

## Chapter 3

# Developmental Stages and the Transgender Child

IF YOU'RE A PARENT or caregiver of a gender-variant or transgender child, you've no doubt been frustrated by the lack of information about gender development in most parenting and child-care literature. Here, we present a chapter on the age-specific milestones that pertain specifically to gender development, and the typical ages at which transgender children become self-aware. Of course, as with all developmental stages, this will vary from child to child. We hope that what you read below picks up where the other books leave off.

### Ages and Stages

#### Age 2-3

Gender identity emerges by age 2 to 3 and is influenced by biology and sociological factors. Even before then, babies can identify people by gender presentation and voice recognition. Toddlers quickly learn from both adults and peers the "gender" of toys and certain clothes, and may turn away from or chastise others who cross the gender divide. Once a

child has established an internal sense of gender, they actively seek out same-sex models and other cues for learning how to act. This process is the same for children whose gender identity does not match their genitalia. They actively strive to socialize themselves according to their inner sense of gender.

Two-to-three-year-olds want to order their worlds. By this age many children can identify men and women and boys and girls based on external appearances. They are often confused by gender-variant adults and tend to label them as men or women based on basic features such as hair length. By this age, some children have already begun to announce to parents and caretakers that they sense a keen difference between what they are told they are and what they know about their own gender identity. Amazingly, a transgender identity is often very clear by this age.

#### Age 3-4

By age 3 to 4 children have a sense of their own gender identity and are increasingly aware of anatomical differences. Since their own basic gender identity has been established, they are motivated to learn about the sexes and incorporate this information into gender schemes—organized sets of beliefs and expectations about male and female gender roles. At this age, gender roles are becoming refined through interaction with others, and stereotypes begin to emerge. These stereotypes are self-regulated and based on what children have been exposed to by the media, family values, and social interactions. Gender segregation usually starts at this age and only intensifies until age 12.

Many gender-variant and transgender children at this young age of 3 or 4 are struggling with language to express their differences: "I feel like a boy." "I want to be a girl when I grow up." "I am a girl." "I wish I was a girl." "I wish I was a boy." "God made a mistake with me." "I am half boy and half girl." "My heart is boy, but my body is girl." This is an age at which some parents of gender-variant children are trying

to ascertain if this is gender variance or truly a transgender identity. Other parents are still fairly unaware of their child's gender variance.

#### Age 4-6

Four-to-six-year-olds associate gender with specific behaviors. They are using gender scripts. Girls wear makeup—so anyone with makeup on is a girl. Boys lift weights and play with trucks—so anyone lifting weights or driving a truck is a boy. Even when they see people of the so-called opposite sex engaged in these behaviors, they still think of these behaviors as applying to only one gender or the other. Though a child's mother may be a doctor, at age 4 the child still says that all doctors are men. However, early childhood research shows that when 4-to-6-year-olds are given enough examples through books, storytelling, or repeated exposure to real persons, they can adapt their constructs. School has a great influence on children at this age, so it is essential that preschools and grade schools incorporate gender differences and tolerance of such differences into their programs. By this age, indicators of gender variance clearly emerge in many children—boys play dress-up repeatedly, often fashioning dresses out of whatever they can find (tablecloths, towels, Mothers T-shirts) and girls start refusing more feminine clothing, including feminine underwear and bathing suits.

It is normal for 4-to-6-year-olds to think they can grow up and become the opposite sex, or a hedgehog, or a mermaid. Some children understand gender stability by 5, whereas many others don't fully comprehend it until they are around 7. By this age, many transgender children have been consistent and persistent in their cross-gender identity for several years. It starts to become glaringly apparent that this is not a stage.

#### Age 5-7

By age 5 to 7 children have an understanding of gender consistency and stability. They understand that one's gender is not going to change: a man is a man even if he dresses like a woman. Once this idea has stabilized,

the attachment to stereotypical behaviors subsides and a fuller expression of self and fuller expression of gender is possible. For example, even among nongender-variant kids, girls this age may adamantly declare that they don't like dresses or anything pink anymore, and gravitate toward athletic clothing in hues of green or navy blue. Once established, gender identity is generally fixed for life, though depending on their environment some children may choose not to express their true gender identity until a later time.

Young children believe they can be anything and do anything. But gender stereotypes and roles limit their dreams and experiences. If a child enjoys doing something that is different from the norm, the child might feel embarrassed or uncomfortable because others signal to them that this is wrong. If a child is significantly gender-variant or transgender and is forced to limit their expression at school or in other arenas, it is very typical for them to develop behavioral problems at school, and they may even begin to express suicidal ideation.

## Pubertal Changes

### Age 9–12

Between ages 9 and 12, a child's gender identity continues to stabilize. In these "tween" years it is common for a subset of the children who have been expressing gender variance throughout childhood to reject this form of self-expression now. Many parents say that it is during these years that their child's gender variance is no longer an issue. Gender-variant boys may cut their hair and start to wear more typically male clothing. They may give away their dolls or sewing things and take up more typically male interests. Likewise, previously solidly gender-variant girls may now retire some of their more masculine clothes and choose to grow their hair out. They may start enacting more stereotypically female behaviors that they had dismissed a year before.

Conversely, at this age, as the pubertal changes begin, underlying gender dysphoria can even more strongly emerge in some children. This may be the time when the family finally recognizes that their child is actually transgender.

Of course, it is common for children to resist the body changes of puberty. For some it represents the end of childhood; for others it is simply odd to feel their body changing. Some feel discomfort at the budding of a sexuality they are not ready to embrace. However, for a child who is transgender, these changes can be a harbinger of depression, self-neglect, and self-destructive behaviors. Such reactions may indicate that your child is experiencing gender-related stress and may even be transgender. Some children of this age realize on their own that they are transgender, whereas others need therapeutic guidance to determine the cause or causes of their inner turmoil.

*Our daughter hated getting breasts. She started to wrap them tightly and to wear many layers of undershirts under her baggy overshirts. She cut her hair very short. She wore baggy pants. Everyone thought she was a boy. We just thought she was a tomboy. But when she got her period two things happened that showed us something was very wrong. The first was that she got very depressed. She wouldn't come out of her room—wouldn't talk to us. It was really scary. The second thing that worried us was that when she had her period, she acted as if she didn't have it. She would not use any feminine products. That was so weird we took her to the doctor. At first none of us knew what was going on. But over the next six months we all realized that she was transgender. It was a hard way to lose my daughter. But the son that we have is not depressed. —Parent of a 15-year-old transboy*

## Age 12-18

During puberty and early adulthood, gender identity generally becomes fully developed. In fact, the third-most-common time for a child to realize they are transgender (after toddlerhood and prepubescence) is during adolescence. For this is when the hormonal and concurrent physical changes of puberty clarify for the child that they are going through the "wrong" puberty. For teenagers this may emerge first as a serious social withdrawal and depression that later develops into a transgender identity. The urgency of their communications at this age reflects less the need to be dramatic and more the fear of the rapidly changing body that is taking them further away from their true nature as the days pass.

*Increasingly I felt that something was wrong with me. I didn't know what it was. It seemed to get much worse whenever I was in the locker room changing for gym. Somehow being around all those girls made me feel horrible about myself. I started to dread PE, even though I am a great athlete. I started to cut gym class. Finally my coach told me I wouldn't be able to play basketball if I kept it up. I responded to this by not going to school. My parents didn't know. When they found out they were really worried. I had been an honor roll athlete type all of my life.*

*They sent me to therapy. Over the next few months my therapist and I began to think I was a lesbian. But somehow it just didn't fit. It helped for a few months, but then the depression was back. Finally we started to explore my gender. I was completely freaked out. I totally felt like a guy. I had always felt like a guy. But there was no way I was going to be one of those weird transgender people.*

*My therapist helped me to understand that I was not weird. He explained that it is other people who just don't understand. He explained that some people are transgender and it is normal. He told me there have always been transgender people. He told*

*me they were not perverts. I was really scared to talk to my parents about it. Finally my therapist and I did it together.*

*I am so much happier now living as a boy. I know that the problems just come from lack of understanding. I wish everyone could just be educated about all the possibilities rather than being told you are a girl or a boy. I almost threw my whole life away—just because no one had ever told me that being transgender was a normal possibility.*

*If I could change one thing, it would be that all people were required to understand that there are more than two categories of gender. That way other kids won't have to suffer like I did.*  
—17-year-old transboy

## Social Anxiety

All too many transgender teens are afraid of going out with friends at all, let alone dating. It does not have to be this way. This response usually comes from a combination of internalized shame about who they are and a lack of full support from their parents. If your child is reclusive it is a good idea to get them help from a trained therapist, and possibly to seek family counseling. Likewise, it is important for you to help your teen make contact with other transgender teenagers so they can see they are not alone. The Internet is the primary way for teens to connect with one another—but it cannot replace valuable in-person relationships.

## Crushes and Dating

*I don't have a problem dating. I've had lots of girlfriends. But I NEVER date girls from my school. —15-year-old transboy*

*I date. Sure, I date. But I am very careful. I get to know someone first. I always tell them first. Now everyone at my school knows,*

*but I tell them anyway to see how they react to my face. Some of the guys I date are gay. They feel better about dating me because I am a girl with boy parts. I am not gay. But I end up with a lot of gay guys. —17-year-old transgirl*

*I can't imagine ever dating. No one at my school knows. What if the girl I wanted to date didn't understand and went and told everyone? It's not worth it, I'm going to wait. —16-year-old transboy*

A lot of parents are very nervous about the prospect of their gender-variant or transgender teen developing crushes or dating. Some parents go so far as to ban their children from dating. Although this response is certainly understandable, it is based in fear. It's not a healthy way to approach your child's normal and age-appropriate developmental striving for romance, dating, sexual feelings, and finding a partner. We strongly encourage you to allow your child to date, but you will need to educate them about responsible dating and safe sex.

Most cross-gender children are already nervous about dating. If they are not open about their transgender status, they do not see any possible way they could date. They are afraid of two things—rejection and being outed. And these are very real concerns. Dating and sexual exploration are a normal part of the teenage years for many cross-gender teens. So, as with all things in parenting, it is most helpful to be proactive and to figure out how to best support your child through these times.

You and your child may be surprised by the positive reactions of teens to dating transgender teens. The most common response can be summarized by an eighth-grade student who said: "When you are hot, you're hot! Who cares what is in your pants!"

While other teens may be open to dating your child, we do not recommend that your teen ever get into a situation where their date could potentially discover this information by surprise. For example, this could easily happen through many types of sexual intimacy. The danger comes

from the date being completely unprepared for such a discovery and reacting in an impulsive or physically threatening way. Your teen should not engage in any sexual activity with someone who is not aware of their transgender status, as a necessary means of self-protection.

This is very important for you to discuss with your teen. Sexually inexperienced teens do not realize the various ways this could come up. They may think they are safe if they are just kissing—many sexually inexperienced teens do not know that kissing often leads to roaming hands. They may think that darkness will hide their anatomy. To an adult, these are obvious misperceptions, but they are not so obvious to an inexperienced teen. Furthermore, many transmale teens—*anatomical female* teens who identify as male—do not realize that they can get pregnant by having intercourse, because they do not think of themselves as female.

Because there is an increased likelihood of self-deprecation, body shame, and body hatred for transgender teens, it is essential to have sensitive conversations about sex with your teen. Transgender teenagers who have been rejected by their parents or caregivers have a much greater chance of engaging in risky sexual behaviors than those from families with low or no rejection. Transgender teenagers need to be taught about safer sex precautions. This can be an emotionally loaded conversation for your teen, who may reject their sexual anatomy because it doesn't feel as though this anatomy is theirs. Take the time to instruct them about the need for protection. You can do this most effectively by using gender-neutral words to describe their anatomy. For example: "If you choose to have intercourse of any kind, you have to use a condom in order to be safe." Diseases can be communicated by anal and genital contact, so please make sure you use a dental dam or a condom if your body will have any penetration by others, or if you will be orally pleasuring your sexual partner."

If you cannot bring yourself to have these conversations with your child, we understand. Also, many teens cannot hear this kind of information from their parents. If this is the case, you must find others who can provide this information. This is a concrete way you can help keep

your child safe. Take the time to contact the nearest LGBT center, transgender organization, or sexual education center and ask for referrals. Keep searching until you find someone. Planned Parenthood often has very good educators, but you will need to prescreen them to make sure they have information about transgender sexual health. Some organizations provide transgender mentors for trans teens who are able to share information on sex and sexuality when parents cannot.

#### Sexual Orientation of Your Transgender Teen

Transgender teens and parents of transgender teens alike can be confused about the differences and overlap between sexual orientation and gender identity. A transgender person can have any sexual orientation. If your child identifies as male and is attracted to females, he is straight. This is true even though your son is anatomically female. Conversely, if your son prefers to date boys, he is gay, even though he is anatomically female. If you are focusing on your child's anatomy, this can become confusing. Remember that this is about your child's gender identity, not their anatomical sex. A growing number of gender-variant and transgender teens identify as genderqueer and date within a pool of teens who also have a broad view of gender and sexual orientation.

Even if your child does not identify as gay, lesbian, or genderqueer, sometimes the safest dating pool and support network for them will be the people connected with their local gay-straight alliance. Youth associated with these school clubs are typically more informed and are more accepting of gender diversity. Likewise, if there is a local community group for gay and lesbian teens—but not one yet for gender-variant, genderqueer, or transgender teens, your child may find some solace in making connection with such groups.

#### Be Prepared

Teenagers get into lots of unexpected situations. Some of these will be mere mishaps, but others may be more serious. Unfortunately, your

trans teen runs a greater risk than the average teen of encountering problems with the police. We recommend that any transgender teenager carry on their person, at all times, a notarized letter from their doctor or therapist explaining that they are transgender. The letter should emphasize the need for sensitivity and privacy around this issue. This letter may help redirect the police officer from pressing the transgender issue as the crime or from revealing the information too broadly. We know that teens are highly unlikely to be prepared unless you help them out. Resize the letter to a wallet-size card and take it to a copy store to be laminated. Make sure the card folds over so it is discreet. Then take your teen wallet-shopping and tuck this card into a pocket where it will be hidden until needed. A sample letter is offered in Appendix 2 of this book.

In a number of situations across the country police officers have put a transgender teenager's life in danger by spreading word of the child's gender status. Although we truly hope that your teen will never have reason to produce that letter from their wallet, it is reassuring to you as a parent to know that they have it.

Finally, to further their safety, make sure that your child always has a way to reach you by supplying them with a cell phone. You should also have a conversation reassuring them that if they are ever in danger, or just suspect they might be getting into a situation they possibly can't handle, they should call you, and no matter the hour or their location, you will come and get them without judgment or questions.

Right before this book went to press, several tragedies occurred with gender-nonconforming teens as victims. We are aware that the world is still not a truly safe place for transgender, gender-nonconforming, and lesbian and gay teens. While no one can ever fully anticipate a violent reaction from others, we urge parents to have a conversation with their kids about personal safety that is as honest as possible. We sincerely hope that with continued societal education, such reactions will soon become a distant reality.