Supporting your transgender child

BY RENE CZERWINSKI
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What does a parent do when their daughter tells them he is now their son? How do parents support their child in a world where they could be in danger by just being themselves? When you have a child, you promise to love, protect and unconditionally be there for them no matter what. However, a child being transgender is something that can hit even the most loving parents unexpectedly. We protect our children from many things in life and want what is best for them, but in some cases we don’t know the answers right away, and that is OK. Life is full of surprises, and children give us many.

As a parent of a transgender child, I have feared for my son’s safety and future, and I have worried how others would treat him and if being transgender would make his life more difficult. But as parent who unconditionally loves her child, I knew my first step in this journey was to respect his decision 110 percent and learn what I can do to best support him. In asking other parents what such support looks like, I have received many different answers. But one I hear frequently, and also share as advice to parents I work with as a Transgender Certified Therapist, is that you have to respect your child’s transition even if you do not understand it. This means you must validate them, including using their preferred pronouns even when it is difficult at first. Acknowledge that you will mispeak and call your child by the wrong name or pronoun sometimes, and know the most important thing is to offer reassurance that you are trying to get it right and correct yourself. In my case, it took me a year before I did not mess up at least once a day, and every time I did, I apologized and corrected myself. A parent’s willingness to walk the journey with their child is also critical. This includes being open to learning, accepting as a parent that you may not know everything, and realizing it is not about you and your beliefs. Many look for a support group to do this. The Seattle area offers a range of wonderful groups, including Gender Diversity (www.genderversity.org). For others, willingness and openness means reading the many books and articles available on how to support a child, going to doctor appointments, helping your child to legally change their name and documents, and talking with school administrators.

One of the biggest lessons I learned over this journey is how to be humble in asking questions and admitting I don’t have all of the answers. I’ve learned to walk with my child and not direct him. His journey has made us stronger, brought us closer as a family and given us a new community, which has become family too. Although there have been trials, I would not change it for anything. Looking at the happiness on my son’s face is all I need to see to know life’s challenges are just another way to show your strength and love as a parent.

If you’d like to make an appointment with Rene Czerwinski, LMHC, NCC, visit PacMed.org or call 206-621-4045.

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