

Shifting the Trans Narrative: Building Bridges of Understanding and Compassion

Keynote With Janna Barkin

Addressing the specific challenges particular to fathers in accepting and supporting their transgender child, and offering possible pathways to success

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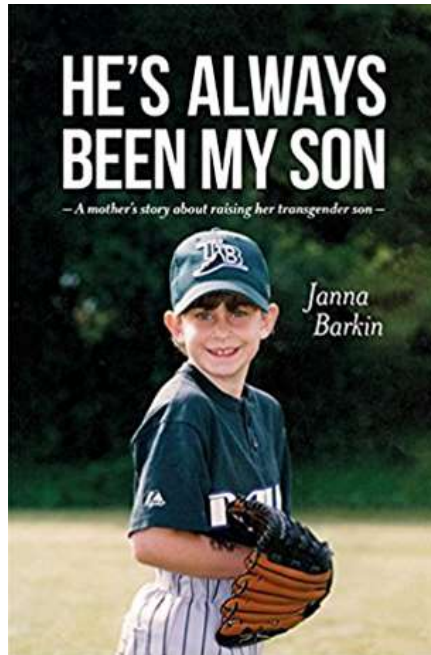
**Every child deserves to be loved and supported
unconditionally.**

Being transgender is just one more beautiful normal
variation of being human.

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A few notes as we begin:

- **Discussions of Gender** are Everywhere.
- **Concepts of Gender** are being discussed even as new terms are being created.
- **It's OK if you are struggling** to figure out what it all means.
(You're not alone if you're confused.)
- This is **a safe place** to ask questions.



Why Focus on Gender?

- Gender impacts **all people**
- Disrupt **discrimination and harassment**
- Increasing **legal protections**
- Recognition of **gender diversity**
- TG/GE youth and adults often face **family rejection**



Gender Congruence is the feeling of harmony in our gender.

- experiencing comfort in our body as it relates to our gender
- naming of our gender that adequately corresponds with our internal sense of who we are
- expressing ourselves through clothing, mannerisms, interests and activities
- being seen consistently by others as we see ourselves



Gender Dysphoria



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Congruence



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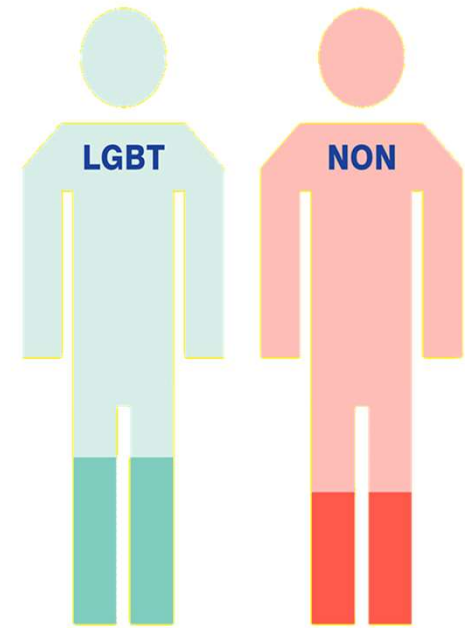


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26% of LGBT youth say their biggest problems are:

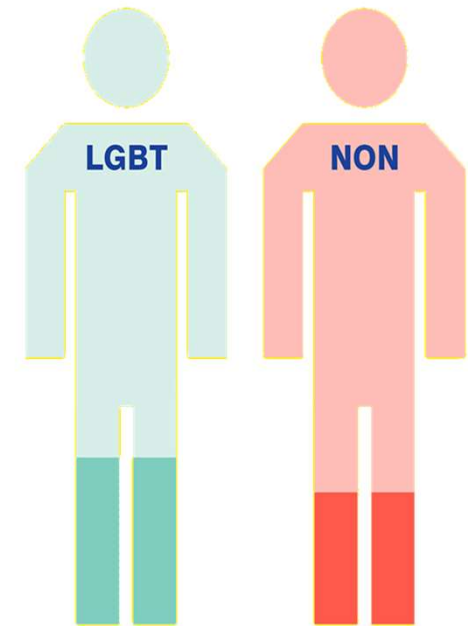
- Not feeling accepted by family
- Trouble at school/bullying
- A fear to be out/open

Source: Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org



**Transgender/Non-Binary:
41%**

**General Public:
4.6%**



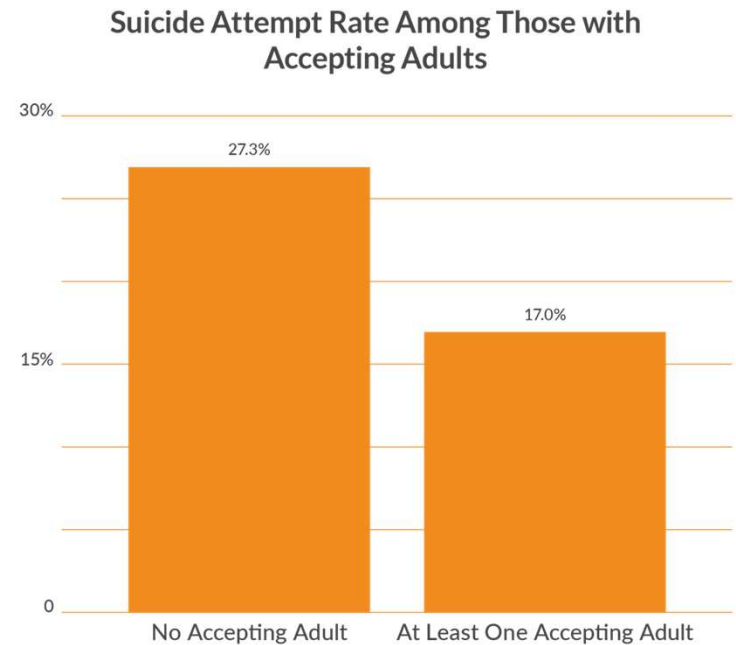
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LBGTQ youth who report having at least one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.

Source: The Trevor Project, www.trevorproject.org



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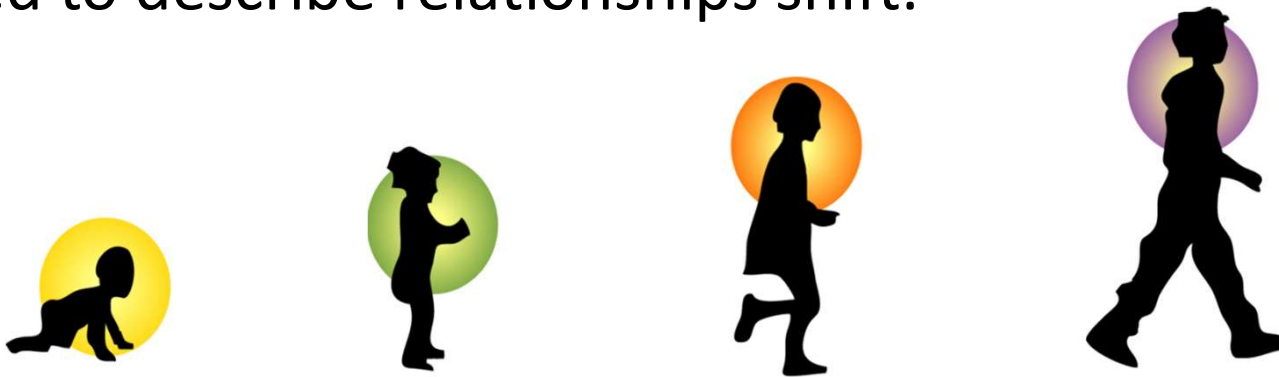
5 Possible Scenarios when Trans Youth Come Out

1. **Immediate Acceptance:** “We believe you. We love you.”
2. **Immediate Rejection:** “Trans is not a thing.” “It’s just a phase.” “You can’t live here if you do that.”
3. **Shock:** “I never expected *my* child...” “I never thought *I* would have to worry about this.”
4. **Ambivalence:** “You can pay for that.” or “You can decide when you are older.” “I don’t care who you want to be.”
5. **Baby Steps:** “I will use your new name and pronoun even as I struggle to understand.”



Each person will have their own timeline and process on the way toward acceptance and integration.

Roles, behaviors, and expectations may shift as the labels and words used to describe relationships shift.



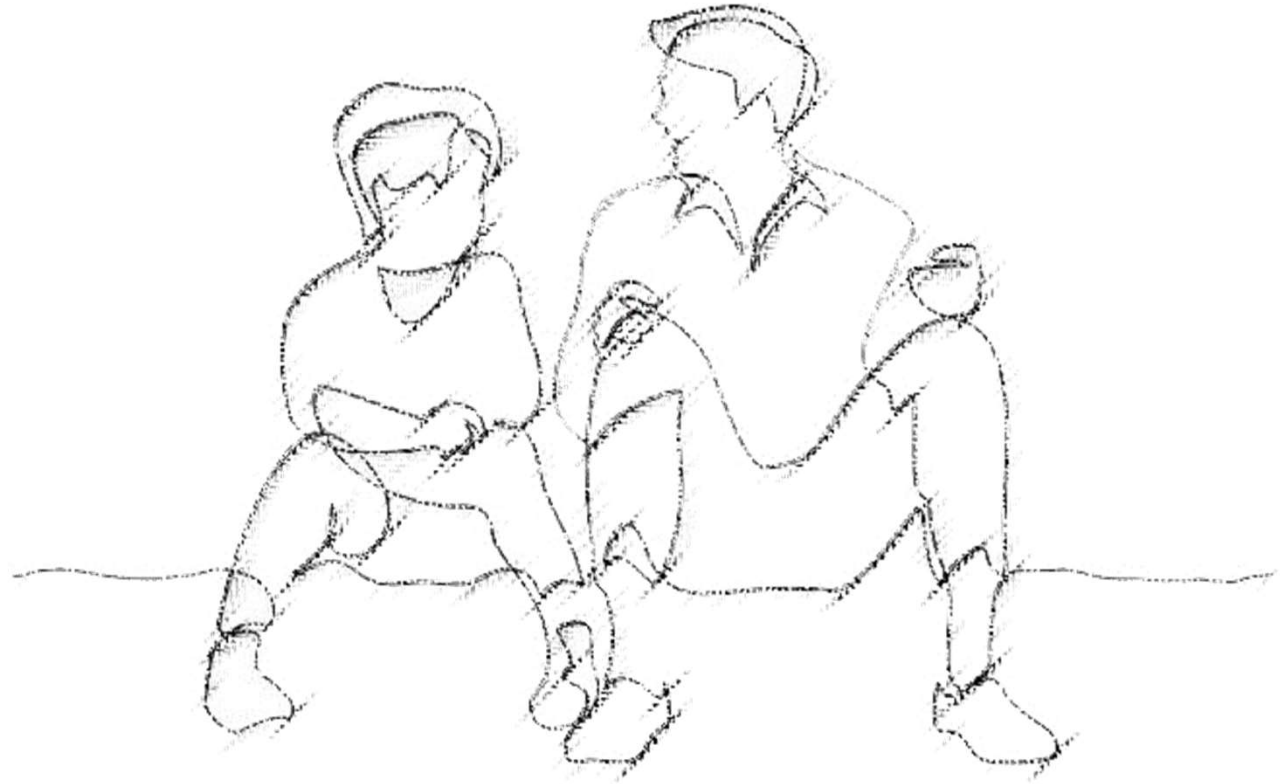
Families in Transition

When one person in the family transitions, the whole family goes through a transition.

- “My son is now my daughter.”
- “My father is now my mother.”
- “My granddaughter is now my grandson.”
- “My sister is now my sibling.”



“The Talk”



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Shifting the Narrative: Fathers Speak

"When my transgender son first discussed with me his true identity, I wasn't surprised as some other fathers likely have been in similar situations. As we talked, my initial thoughts were only those of support and love for my child. Over the next few days, as I reflected on his awareness and the 'what comes next' stages of his journey, I began to have questions related to the mechanics of various daily life activities that cisgender people take for granted. For example, I began to ask myself what bathrooms would he use when we go to the movies or ballgames together, how does he explain his identity and physiological characteristics to doctors, how would paramedics react if they were in the middle of treating him for a medical emergency?"

Some of my questions had merit and others were based upon my selfish lens and my cisgender privilege and naivete. I then realized that many of my questions were primarily rooted in fear, fear of how others might treat him, fear of his future interactions with segments of society that are less tolerant of the trans community, and mostly, fear of those who could be hostile or even violent toward him. These are the challenges I faced, and in some part, continue to grapple with years after his steps in transitioning."

~Brian, father to 27 year old Montana, trans son, who invited Brian in at 21.



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Barriers to Acceptance particular to Fathers:

- Lack of community support for fathers in general
- Fathers less likely to seek counseling or support groups
- Expectations that they are in control
- Ostracization and/or fear of ostracization
- Fear of “what will others think”
- Religious/Cultural norms and expectations



Cultural/Societal Gender Norms and Expectations

- Provider
- Protector
- Strong
- Tough
- Violence
- Independent
- My child is a reflection on me, or my “mini me”
- Not connected to feelings or keeps them bottled up
- Mother is responsible for childrearing, Fathers are not nurturers
- What else?



Toxic Masculinity

- Showing emotion is not safe or condoned.
- Suppress emotions in order to belong and feel accepted.
- Boys and others make fun of boys who don't conform.
- Fathers, other influential adults pressure boys to adhere to these norms.

What else?

Source: A Guide To Fighting Toxic Masculinity by Schuyler Bailer



Shifting the Narrative: Fathers Speak

I think one thing that is difficult is that fathers have stereotypical roles in society. So if I have a son, I'm supposed to throw a ball with him. If I have a daughter, I'm supposed to protect her. So, I feel like I have to change my role somewhat to fit their identities. That shift would be true as they grew up regardless of whether they are cis or trans, but I'm more aware of it now.

We also know, growing up as boys and men, how little room was allowed for us to vary from the gender norms of what it meant to be masculine. As a cis person, I found my way through adolescence often by hiding parts of myself. And while trans kids can and may have to hide parts of themselves, their physical bodies are not always something they can hide. So, our worry as fathers is that they will be perceived as weak or different, and in that vulnerability — whether actual or perceived — be attacked.

I think that when my kids first came out as trans, I tended to put too much weight on gender when considering their identities. Hope has always loved science and debating ideas. Abby has always had this amazing connection to nature, to exploring her world and to sharing that knowledge with others. They are my kids. And what I love about them hasn't changed. Gender identity and gender expression are things that also make them who they are, and I am learning to appreciate them as whole people.

~Tatian, father to two trans youth, 16 yr old Hope - non-binary child, and 13 yr old Abby – trans daughter



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Shifting the Narrative:

Circles of Support



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Shifting the Narrative

- **Reimagine gender norms: Gentle Masculinity**
 - Let boys and men express emotion.
 - Let boys and men wear whatever.
 - Let boys and men be feminine.
 - Let boys and men be affectionate with each other.

“Rejecting Toxic Masculinity is not rejecting all masculinity. It is rejecting the toxicity that is (literally) killing people – men included.”
Schuyler Bailar – also known as Pink Mantaray



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Shifting the Narrative

- **Education**

- Educate about impact of accepting vs. rejecting behavior
- Culturally competent – meet people where they are
- Inclusive marketing campaigns – reflections of self
- Educate on the importance of safe, nurturing environments
- No one way to parent, no one way to be a man, a woman, a nonbinary person, a human

Source: Family Acceptance Project - San Francisco State University



Shifting the Narrative

- **Support**

- Build trusting relationships with clients
- Identify and treat emotional/psychological stress
- Connect fathers with other fathers experiencing similar journey
- Baby Steps – what can you do to meet your child where they are?
ex: using pronouns even if you are not sure you believe this is real for your child

Source: Family Acceptance Project - San Francisco State University



Shifting the Narrative

- **Inclusion**

- Provide support/discussion groups for Fathers lead by Fathers with lived experience
 - Dads of trans people
 - Trans people themselves
 - BIPOC
 - Dragon Dads – religious dads who choose to accept their child regardless of what their religion says
- Multi-lingual education campaigns
- All Gender Bathrooms
- Inclusion in sports and other “gendered” activities



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Shifting the Narrative: Possible Pathways to Success

- **Approach #1:** Acknowledge and address feeling of unfamiliarity
- **Approach #2:** Emphasize shared values, hopes and dreams
- **Approach #3:** Talk about how family can support and protect transgender youth – and why it's so important
- **Approach #4:** Share stories of the journey to support

Source: Talking About Family Acceptance and Transgender Youth, Movement Advancement Project, 2019.



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Shifting the Narrative: Fathers Speak

I'd say one of the most powerful discussions I've been part of when discussing having a transgender child is speaking to the fact that feelings of loss of "our" (a father's) dreams of the future is about us as fathers. Our dreams are ours, not our child's. Who they are is who they are. They are still our child. They have their own identity and their own dreams. We are only here to guide them into achieving their dreams. And once that is realized, any feelings of "loss" are gone.

~Philip, father to 12 year old daughter Phoenix, trans girl and co author of the children's book *Phoenix Goes To School*.



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Respect



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What is Your Gender Story?

- What were the messages you received about gender while growing up?
- How did these messages create opportunities for you? Expectations? Limitations?
- Would you say that these ideas about gender had a generally positive or negative effect on you, or some of both?

