expression.

Being transgender is, of course, not the only identity that can make these youth vulnerable to bullying. Youth of color who are transgender, for example, are doubly targeted; the consequences are compounded in schools and communities where homophobia, transphobia, and racism grow unchecked.

Access to adult support. Like lesbian and gay youth, trans youth must be careful when seeking support from adults. Adults may offer tremendous support; however, adults may also act or react out of fear, bias, or ignorance.

Coming out as transgender to one's parents, for example, is not always a safe choice. One study of 55 trans youth found high levels of verbal and physical abuse from parents, with the highest levels seen by those youth who least conformed to gender stereotypes (Grossman, D'Augelli, Salter, & Hubbard, 2005). Many parents do respond supportively, especially over time, becoming their children's best advocates. But when a parent rejects a child's gender identity and expression, this critical and formative relationship is at risk, with repercussions for the child's mental and physical health, safety, and future.

Puberty. For children who deeply feel that their gendered self conflicts with their biological sex, pubertal changes can be extremely stressful and alienating. Transgender people may not relate to or may hate the parts of their bodies that mark them as male or female, and this estrangement can affect mental and physical health (Burgess, 1999).

Physicians may recommend hormone blockers to delay puberty, allowing time for trans youth to understand the choices regarding transition to their preferred gender. For those who have access to health care, the choices are complex. Some youth will pursue sex reassignment surgery; others may not have access to surgery, or may choose hormones alone to help their bodies become more feminine or more masculine. Still others do not choose any form of medical transition, and some are comfortable with a more fluid expression of gender rather than undertaking a definite transition from one gender to another.

> *The changes were unbearable. I was growing breasts and I had started my period. It was really hard to fantasize anymore that I was a boy, even though my brain told me to keep believing. ...I didn't have the motivation to do anything anymore, and I wanted to disappear forever.*
> - Jake, 16 *(MSNBC, n.d.a)*

Parents control much of their children's access to health care, but youth may be reluctant to ask their parents to support transgender medical care. Youth who are homeless or who do not have access to health care for other reasons may inject street hormones or silicone, exposing them to hazards such as HIV or hepatitis. Some may engage in sex work to to earn money for transition and basic needs (Klein, 1999).

Sexual health. Sexual health education rarely takes into account trans concerns and language. Some trans youth, for example, develop their own words for genitals, rejecting terminology they find alienating. Similarly, trans youth may

tune out critical information that doesn't speak to them: identifying as women, male-to-female youth may ignore information about using condoms (O'Brien, 2003).

Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) point out that trans youth can face added health risks because sexual partners may be more resistant to using condoms. Partners may believe that female-to-male (FTM) youth cannot become pregnant while on testosterone. (This is false; without a hysterectomy, FTM youth can still become pregnant with male partners.) Partners may also resist safer sex behaviors because they expect gender transgression to signal uninhibited/risky sexual behavior.

Consequences of victimization and rejection. It is well established that violence and harassment contribute to depression, isolation, and suicidality in sexual minority youth (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001). Some trans youth seek safety and relief from victimization by running away from home or dropping out of school (Klein, 1999; Sausa, 2005). This, in turn, may place them at risk for poverty or criminal activities undertaken for survival (Marksamer, 2008).

> *You just never know. You have to feel out when it's safe or when it's not…how far is it to the car? Who else is around, you know? Who else is around…and whose side are they going to take?*
> - Ethan, trans youth *(DiFulvio, 2004)*

Homeless shelters and detention facilities are often managed through highly gendered systems that fail to support trans youth. Trans youth in the juvenile justice system face rigid gender rules, norms, and structures that expose them to further harassment and violence, and cross-gender behavior may be misinterpreted and punished as sexually inappropriate (Marksamer, 2008). Trans youth may also feel unsafe or unwelcome in homeless shelters, which are often organized around gender (Lombardi, 2007).

The consequences of victimization can be devastating, and they are preventable.

Fostering Safety and Resilience

Working together with youth, adults have opportunities to create safer, developmentally rich environments. We know from decades of resiliency research that adults play a key role in helping youth build the capacity to respond positively to adversity. Positive, enduring relationships with individual adults are extraordinarily effective in facilitating resiliency, and this is certainly true for GLBT youth (DiFulvio, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Sausa, 2005). However, we can have greater impact by working ecologically at the family, group, organization, and community levels, creating environments that promote connectedness for and with all youth.

Connectedness—a sense of belonging to family, school, or community—is one protective factor that appears to promote resilience across all social groups (Bernat & Resnick, 2006). Connectedness includes, but goes beyond, those vital personal relationships; in fact, relationships may not even be the most important factor in giving young people a sense of belonging. According to one study, youth who had genuine opportunities for participation were the most likely to experience school and community connectedness (Whitlock, 2004). Another study of GLBT youth reinforces this theme, finding that while connection to others is essential, resistance, expressed through fighting back or through activism, offers a parallel pathway to self-discovery and resilience (DiFulvio, 2004). It is not only through relationships that youth learn to overcome adversity; opportunities to make a lasting difference for others give young people purpose and connection.

Creating safe environments, positive relationships, and a sense of belonging begins with respect. Those who work with trans youth can show respect and lay the groundwork for safe communities by:

- **Using the name, pronouns, and terms preferred by the individual.** Calling a young person by a rejected birth name is not only disrespectful of that person's identity, it can also lead to violence and bullying (Sausa, 2005). Avoiding pronouns, or, when appropriate, asking the young person about preferred pronouns also demonstrates respect for an individual's right to define himself or herself.

- **Honoring a young person's right to privacy.** People who are transgender are often subjected to extremely personal, inappropriate questions about their bodies and medical issues. While it is important for some service providers to be educated about transgender health and bodies generally, in most cases, it is not necessary to know the details of a particular person's anatomy and health care in order to offer good services. Safer sex education can also be inclusive without tying specific safer sex practices to specific genders. For a discussion of these issues and tips on how to make safer sex education more relevant to transgender people, see *Keeping it Real: Transgender Inclusion in Safer Sex Education* (O'Brien, 2003).

- **Maintaining confidentiality.** Follow the lead of the young person regarding disclosure about transgender identity. While coming out can be empowering, it is also fraught with risk, and individual youth should control that process to the greatest extent possible.

Teachers don't realize that when they call me by my 'government name' everyone is going to call me that [and] it's going to cause a fight. Because, if they don't stop, I'm going to fight.
- Trans youth *(Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006)*

I think that is one thing transgender people need to know: though there are several people who will NOT accept you, there are many others who will… I could not tell you how great I felt the moment I realized I could actually fulfill my dream of being the girl I always knew I was, and people would not only accept me for it, but love me for it as well."
– Tayler, 21 *(MSNBC, n.d.b)*

- **Reaching out to families** may increase youth safety when done with the approval of the youth involved. Parents and families may feel alone, and supportive connections may help to ease tension in the home.

- **Cultivating cultural competence.** In any social setting in which youth grow up, adults should be educated about what it means to be transgender.

- **Establishing clear policies.** Creating anti-harassment policies establishes minimum expectations for respect, as long as the policy is explicitly transgender inclusive by protecting gender identity and expression (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006).

- **Decreasing emphasis on gender binary.** Activities, clothing, and spaces that divide people by gender bring unwanted attention to trans youth. School uniforms can increase discomfort and vulnerability, while mixed gender activities, access to gender-neutral bathrooms, and private areas for changing clothes can decrease risk and discomfort (Lambda Legal & National Youth Advocacy Coalition, n.d.).

- **Communicating high expectations.** We show respect and build resiliency when we let young people know that we believe in their capacity to build competencies and to succeed (Bernard, 2006).

- **Valuing youth participation and leadership.** Youth feel respected when we seek and value their input. Building mechanisms for including youth voice in planning and policymaking demonstrates respect and creates connectedness (Whitlock, 2004), and ultimately makes for better planning and policy. Opportunities for activism and for cultivating a sense of purpose, such as those provided by trans-inclusive Gay-Straight Alliance clubs, can also make a positive difference for trans and other sexual minority youth (DiFulvio, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006).

Nurturing resilience is, in the end, about how individuals and groups interact with youth over the long term: with respect, valuing and seeking out individual strengths, and providing authentic opportunities for contribution. To the extent that we are able to enlist individuals and groups in understanding and supporting youth in these ways, and to the extent that we successfully model inclusive, culturally competent institutions, we create safer communities for all youth to grow up—no matter their gender. ★

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Links to further resources are available from ACT for Youth: **http://www.actforyouth.net/?transgenderResources**