

IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILDREN

When I do educational presentations, the question often arises, "What is the best way to tell children one of their parents is transitioning? Doesn't it harm the child in some way?" There are a number of variables to consider in answering these questions, but the first answer I give is that children are not harmed by this sort of information, if the disclosure is handled appropriately and with the specific child in mind. Things to consider when disclosing are: the child's developmental age, gender, religion, cultural milieu, geographic location, status of the parental and extended familial relationship – in other words, each aspect of a child's life has an impact on (and is impacted by) this kind of major transformation. When one considers the disclosure from this holistic perspective, it becomes clear that there is no right way or time to disclose, as every child has a unique reality to consider.

As with any major life transformative event, it is not a good idea to lie to the child. When the issue under consideration is controversial, as being trans certainly is in this culture, one has to imagine the impact on the child if this is treated as a "family secret." The message the child will internalize is some form of, "This is a bad and shameful thing." While some people in the family probably believe exactly this, it is not in the *child's* best interest to believe their parent to be bad or shameful. Therefore, regardless of other adults' beliefs, it is better for the child to be told some variation of the truth without moralizing on the part of the adults in the child's life. This is particularly true in the case of pre-adolescent children, who have probably not attained the capability of critical, abstract logic and may not be able to discern for themselves that adults have their own agendas and belief systems that are not inherently right.

Disclosure of this sort of information is a gray area, as one considers how much information the child can understand and incorporate without confusion. Oversimplification can have a similar effect as lying, once a child matures and looks back on what they were told previously. However, this is an easier disclosure than having to tell a child one of their parents has died, for example. The child will never see their parent again in this lifetime, in any form, when the parent has died. Further, there is no way to explain to a child what death actually *is*, as no one knows what really does happen to someone after they've died. Many people's religious beliefs give them an explanation of death and its aftermath that they convey to the child, but this is cold comfort to a child, who only knows, "Mommy (or Daddy) has left me behind and I'm never going to see them again."

In the case of transition from one gender role/bodily sex to another, the most important consideration is the child's developmental age. A child who is a baby at the time of parental transition is not going to remember their parent's previous gender, but will need to be told at some point about the transition as a historical fact. Otherwise it is all too likely the child will find out at a later time, perhaps accidentally, simply through transmission of family history. If the child finds out about a parental transition through secondary sources, this is likely to lead to feelings of betrayal, anger, shattered trust, confusion, etc. This scenario is unlikely to have any positive component to it.

Disclosure to pre-pubescent children

Pre-pubescent children are not yet conscious of sex as a driving force. They are curious about bodies, and already have a sense of their own gender identity, but it is not until puberty that sex assumes an urgency out of all proportion to its actual place in everyday life. Because their gender identity has long-since emerged, and sex differences are still in the realm of curiosity, it is not going to impact a pre-pubescent child's own sense of identity to find out daddy is becoming a woman, or that mommy has always felt like a man inside and is going to become male on the outside. If they do ask about whether this means they will grow up to be a different gender themselves, most will be reassured by the explanation that if they already know themselves to be a boy or girl, that's not going to change¹. What will impact the child far more are questions such as, "Are you going away? Can I still call you 'mommy' (or 'daddy')? Are you getting a divorce? Where are you going to live? Where am I going to live?" Loss of consistency, loss of continuity, loss of love – these are the primary concerns of younger children.

As in a divorce situation (even if the transitioning couple is not divorcing), children need to know: (a) this is not about them, (b) they are still loved and cherished, and (c) they are still going to be part of both parents' lives. If the child sees 'daddy' disappearing and turning into a woman, the child needs reassurance at first that the person they knew as 'daddy' is still there for them, the love is no less than it's always been, and the child can count on this new person to be there in the same capacity – as a loving parent. Over time, if this message of constancy and love is consistently reinforced, the child will probably relax into acceptance

¹The exception to this, of course, is the gender dissonant child. Since one can't rule out gender dissonance as a possibility, it may be a good idea to explore the child's gender identity with them, in a matter-of-fact way. Children can understand an explanation along the lines of, "Some people when they're born are told they are boys, or girls, and their bodies might look like that, but it might not be how they feel inside. They might feel like they were supposed to be boys instead of girls, or girls instead of boys. There is nothing wrong with this; this is what mommy (or daddy) has felt like." This type of explanation does not force the child to disclose anything they aren't ready to, but does let them know that whoever they turn out to be, is okay.

as their fears of loss and abandonment are alleviated. (If this does not happen, it may be time for some family therapy, to help the child express whatever feelings they're experiencing about the transition that are preventing them from fully accepting the situation.)

If the couple does divorce, it is important that each parent consistently reinforce their love for the children. The transitioning parent needs to find words the child can understand, and then explain the transition process more fully as the child matures. As an example of how this might play out, Kate Bornstein (a trans writer and performer) appeared on a television talk show back in the 1980s. The following day, a 5-year-old neighbor girl asked Kate, "Are you a boy or a girl?" Kate replied, "I'm a girl who used to be a boy." The child thought about this for a minute, then nodded and said, "Okay." This was a level of explanation a 5-year-old could follow and accept.

Had Kate been the child's biological father, zie (Kate does not use female pronouns at this point in hir process) could have used this same explanation, perhaps elaborating to say, "Some boys always feel inside like they should have been girls when they were born. I felt that way for a long time, but tried really hard to be a boy because it's what my parents expected me to be. But it didn't work, I wasn't happy trying to be a boy, so I finally decided to be a girl. But I'm glad I was a boy until now because otherwise I could not have been your father, and I love you more than anything in the world. I'll always be your dad. I'm not going anywhere."

Another important aspect to disclosure is keeping the door open for questions. Once word gets out that a parent has transitioned, the child may hear gossip and unkind remarks about the parent. It is helpful if the parent overtly says to the child, "People might say things you don't understand, or that seem really wrong or hurtful. There's nothing wrong with me, or with you, but a lot of people just don't know what they're talking about and might say things. Let's talk about those things, because I want to help you if you're hurt by what they say." It may help to reiterate this sentiment in various ways as time passes; the child may be reluctant to repeat the most hurtful remarks they hear, for fear of hurting the parent.

Many children grow up experiencing discrimination of one sort or another. Race, religion, class background, ethnicity, sexual orientation – if the child's experience (either personally or vicariously, through a family member) places them in *any* minority position, they are likely to be teased or treated badly to varying degrees

throughout their childhood. At younger ages, children simply don't have a large enough world view to understand history, and the transmission of misinformation and prejudice through generations. They will take things personally that are in no way personal to them, or their family. All parents can do at younger developmental ages is reassure the child, "It's not you, it's not me. Some people just don't understand. As long as we love each other, we'll get through." As the child matures, the parent can provide more historical education, placing discrimination in a cultural context. I cannot specify chronological ages at which particular forms of information are appropriate or not – children develop at different rates, and even in the same family, one child may be ready for the larger-culture perspective at 9 while a sibling may not be ready for that level of discourse even at 11.

Disclosure to adolescent children

This life stage, bridging childhood and adulthood, is a maelstrom of shifting hormone balances and abrupt physical changes that can wreak havoc with self-esteem, self-in-relation, and social poise. Some adolescents weather the storm more easily than others, particularly if their home life is relatively stable and they are living with boundaries appropriate to their developmental age.

Regardless of how appropriately parents behave, however, there is no doubt adolescence is a time period usually remembered in later life with relief that it is over. Sexuality assumes a role of more importance than at any other time of life. The adolescent is often self-conscious, and may feel others have more awareness of them and their behavior than is actually the case. Some adults speak of adolescents in a disparaging manner, saying, "They think everything is about them, and the world exists for their pleasure and convenience." However, I think this attitude attributes too much agency and deliberateness to the adolescent. I believe adolescent self-consciousness makes it difficult for an adolescent to know that not everyone is paying as much attention to them as they are themselves.

There are many parallels to be drawn between adolescence and early transition, beyond the obvious physical effects of hormones bringing about a feeling of "second puberty" for the transitioning individual. As with early stages of transition, adolescence is an unavoidably self-centered process of self-knowledge. As puberty (whether it's the first or second time around) brings about major hormonal upheaval in the individual's system, sexuality emerges and with it new possibilities of relationship that were not present at earlier times in life. The same questions posed by the transitioning individual are at the forefront for the adolescent: "What are the boundaries now in relationship? What kind of man (or

woman) am I becoming? What are the options open to me re gender roles?" Imagine the effect on the adolescent, in the midst of this sort of existential process, to learn one of their parents is going through a similar process of gender realignment²!

Adolescents value straightforward honesty. They are not children any longer, and have developed the capacity for abstract thinking and considering the feelings of others as separate beings from themselves. The primary concern in disclosing to adolescents is to explain the nature of the process, as the transitioning parent understands it, and to be sure to reinforce that the parent's identity does not reflect on the adolescent's emerging sexual identity. Psychoeducational work about what transgenderism is will also be necessary, as our cultural understanding is "drag queen who goes one step further." The adolescent is not going to understand on their own precisely what it means to be trans.

While the adolescent brain is fully capable of abstract logic and understanding the concepts of emerging identity, the familial relationship and homeostasis is still deeply affected by a possible transition. As with younger children, reassurance of stability and continuity can go a long way toward reconciling the adolescent toward the idea of a parent transitioning. The adolescent may be able to understand the nature of transition as an adult would, but they still need reassurance in the midst of an existential upheaval to the family system when the transition involves a parent. In essence, they need the explanation given adults *and* the reassurance given children, as they are in a bridge period in their own lives, not yet independent adults and not fully dependent children.

Adolescence is also a time of coming to understand social issues on a broader scale than is possible for younger children. Adolescents begin to form a world view at this point, adopting political opinions and taking stances on various issues. These views are often polarized, with "black and white, right or wrong" judgments the norm. Some adolescents may see the social discrimination against trans individuals as a civil rights issue, and be appalled at the pariah status of trans people in U.S. culture. Others may continue to see gender as polarized; the "black and white" thinking that characterizes adolescents dovetails well with the gender binary concept. I have known several families in which adolescents withdrew from a transitioning parent on this basis, only to come around later in

²While the adolescent is not (usually!) changing their gender, nevertheless, gender realignment is happening because the gender role of an adolescent differs markedly from the gender role the same person had as a child, because sexual potential is now a factor. Gender roles are all about boundaries, and the boundaries shift radically once puberty begins.

their lives, when their world views had evolved beyond the “black and white” of adolescence. (Unfortunately, many people never do evolve beyond this “black and white” world view, thus it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the trans person may never be accepted by one or more of their children.)

Adolescence is also a time of life when the need for peer acceptance and approval is at its highest. Some adolescents believe they will not be accepted by their peers, for various reasons (too smart, not athletic, not handsome or pretty, etc.), and withdraw. Others have identities (particularly around sexual orientation or gender identity) that cause them to believe they won’t be accepted, and may also withdraw. It is important for parents to pay attention to this sort of withdrawal from social activities and friends; while it may be a sign of introvertism, it can also be an indicator of isolation leading to depression.

However, if an adolescent feels they will lose peer support because of their parent’s trans identity and withdraws *solely for that reason*, this can create deep resentment on the part of the adolescent toward the parent. It is important the parent reassure the adolescent that as much as possible, it is the adolescent’s choice whether or not to tell their friends about the parent’s transition, and that the parent will do what they can to ease the adolescent’s way among their peers.

There is a fine line here (or perhaps not so fine, but a broad gray area) between supporting the adolescent and giving up one’s identity in order to try to keep the adolescent happy. Each family situation is unique, and finds this balance in its own way. The most important component, common to all such situations, is the need for constant communication and mutual respect. Adolescence is a maturation process, often in a milieu of harsh judgmentalism by peers. Transition is a revisitation of core identity after a lifetime of invisibility and inappropriate socialization. Neither is an easy process to navigate, and all involved need to understand it isn’t easy for *any* of them.

It can be very difficult for a parent to decide to transition before their children are fully grown and living independently. Many non-trans parents may judge the trans person harshly for so doing, feeling, “You had children, now you have to do what’s best for them and put your own needs/desires on hold until they’re on their own. It’s your duty.” Gender and sexuality are the core identities underlying all our other identities as unique human beings. To deny either identity, to try to live a false identity, does not serve the individual well at all. When an individual is false to themselves to such a degree, the result is a person who is emotionally dampened down such that they are not truly “present” in the

family system. This emotional unavailability also does not serve children well. Further, a parent courageously actualizing an unpopular identity presents a fine example to the children of being true to oneself and standing up for one's beliefs. A parent remaining a stunted, repressed individual does not serve their children well.

In conclusion, children are not harmed by a parental transition. Their identities are not affected or warped in some way if one of their parents changes gender expression/role. Healthy child development is affected much more deeply by the love, respect and appropriate boundaries within their home milieu than by the gender roles of their parents.