Supporting Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth

Allowing young people to be who they are, no matter how they identify, leads to an increase in peer interactions, satisfaction at school, participation in community and positive mental health outcomes. Unfortunately, fears and misinformation about transgender youths often prevent people from offering them the same freedom to live life authentically. Below you will find information on understanding gender identity, up-to-date information on treatment options and some best practice tips for adults working with transgender and gender expansive youth.

Aren’t Children Too Young To Know?

Sexual orientation is typically established around puberty but our understanding of our own gender is usually formed at a very young age. Gender fluidity is very common and widespread in young children (ages 1-4). Between the ages of 4-6 gender constancy is established (ie. children become aware that gender remains constant despite perceptual shifts in clothing or behavior) and gender identity becomes fairly stable.

Best Practices for Supporting Young Children

Listen to the young people in your life and ask how you can support them. Research indicates that gender expansive children who have a supportive adult in their life are at a greatly reduced risk for harming themselves. Allowing children to wear clothing that makes them feel comfortable, have their hair cut or grown and styled to fit their sense of self, and use names and pronouns that fit for them is a respectful way to treat all children.

Time Is Of the Essence for Preadolescents

For gender expansive children approaching pubertal age who have been insistent, persistent and consistent about their gender identity, puberty blocking hormones may be recommended by gender specialists. Puberty blockers, or GnRH (gonadotropin-releasing hormone) analogues, are used to temporarily and safely pause puberty. There is, however, only a small window of time when puberty blocking hormones can be used effectively. If that time period is missed, the youth may experience changes to their body that their brain may not want.
Some Facts About Puberty Blockers

- Puberty blocking hormones allow gender expansive youths more time to discover whether or not their journey will include physical transitioning.

- They must be started around Tanner Stage 2 in pubertal development and are administered by injection every 3 months or yearly implants. Most insurance companies are now covering the costs.

- Puberty blockers have been safely used in the United States since the 1950’s. The effects are totally reversible and they do not affect future fertility. They can also reduce the amount of invasive surgical procedures later in life if transitioning is chosen.

- In a study of 55 young transgender adults it was shown that pubertal suppression in youth is linked to increased mental health and overall happiness equal to or better than youth from the general population. (de Vries et al, 2014)

- Although a “wait and see” approach may seem like a neutral option, it may, in fact, be harmful due to the irreversible changes that take place during puberty. Delaying treatment of persistent gender dysphoria has been linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicide. (Kuper, L.E. 2014)

How Can You Help?

- Respect all children by allowing them to express their gender in a way that feels right for them. Forcing children into rigid gender boxes may temporarily change behavior, but it does not change a child’s inner sense of self.

- Let gender expansive youths and their parents know that they are not alone and connect them with others. The LGBTQ Resource Center at the Gay Alliance can offer resources on gender specialists, transgender knowledgeable doctors, therapists and support groups.

- Work with your school or agency to implement transgender inclusive practices. Train your staff on transgender identities and inclusion. Contact the LGBTQ Academy at the Gay Alliance to see our full list of training offerings.

www.gayalliance.org