

LET'S CHANGE
THE PAGE



WEBINAR #1 report

Parents sharing their experiences



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Trans* children are our children, and we want them to be loved! But are they? Are they receiving the care and support they need? In the community and the schools, health care; in the spaces of life; in their families and relationships; in legal frameworks and governments! These are the questions that the Erasmus+ project "Let's Change the Pace" seeks to address and bring to the attention of policymakers, governments, and allies willing to know and act.

Transgender rights and needs have been widely discussed in society, and significant progress has been made in many countries. However, much work still needs to be done to achieve full equality for gender non-conforming people.

Let's Change the Pace is a project run by ENP in collaboration with Drachma (Malta), Agedo (Italy), AMPLOS (Portugal), Grupa-IZADJI (Serbia), and Ampgyl (Spain), co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme. The project includes three series of webinars and a live conference.

WEBINAR 1

Parents' experiences are invaluable. They are the source of all our knowledge when it comes to understanding the reality on the ground. There are theoretical studies, and then there are the real life stories. Parents' experiences talk about their journey and that of their child/children - their feelings, their struggles, their challenges, their growth, but most of all their love. These experiences show us the support they found in other parents going through similar experiences, how they found the hope, the courage, and the strength to carry on. They also show us how, coming together with other families facing the same challenges, they have been able to unite as one voice to walk the walk and fight the fight for their children, for their wellbeing and their future, putting pressure on governments and institutions to understand that their children are loved and valued, that they have the same right to life, to education, to medical care in equitable measure as other children. Parents want their gender variant children to be able to live their lives fully, knowing who they are and being embraced and welcomed for who they are.

Parents play a vital role in the wellbeing of gender variant youth. They are integral community partners who through their experiences, offer support and resources to trans* or gender-diverse persons and their families, who might be navigating through the tumultuous path to acceptance and understanding.

Parents' associations are crucial to the advocacy of trans* and gender-diverse people because they offer support, understanding, and stability. Through them, parents, guardians, and extended family members can learn how to foster successful relationships with one another that allow for those who identify with a certain gender or orientation to experience acceptance in the home environment.

Associations play an important role in providing information on resources available in the territory. They also act as a liaison between marginalised individuals in need of representation and decision makers by amplifying the collective voices within communities that are likely to be otherwise silenced.

This booklet contains testimonies shared by parents and experts, to show how parents' associations have helped create a culture of awareness and acceptance around gender issues. Through understanding the experiences of these individuals, we can learn how to best support and advocate for gender variance among young people, allowing them to grow up feeling safe, confident, and empowered.

This was the first webinar of the Erasmus+ project "Let's change the pace!—How are European trans* and gender diverse children doing?" The "Let's Change the Pace!" project included a series of 3 different webinars as well as a live conference, where parents got together to write a parents' manifesto to advocate for the rights of trans* and gender-diverse youth.

The goal of the first webinar series was to listen to real-life stories to gain a better understanding of the wide range of situations that parents of trans* children and youth experience in various countries across Europe.

The "Parents' Experiences" webinar series was held on March 29th and 30th in the evenings and was led by Drachma, Malta, and supported by Ampgyl, Spain. Ten speakers, between parents and experts, participated in this webinar, which had an average of 80 participants per session.

The webinar was divided in sessions that started with a vertical meeting with professional interpreters and ended with a round table session moderated by volunteers in language groups. This engaging format allowed more parents to participate in the discussion, and offered a deeper insight into the concerns and opinions raised.

Understanding that the transition process can affect parents' of gender variant children is essential. It is also important to create a supportive environment in which parents and teens can learn together through open, honest conversations. Family therapy can help gender-variant kids and teens identify who they are and accept their identity while still allowing parents to find ways of understanding and supporting them throughout their journey. The findings suggest that by unlearning cisnormative assumptions and teachings on the gender binary and learning about diversity, parents are more likely to become trans affirmative, affirming their teen's gender nonconformity. In this way, families have greater opportunities for mutual understanding through dialogue and collaboration as together they adjust to life's struggles as well as celebrate its joys in support of one another .

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TESTIMONIALS

Parents of trans* and gender diverse children have much to offer in terms of experience, insight, and understanding. Their testimonials are a treasure trove of information and an important source of education. From them, we learn about the reality on the ground. All those seeking knowledge about this community can learn a lot from parents' experiences. Life can be challenging for parents, but many find tremendous comfort and strength through sharing their stories. Doing so adds to the available resources on transgender issues, helping more people move towards acceptance and understanding. Listening to their stories validates their experiences, with all the joys as well as the struggles that come with them. We can learn to empathise and understand their journey and unite with them as one voice to work for the wellbeing of trans* and gender diverse children.

Victoria

Hello, my name is Victoria and I am a trans* mother of 3 children and a practising Christian and I come to give you my testimony of life and faith, because to a great extent one cannot be understood without the other.

I started dressing as a girl when I was about 9 years old. I went into the bathroom, closed the door with the latch and put on the clothes my mother had left in the laundry basket. But before that I also remember playing, when I was about 5 or 6 years old, with a sheet of paper with buttons drawn on it that was a machine that was transforming me into a girl, now my hair, now my hands, now my chest... I was pressing buttons and little by little I was transforming into a girl, that is one of my earliest memories, playing with that sheet of paper.

In the end my parents caught me out and the truth is that they did not take it well or badly, they simply did not know what to do. They concluded that this was a phase, that it would pass and I was allowed to do what I wanted. The important thing was that no one should ever find out. In general they tried to turn a blind eye with respect to my mother's stockings that broke or disappeared and that sort of thing, behaving as if my sexuality did not exist.

Personally, what hurt me the most about this matter was that I had a very marked maternal instinct. I wanted to have children, many children, but I saw this as a problem without a solution. I thought that if I became trans* I would never be able to have children, and if I got married and had kids, it wouldn't be me. I thought I had to choose between being a woman or being a mother, and it was a deadly dilemma that tortured my soul. Regarding my relationship with God, at first I thought that transsexuality was a kind of test or temptation that I had and which I had to resist, but which I inevitably ended up falling over and over again. When I was 18 or 19 years old, I ended up accepting myself as a transvestite, but for me transsexuality or cross-dressing was a kind of punishment that God made me go through for some reason.

At that stage of my life, which lasted more than 10 years, I believed in God and prayed and talked to him, but mainly to complain. Why me? Still I felt a need for God, and in fact, if it had not been for faith, I would be dead. I had suicidal thoughts frequently, because despite accepting myself as a transvestite, I saw no point in anything, not even the future. This duality of woman or mother seemed impossible to achieve and faith was the only thing that kept me alive in those years. Faith that there would be some reason why I was escaping from my transsexuality, faith that if God wanted me like that something would happen, faith that if I committed suicide, I would go to hell headfirst, so suicide was not a way out either. Faith in Christ who suffered immensely on the cross, and that transsexuality was the cross that I had to suffer. And also faith in that God loved me, that I felt Him inside of me, and that everything would somehow make sense, that God squeezes but does not drown, that he does not give us challenges that we cannot solve. But they were very hard years. And without faith, I certainly wouldn't have made it, because it was with faith that I survived though I almost didn't make it. And in this one sense I can't help but remember that suicide is a very real and very true cause of death for LGBTI people, especially trans* people, and that is why it is essential that there is clear support for them, especially from childhood and adolescence, which are the most complicated years in which one can make a difference.

For my part, I was lucky. God smiled on me and protected me despite my difficulties. I met a girl who accepted me as I was, with my transvestism/transsexuality which I never hid from her. We fell in love, got married, had children, but the closet was still there, suffocating me. I knew that yes, if I came out of the closet, I would lose her, because she accepted that part in privacy, but never in public, and I didn't want to lose her but I couldn't go on with the charade much longer either. I just couldn't. Neither for her, nor for my children, not for anyone. The closet of more than 30 years, in which I had been tucked away with all the complexities, traumas and falsehoods associated with it, was suffocating me and affecting even my health. I began to have anxiety attacks and balance problems, where everything began to give way.

And so, we ended up separating. And it is true that closets kill, I know it very clearly, kill with a force that only the person who has lived within one can witness. Closets kill by taking away the desire to live as one cannot enjoy a life that is not really the one you want, the one you know corresponds. Closets kill by making you feel guilty of living a double life, of being a farce, of cheating on your friends, lying to your acquaintances, to everyone from whom you hide your true self in the closet. They kill and suffocate you like the authentic prisons that they are, and that is why if we really want to save lives it is fundamental that we open closets, that we allow each person to live and express themselves as they feel, that his safety, or his job, or his family or friends are not threatened by leaving the closet and express yourself as you really are.

But I still wasn't clear what God wanted from me. Should I come out of the closet or was my transsexuality the cross that I should continue to carry and suffer in silence? And then, while reading the Bible I stumbled upon the parable of the talents and at that moment I realised that the true talent that God had given me and that I kept buried was my transsexuality, and that it was this that I had to bring to light and wear. And it was coming out of the closet and feeling that God did not stop accompanying me, confirmed that I had taken the right decision.

Despite what I feared, I did not have any problems at work, neither with friends nor in the close family, nor my children. It is true that some people had a harder time processing it than others, and that they were very wrong with the name at the beginning, but in general the great fears and problems that I was afraid of never came true.

In fact, I was even surprised at how easy it was for some people to accept me, and perhaps that is because the problem of transsexuality is mainly in our mind, in internalised transphobia, in the traumas and complexes it

“Transgender and non-binary people are among the most marginalized groups in society and are exposed to various forms of violence and discrimination.”

generates. But it wasn't just the absence of problems, but God, as usual, smiled on me and made me meet lots of wonderful people. Shortly after coming out of the closet I met Ichthys, a Catholic association of LGBTI people in my own city, where I was able to live my faith in a much fuller, sincere and personal way than I had done before and I also met another trans* girl who is now my partner.

After the divorce I did not think that I could interest anyone anymore, what with my age, my 3 children and also the fact of being trans*, all these complexities that I still carried despite having left the closet. Because coming out of the closet is only the first step; it is overcoming fear and being able to introduce yourself and live as you are in front of the people you love that is most difficult. Then there is the next step of taking away, little by little, all that internalised transphobia and homophobia that you have been accumulating over the years. And this is something that is very gradual and that only happens as you are finally able to live your life naturally and realise that there is nothing wrong or worse in your gender or sexuality, on the contrary, that in many ways transsexuality is a gift, an authentic gift of God. And when you live it as such, that is when your whole life begins to make sense and shine with a light that illuminates those around you.

I would like this testimony to serve to give hope that with God's help everything is possible, that you can be trans* and a mother, that you can be trans* and Christian, be LGBTI and feel God in your heart. We should not feel forced to choose between our faith and our identity or orientation, because they are perfectly compatible and there are many, many LGBTI people who are believers, even if it is a reality that remains invisible.

“We should not feel forced to choose between our faith and our identity or orientation, because they are perfectly compatible.”

Gianni Roggero

About six years ago, my daughter came out to me. I would like to tell you that I have two children. At that time, the eldest was in his early twenties and the youngest was seventeen. One day I stopped to talk to my eldest son who was doing some work in the garage. He told me to go with him to his room as he needed to talk to me. When we got to his room, he said that it was actually his younger brother who wanted to talk to me. My youngest son, with tears in his eyes, told me that he didn't feel he was heterosexual. At this, my knees started to shake as I was not prepared for such news, especially since I was practically ignorant of anything that had to do with LGBT persons.

Seeing that she was expecting some sort of an answer, I told her that whether she was a boy, or a girl or a Martian, she was still my child and my feelings for her would not change. There is one important thing that I have to tell you before going on with my story. My daughter was totally terrified at that moment. She was afraid that I would tell her to leave the house. This great fear came about because, as she felt she was unable to talk to anyone, she looked things up on the internet to find out and understand what she was feeling. Sadly, what she found there was not at all pleasant or helpful. She was so scared that she would be told to leave the house that she turned to her elder brother for support. Her brother encouraged her to talk to me and not to worry as he would always be there for her. He had also told her that if I acted stupidly (and to be honest, he actually used harsher language than stupidly), and sent her away, then he would also leave home and go with her. I had to stop and ask myself some questions. If my eldest son was ready to defend her and go against his father and leave home to go with his sister, could I be the one to act stupidly? Certainly, I could not do that.

My daughter then asked me if we could go to a psychologist. This was her request not my demand. We started looking for a psychologist who would be familiar with these issues, as, unfortunately, not all psychologists are.

We had the good fortune of meeting up with a psychologist who practiced in our own territory. After a couple of sessions with this psychologist the real truth came out. My daughter was not a homosexual and had never ever been so. Rather, my daughter was a transexual person.

This recognition of the truth sent us into a crisis because as parents we were very concerned as to what the future would be like for her. Would she find love? Would she have friends? Would she find a job? These were some of the questions that came to mind, And these questions preoccupied us and gave us sleepless nights.

Fortunately, on our journey we came across Agedo, an association of parents, which opened up doors and together we started to understand, more.

In Italy, there are still a lot of stereotypes and prejudices that really have no reason to exist but which are at the core of our society. All these things created for us a number of problems. However, as parents, our decision was to accompany our daughter on her journey, as we had started out from the premise that we always want the best for our children, and that was the way forward.

Sadly, in Italy, in order to proceed to surgical intervention, which my daughter wanted to have, one has to go through a very long, difficult and in most instances, a torturous path. In any way, we started this journey together and we knew she had to go through this too. At a certain point when my daughter felt that her situation was insufferable and too difficult, she even threatened suicide.

At this point the family decided to go a step further. We decided that we were not going to wait until the Italian courts gave us a favourable answer, because here in Italy, we also need to have clearance from the court to proceed with the surgical intervention. We decided to leave and go to Thailand because there isn't that type of bureaucracy there. And we couldn't wait any longer. We placed ourselves in the hands of a professional from Thailand who at that time was a luminary with regards to surgical interventions.

So we traveled together as a whole family to Thailand for this intervention, with a thousand thoughts and a thousand doubts. Clearly we were hundreds of kilometres away from home, in a country where we did not understand the language spoken and where we were faced with a lot of uncertainties. This naturally brought on a lot of anxiousness. I always say that I aged over ten years in the time we spent in Thailand for the surgical intervention of my daughter. I am telling you this now with a smile and a laugh but I can assure you that life was tough and hard at that point in time and there was little to laugh about.

Fortunately, things went very well; my daughter had done the intervention and we were able to go back home to Torino in Italy. Some weeks later we received the approval from the Italian courts so we were also able to change her name legally.

This is basically a short version of our story. I would like to stress that kids in Italy who have to go through this transition need to have loads of patience to wait for the results from all the bureaucratic procedures that are required. Clearly this increases their suffering. We too suffered by having chosen and decided to go to Thailand. The problems and the challenges were many but together as a family we decided to take this path.

Many people think that the surgical intervention is the point of arrival but we believe that it is actually the point of departure because these kids need to keep taking hormones for the rest of their lives. In the case of my daughter, she can never have her own kids and everytime that she enters into a serious relationship with someone, she has to make the choice of disclosing who she is. And it is for this reason that I say that the intervention is really the point of departure and not of arrival.

This experience has actually made us better persons, in the sense that we have become conscious and aware of things we never imagined before. And throughout this journey, together with Agedo, we are living at peace with the fact that our child is transgender.

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Amélia Almeida

I remember the day of my child's coming out as if it were yesterday.

He was 14 years old and looked very uncomfortable as he started talking to me.

He told me that, after a lot of thinking, he felt something wasn't right. He couldn't stand his female body, and he had no self-esteem. Then, he told me that after searching on-line, he thought he may be transgender and wanted to change sex.

At this point, I must confess I didn't react well. I just panicked.

I asked him why he'd want to change when he was such a beautiful girl, and I even said something dreadful: "as a boy, you'll be ugly."

I will never forgive myself for that. He was so sad!

But I was just terrified. I started imagining my child as the victim of aggression and insults, and I couldn't bear it.

The following nights were awful: I couldn't sleep, and the subject was always on my mind. So I looked up information and help, and found Centro GIS and AMPLOS. AMPLOS helped me realise I wasn't alone, and I prepared myself to help my son on his journey.

I took him to Centro GIS, but he didn't like the environment, as he wanted to go at a slower pace and everything felt like it happened too fast over there. He decided he only wanted to start changing after graduating from school. In the meantime, he consulted a paediatric psychiatrist. He isolated himself, and summers were tough, as he was always at home, never went to the beach... it was a very hard period.

However, at school, everything went well. He had good relationships with both his teachers and his classmates, and received excellent grades. In his 11th year, a new girl arrived in his class: Rita. She became his best friend, confidant, and a great source of support.

Well, finally, secondary school was over – it was time for action, as he'd planned, but not everything went well. The pandemic was here, and everything became slower. Fortunately, he managed to change his name just before going to university, and became Samuel.

On the medical side, things weren't too bright. He was appointed a psychologist and a psychiatrist on the national health service, neither of whom were specialists on gender. The psychologist, especially, had no empathy of any kind for Sam. She scared him so much that he couldn't sleep the night before his appointments with her, and his life became a nightmare. He was desperately unhappy, and thought he'd no longer be able to reach his goals.

Once again, I needed the help of a mother from AMPLOS. She advised us to change hospitals and to consult a private endocrinologist, which we did. He also found a very nice psychologist to accompany him, and a regular psychiatrist.

After a few medical exams in the private sector, the doctor finally prescribed him testosterone. Sam was eighteen years and one day old, and I'll never forget the sparks in his eyes.

Last summer, he had a mastectomy, also in the private sector, as, sadly, the public option doesn't work properly.

Today, Samuel is a very happy boy. He studies Sociology at the University of Porto, he has a close-knit group of friends who support him and accept him for who he is, and he's ready to live out a successful life.

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Ruth Busuttil **LET'S CHANGE THE PAGE**

My name is Ruth Busuttil, and I am the mother of a 16 year old trans* male.

I would like to share with you my experience of 'the coming out' and how I dealt with my son's transition.

I started noticing a very big change in the behaviour in my then daughter's behaviour from the age of 7. She suddenly started doing really badly in school, not doing her homework, not participating in classwork and also misbehaving.

At home she would insist on staying in her room constantly, in complete darkness, reduced intake of food and didn't see her smile in months.

Despite my many attempts to talk to her , and offer physical affection such as hugs, nothing helped. I was constantly mocked by my family as they were all convinced that this sadness she was showing was all due to myself being a very bad parent.

This went on for years, until one day, at the age of 12, she accepted to go see a psychologist. This was not a very pleasant experience for me, as this psychologist was having weekly sessions with my daughter for months and I was kept in the dark of what was going on. I was noticing changes in my daughter, such as cutting her hair short, and a change in the style of clothing. With the psychologist she had opened up that she was feeling gender neutral and they decided that in order to come out she would give hints slowly by changing clothes into male ones, starting to behave more like a male, change her girl name on social media to male, etc..

This was driving me crazy, and one day I really pushed my daughter to tell me exactly what was going on. Of course she found it very difficult, but she finally told me that she was not comfortable as a female, and was not sure if she was gender neutral or wanted to be referred to as a male, and immediately asked me if I could go online with her and buy her a binder so that she can start her transition.

And this is one of the challenges which I think our teens and youths need some support on, the "coming out" - starting from more training to psychologists who give therapy sessions to teens and youths in order to help them with this and also to educators in schools, as most of the times they are the first people who start noticing a change and also they are the first people to whom the kids start to open up to .

I personally had a few very bad experiences with psychologists who were seeing my child, the school psychologist was very clearly not very knowledgeable on the subject, in fact I felt that I was guiding her more than she was guiding me or my son.

Starting with the fact that, when I was explaining what my daughter was experiencing, she passed a very unprofessional comment by saying, "Oh my goodness I also have a daughter! I really hope it doesn't happen to her".

Also she was very sceptical on believing that my daughter wanted to transition into a male, and made our first few appointments very difficult. That being said, she was aware that we had already been to many professionals, such as counsellors and endocrinologists, to make sure that this was not just a phase but was really and truly a case where my daughter did have the physical body of a female but the gender of a male.

With regards to school teachers, I had both reactions. Some were very understanding, however needed more information and knowledge on the subject, and some seemed very distant and didn't want to be part in helping or understanding the matter.

With the help of a very respected social worker from the rainbow support group, who was guiding us through this transition, we had spoken to the head mistress of the church school where my son was attending, and also set up two different meetings, where my son would explain that he would no longer be addressed as a she, the new name he chose and also answer any question which needed to be asked .

The first meeting was with all the teachers, which went quite well, apart from a question which was asked by one of the teachers - which was " May I ask, if I touch her will I also become like her?". I believe it was very hurtful to my son, and also showed such a lack of education on the subject.

Apart from that all other educators were asking very valuable and intelligent questions, which were showing a want to help my son feel welcome.

The second meeting was with the students, which went extremely well, lots of questions were asked but all of good nature.

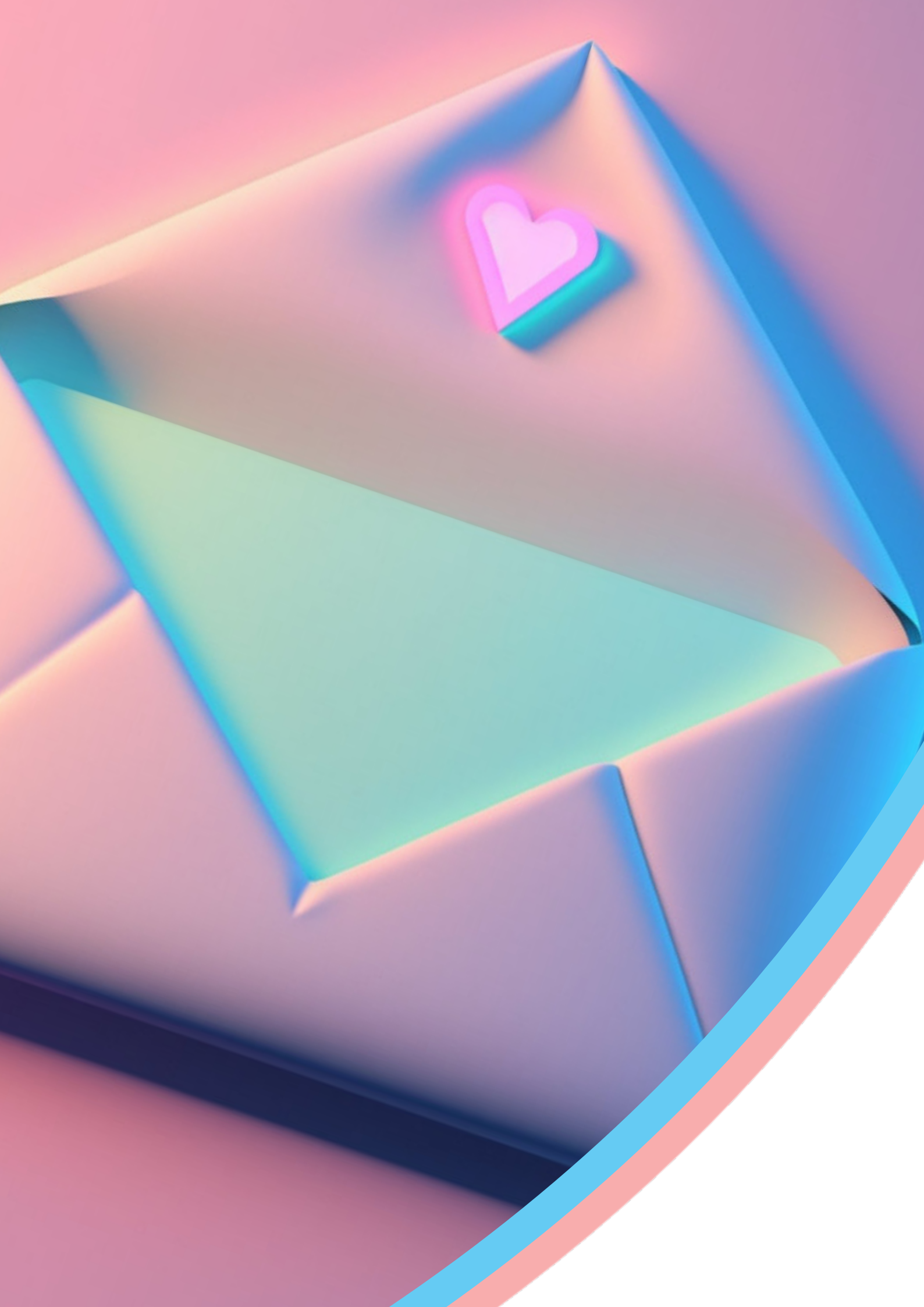
Because of this I strongly believe in the awareness of LGBTI+ in primary and secondary school education. I believe that a good education on the subject will help a person who is either gay /trans* / bisexual or other, find better understanding in their own friends, and also feel that what they feel is not something out of this world, but actually just a matter of finding themselves and be able to bring it forward to everyone else.

A need for empathy is of great importance I believe, as it is what will make everyone more understanding and aware of other people's needs and their behaviour.

Transitioning is not an easy time for a teen, but with the right guidance and help, this can be so much easier, all is needed is understanding and a way forward.

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Letters

The heartfelt stories of parents of trans* and gender diverse children provide an intimate and often inspiring insight into the familial experiences of trans* youth. Their honest accounts can be instrumental in bringing greater understanding to a seemingly invisible part of society. By presenting these personal struggles and progress through heartfelt letters, this chapter helps to communicate these issues with greater clarity, while amplifying the raw emotions associated with the process. Collectively, these letters act as a powerful testament to how much can be gained when families are supported with hope and unconditional love throughout their journey. This emotional account can then be taken further, helping to inform decisions that will drive social change, enabling future generations to have a better future.

Challenges of Parenthood

****Anonymous***

Dear unknown friends and comrades-in-arms!

At the beginning I want to introduce myself to you. I am a single mother of a beautiful, good, gentle and smart girl who is now 20 years old. Even while I was carrying her in my stomach, my wish was to give birth to a girl, but she was born as a boy. And then I said to myself - no matter what gender, I love my child the most in the world, I will protect her from all the evils in this world, I will give her all the love I have in me, I will help her grow into a good, hardworking and happy human being !!!

And so, it was until she was 13 years old. We were extremely close. She was an excellent student at school, curious and always ready to learn something new. She had friends, she was communicative and sociable. She participated in extracurricular activities - she trained karate, went to music school where she learned to play the guitar, but most of all she was looking forward to the art school she attended from the age of seven. I supported all her wishes, especially if she flourished and progressed in that. Of course, like all kids, she loved watching cartoons, not just any one, but the ones on Cartoon Network. That is why today she speaks English perfectly, better than her mother tongue. She also had favourite heroes to dress up in and I sewed her costumes. Her father was what would be called "weekend dad" and in order to make up for his absence, I did my best so that she could grow up happy. She was allowed to use the Internet from an early age, and through some games she met children similar to herself. She had no secrets, she shared everything with me.

But that summer, between the 6th and 7th grade, changes began to take place. She stayed awake until late, she spent a lot of time on the Internet, she changed her nights to her days. She answered my questions superficially and started hiding the monitor when I entered her room. I felt that a big change was happening and I connected it with the beginning of puberty. I remember when I confided in one of my friends who is a psychologist that she told me "What you poured, you poured! Now is the time to flourish! " But I had no idea that there were such flowers as is my child!

Fear overcame me! I was afraid that someone would manipulate my child over the Internet, and I went alone, without her permission, to read her correspondence with friends. And then I found out that my child wants to be a girl! I couldn't believe what I was reading! I reacted violently and today I regret it. Questions began to arise in my head to which I had no answers. Some of them are the following and I believe that some of you, like myself, asked yourself - "Are there transgender children and if there are, why is it not written anywhere?", "Is my child really transgender or mentally ill? "And" Who should I turn to for help? " This all happened in 2014 and then I did not have such available information and professional help as there is today.

My life has turned upside down! Through my friend, I came to a psychologist who had experience in working with LGB children at the time, and my child started psychotherapy. However, the situation was getting worse. I noticed she was hurting herself. She shut herself in. She avoided school and everything around us fell apart, and the psychologist's advice was that the situation was very serious and that her recommendation was hospitalization at the Child Psychiatry for a detailed analysis. My biggest fear was her suicidal thoughts. In the end, I came to a situation where I had to take extreme measures and she was hospitalized at the Psychiatric Hospital for Children. And now I wonder if I made the right decision then. Visits were allowed but my child did not want to see me. I felt like the worst person in the world. I didn't know what to do! At that time, there was no support group for LGBTI + parents and there was no one in my city who had experience working with 13-year-old transgender children and their parents. The hospitalization lasted over a month. The first success in the family therapy agreements was when they allowed me to address her in the desired gender and the name she gave herself.

On the recommendation of a psychiatrist from the Children's Hospital, my child was given an appointment with a psychiatrist who specializes in working with transgender adults, in Belgrade. We have been waiting for that term for a long time. The psychiatrist said that it was too early to claim that it was a matter of "transgenderism", that she had to continue her education as a boy. But from today's perspective, that not allowing me to address the child in the desired gender and the name she chooses is totally wrong! If the experts had given a recommendation to respect the gender and the name that my child chose for herself, I would not have experienced rejection and condemnation from my child.

Since she did not go to school, I had to make excuses to the homeroom teacher and explain how my child may be transgender, but that the experts told me it is too early now to confirm that. You can imagine the reactions of the teachers! The school psychologist barely knew what „transgenderism“ was, let alone what to do if they had such a child at school. Nobody explained to me what transgenderism is, but I went to the Internet looking for the answers. And that's where I knew I was getting lost! And my daughter was building a wall around herself, which unknowingly I started doing too. I stopped talking about my child and if someone asked me I made up various stories. I told my closest friends and their reactions ranged from full support to the fear of asking me anything because I was strong on the outside, so I guess it was taken for granted, and they were used to me being able to do anything. I lived in constant anxiety for the future of my child. My life turned into a nightmare and I did not see any solution. And I couldn't do all of that alone. I was looking for experts and people who know the problems of transgender people, I was looking for parents who have children like me who will share their experience with me, who will advise me, comfort me, instil hope and whose children are the age of my child.

In 2016, I finally found people who are actively fighting for the rights of transgender people. I named them my three good fairies. They are from Belgrade and all three are women. Meeting them, a burden fell from my back. They organized our meeting in Belgrade. It was my first meeting with a real activist / lesbian, a transgender woman who was in the final stages of transition and a psychologist with many years of work with LGBTI people. Their advice was as valuable to me as dry gold at the time. They instilled in me faith, strength and hope to continue to support my child, to give her time, to be patient, that nothing is abnormal, that there are always such children but that they have never been talked about and that few experts specialize in children like this.

My daughter was now in a high school at that time, but the situation was no better there either. The school did not allow her wish to be addressed in the desired gender and to be called by a name that has not been officially changed. She had to enrol in another school part-time. The school system does not recognize the problem of addressing transgender students, which means that the name and gender with which they are enrolled cannot be changed without an official legal change of documents, which is possible only after the transition and when the person is an adult. All this must be confirmed by the doctor who is leading the child through the transition, and at that time the limit for entering the process of gender reassignment was 18, and my daughter was 16 at the time.

In the spring of 2017, on the recommendation of a psychologist who first worked with my daughter, I got in touch with a young psychologist from the Group COME OUT and joined the support group for LGBTI + parents. However, that group was short-lived and they were the parents of adult children from different cities in Serbia.

In 2018, I was finally lucky. The COME OUT Community Centre for LGBTI + people has opened in my city. That space became my second home. For the first few months, I went there to hang out with young people in order to get to know my child through their life stories and regain lost trust and closeness. Conversations with these young people helped me more than the expert advice of psychiatrists and psychologists, they taught me to raise my head and be proud of my child and her struggle that has lasted for a long time. And then a beautiful miracle happened! The Group COME OUT has formed a support group for the parents of LGBTI + people in which I have been since the beginning. My parents' group strengthened me, so I was one of the participants in the first Pride and Pride Week in Novi Sad in 2019.

It is now 2022 and I am honoured to participate with my parent group in such a large Erasmus + project 'Let's Change the PACE'. It has been a long journey, but I am happy that I did not give up when I encountered obstacles, that I was constantly looking for a way that would help me make this world better, more beautiful and fairer for my child and children like her.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sosNpy8S6Po>

Pilar Sánchez

Dear son,

Although ever since you were little there were always signs, I was not able to understand these signs until years after they occurred. From the age of 2 and a half you started exhibiting different behaviours to show me who you are. However, my prejudices and my ignorance made me think that I had a lesbian daughter and that this was nothing to worry about.

The truth was different and this is what always happens - society is not prepared to accept people with a different sexual orientation from that of the heterosexual majority, the only gender that books in schools talk about. At that young age, you still did not know what your sexual orientation was, or so I presumed (for believe me, I was mistaken when I thought I knew more than you).

But you did know who you were and you behaved as such, and for that very reason, from an early age you began to suffer bullying at school. Before you were even 4 years old, you began to be rejected and had to suffer aggressions of which we were not aware until you were 5 years old. The greatest aggression was when you were beaten up by a group and you came home with a nose that was almost broken and purple in colour. Changing schools did not even give us a year of tranquillity. You were soon facing loneliness again and that was followed by bullying, insults, threats and attacks again.

From the age of 3 you soon reached the age of 11. You knew who you were despite the fact that all the rest of us treated you like a girl, that course after course the biology school books denied your existence and showed you the female genitals, but that only told you that these belonged to a gender that is not yours.

Even knowing who you were, you decided to make your transition in 2 phases. I imagine that you thought we were not ready, so you started with what you thought would be best for us to accept you, and not cause confusion. You told us that you were a lesbian girl, something that at home did not surprise us because it was what our ignorance had made us think. However, at school, that statement caused the bullying to start up again with insults, threats and attacks.

In the despair we were feeling with what was happening to you at school and our inability to make all this stop, we looked out to try and find others with whom we could relate, where we would not feel judged or under attack, and where we could learn how to deal with this reality, and we found AMPGYL. And so it was that we found refuge, help, guidance and a support group for both you and us, as well as the opportunity to meet many people with different and diverse situations.

It was then that I found out about the existence of trans men, a reality that before, despite considering myself a tolerant person and aware of the social struggle, I did not know. I knew about trans* women and it seemed good to support them, but now I realise that I only looked at them from a distance, without really knowing their situation, their struggle, their pain and their exclusion. It was support for those who were discriminated against from my privileged position as a middle-class white woman with university studies and who had never had any real relationship with any discriminated group.*

In the next school change, I imagine that you either finally felt somewhat more secure or you couldn't take it anymore, and 3 months after starting the course you told us who you are and what your name is. But we, in that process that you had started almost 2 years before, we had already learned to look and we knew who you were 6 months before you told us. The feeling, that we had wasted so many years, that we had not protected you properly, that we had not known how to accompany you, was horrific and is often still in my head.

From the very moment that you communicated who you are, you went from being a sad person to a happy person. If my little one always had sadness in his eyes, I thought that it was due to a misunderstanding. When I found out that you always asked the Three Wise Men to make me realise that you were a boy, I realised what a pity it was that you never wrote it in a letter that parents send to the mailbox of the Three Kings or Santa Claus. Once you communicated it to us and to the school, the rush began; you had been waiting for many years. So we started again with the meetings and the lack of understanding of the school, which this time, at least, complied with the law and began to call you by your name, your new name but not without many constant "oversights" throughout the course.

We also began the administrative procedures to legally change your name and gender. The procedures lasted almost 3 years, because, even though we were lucky enough to have some laws that protected you, they are complicated laws, with obstacles, that question your mental health. There are many people in administrative positions who apply these laws but have absolutely no preparation on how to treat people. We had to face much prejudice and we found ourselves in many uncomfortable, vexatious and discriminatory situations in different levels of the public administration. We did not want to tell you about this in order to protect, as much as possible, your self-esteem and your struggle.

Fortunately you are now a happy teenager, with your legally modified documentation and you continue your studies quite safely thanks to your cis passing, because yes, the social gender roles so marked in our society continue to force many of you to want to adopt those forms so feminine or so masculine that they allow you to go unnoticed among the rest, because if you look like one of them, like the others, one like the majority, you are allowed to exist.

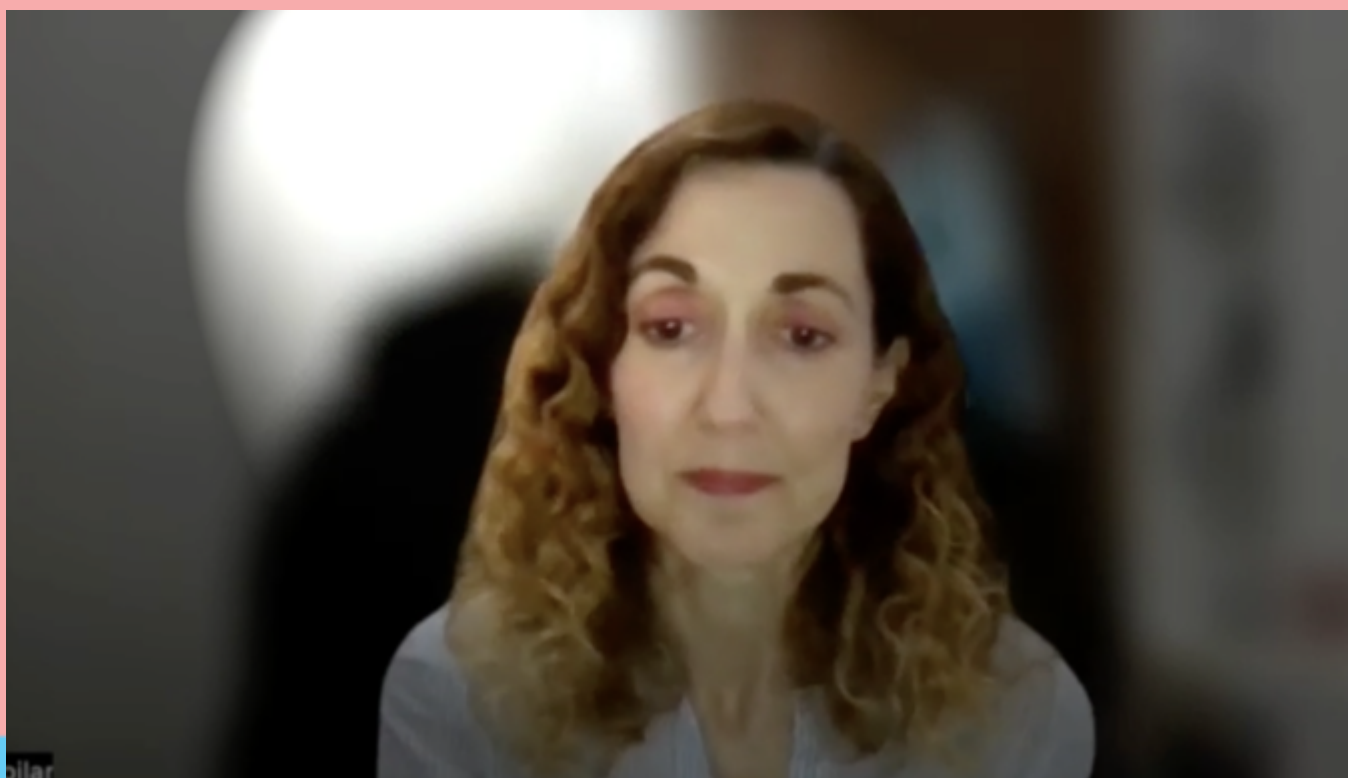
It is important to protect diverse childhoods and youth, diverse people, and discriminated groups. It is important that we are people who feel empathy and who understand that differences add on and do not subtract, that there are no absolute truths, that you cannot have an opinion on everything, that we cannot comment on the identity of other people as they are not us and that we want the same rights for all, equality as human beings, that should be our goal. It is a great goal, but it starts with us. We need to deconstruct ourselves, to unlearn in order to learn again, to accompany our children.

This is a love letter to you son, that you have helped me improve as a person, that you have made me open my eyes to the real world, to the world in which the diversity of human beings exists. It is a love letter to you, Lucas. Without you I would not have understood anything and nothing would make sense. I love you.

"It is important to protect diverse childhoods and youth, diverse people, and discriminated groups."

I am Pilar Sánchez. I come from the Spanish association AMPGYL, an association of families against gender intolerance. As the motto of the association to which I belong says, "We are your mothers, we are your fathers and we are by your side", so I believe that this phrase explains our motivation. I was asked to write my experience, but putting it in writing, in an orderly way, so that I can communicate what I would like, my feelings, my demands and even my pain is more complicated than it seems. Therefore, in order to write something coherent, I am going to take the liberty to address this testimony as someone who writes a letter, a love letter to my son. Each family, each person, starts out on this path from different viewpoints when we become part of this family that is the LGBTQ+ collective. We start with different personal experiences, with some prejudice or other, with some privilege or other, but if something has marked us in the time that I have been part of this great family is that we were welcomed, we are not judged, we were accepted for who we are, without questioning, with that which is good and that which is less good, and without discriminating against us no matter our physical characteristics, ideas, gender or religion.

I am the mother of 2 children and I am here for my 16-year-old son Lucas.



<https://youtu.be/AqNgoJW9-MA>

Filomena Perez

I'm Filo, from Portugal, and I'm a mother of two beautiful girls. The little one is Maria. Maria is a happy and an amazing girl, full of life! She has a great sense of humor and she loves to play, like any 8-year-olds child. Maria has a very strong personality. At the same time, she can be very childish and very mature. She is polite and popular. It's the child everyone loves and who is invited to all birthday parties. My daughter Maria is a sweet brunette beautiful girl, with a long hair, who happens to be a transgender girl.

We noticed the first signs at 2 years old, when she started to choose how to play and which toy's to play with. She was 3 years old when she realized that there are boys and girls. It was when she asked us to be a girl. The transition process took a year. Maybe more.

She started elementary school as a boy, but, at the first day, she introduced herself as she was and felt. She said «Hello! My name's Manuel, but I want to be a girl!

The first pandemic lockdown was critical for the transition. It was so crucial that she started the second grade already as a girl.

After some initial turbulence, she was accepted as she is. A girl. At this moment, she dresses girl's clothes and she uses the girl's toilet. Maria is a girl like any other.

The truth is that it's not an easy task for any mother or father to deal with. Nobody wants their child to be transgender, but Maria is my daughter. I love her like any mother loves her son or daughter. Love has no gender. When we think about having a child, we cannot choose the kid's sex or gender. Maria is my daughter and I love her a lot as she is. Life is just the way it is!

Maria taught me a lot. I learned immensely. I searched and studied hard, wanting to be updated. Transgender topics and all the LGBTIQ+ topics are a constant learning and I try to be informed.

The biggest challenges are the daily struggle of integration and

acceptance. That she can be treated, that she can be seen, like any other girl. Nothing more or less. The long conversations with principals, teachers, assistants, at school, at the dance school, at the new dance school. Have to explain everything from the beginning over and over again.

I always tell the story with goose bumps, and tears in my eyes. When I said it out loud for the first time to family and friends it was... odd and difficult.

It was no easy task. They asked «are you sure?» «It must be because she has an older sister!» «She spends too much time with you!» «It's TV influences.» «It's a phase and it goes by in no time!»

But the "phase" still goes on... And after the «boooooom» impact and the novelty, everyone accepts and recognizes her as a girl.

At school we did it step by step. We never cheated anyone. In meetings we always let them know everything, always telling the evolution of the situation, answering all the questions, getting all the answers.

We always carried the legislation with us. Only few times we had to show it. Everything really went quite well. At first there was the pronouns question and the «Manuel, sorry Maria!» situation, but now no one calls her by her male name.

The people who need to know it, they already know it. They treat her with respect and always call her Maria. We would not allow it to be any other way. Few people didn't see it very well. We erased those people from our lives and moved on. When someone not so close asks me about my son, I tell them everything is fine and I move on with the conversation.

I am afraid of the future, afraid of what I do not know. Probably, I'm more scared than Maria, but, is the constant fear that any mother or father has about their child. Fear that someone will harm your child.

We don't want Maria to be afraid, to be embarrassed or uncomfortable. We will do everything to protect and support her.

Maria is... Maria... with lots of tulle, pink color and glittering.

And we let her be as she is and support her.

Maria is... Maria. For now, a child. A little girl. A beautiful and happy little girl.

I will raise my daughter with love, supporting her, how any mother raises her child, whether it's a boy or a girl.

I will raise her with love, values, and respect. In the end, she will be a good person. A good woman and... happy!

About Grief

The worst of all the challenges was the grief, the grief of losing a son and all the plans I had dreamed for him! I imagined his whole life in my head! I dreamed and created a life for him in my head... as a man. The dreams and desires were mine, but the life was his!

Every parent of a trans* child has to go through a difficult phase, the grief. Although the child did not die (and I thank God for that), the parents of a trans* child are grieving, for losing their child. Their desired child, the child of their dreams, of some lost dreams!

It is necessary to live the mourning and to cry for the lost child. We must cry for the son who will never be our son, our son Manuel.

We have to live the mourning of all our dreams. We have to live the mourning of a whole world lived with a boy who no longer exists, or it exists, but not as we once knew and as we dreamed.

We, parents of trans* children, see our child alive, in front of us, but something inside us has died and for a moment we feel unable to accept it and move it on. But after acceptance, grief turns into a struggle to face challenges and fears. The pain subsides. The child is still here with us and we fight. We fight for love, for minorities, for difference, for equal rights and opportunities. For a reborn daughter, with all her life ahead.

It is a constant struggle for the happiness of a new daughter. Because a mother's love, a parent's love, conquers all! When you really love someone, nothing changes this love!

As with any grief, this is the time when we need family, friends, and support groups the most. It is also at this stage that we know who are the true friends and who to keep. There are surprises. Some good, some not so good, and some bad... but that's life and we have to move on with who really matters.

Advice to parents with trans* children:

It is not a phase. Don't be ashamed. We have to support them. Seek help. You are not alone!

First, we must accept that the expectations we imagine never match the real child. Be it a cis or trans* child.

We have to realize that it's going to be a long and harsh process. And one of our main tasks as parents is to try to make it easier.

At home, children must have a "bunker" where they are sure to be accepted, understood, and helped in whatever they need.

Second, we have to teach the child that not everything is going to be perfect. Some people will accept it. Others won't. But that we will always be on their side. Each child must learn that there will be good and bad days, but the main goal is to keep fighting, move forward, and never give up.

To finish, I would like to thank you for the opportunity and all your good work. I feel proud to belong to AMPLOS, to the AMPLOS family.

And don't forget... Trans* children exist!



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j59gtJwolWg>

“Every parent of a trans child has to go through a difficult phase, the grief. Although the child did not die (and I thank God for that), the parents of a trans child are grieving, for losing their child. Their desired child, the child of their dreams, of some lost dreams!”

“Each child must learn that there will be good and bad days, but the main goal is to keep fighting, move forward, and never give up.”





Experts

It's more important than ever to listen to experts discuss everyday issues. The discussion surrounding trans* and gender nonconforming kids should be no different; their voices, experiences, and viewpoints are priceless because they represent a group that is frequently underrepresented in society. Through hearing their stories, we can gain insight into their experiences and develop strategies for supporting trans* and gender diverse children now and in the future. In this chapter, two professionals, one a Psychiatrist and Mindfulness instructor endorsed by Médicos del Mundo, and another: a Social Worker with a Masters in Family Therapy & Systemic Practice, explain the importance of valuing children's individual differences. These renowned individuals' unique perspectives help explain why trans* and gender diverse community testimonials are valuable, offering life lessons we can all learn from.



Toni Adam

Psychiatrist and Mindfulness instructor, collaborator of Médicos del Mundo and Member of the association Right to a Dignified Death

Hello, my name is Toni Adam, I am a cis homo man, in a same sex relationship. For more than 40 years, I have worked as a psychiatrist. I am a Mindfulness instructor, activist of the LGTBQ collective, collaborator of Médicos del Mundo (MdM) and member of the association Right to a Dignified Death (DMD).

There are different aspects, or areas, that we must address. Empowering parents means to enable them to open their minds, or deconstruct concepts, to make it easier for the kids and adolescents with diverse sexuality or gender identity to express themselves freely, to be called and represented as they identify. The way we have been taught to perceive gender as male and female defines our outlook and has unfortunately made it more difficult for us to understand diversity and in a sense has also been harmful to those children and youth whose sexuality or gender is diverse.

Entities such as AMPGYL refer to this problem as X Gender Intolerance, that is to say, all those forms of violence that are exercised against those children and adolescents who act differently from how we perceive that girls and boys are supposed to act. X Gender Intolerance is the result of understanding that reality can only be divided into two poles: correct femininity and correct masculinity, forcing our sons and daughters to assume an identity, behaviours and bodily representation that adapts to what is socially expected of them.

X-Gender Intolerance is a very common type of violence, which occurs in many spaces, but it is especially intense in the educational sphere. X Gender Intolerance is, in many cases, the origin of bullying. This violence does not only attack those children and adolescents with non-normative gender roles, but also defines how they should sit, what sports they can or can't play, or what colours and clothing they must dress. X-Gender

Intolerance does not only manifest itself through homophobia and transphobia; weight, height, or even wearing glasses can be a reason for violence, as it may be perceived as not complying with an idealised model of "man" and "woman".

A four-year-old person does not identify as trans*, he simply tells us that he is a she, that her name is another, that what she is does not correspond to what we consider to be his gender ; or that what she likes, her favourite colour, her clothes, her play stuff doesn't fit with our expectations. We are talking about children, we must allow them to play and explore within that broad spectrum of identities that is gender, and they, as children, they should only learn that they have the right to play, to know and to recognise oneself.

The fight for the acronym LGTBQ+ is based on a premise that is more than 40 years old. I, as a gay man, I define myself. I am the one who defines myself, and just like I have struggled not to be named and pathologized from the clinic, the political or the institutional representatives, neither my mother nor my father should be an exception.

As children you have to accompany them, not explain who they are before they have had the time and the possibility to discover it for themselves.

On the other hand, the testimonies we have collected have led me to wonder why do diverse children suffer so much? Value diversity, show us that the role of the family is essential for education during the early stages of growth. The LGTBQ+ movement needs families. But families need both mothers and fathers and parents need to empower themselves as activists. And empowering themselves as activists here does not imply only "letting them be". To accompany, from activism, it is necessary to change our own perspective, to be aware that, whether we like it or not, we have been educated in the gender binary. This learning, invisible but omnipresent, prevents us from seeing beyond the child-child dichotomy. Turning these families into activists means opening our minds to get out of this binary of gender and power, thus, transforming our own gaze, allowing them to express themselves and, when the time comes, they will tell us what or who they are.

As part of this strategy, proposed to combat X Gender Intolerance, there are some tools that can be very beneficial for all families present here.

I refer to the acronym PROA: (P for pause or stop, R for breathes, O for observes and A of Act). It is essential to "review ourselves", but not for self-criticism and self-punishment, but rather to rethink how to look at the world. It is necessary to stop before reacting with or about our children, distance ourselves from our own identity to be able to take a breath, breathe and be fully aware of where we are, starting from observation, in order to be able to act with them, not only guided by love, but also with empathy. with a feeling that we are learning to understand and avoiding the forms of "protection" that we carry out from fear.

Improve intra-family communication: establish communication channels that start from empathy; this not only enhances our understanding of diversity at the familiar core, but it allows us to establish real active listening between our loved ones, facilitating the empowerment of these diverse children and adolescents, in order to turn the family into a loudspeaker that empowers our voices.

And above all, allow and work on uncertainty: from the heterocentric framework we need to play it safe, but we know that such safety does not really exist. The present is what allows us to work in the future. The lack of referents for our children is an element that increases this uncertainty, the not knowing what will become of our children, and accepting that we cannot know what or who they will come to be. Accept that we cannot control how their identity will develop, or how their life will become and this is the greatest act of love we can show our children, allowing them to be themselves without fear, and not becoming ourselves a new obstacle that prevents them from growing, developing and, ultimately, flourishing.

"As children you have to accompany them, not explain who they are before they have had the time and the possibility to discover it for themselves."



Colette Farrugia Bennet

Masters in Family Therapy & Systemic Practice

Parenting Adolescents Across the Gender Spectrum

The Experience of Parents Whose Adolescents Identify as Gender Variant or Transgender

Colette Farrugia Bennet has a Masters Degree in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice, as well as a Masters Degree and Bachelor Degree in Social Work from the University of Malta. She has over 15 years of experience working with individuals and families facing multiple challenges in the couple's relationship, attachment issues, and parent-adolescent relationships. Colette has specialised in the therapeutic empowerment and affirmation of diverse gender and sexual identities within the context of individual, couple and family therapy. She is also an activist for LGBTIQ rights and has been active for the past 20 years.

Introduction

This study aims to better understand how parents of gender variant youth experience and understand their child's identity, as research focusing on the parental experience is limited (Wren, 2002; Riggs, 2019). It aspires to continue to address this gap and shed light amongst professionals in supporting them to gain insight and be better equipped to work with such families.

It also seeks to document and extend the parents' voice in making their experiences known and better understood, from a systemic understanding (Riggs, 2019). This study aspires to understand the strengths and needs of the parents, as well as the social constructs that influence how they cope with this reality.

Methodology

The study was designed to explore the understanding and meaning-making process of the parents whose adolescents identify as gender variant or transgender.

A Phenomenological Approach

A qualitative method of inquiry was utilised since the primary focus is the experience of the participants, as well as gaining a deeper understanding of how the participants understood their subjective experiences and the meanings they attached to them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach was adopted in order to focus on the particular experiences of the participants (Smith, et al., 2012).

Participants

The target population chosen for this research involved six parents of gender variant adolescents aged between 14 and 19 years living in the United Kingdom, in order to avoid any bias due to my activist and supportive role within the LGBTIQ community. The criteria for the participants were that they were parents to a gender diverse or trans* adolescent aged between 14 and 19 years, and were in contact with a psycho-social professional or a support group. Out of the six participants, five were trained in the psycho-social field, and two of the participants also self-identified as gender diverse or trans*. Reference to their professional training and supervision, and their own gender diverse identification, was made throughout the interview and this further complemented the data collected. Recruitment of participants was sought through various professional organisations working with the gender and sexual diversity population and their parents in the UK. The interviews were video recorded through Skype and transcribed with the consent of the participants. All participants in this study were given pseudonyms and a representation of their main characteristics is found in the below table.

Data Collection

This research was carried out by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews as recommended by Smith et al. (2012), since it invited participants to share their experiences in detail. Due to geographical distance, online interviews were carried out and video-recorded via Skype. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) suggest that Skype is internationally recognised as a communication platform suitable for research, and is downloadable for free. An interview guide was developed with the aim to engage in an interactive dialogue with the participants (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). The questions focused on several aspects of the parents' experience in relation to their family composition, the context in which they lived in, and how they understood their adolescent's gender variance.

Following email contact with the participants, the research information sheet and consent form were forwarded to them to familiarise themselves with the study. Once they confirmed their participation and forwarded me the signed consent form by email, a time and date for the Skype interview

Parent (Pseudonym)	Gender of Parent	Age of Parent	Adolescent (Pseudonym)	Age of Adolescent	Gender of Adolescent
Catherine	Cisgender female, she/her	41 - 50	Blake	19	Non-binary, they/them
Albert	Transgender male, he/him	51 - 60	JC	19	Non-binary, they/them
Elaine	Cisgender female, she/her	31 - 40	Miles	15	Transgender male, he/him
Jess	Cisgender female, she/her	31 - 40	Jules Kim	17 14	Non-binary, she/her Gender fluid, he/him
Kara	Non-binary, she/her	41 - 50	Esme	19	Demi-girl, she/her
Benjamin	he/him	61 - 70	Blake	19	Non-binary, they/them

was set at their convenience. The interviews were conducted at an appropriate time chosen by the participant, and they generally lasted around 60 to 90 minutes. Throughout every interview, I noticed how the researcher role and the therapeutic role became intertwined (Sammuto Scerri, Abela, & Vetere, 2012). The research guide generated responses from the parents, while empathic responses to the parents' concerns for their children's wellbeing due to the transphobia in society, continued to generate a richer conversation.

Data Analysis

IPA views the analytical process as "an iterative process of fluid description and engagement with the transcript" (Smith, et al. 2012, p. 81), however IPA offers a step-by-step guide to support the researcher in identifying the major themes within the collected data (Storey, 2007). In the analysis, I strived to capture the core experience of each of the participants, by remaining attentive to their context, their choice of words and how they presented their narratives. As I analysed each transcript individually, I extracted the main themes of each interview, as well as the overarching themes across the six interviews (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). A final table of superordinate themes and subordinate themes was built from one of the richer interviews, and was further expanded through the analysis of the remaining interviews.

Results

The below table depicts the Superordinate and Subordinate Themes that emerged from the analysis of transcripts of the six interviews. Pseudonyms are used for all participants, their children and other family members to protect confidentiality. The names chosen for the gender variant adolescents were carefully chosen according to their gender identity. Gender neutral names were sought for those identifying as non-binary, and gendered names were chosen for those identifying with either of the gender binary.

Master List	
Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Anticipating the gender diversity	Child's apparent diverse identity Parental outlook towards their child Approaching their child The moment of truth
Reactions and aftermath	First reactions Experience of loss and grief Understanding gender variance
Ongoing struggles	Remembering to use the preferred name and pronouns Living the new reality in the context of the old Fear of judgement Challenges for extended family Lack of community support
Supportive elements	Support from extended family and friends Therapeutic interactions with clients Reflective spaces Relationship with adolescent Online parents' groups/forums
Parent's love and respect for the adolescent	Concern for the adolescent's wellbeing Being a gender diversity affirmative parent
Making meaning of their experience	Surprised it was so hard Trying to understand the adolescent's process

Anticipating the Gender Diversity

Most of the parents expressed their anticipation of what they perceived to be apparent in their children's diverse gender identity and how they confirmed this. One parent explained that her outlook was always gender affirmative, yet she approached her son out of concern. Benjamin, (cisgender male, 61-70), a parent of a 19-year-old non-binary adolescent, explained how he "was expecting them to come out, I could see them going in that direction, especially after they became more involved with the

LGBT community through school activities" (L. 169-170).

Distinct from the other five participants, Elaine took a different path to confirm Miles' gender identity, since she had become concerned for him as she had observed him unhappy at school. Her concern led her to approach Miles on the subjects of both his school experience and his gender identity.

Albert's personal experience as a trans* person helped him identify a parallel process he had lived years before, and recalled that, "I was pretty sure that there was some gender diversity of some description going on" (L. 166-167). Albert explained that, "it wasn't really until, you know, they actually came and sat down, and said I need to talk with you and I kind of knew what they were going to say, and that's when I found out" (L. 168-170).

Reactions and Aftermath

The parents' reactions to their children's disclosure are presented in the superordinate theme of their initial response, experiences of loss following the news, and their learning curve regarding gender variance. Every parent reacted in an affirmative manner, and were supportive from the start, however internal reactions differ. As a trans man, Albert, is the biological parent to JC, and his partners are both gender variant and the adolescent was brought up by the three parents together. To Albert's surprise, JC found it difficult to disclose their non-binary identity to his male 'mum', as Albert put it, and attributes this challenge to the transphobic social narratives that JC has been exposed to.

Some participants spoke about their experience of loss following their child's disclosure of their gender variance. The loss and grief presented by the three participants was somewhat different from each other, and while Catherine expressed how the change in their child was difficult, her co-parent Benjamin stated that, "You know it's almost to say that I did feel some form of loss. But I wouldn't put it that hard but I'd say yes, it was a fleeting feeling of that is different, that has changed" (L. 399-401). On the other hand, Catherine associated the loss and grief with the transition process in relation to Blake's given name and the pronouns originally associated with them.

Ongoing Struggles

Ongoing challenges experienced by the parents were varied, depending mostly on their social context, but also on how long they had known, and with whom else their child disclosed their gender variant identity. For those parents who had recently gotten to know, they sometimes misgendered them as they were still adjusting. Another challenge experienced by some of the parents were feelings confused due to some family members and friends knowing and others not, about the gender variance. Catherine referred to this struggle as an aspect that has not helped her to fully adjust to Blake's preferred name and pronoun. On the other hand, Kara's experience was more related to the confusion she experienced when other extended family members, such as grandparents, used the child's dead name.

The two parents who self-identify as gender variant expressed their fear for their adolescents when coming into contact with professionals, as they may be judged as copying or being influenced by their parents. Both parents referred to professional assessments carried out by the Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) of the NHS, whereby their children can access hormone treatment and other specialised health and psycho-social services. Both parents reflected on their own experiences of social judgement and transphobia, and how they wished for their children to have a more affirmative experience.

Supportive Elements

The supportive elements identified were experienced as the ray of hope that encouraged the parents in their journey into parenting their gender variant adolescents across the gender spectrum. Most of the supportive elements are located outside of the parent's self and within their network of family and friends, social networks, and professional lives.

Albert identified his diverse and sizeable chosen family as his source of support, which extends support to his non-binary adolescent. Likewise, Kara recognised her LGBT friends as those who have supported her the most throughout this journey with Esme. Differently, Benjamin identified

cisgender and heterosexual acquaintances and friends he meets regularly at social clubs who have given him strength and a listening ear. Benjamin said, "I appreciated the other people's openness in sharing about their families, as it was their way of saying that they are supportive of my Blake" (L. 401-402). From a systemic perspective, the relationship between the parent and the adolescent is the fulcrum of how they experience and make meaning of the gender diversity of the adolescent. This relationship was presented by all the participants, and while some claimed that they have always had a healthy and close connection with their adolescent, other parents identified how adolescent's gender journey was an opportunity for their relationship to improve. Some parents also identified parents' support groups/forums as encouraging element that was beneficial to them and the relationship with their adolescent.

Parent's Love and Respect for the Adolescent

The love between a parent and their child is a unique kind of love, and Benjamin declared several times along the interview that he loves his children unconditionally, including Blake. Some participants showed their love and respect through sharing their concerns for the adolescent's wellbeing, and responding to them by affirming their gender diversity. Albert spoke extensively regarding his concerns about JC's wellbeing. He expressed that, "It is horrifying to me that the socialisation externally was so strong that even though they actually knew we would be supportive, at the time they were terrified we wouldn't be" (L. 97-98).

To counter the social pressures and challenges their children may encounter, every parent spoke about how they affirm their adolescent's gender variance. Jess referred to the London Pride as a yearly family outing. Benjamin's affirmative stance came through his statement that, "every child is gifted. They just unwrap their packages at different times. Blake has unwrapped their package and they're beautiful as they are" (L. 252-253). The journey shared by Albert, Catherine, Jess, Elaine, Benjamin and Kara led them to make meaning of their experience of getting to know, understand and embrace their child's gender variance.

Making Meaning of Their Experience

In understanding their adolescents, each parent searched for and made meaning of this journey. For some it was harder than expected, while others engaged in a process of understanding their child's journey and how this interacted with their own and those around them. Despite having identified several supportive elements in their life to assist them in their interaction with their adolescent's gender variance, some still experienced challenges. Notably, Catherine shared that as she was trying to make meaning of Blake's experience, she experienced distress. "I didn't expect it, but honestly, I didn't expect it to be so hard, even though I kind of saw it coming" said Catherine (L. 134-135).

Kara's own non-binary identity may have broadened her outlook towards gender, however she claimed that despite having worked on herself in therapy, she "hadn't considered being open to someone coming along...and I suppose in some ways that's no different to as cisgender parent being challenged and discovering that trans* people exist for the first time" (L. 243-245). In finding their own meaning, the parents have sought an understanding of their adolescent's process. The journey for each parent was different, as is unique the adolescent's journey.

Parents in Transition

The journey that the parents embarked on, as presented above, somewhat corroborates the work of the Social Worker and Family Therapist, Arlene Lev (2004) who proposed the 'Transgender Emergence in Families Model'. This theory suggests that the concept of transition is relevant to the parental process, as much as to the gender variant adolescent. As expressed by the participants, the transition process for them is not a linear one, and, thus it suggests that stages may be ongoing and revisited depending on the emotional predicament the parents find themselves in, their social context and support networks. Similar to Lev's model, the themes presented suggest a process of adjustment, from reactions to struggles, to finding supportive elements that allow the parent to find meaning in their experience and the gender variant identity of their adolescent.

Support and knowledge during transition.

Without diminishing the struggles the participants have been through when their adolescent's gender variance was confirmed, neither of them described any unwillingness to acknowledge their child's gender identity or rejection towards their children or the identity. The fact that five out of six parents were therapists themselves, suggests that their reflective spaces such as supervision, as well as access to knowledge, may have been an asset to them. This might suggest that parents who have a greater level of support, fare better in their support towards their children, and the transition may be smoother when compared to those who do not have knowledge and a support network in place (Coolhart, 2012).

Inter-intra personal processes during transition.

Lev's (2004) 'Transgender Emergence in Families Model' was developed in response to the theory around grief and loss of Kubler-Ross (1969) which was often referred to when describing the parents' responses and process of grief they experienced after learning that their child is gender variant. It was often described that the parents lost their child, until they realise that they have gained a more fulfilled child who affirms their gender. None of the participants expressed that they were grieving their child, and in fact, their experiences demonstrate the development of both the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes following the disclosure by their child. These parental transactions may attest to their reflective journey, accompanied by the challenges encountered, as well as the opportunities of support from those around them, including the children themselves.

In practice, Lev and Gottlieb (2019), found that many parents often said, "When my child came out, I was faced with a decision: Do I want a happy daughter or a dead son?" (p. 64). This implies that trans* youth who are not supported by their parents are more likely to engage in self-harming behaviour or attempt suicide (Lev & Gottlieb, 2019). This bargaining process was discussed by all participants who spoke about their concern for their child's mental health and wellbeing, and the support given through validation, love and acceptance. To this effect, Coolhart (2012) suggests

that the parents' commitment towards their growth in understanding the children goes to show "how much they love their child and that they just want the best for their child" (p. 206). Notwithstanding this, it is essential to acknowledge that the social context that one lives in makes a difference in the parental responses.

Parents' Systemic Experience

Wren (2002) presented how some parents' anticipated their adolescent's disclosure regarding their gender variance, and this was a result of their observations of the children's interactions and non-stereotypical gender expression. The six participants anticipated the diversity in their children, and the majority expected them to talk about their gender variance when they asked to speak to them. Wren's (2002) research was also conducted in the United Kingdom, however one must note that differences in the social climate, may impact the parents' view of their child's gender identity.

As the participants' experiences documented in this study attest, the current legal and policy measures available in the UK suggest an improvement in the social climate, and thus, one can conclude that Wren's research was set in a less trans*-affirmative social environment than that which is found in the present. Thus, the reactions of the parents towards their children's gender variance may have been influenced with the social climate present then (Wren, 2002). Riggs (2019) suggests that parents' reactions are directly influenced by the social environment they are living in. Their research highlights that the literature previously focused on the "narratives of loss, distress, challenges, and fear" (p. 96), while recent research studies have documented "how some parents actively challenge cisgenderism and normative gender ideologies" (Riggs, 2019, p. 96) and affirm their child's gender variance. This corroborates with the experiences of the research participants.

From a systemic perspective, there is no clear linear cause and effect between the different parts of the system, however there are complex interconnections between each part, that together make up the whole (Coolhart, 2012). Thus, the effects between the institutions in society and

the citizens, go both ways; in a bi-directional manner. The current trans* affirmative climate found in the UK and many other countries in Western Europe, including Malta, is a result of citizens' advocacy. This affirmative stance has reached the families of the participants interviewed for this research and the effects of the supportive parents will be felt in the wellbeing of the trans* and gender variant adolescents. Thus, from a bi-directional perspective, the worthy experiences of gender variant youth are connected to the affirmative and supportive parental responses, which is ultimately connected to the social climate present in their culture and environment. The intersectional identities of an individual add to the complexity of these interconnections. The intersectional identities of the six parents interviewed generally contributed towards a more positive outcome in their experience of their gender variant child.

One of the struggles identified by some of the participants was their concern for potential regress in social attitudes, as although their responses to their children's gender variance challenged normative cisgender ideologies present in society, they were aware of the growing far right movement in Europe. Some regress has been seen in certain countries in the West where far right politics has gained momentum and influenced the removal of certain legal rights and protections for trans* and gender variant persons, as well as the social climate within the country. Some parents in fact made reference to this concern and how this may affect them and their child, as from a systemic and bi-directional perspective a non-affirmative culture may pose a threat to their child's wellbeing, mental health and access to health services, amongst others. This suggests that the parents' perspective towards their children's gender identity and how they make meaning of it, goes beyond the local social environment and culture, and that the global climate is another system that they are part of and their outlook may be influenced by this too.

Supporting the Parents' Process

Lev and Gottlieb (2019) purport that the struggles of parents are less known, not only due to the limited research and literature about their experiences, but also “because their stories are intertwined with those of their children” (p. 52). The authors suggest that this overlap may be a barrier for the parents’ voices to be heard, and they may also fear judgement both if they are supportive of their child and if they are not. Coolhart (2012) explains how parents are often judged as too accepting and encouraging the gender variance if they were immediately supportive, and if they are sceptical or non-affirmative, they are labelled as transphobic. In fact some participants explained that they still fear judgement by others around them.

Despite the affirmative outlook described by all participants, they all identified how they wished to have found specialist support throughout the process. This was common to all, irrespective of their professional training and their own gender identification. One must question how other parents who have less resources available to them cope with this reality, and what effects this has on their wellbeing, their child and the relationship between them.

In making meaning of their journey with their gender variant adolescent, some participants identified that it was difficult for them to cope at the start, although they had anticipated their child’s disclosure around their gender identity. The majority of the parents were therapeutically trained, which suggests that they have had some processing, as well as some knowledge and other resources around gender variance, at their disposal. Despite this, almost all parents expressed the importance of learning and gaining new understandings around gender diversity. This suggests that part of the parents’ engagement in this journey is to unlearn the cisnormative assumptions and the gender binary, and explore new knowledge around diversity in gender (Coolhart, et al., 2013). The unlearning process is key to becoming a trans* affirmative parent, since no parent or any other individual are spared from the dominant discourse around the gender binary and cisnormative ideology. Naudi (2006) describes the influence of the dominant discourse in our lives as becoming the “implicit taken-for-

granted background and rationalities" (p. 118), which affect both the parents and the adolescents. In fact, two of the participants explicitly referred to the dominant social discourse as being stronger than the values and openness that is embraced in their families.

Parents who are still struggling and rejecting their child's gender variance, need to be supported in this process. Additionally, their engagement in processing this journey is a strength, and "their commitment to grow in the process demonstrates how much they love their child and that they just want the best for their child" (Coolhart, 2012, p. 206).

Conclusion

This research documents an often unheard narrative of parents who struggle with their concerns and love for their gender variant child. The implications for Family Therapy are two-fold. It is essential for specialised knowledge to be included in the training for future professionals, including a focus on the experiences of parents, as they are often sidelined because affirming the adolescent's gender may be seen as more pertinent. Secondly, like the six participants, Family Therapists need to critically evaluate their own cisnormative biases and bring this critical perspective into the therapy room with all service users as everyone is chained to the dominant discourse around gender stereotypes and expression. A systemic perspective is key to support parents and families whose children and adolescents identify as gender variant.

"Family Therapists need to critically evaluate their own cisnormative biases and bring this critical perspective into the therapy room with all service users as everyone is chained to the dominant discourse around gender stereotypes and expression."

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“Ongoing challenges experienced by the parents were varied, depending mostly on their social context, but also on how long they had known, and with whom else their child disclosed their gender variant identity.”

Parent Associations are a valuable resource for both parents and practitioners when it comes to understanding the transition process of trans* and gender variant children. Such associations offer support by facilitating meaningful dialogue between parents, other family members, and professionals in order to provide an enhanced understanding of how best to love, affirm, and support these children as they move through their transition. Through regular meetings and educational seminars, parents' associations ensure parents are kept up-to-date on the latest information and resources that are out there for individuals of all gender identities. Ultimately, groups such as these exist to foster inclusion in our society by bringing together families united by the desire to create a world where transgender and gender variant youth can be who they truly are without fear of discrimination or judgment.

The concerns expressed during the webinar and highlighted in this brochure, are the foundation stones for the Parents' Manifesto, a document to advocate for the rights of trans and gender-diverse children in Europe.*

***Read the manifesto at
www.enparents.org/thepace***

We thank all the amazing people who made this project possible, we thank you, the reader, and all the brave parents who stand for the rights of their children.

“Let's change the pace: how are European trans and gender diverse children doing?”

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