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Teenagers and gender identity: the evidence base

Part 3: How parents can support their children

Matilda Gosling

About this paper

This paper is the final part of a series summarising the evidence base on teenagers and gender identity for parents. This part of the paper looks at practical ways in which parents of gender-questioning teenagers may be able to help their children. Part 1 looked at reasons teenagers might start to question their gender. Part 2 looked at treatment and outcomes.

About Sex Matters

Sex Matters is a UK-based not-for-profit organisation with a single mission: to re-establish that sex matters in rules, laws, policies, language and culture to protect everybody's human rights. We campaign, advocate and produce resources to promote clarity about sex in law, policy and institutions.
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About the author

Matilda Gosling is a social researcher whose specialisms include issues affecting children and young people. She has worked for governments, charities, foundations and private-sector organisations internationally, and has overseen field research in more than 60 countries. As well as conducting commissioned and independent research, she is writing two evidence-based parenting books.

Thank you to the interviewees, all experts in gender identity, who generously lent their time and insights to this paper. I spoke to several specialist psychotherapists: Lisa Marchiano, Marcus Evans, Sasha Ayad, Stella O'Malley and Susan Evans. I also spoke to representatives of several support groups: the Gender Dysphoria Support Network; Our Duty, represented by its co-founder, Keith Jordan; and Transgender Trend, represented by its Director, Stephanie Davies-Arai. Finally, I spoke to a parent member of the Bayswater Support Group and to social theorist Dr Heather Brunskell-Evans.

All personal stories shared by interviewees have been anonymised. Some other information has been anonymised too, where necessary.

About the contributors

Sasha Ayad is a licensed professional counsellor working in private practice, and has treated adolescents for more than 13 years. She works with teenagers and young adults struggling with issues of gender dysphoria and gender identity, and offers support and coaching to parents with gender-questioning children. She co-founded and co-hosts the podcast *Gender: A Wider Lens*.

Dr Heather Brunskell-Evans has been at the forefront of the campaign to protect the rights of gender-non-conforming children and young people since 2015. She is a key figure in academia, analysing and challenging the claims of queer theory and the social construction of the"'transgender child".

Stephanie Davies-Arai is the founder and director of Transgender Trend, the leading UK organisation calling for evidence-based healthcare for gender-dysphoric children and young people, and fact-based teaching in schools. She is also a communication-skills expert, teacher trainer, parent coach and author.

Marcus Evans is a psychoanalyst. He had various roles at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, including associate clinical director of the adult and adolescent departments. He is the author of three books, including *Making Room for Madness in Mental Health* and *Psychoanalytic Thinking in Mental Health Settings*.

Susan Evans is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in private practice. She worked in the NHS for nearly 40 years, including time at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, where she worked in the adult department and the Gender Identity Development Service for children. She has worked within many mental-health specialist services; developed, managed and delivered courses for frontline mental health staff; and was a senior fellow at the University of East London.

Keith Jordan co-founded Our Duty in 2018, which is an organisation that supports parents challenging the medical transition of children. He is a qualified teacher and has an MBA.

Lisa Marchiano is a clinical social worker, a certified Jungian analyst and a nationally certified psychoanalyst. She has been writing and publishing pieces on issues relating to gender dysphoria since 2016.

Stella O'Malley is a psychotherapist with many years' experience in counselling and psychotherapy. She has written several books: *Cotton Wool Kids, Bully-Proof Kids, Fragile* and her fourth book, *What your teen is trying to tell you,* which was released in March 2023. She is the founder and director of Genspect and she co-hosts the podcast *Gender: A Wider Lens.*

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Introduction

This paper contains practical ideas for the parents and carers of gender-questioning teenagers. It is based on the model of supportive waiting, which does not prejudge outcomes for a gender-questioning child, but instead prioritises their well-being and state of mind. The gender-affirming care model for teenagers, on the other hand, promotes social transition (using, for example, different pronouns and a new name) and medical transition, which can include puberty blockers and/or hormone treatment.

Part two of this paper sets out the evidence behind both approaches, and shows that the evidence base underpinning the gender-affirming care model contains serious flaws. While the evidence and advice used to inform the rest of this piece are, necessarily, selective, they are based on the approach with greatest potential to support gender-questioning teenagers according to current evidence. Part one also provides useful background to this.

Most available advice for parents uncritically reflects the gender-affirming care model. A Google search on *advice for parents of teenagers with gender dysphoria* brings up guidance from well-respected organisations that children must be affirmed by parents in their chosen identities.[1] There are 16 articles encouraging parents to accept unquestioningly what children say they are and to support them to transition socially, before a link appears to an article containing any suggestion that this may not be the most appropriate, supportive action for children's long-term well-being.[2]

The ideas set out here are varied. They are not a prescription – instead, they present different starting points that may be helpful for your child and your family. You will know which ones are most likely to be useful for your child. As psychotherapist Marcus Evans puts it: "There is no magic expert answer to this. There are… helpful general principles."[3] Context is incredibly important, and everyone's situation is different. Experts' own knowledge is constantly evolving and changing, too. "This is a new phenomenon, and we are all learning together," says therapist and teenage counsellor Sasha Ayad.[4]

The early teenage years are when children begin to separate from their parents. Stephanie Davies-Arai, founder and director of Transgender Trend, offers reassurance: "Children will listen to you when they're young and think that you're right – and the start of the teenage years is when they think you are wrong on everything, and they are more influenced by their peer group than they are by you. It is natural and a normal part of development. The child sometimes has to rebel."[5] According to Marcus Evans, one job for parents is to tread the line between not suppressing this legitimate wish to rebel and to make decisions for themselves, and intervening when teenagers want to do things that are reckless and that may lead to harm.[6]

Much of what is covered in this paper can be reduced to good parenting strategies. These include building relationships, being

affectionate, having firm boundaries and reducing conflict. Keith Jordan, a spokesperson for the parent support group Our Duty, recommends what he terms “bog-standard good parenting” when dealing with a gender-distressed teenager[7] (which does not mean, of course, that you are a bad parent if you have a gender-distressed child – it means instead that there are some useful general principles to which it may be helpful to return). Another overarching principle is that thinking holistically is more useful than a narrow focus on gender identity.[8] The role of a parent is to encourage children to develop, to open their horizons and to avoid closing things down.[9]

There are some important notes I want to highlight. When I talk about parents in this paper, it is a shorthand – I include all carers of teenagers. In cases in which I have reported interviews as a general source for a paragraph but not used direct quotes, I may have summarised interviewees’ views in a slightly different way from what they would have chosen – any mistakes on this front are my own. Direct quotes are taken from transcripts. In a couple of cases, interviewees made some minor changes to their points after the interview.

A further note relates to the point I have made about there being no clear roadmap. Parents of distressed teenagers face a difficult, hugely stressful challenge in supporting them. The journey is a long one for many families, and external influences on outcomes – for example, friendship groups, schools and the internet – are many and varied. Parental support can take children only so far. A final, crucial point is that this paper cannot help all situations, and it does not pretend to – it provides some ideas for parents who might not otherwise know where to begin.

Engaging with gender

First steps

If you are reading this paper as the parent of a younger child or a teenager who has not started to question their gender, you have the opportunity to prepare yourself for a possible future first conversation about this area. When a child first mentions they are considering a different identity, psychotherapist Stella O'Malley advises parents to speak little, listen a lot and take time to research the issue before they respond. You might say something like: "My job, as an adult, is to guide you – but I can't guide you until I know about it."[10]

The key, according to Bayswater Support Group, is to ensure that your child feels able to keep communicating with you, and does not see you as a barrier.[11] O'Malley cautions that it is easy to say something, in the face of high emotion, that will make things harder later on. "It's about listening," she says. "It's about showing compassion in your body and face, and admitting: 'I'm at sea.'"[12] Active listening can be useful in early conversations about gender. This means finding slightly different words to check that you understand what your child has told you, without adding your own feelings about what they have said or ideas about what to do next.[13]

Davies-Arai advises parents not to panic. The issue is so big, and there have been so many publicised stories, that fear can claim centre stage – but panic may make the situation worse for your child. She says: "The teenage years are notorious for throwing up really worrying issues for parents. If we are focusing on one issue, we can be almost looking out for it – and in the way that we respond to our child, we can focus too much on it." Instead, she recommends taking an emotional step back.[14]

Whether gender identity, mental-health difficulties, or wild and risky behaviour is your concern, Davies-Arai suggests acting as if you absolutely trust your teenager, that you are confident in them, and that these are not issues that frighten you. "I'm not saying pretend. I am saying act *as if*. It's not about acting very bright and cheerful when you are really worried, but really getting into that place where you can create that confidence in your child within yourself. Fake it to make it." She adds that it takes a bit of focus, but if you can create this confidence in yourself, you will communicate it to your child. "In other words, don't treat them as an idiot."[15]

Summary of ideas

- Don't engage at first – just listen (actively, if possible).
- Show compassion in your face and your body.
- Take an emotional step back.
- Act as if you absolutely trust your teenager, and as if these issues do not frighten you.
- Research before you respond.

Learning and understanding

Your approach with your child needs to be informed by an understanding of the reasons they may be experiencing distress. Mental health is an important consideration, as are neurodevelopmental conditions, trauma, whether your child is same-sex attracted and how much time they have spent engaging with trans-influencer material online. More information about each of these possible contributing factors is available in the first part of this paper.

Psychotherapist and Jungian analyst Lisa Marchiano adds a further possible dimension: "Kids are recruiting gender to assist with developmental tasks such as separating from their parents. Your 13-year-old needs to be separating from you, and this is one of the ways [she or he has] chosen to do it."[16] Marcus Evans observes that gender-questioning teenagers are sometimes compliant, passive, identity-seeking children who like to be in control of their emotions. Their aggressive, rebellious feelings get channelled into gender identity. "In many ways," says Evans, "they may be trying to distance themselves from the child they imagine their parents wished they were [in order] to become themselves. Difficulties in thinking about this sort of conflict at a symbolic level mean that their plans are often rather concrete – that is, 'To become myself, I have to change my gender.'"[17]

Gender identity may also be an internal reflection of what is happening externally. Detransitioners writing for Our Duty say that a transgender identification might stop unwanted sexual harassment, remove a pressure to have romantic relationships or offer greater freedom: "Boys who love glitter and dresses and ballet might feel they will find it harder to find social acceptance 'as a man' than if they were to transition and 'live as' a woman.'"[18]

Gender identity certainly needs to be understood in relation to other people. Teenagers' identity is the most important thing to them, according to Davies-Arai, and this can extend to gender. "We know that the child may be identifying this way to gain status in a peer group. It may be that other girls have started identifying as trans or non-binary, and everyone is looking up to them. They may be doing it to gain that social status, and it may be a stage. Teenagers try on all sorts of things to establish their identities. They do it by establishing it within a group or a tribe first – and if a child has discovered the trans or non-binary tribe, they have to adopt the markers of the tribe: language, hair and dress. It's a serious first stage of identity development."[19]

Your child's situation, and how these factors combine with each other or with other influences, are almost certainly unique. The Gender Exploratory Therapy Association describes a number of ways in which drivers of a desire to change identity may coalesce: "Aspects of the relationships with one or both parents may cause or exacerbate pain, rejection, or confusion. Trans identification may serve to reject, control, distance, punish, or usurp the parent. On the other hand, it may be a plea for attention and recognition, an attempt to bridge distance, or a way to become someone who will be more lovable. Sibling

relationships may be competitive… The potential dynamics in which the gender issues are emerging are multiple."[20] Understanding the mechanisms that underpin how your child is feeling can help you to see how much your child's gender identity is a helpful construct to get them through school or other challenges, and how much it is a destructive label.[21]

The first steps to understanding your child's route to a questioning of identity are to observe them[22] and to listen carefully to what they are saying underneath the headline messages.[23] Another is to find out what they have been consuming, which means retreading some of the steps that your child has taken. What are they watching on YouTube? What are they reading online? Sites and forums to check might include Reddit, Tumblr, Discord, DeviantArt and Instagram. Understanding what has led your child to feel the way they do can help you to navigate the next stages.[24/25]

Parents' jobs are much harder when teenagers have spent considerable amounts of time engaging online with ideas around gender identity and when they have friends who centre these ideas, too. These teenagers are likely to be much more invested in their sense of gender identity.[26] It is also important to understand how long your child has been thinking about this issue. According to Jordan, once a child has been ruminating for years, they are so emotionally committed to their position that there is shame in backing out of it. It is simpler for parents if they are able to get involved at an early stage.[27]

You may also want to look out for parental blindspots. Marcus Evans says that family dynamics are important, and that there has often been a trauma involving a sibling – for example, a sibling illness that has distracted the parents. "There is a grievance against the parents," he says. "'You let me down.'… We all have [parental] faults, [but] trying to placate the child's rage by collapsing into a guilty state or confessional mode is unhelpful." Instead, trying to understand what lies beneath is likely to be more productive.[28] It is worth, too, spending some time reading or watching material about what particular steps may mean for your child: for example, the effects of puberty blockers on a developing body.[29] Part two of this series may be helpful here.

Summary of ideas

- Try to understand your child's pathway to gender distress.
- Observe your child carefully, and try to work out what may be happening under the headline messages they are giving.
- Find out what your child has been consuming.
- Look for parental blindspots.
- Read more about what particular avenues might mean for your child.

Social transition

Social transition, as I define it here, means using a different name from your child's birth name, and pronouns that do not align with your child's sex. Some people include hair and dress within social transition, although for me (and I do not purport to speak for my interviewees here), hair and dress are more to do with gender non-conformity and moving away from sex-based stereotypes. A section on social transition in part two of this series outlines evidence suggesting it may contribute to lasting gender dysphoria.

Social transition is complex and should not be underestimated, according to O'Malley. "I think it's a powerful psychosocial intervention, and parents should be aware that it has never happened before in history that we've changed pronouns en masse and changed people's identities."[30] One interviewee, a member of Bayswater Support Group, advises parents to understand the enormity of what social transition might mean before they make a decision. "Parents go down the path thinking it is reversible, and they subsequently realise it impacts the outcome."[31]

There is no single route for parents when it comes to social transition, according to Davies-Arai. "I would never say: 'Don't ever use the pronouns or the new name.' You know your child best. Think about, as a parent, what you are prepared to do, and be honest about that. In my case, I would say: 'I am not prepared to use pronouns that don't match your sex… because it would be beyond my own conscience. I can't pretend that reality doesn't exist.'" You might also explain that you think it would be harmful for your child: "But don't lecture. Practise your 'goes without saying' voice."[32]

Using a new nickname – while avoiding the use of different pronouns – can be a compromise in some families, so long as the name is gender-neutral (this is to avoid it cementing identity and related distress).[33] The Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative recommends using a term of endearment or a pet name: "Many of us have nicknames for our children."[34] It is important that you have some say in the name used, even if it is different to the one their friends are using. You may feel, though, that a new name could make an identity stick rather than remain fluid.[35]

Names can be approached, perhaps, a little more lightly and flexibly than pronouns.[36] There is no long-term research on changing pronouns,[37] and – as set out at the start of this section – categorically treating a child in this way may make their dysphoria more concrete.[38] Keeping sex-based pronouns allows your child a connection to reality,[39] and a pathway back if they later change their minds.

How you engage with your child on this issue, of course, needs to be informed by their age and the context. The most straightforward situation is one in which newly questioning younger teenagers have good mental health and a good relationship with their parents, and there is no reason to suspect they have spent significant amounts of

time immersed in online content about gender identity. If this is the case, Marchiano recommends setting clear boundaries around what you will and will not tolerate – for example, using children's birth name and sex-based pronouns at home.[40] Jordan warns that you may need to have conversations with relatives about names and pronouns if you have made a decision not to go ahead with social transition.[41]

In situations in which a less definitive approach seems appropriate, Davies-Arai says: "You can soften that approach while also remaining true to yourself and your perceptions of reality. You can say: 'Oh, that is interesting. I won't always remember to do that. I'm not sure if it's the right thing to do.' Keep it non-combative. Keep the communication channels open. Keep a good relationship where the child will tell you things."[42]

Consistency is important, which means not changing your mind regularly on names and pronouns.[43] Any boundaries relating to social transition also need to be enforceable. Parents cannot influence what teenagers get called by their friends, and attempting to do so risks undermining your other efforts to engage constructively with your child. As Marchiano puts it: "You will waste your parental authority if you try to set limits that you cannot enforce."[44] There are other reasons, too, against trying to influence what happens within your child's friendship groups. O'Malley is clear that children need their own peer interaction away from adults, and would be relaxed about social transition among friends.[45]

While your decision at home may be dictated by your particular circumstances, and what your child's friends call your child is outside your sphere of influence, you should probably be less flexible in your approach with the local authority and your child's school. "Adults and schools and institutions… give an imprimatur to this identity," says O'Malley.[46] Ideas about how to advocate with your child with these institutions are given in the Advocating for your child section.

A note on non-binary identities

It may be that teenagers who identify as non-binary or gender fluid need a less carefully considered approach than you might adopt for other gender-questioning teenagers, if you are unconcerned about underlying issues. It may be a normal part of identity exploration, akin to using black nail polish, having a dramatic new haircut or wanting to be a little edgy. According to Marchiano, "She's just playing around a little bit. And it gives you a social credibility, but this is a kid who is not going to dig further into the ideology, who is not going to cloak herself in this mantle in a way in which other developmental interests and challenges get shunted aside. This is part of the fabric of a fairly normal developmental process." There is probably nothing to worry about if your child is happy and they have plenty of different interests.[47]

There are others, though, who get locked into ideas about gender in a less harmless way. Some non-binary teenagers end up seeking

mastectomies. Marchiano advises that while it may be naive to have no concerns about the possible trajectory of a non-binary identity, it is also important not to over-react. You can identify the teenagers who may need more support with underlying issues "when they go dark, and you get the feeling they are just up in their room all the time on the internet – and when they come down, they've got this black cloud around them". You may need to be more concerned, says Marchiano, if your child has autistic traits, or if they are using their identity to avoid school or friends or hobbies, or to wield power in your relationship with each other. She also believes that parents know their own children and can trust their instincts here. "You can probably discern if there's something that feels like it is being held lightly and the kid might move through it, or is the kid latching onto it really hard?"[48]

Summary of ideas

- Do not underestimate the potential impacts of social transition.
- Use your knowledge of your child to inform any decision about names. Consider using a nickname as a compromise.
- Be wary of changing your child's pronouns.
- Soften your approach, if needed, while remaining true to your perceptions of reality.
- Do not be combative.
- Make sure any boundaries you set are enforceable.
- Be relaxed about social transition among friends.
- Be very unrelaxed about social transition by other adults and institutions, including your child's school.

Minimising gender-related conflicts

Battlegrounds between parents and teenagers can be centred on gender, but what is happening is often much wider than that. There needs to be an understanding of what is going on with the teenager in the broadest sense. They are struggling to establish their identity, according to Marcus Evans. They narrow down to this one area of preoccupation their entire field of experience, their sense of who they are and their transition from childhood to adulthood.[49]

Having arguments about this issue can drive a wedge between you both.[50] Vociferously trying to persuade your child out of their gender beliefs can lead to resentment and, later, to them being stuck developmentally in their teenage years.[51] "You have to be careful about not feeding the fire," says Marchiano. If you state simply that "We are not doing that," you risk making it a real battle-ground.[52] An Our Duty piece cautions that teenagers may see rejection of their beliefs as being a rejection of who they are: "Parental alienation can occur as a result of arguments around ideology. Tread carefully."[53]

It is important to keep communicating. At the same time, you can share your concerns, keeping them brief and to the point. The key is to avoid power struggles.[54] Any disagreements should also be made respectfully and empathetically, and you may choose not to disagree at all if you think your child is particularly fragile or invested – you will know them best.[55] It is not a question of avoiding all conflict, according to Marcus Evans, but if conflicts become repetitive and routine, they are probably being used as a distraction from other issues. "In some cases, the child provides a conflict, as they feel most convicted in their beliefs when arguing against someone else… Doubts and confusion must be acknowledged when they are left to consider their views without an antagonist to fight against."[56]

Social theorist and philosopher Heather Brunskell-Evans recommends remaining open with teenagers during times of disagreement about gender. "We've got ourselves backed into a corner here where the only [way to keep dialogue open] is to affirm and agree with the ideology. This could be an opportunity for children to demonstrate that it is possible to disagree and the world doesn't fall apart." Gender is a great opportunity to talk, she says, if you can avoid moralising. It can be particularly useful if you can paint rejection of stereotypes and openness to everyone presenting however they want – no matter what their underlying characteristics – as the progressive position.[57]

Trying to be positive with your child, while remaining neutral about gender issues, may be an alternative approach.[58] Parents may also need to accept that you agree to disagree, says one interviewee, particularly when they have older teenagers. This does not mean accepting everything your child says unquestioningly, though: "You're not going to get anywhere if you are just trying to be your kid's friend."[59] The place to put down firm boundaries is on homework, tidying the table, how they treat siblings and putting their phone away at the table. "It's about asking the kids to come into the world of the family and not

be excused out of it. You want to demonstrate an empathy that they feel distressed, and show it can be borne."[60]

Summary of ideas

- Try to understand what might be driving conflict.
- Avoid arguing with your child about gender issues, if you can, and be careful about rejecting their beliefs.
- Express any disagreement respectfully and empathetically.
- Avoid power struggles.
- Keep communicating.
- Agree to disagree, where needed.
- Focus boundaries on family life.

Broadening perspectives

Conversations about gender are best approached by opening perspectives up rather than closing ideas down. Marchiano advises approaching everything with a friendly curiosity, which can prevent things from becoming too rigid or reified. She says: "If your kid is saying, 'I have dysphoria,' you might model being really curious about it – so, 'When does it come up? What do you think about that? Let's listen to it. Let's let it talk. Let's see what it has to say.' Have a radical curiosity about it."[61] Open-ended questions can be useful – you might, for example, ask how they know they are not really a girl, or what they think might happen if they changed from a girl to a boy (or vice versa). It's important to keep these questions as neutral as possible in their framing. If you are non-judgemental, your child will know they can talk to you.[62]/ [63]

"One of the most neutral ways to engage with our daughter was to talk about ideas," says one interviewee. "Rather than talking about her and her male identity, which was very personal, we used the frame of: 'I am interested in what you think. I want to understand this. Do you think sex is real? Do you think it matters, or is it always gender identity?… What does it mean to feel like a woman inside?'" She advises never mocking or dismissing ideas. Domestic violence and prisons policy can be useful areas with which to engage, she says. A "penny drop" moment for her daughter came from the realisation that trans people (and

specifically trans men who were being missed for cervical screening) were being harmed by an insufficient focus on sex within medicine.[64]

At the same time, it is advisable to help your child focus on ideas and activities that extend beyond the narrow world of gender, at the same time as noticing and understanding what your child is trying to avoid through their endless preoccupation.[65] According to Susan Evans, "You are trying to help broaden out the life, the thinking, the experiences."[66]

According to Davies-Arai, the more interest we show in an area, the more the child is encouraged to hold on to it.[67] Downplaying gender can buy you time, according to another interviewee. "We were in it for five years. We were ignoring it for the best part of this time – ignoring gender and that frightening barrelling towards medicalisation. At the time, it felt like we were failing. In hindsight, it was the best thing we did." This interviewee recommends trying to broaden your child's interests as a counterpoint to downplaying gender.[68] This might involve trying to maintain a good connection with your child and doing activities together that they are willing to do.[69] Ideas on this are available in the Connecting mind and body section below.

Summary of ideas

- Approach conversations about gender with a friendly curiosity.
- Try to open up perspectives, not close them down.
- Support your child to think about issues unrelated to gender and to broaden their range of experiences.

Transition decisions

Parents need to move slowly and carefully when it comes to engaging with their children about transition decisions. Curiosity is likely to be more helpful than judgement,[70] and categorical denial of a particular pathway risks cementing your child's perspective. Detransitioner advice summarised by Our Duty puts it this way:

> "Remember what it is like to be a teenager. Forbidding anything is likely to get some sort of pushback. What we can do is shift the focus from forbidding to delaying bigger decisions until they're older. Using excuses such as 'This year we have your GCSEs to focus on, and a referral to [gender identity services] can wait a bit longer. Let's put everything we can into getting you a great education so you can do the career [of] your life, transition is always going to be an option around the corner.' Teenagers can be receptive to this type of reasoning, where outright forbidding them will make them feel infantilised and controlled, and they are more likely to dive deeper into gender identity."[71]

It can be useful to build a golden bridge for your child. "You have a teenager who wants to hate you," says the Bayswater Support Group member. The potential of this to cause damage can be mitigated by never implying that you are absolutely closing down the issue. For younger teenagers, it may help to say things like: "This is for you to decide when you're older. It's a big decision. It needs to be the right decision."[72] Desisters and detransitioners report finding it easier to turn back if they had parents or a friendship group who had previously expressed concerns, as long as there was no message of: "I told you so."[73]

Teenagers entering adulthood are able to make their own choices, and this needs to be factored into how parents engage with their decisions about transition. You can convey that it is healthy and normal to have doubts, and that these are big steps.[74] However, parents should avoid coercing adult teenagers into delaying transition – for example, by offering financial support during university only if they delay. Therapist and teenage counsellor Sasha Ayad cautions that doing so risks a potential relationship breakdown between you and your child, and your teenager getting emotionally stunted. It may be better for them to come to any realisation later, on their own. This does not mean that you need to agree with their choices, or say you agree – but instead make clear that while you do not support this pathway, once they are independent of you it is their own decision. Ayad points out that being clear to your child about their autonomy in this area can make them feel less trapped: "Trapped kids do desperate things."[75]

In other cases, however, Ayad has observed that young adult children with healthy and strong relationships with their parents may benefit from being supported to slow down any medical decisions. Young adults may feel tremendous external pressure to "transition", yet may harbour ambivalence or fear about such consequential decisions.

Sometimes when parents draw a hard line, this offers the young person a tangible excuse for moving slowly and having more time to think.[76]

You can convey a message that you love your child and that you understand they are having a difficult time, says Susan Evans, and that you would really like it if you could look at things together. You can help them to explore and to share their concerns while being clear about your own beliefs. If your child is still living at home, she advises continuing to exercise parental authority in areas such as participation in family life.[77]

With older teenagers, "You have to tread that careful line where you never want the relationship to break down," says the Bayswater Support Group member. "You don't ever want to reach complete breaking point."[78]

Where you may want to push back slightly with an older teenager is in the area of uncertainty, by encouraging them to own their own doubts. One risk is that doubts reside with the parent, and the teenager retains all the certainty. Marcus Evans says that teenagers need to take ownership of their own doubts and worries, otherwise they are exporting the problem to become conflict between the two of you rather than a proper assessment of concerns. It is important to make clear to teenagers that they will have to make the decisions and live with the consequences, and as a result, they need to own all aspects of this decision-making process – including sitting with these doubts and questions.[79]

Parents may be concerned about conflict with younger teenagers if they hold the boundary and transition is delayed. While conflict on this issue needs to be minimised (see Minimising gender-related conflicts above), some level of conflict is probably inevitable – and this is not necessarily a bad thing when it relates to parents holding their authority on an important boundary. "It's the child's job to push the barriers," says O'Malley. "It's the parents' job to keep the barriers. You're probably not going to slow the kid down and convince them [that it is the right thing to delay transition]. What we might convince them of is that 'My parents are loving and are convinced that this should be done slowly.'"[80]

For teenagers who are pushing for transition as quickly as possible, Marchiano suggests setting a hard limit, whatever the reaction – teenagers are not always going to agree with you, and you may need to take the heat. She cautions parents to avoid language that implies an instant transition at the age of 18. "I say to parents of younger kids who say 'We're not going to do anything until you're 18' that it really sneaks up on you. It's better to say something like: 'When you are on your own, have your own job, when you've had a few relationships – if you want to do something like that, you can – but you've got to fully launch into adulthood before you can take that on.'"[81]

Marchiano recognises that it may be hard to unpick the black and white thinking that may come from being on the autistic spectrum or from having spent a lot of time engaging with online material about

gender ideology. In an ideal world, she says, a family might disappear to an internet-free zone in Alaska for six months. By the time they get back, a more nuanced version of reality will have returned.[82]

For the vast majority of families for whom this is not practicable, she recommends better listening and encouraging more flexible thinking. Better listening means asking questions and really listening to the answers, whether you agree or not with what is being said – this may bring a bit of softening in your child. Flexible thinking can be developed by normalising ambivalence. If your child is absolutely certain about something, Marchiano suggests saying something like: "Most of us are never sure about anything, really. The normal state is to feel a little bit mixed. I feel mixed about what I want for dinner tonight. I felt mixed when I married your mum. Because people do feel ambivalent about every big decision. It doesn't mean I'm not happy I did it but yeah, I have my doubts. I think it's interesting you don't have any doubts about this. Can we talk about that more?"

You might develop flexible thinking, too, by taking an indirect route – perhaps watching a documentary about cults or the opioid crisis together. Gender does not feature, but you might have a discussion with your child about how these things come about.[83]

Summary of ideas

- Move slowly and carefully, and be compassionate.
- Be nuanced, not definitive, in your discussions – with the exception of transition timeframes: be clear with younger teenagers that you have a firm boundary on early transition.
- Let teenagers entering adulthood make their own choices, even if physical harm is involved.
- Encourage older teenagers to own their own doubts.
- Focus on listening and encouraging flexible thinking in your child.
- Build a golden bridge for your child so it is easy for them to change tack.

Supporting yourself

Parents of gender-questioning teenagers have to balance their child's needs relating to healthy development and future well-being, considerations of how to maintain a strong connection to their child in the face of potentially conflicting beliefs, the needs of the rest of the family and their own mental health. These may be some of the toughest times parents encounter. This section does not pretend that the weight of these competing pressures can be lessened, but there may be some ideas that help them to be carried.

Support needs vary according to the individual. "Some need to immerse themselves," says the Bayswater Support Group interviewee. "There are others who need to pretend it's not happening. Whatever keeps you sane." There is a silence around this issue which you would not have to contend with if your child was experiencing comparable challenges in another area, which can be particularly hard for parents. "It feels like you're in an upside-down world, with people conspiring to get your child further down a harmful path."[84]

Accessing external support

Talking to other parents is extremely important for parents of gender-questioning teenagers, as is the exchange of ideas that forms part of this.[85] "Every parent needs a good friend who will listen to them and not judge them – a friend who… will agree with you and never make you feel you are a bigot for feeling this way," says Davies-Arai.[86] It is worth finding a person or a group where you can speak in confidence without having to explain yourself and without others questioning your motives.[87] Another school parent may be this person if you do not have anyone in your immediate circle.[88]

Good support groups can help you maintain a good relationship with your teenager while avoiding affirmation,[89] and can help you, too.[90] Groups include the Bayswater Support Group (UK), the Gender Dysphoria Support Network (international), Our Duty (UK) and Parents of ROGD Kids (US – note that the website has not been updated recently, so it may be less active than others). Over the past few years, says Jordan, people have felt very constrained in what they can say in social settings. Support groups offer an environment where parents "can say what the hell they like, and no-one will mind. It's very liberating and gives confidence as situations arise with their children – if you are part of a group, you can sound the group out for ideas."[91] You might want to vary which support group you access depending on your mood and situation at the time, as they each meet different needs.[92] Organisations such as Transgender Trend (UK) and 4thWaveNow (US) can also be helpful through provision of resources and guidance.

It is well worth considering therapy for yourself. "Don't scrimp on that," says O'Malley. "People so often will pay all sorts of money for their teenager, but won't pay for themselves, and they're very wrong… It's much more effective to get help yourself and then think about whether your kid needs help."[93] Coaching on parenting should form part of this,

which is not because parents are lacking, according to O'Malley – it is because the situation is so difficult. Ideally both parents, if both are around, should get therapy, but the priority should be the person who is most involved in parenting. "The person who is making the decisions should be getting therapy… coaching, help, support."[94]

You can find a therapist who takes an exploratory, not affirmative, approach to the issue of gender identity through the Gender Exploratory Therapy Association (international; some listed therapists offer online appointments).

Summary of ideas

- Talk to other parents or trusted friends.
- Join a good support group.
- Access online resources and guidance.
- Consider therapy for yourself that weaves in an element of parental coaching as well as more general support, and do not economise on this.

Handling the negatives

Negative elements you may need to handle include rejection by your child, feelings of shame and worries about making or having made mistakes. Part of getting through this period is likely to require learning to navigate these elements, the most difficult of which may be rejection – teenagers, and not just those who are gender-questioning, will often reject the love and support that parents try to give them. One interviewee says: "In my own experience, it can be quite easy to withdraw yourself as a parent. It's very upsetting when you feel rejected by your child. Take some time if you need to, go for a long walk to give you time, and maintain that loving bond with your child."[95]

It is important to separate your child's behaviour from who they are, according to Jordan: "Remember what a person is doing is not what that person is. They are still your child." He says to be mindful that "the child will do some pretty hateful things, and it's having that resilience to understand that you can love your child but really dislike what they are doing… That can be really nasty, when the child is beastly and trying to wreck everything." In these situations, being aware that support is available (see above) may be helpful,[96] as might the awareness that any rejection is likely to be skin-deep. Even the most recalcitrant, rejecting teenagers still really want and need their parents, according to Marchiano.[97]

You may be able to build up your resilience by spending time really thinking about what you believe, which makes it easier to stick to later

Summary of ideas

- Take the time and space you need to become resilient to any rejecting behaviour by your child.
- Separate your child's behaviour from who they are.
- Remember that support is available to you.
- Do your research so you can have faith in the limits you set.
- Tell yourself that you do not need to feel ashamed, and that while you can influence your child's path, you cannot determine it.
- Get comfortable with mistakes – you will make them, and it is fine.
- Remember that you know your child and have good instincts, and that you do not need to walk on eggshells around them.

in the face of opposition from your child. Ayad says: "If you present a boundary… and you are faced with really harsh language from the child, that can break down your emotional robustness and you might capitulate. You might do something not in best interests of the child. If you as a parent feel confident and certain about what your instincts and gut are telling you, and you've done your research and you feel well-equipped and you feel like you understand the situation, that can help to strengthen your resolve."[98]

She describes a sense of standing in the face of the anger and vitriol, and withstanding it by saying: "I love you. I love you. I love you. You may not understand why I am saying this right now, but I promise you I am coming from a place of love."[99]

Shame is another obstacle to many parents feeling able to cope during this period, as they may feel they have contributed in some way to their child's distress. Susan Evans suggests that so much has been made of the large traumas that sometimes inform gender-related distress that parents worry their child must have suffered significant trauma – but there are children for whom this is not true. "Some of the trauma is with a small 't'," according to Evans. "It's not that they have been traumatised or badly parented… Each child is unique. For some kids, it's hard to understand how they have got to where they have."[100] Similarly, you may be able to influence the path your child will follow, but you cannot determine it. "You don't have the answer. There isn't a magic solution…To some extent, it is luck of the draw," says the Bayswater Support Group member. "Children vary, and some are more… risk-taking."[101]

It is worth getting comfortable with mistakes. "Sometimes you might lose your rag and have a row," says Marcus Evans, "and it's not the end of the world."[102] This point is underlined too by the Bayswater Support Group interviewee: "You mess it up all the time. Don't be too hard on yourself when you get the conversation wrong."[103] It may be helpful, during times of worry that you are taking the wrong approach with your

child, that you know them. You have instincts about what to do. These are important, even when they conflict with what your child wants.[104]

Part of becoming comfortable with negative aspects and your own thoughts may be about honesty. O'Malley says: "There's a bit of a myth among many parents of gender-distressed kids that they have to keep their thoughts secret – that they have to be dishonest, that they have to pretend that they agree – and I think it's not true. I think it's a myth. Parents are walking on eggshells and they're afraid to speak their truth." Fear of conflict is common in many parents of gender-questioning teenagers. This is something that can be addressed, says O'Malley, even if you need help to do so (and bearing in mind the point made earlier that conflict is better when it is contained than when it is all-consuming). "Don't necessarily buy into the myth that you have to pretend," she advises.[105]

Opening up your own world

It is not just gender-questioning teenagers whose perspectives can often usefully be broadened. While it is important not to let thoughts of gender percolate incessantly in your child's mind – they need to know they are so much more than how they identify – it is also important to be able to focus on other things yourself. Parents with a gender-questioning child can find thoughts about their children's identities take over, and that they may find themselves enmeshed with their child – with a parent's mood dependent on how their child is feeling.[106] Parents can get lost in this issue, according to the Gender Dysphoria Support Network interviewee: "It can take over a parent's life as much as it can take over a child's. Parents try to become experts… It can feel like an emergency."[107]

This can be unhelpful for your child, however, just as much as it is unhelpful to you. "You still need to be a whole person to support your child," says the Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative.[108] The Bayswater Support Group interviewee suggests applying the same advice to yourself that you would to your child – do not become fixated, and keep other areas of your life open.[109] Focusing on things that sit away from your child's gender identity includes making sure you are looking after your own needs,[110] perhaps by taking up new hobbies, making sure you are spending time with friends and talking about something other than gender, and giving yourself doses of culture.[111]

Going back to an old hobby or taking up something you have wanted to do for a long time can also help. Marchiano has known parents who have finally taken up the piano or started to read Russian literature. She says: "Invest in your own life. Do things that you find nurturing, make sure you're sleeping, make sure that you're eating, make sure that you're exercising outdoors."[112] You need to prioritise the things that allow you to behave patiently and rationally. One family therapist puts it this way: "You have to take up running, yoga, meditation, prayer, Xanax – whatever can chill out your emotional lizard brain so that you can access your logical, strategic, patient, prefrontal cortex."[113]

Refocusing your attention from your child to your family as a whole can be part of your efforts to open up your world. "Self-care is a bit of a cliché," says Davies-Arai, "but this issue can become the focus of the family." She recommends that parents – insofar as it is possible – take their focus off gender and off the child, and instead focus on the whole family. She says: "It can very easily happen with any issue. The child who is having the problem is the one who can dictate the rules of the family, and everyone else is tiptoeing around. Take your focus off that issue. Allow your child space to grow and develop. Keep your boundaries and your understanding of reality. Don't pretend. Be matter-of-fact. Talk about other things." Focusing on your other child, your partner or the wider family can be hard to do in practice and takes a lot of work, but Davies-Arai says: "It helps to keep you sane as well."[114]

It may feel tempting to get involved with activism in this area – for example, campaigning to get schools to teach gender identity as a belief system, not a fact – as a way of refocusing your attention. O'Malley advises against this, however, and advises looking for support instead. "Activism can be good in certain contexts, but it can also be a massive displacement activity."[115]

There are so many moving parts relating to teenagers' sense of gender identity that their identity is likely to shift along with any influences on it.[116] Part of opening up your world may therefore involve thinking about the future. Your child is probably very different now to how they were five years ago, and the same is likely true for their future self. The challenges they are currently experiencing may well dissipate.

Summary of ideas

- Try not to let this issue take over your mind.
- Take up new hobbies or old ones, spend time with friends, talk about something other than gender and give yourself doses of culture.
- Prioritise things that allow you to behave patiently and rationally.
- Refocus your attention from your child to the family as a whole.
- Tread carefully with activism.
- Do not assume that nothing will change.

Communicating with a gender-distressed child

Knowing how best to communicate with a gender-distressed child can be hard, as the stakes are so high. There are lots of general principles, though, which can help. A lot of the advice coalesces around the fundamentals of parenting – for example, showing your child you love them, validating their feelings (even if you are not validating their interpretation of reality) and handling conflict effectively. There is a dedicated section on communicating with a child who is highly disengaged in the Specific challenges section below.

The role of noticing

Being aware of communication patterns can help you to interact better with your child. Jordan advises parents to be aware of parent, adult and child ego states as conceptualised by Eric Berne.[117] The parent state is based on observation, and might include instructions about how to behave around others. The child state is based on feelings. The adult state is the one that, ideally, you want to be occupying as a parent (avoiding, counterintuitively, the more observational and instructional parent state) – in the adult state, you make sense of observations and feelings in order to generate decisions. Berne advises thinking about how words are delivered and about non-verbal signs when working out which state you are occupying, not just about the words themselves.[118]

Jordan recommends watching for signs that your conversation with your child is moving from adult to adult into a different pattern. When one person goes to parent and the other moves to child, he says, it is important to recognise that the conversation is no longer constructive and you need to move onto something else. “Recognise that only constructive adult conversations are useful,” he says, when it comes to gender. “Everything else will be destructive.”[119]

Marcus Evans puts great store on noticing things about the child, which includes noticing the absence of things, as well as the presence.”[120] One such area might be sexuality. “The kids we see are often terrified of sexuality,” says Evans. “These kids are not having sex. They are not thinking about it. They are looking at [their own] sexed bodies and want nothing to do with them.” Part of opening up this thinking might involve chats with your child about who they like or who they find attractive.[121]

You might also want to spend some time looking for the scenarios in which your child finds it easiest to communicate with you and, when you have done so, giving them plenty of opportunities to interact with you in this way. Maybe they find it easiest to open up when you are sitting next to each other in the car or playing a video game together.[122]

Summary of ideas

- Be aware of communication patterns.
- Close a conversation when it is getting destructive – when one of you and your child is getting autocratic and the other is getting emotional.
- Notice the absence of what your child says, as well as the presence.
- Think about how your child finds it easiest to communicate with you, and give them plenty of opportunities to do so.

Connection and validation

It is important that your child knows they have your love and support – even if you are demonstrating support for your child rather than for the identity they have chosen. Validation means recognising and valuing your child for the human they are right now, even if you miss the happy, carefree version they used to be. It also means getting to know this new version of them, and being open to what they think and feel. The things about your child that make them unique and interesting have nothing to do with whether they see themselves as a girl, a boy or something in between.[123/124]

Part of facilitating this connection is about building your relationship with your child, despite the stormy seas in which you may find yourselves. Marchiano points out: "Once a kid turns 18, the only influence you have over that child is your relationship. You have to work on that."[125] It can be helpful to find purposefully positive things to say to your child. Giving consistent, positive feedback – alongside reflective listening (where you listen to what your child says, and reflect back to them what you have heard) – can strengthen your relationship with each other,[126] which in turn makes it easier for your child to handle tough situations. Just knowing that you are trying to connect with your child, even if your attempts to connect are inept or misguided, can help them to feel less alone.[127]

Finding a balance between two extremes may be key when it comes to communication. You do not want to be constantly invading your child's

space, nor do you want to leave them alone with their thoughts. Instead, you might find a balance by checking in with them from time to time without pressuring them, says Davies-Arai: "It's so much about your tone of voice and asking in a non-intrusive way – 'Is everything OK? What's going on for you at school? What's this about?' – the kind of question that gives your child a bit of space."[128] Connection does not need to be verbal. You can connect with your child through something as simple as bringing them a cup of tea.[129]

Returning to the point made earlier about broadening perspectives, it can be good to chat to your child about the world around you both. Options might include politics, TV and films, music and comedy.[130]

Summary of ideas

- Validate your child (this does not mean validating their gender identity).
- Make sure they know they have your love and support.
- Purposefully find positive things to say to them.
- Check in with them without pressuring them.
- Notice your tone of voice.
- Chat to your child about the world around you both.

What not to communicate

"Cheerful competence" is a persona developed by many parents of young children that can persist into the teenage years. It becomes harder to maintain as children get older and requires parents to pretend – and this can alienate teenagers, according to O'Malley. It is better to be authentic.[131] It is also worth avoiding the discussion of potentially contentious issues that you do not need to face just yet. "Don't fight future battles," advises the Bayswater Support Group member. "Stockpile information ready for the point where you would need to have that conversation."[132]

Finally, there is probably little to be gained by arming your child with facts and figures on medical transition or other areas on which you may not agree. "Trying to talk a child out of a deeply held belief with reason and facts will not work," says Jordan, "so don't bother trying."[133] Susan Evans suggests that evidence does not work until the child is in a more receptive frame of mind: "In the earlier stages, these kids are getting rid of things from their minds – and before they can start to look [at evidence], they need help to open up their own thinking."[134] There are some ideas on doing so in the Expanding horizons section below.

Summary of ideas

- Avoid "cheerful competence".
- Do not fight future battles.
- Do not use evidence to try to persuade your child to your way of thinking.

Handling disagreement

We have already looked at the need to minimise conflict when it comes to gender identity, but there is a wider question around how to disagree well with your teenager on the topic of gender, and perhaps on other subjects. You can disagree while minimising conflict – disagreement does not necessarily need to lead to a blow-out. And some level of conflict is inevitable.

It may be that children feel unable to disagree in other areas of their life, but gender becomes a zone of fierce conflict.[135] If your child is not able to disagree with you in other areas, you might want to observe this gently. Marcus Evans suggests asking questions – "You don't want to have an argument – why is that?"[136] You might want to facilitate disagreement about something safe, like politics,[137] which can allow your child to practise healthy disagreement in an area they find unthreatening. You can also approach disagreement lightly. Marchiano suggests saying something like: "You can wear your hair however you like. You can pick your own clothes. We want you to follow your interests. But we don't accept that you were born in the wrong body."[138]

Brunskell-Evans points out that disagreement, when it is linked to limits, gives children and young people security. "I think what is happening is that when the adolescent learns they can pull the parent with them onto their terrain, you are increasing the young person's unhappiness, insecurity and giving the young person far too much power. And [that power] would be OK if it led to happy conclusions. But

my experience is that it doesn't lead to happy conclusions. The more ground that is given, the more ground that is asked for by the teenager… Parents have got to get a strong sense that they are the grown up and they are protecting their child."[139]

When it comes to more conflictual disagreement, you will probably want to work out which potential areas of conflict with your child really matter, and leave everything else to one side.[140] Depending on your child and your family, a boundary on social transition or lack of commitment to early medical transition may be an area of conflict where you are willing to – or need to – engage.

When conflict arises between you and your child, O'Malley recommends closing down the discussion and leaving the room once the key engagement has passed. "A lot of parents are invested in getting their child to agree with them, rather than saying: 'This is the rule,' and leaving the room," she says.[141] Marcus Evans makes a similar point: "There is often a childish wish that the parents will endorse everything. This is part of the problem, and [parents] are blamed because they won't endorse everything. Being a parent involves having to make your own mind up about what you think is in the child's best interest."[142] After conflict, you want to pass on the idea to your child that you know they are upset, but it is better for both of you to end the fight.[143]

What you do then, says O'Malley, is lean in with love in other contexts. You might say to your child: "So you know the way I've said you could never have a puppy, and I've resisted it, because of all the difficulties that it brings? I'm willing to give you a puppy. I see how upset you are." You might offer things that really do not suit you, and your child knows it. "But you're willing to drive them half way across the country because they want to attend something, because you love them very much. You have a hard line on this issue, but you're willing to show your love on other issues. You might scour the world looking for opportunities to show your love… because you know how devastated they are on this."[144]

Summary of ideas

- Ask gentle questions if your child feels unable to disagree on topics other than gender.
- Remember that parents are entitled to disagree with their children.
- Work out which potential areas of conflict matter, and ignore everything else.
- Leave the room rather than prolonging an argument.
- Search for opportunities to show your child how much you love them.

Supporting mind and body

Background work

Background work may include supporting your child with any pre-existing issues and helping them to facilitate a strong sense of identity separate from gender. As outlined in part one of this series, if your child is gender-distressed, they may well have poor mental health, neurodevelopmental conditions or other vulnerabilities, or puberty may be making them uncomfortable. Alternatively, they may be struggling to accept that they are same-sex attracted. Finding ways to support your child with these areas may help to resolve the distress that underpins their gender-related discomfort. You might, for example, ask your child's school for additional support if you suspect they have a neurodevelopmental condition or buy them a book that helps them to realise that feeling hideous about puberty is normal and temporary – for example, Milli Hill's *My Period* for girls – or normalise discussions about being gay or lesbian.

Jordan says that we need to be better about educating children about what to expect during adolescence. Puberty "causes huge changes in the way you perceive your body. It's growing in all sorts of different directions. It's associated with increased clumsiness. We must reassure children: 'Yes, this is part of growing up. You'll never be growing faster than this, and it will feel weird, and that's OK.'"[145] You might also want to look honestly at other factors that may be underlying your child's distress and how you might be able to help them with these. If you are not getting on with your partner, for example – which can lie underneath teenagers' distress[146] – it is worth thinking about couples counselling.

It is also important to validate and affirm gender non-conformity. Marchiano comments: "I think part of this whole behemoth has to do with overly strict gender norms for both sexes, and that trying to reinstate those takes things in the wrong direction."[147] If you have a girl, you may want to be clear about what a brilliant thing that is to be, as it is something often denied by culture.[148] Part of this work is likely to involve getting across the message that your teenager can express themselves however they like, and that they do not need to conform to what society says they are. Boys can be sensitive; girls can be strong and assertive. There is a range of human emotions across both sexes, as well as a range of interests and preferences.

Brunskell-Evans recommends steering away from the idea that a child has gender dysphoria, which she views as a construct, both in talking with your child and how you view it internally. "Once that has become concretised as a material reality, how could a parent distinguish between genuine gender dysphoria and all the other things the young person is undergoing at this moment in time?" These teenagers are making sense of their experiences through a particular cultural lens, and this label is unhelpful, she believes.[149]

This links to identity, which Marcus Evans recommends considering in its broadest form. "Who are you?," he asks. "This is an identity problem before it becomes a gender problem… Don't see the child as a gender, or even a sex." He recommends asking: "Who is this child, and how do we help them to lead a fulfilling life?… The child often feels [they] can't measure up to parental ideals, but [they don't] have to. The child is entitled to be the way they are, and parents need to come to terms with that."[150]

Making sure your child has access to role models who do not conform to society's gender expectations can show them it is positive to reject stereotypes. Advice to parents from detransitioners, published online by Our Duty, suggests: "For young women, this might be Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road,* Rey in *Star Wars,* Naomi Nagata in *The Expense,* the 'Tank Girl' comics, Jodie Whittaker in *Doctor Who*… For boys, there are fewer options for positive gender non-conforming role models who embrace their sex, but Boy George, David Bowie, and Brian Molko might be considered 'old' enough to be cool again."[151] Harry Styles is a more recent convert to gender non-conformity.[152]

Part of this background work is about being aware of your own triggers and acting accordingly. You might have an emotional reaction to conversations about trans identities, eating disorders or expressions of bodily insecurities in your teenager. "When you react instantaneously," says Davies-Arai, "you're reacting from your primitive, emotional brain. You will probably say something destructive. Upset or fear will be expressed as anger or real anxiety, which is far too over-the-top for a teenager." Davies-Arai recommends practising taking a deep breath when you hear something that makes you upset, angry or afraid, which creates space and gives your brain time to respond more rationally and casually. Teenagers have not yet developed the capacity to self-regulate their emotions, but you – as an adult – have. "With teenagers, with all these emotions going on that are really hard to handle, they don't need our really strong emotions on top… Those feel too overwhelming for a teenager."[153]

If you have the space to do so, making your home the place where teenagers come over to spend time can be useful, as can forming a relationship with your child's friends. If you are part of those relationships, you have a better idea of what is happening in your child's life.[154] Finally, prioritising sleep, good food and movement is likely to be helpful. These, along with good friendships, can be simple underpinnings that help your child.[155]

Summary of ideas

- Find ways to support your child with any underlying issues.
- Educate children about what to expect during adolescence.
- Validate and affirm gender non-conformity, making sure your child has access to gender non-conforming role models.
- Consider your child's identity in its broadest form – not their gender or their sex, but who they are.
- Be aware of your own triggers, and act accordingly.
- Prioritise sleep, good food and movement.

The online world

The internet is where many teenagers get their information on gender. It can be an incredibly unhelpful place for teenagers who have started to ruminate on these issues (for details on the potential role of the internet in creating and deepening gender-related distress, see part two of this series). Misleading content and pernicious algorithms can take your teenager to uncomfortable places.[156] One interviewee's daughter told her post-desistance that Tumblr, combined with the influence of her peers, led her into a mistaken trans identity.[157]

O'Malley likens the internet to your children hanging out in the chip shop down the road. "You should be aware of who they are hanging out with, and what's going on."[158] Even seemingly innocuous sites like the NHS may point teenagers in a direction with which you are not comfortable. The NHS page for teenagers on gender identity[159] links them to a site by the Gender Identity Research & Education Society (GIRES), containing links to local gender-affirming charities. GIRES itself advocates for "prompt and autonomous access to gender affirming biomedical interventions" for children, adolescents and adults who identify as trans.[160]

Some parents have noticed heavy use of sites such as Tumblr, Reddit and YouTube and, in particular, constant watching of transition videos, before their children start to question their own gender. Of course, they may be immersing themselves in this content because they have already started to question their gender, or more likely there is an

interaction of the two – a teenager who is already gender-questioning is more likely to be drawn to transition videos, deleterious algorithms find the child more and more damaging content to consume, and the child is swayed further towards wanting to change gender.[161]

Marchiano recommends that parents of younger gender-questioning teenagers get on top of their internet use. She recognises that many parents can be hesitant to do so, but says: "You should marshal all of your parental authority and set some safety-based limits."[162] Davies-Arai cautions that a blanket approach may not be right for all families. She says: "How far do you allow extra freedoms, and how much do you keep the tight controls that you had [when your child was younger]? It's up to families. Some have banned all screens, and it's been fine – there are others where it would create a huge rift within the family. It's looking at your personality, values and your relationship with your child."[163]

If you decide to go ahead with limits on internet use, steps might include parental controls (including screentime limits and limits on access to apps); keeping screens out of bedrooms altogether or only at night, or turning the router off at a predetermined time; and making sure you have access to your child's passwords.[164][165][166][167] The Bayswater Support Group interviewee says you can have a big impact by reducing or removing access to online forums. "It's harder to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted," she says, but not impossible."[168] Just reducing the amount of time spent on these sites can help. According to Marchiano: "The thing about indoctrination is that it's fairly dose-related. Spending 15 minutes a day on Instagram looking at trans influencers is very different from spending four hours a day looking at trans influencers in terms of its effect on our cognition."[169]

For children who do not yet have a smartphone, parents might want to delay the point at which they are given one.[170] Abigail Shrier, who wrote a book on the allure of gender ideology for teenage girls, makes a compelling case for this: "The statistical explosion of bullying, cutting, anorexia, depression, and the rise of sudden transgender identification is owed to the self-harm instruction, manipulation, abuse, and relentless harassment supplied by a single smartphone."[171] There is no available data to show cause and effect, but the correlations may give parents pause for thought.

Conversations about online safety are, of course, essential. Shrier recommends encouraging your teenager not to post any private information online; it is easier to explore different identities and to be flexible with that exploration if a firm commitment has not already been made in front of friends and strangers.[172] O'Malley recommends having conversations about what teenagers are doing online and making clear that they should not be putting anything online that is private. She says: "Parents should have the position that a company has over the company phone – that you don't put stuff down that could be screenshottable. You use real life [or] you have a video call. There's

many ways to communicate. You don't put it down in screenshottable content, and if you do, you're giving it to the parent and to everybody else."[173]

Marchiano says that restrictions can be put in place with warmth and care. "You certainly don't want to impose draconian smartphone limits in a way that isn't also compassionate and loving."[174] Supervision needs to be balanced with privacy as teenagers get older – we need to have sensitivity to that, says O'Malley, at the same time as having presence.[175] You can encourage curiosity about the reasons people may be promoting particular positions online, and encourage safety by not sharing personal details with strangers.[176] If you have Netflix, *The Social Dilemma* can help to inform your child about algorithms and their relation to online content.[177]

While it may be unwise to limit smartphone use for older teenagers to the same extent as you might for younger ones, limits can still be put in place. It can be helpful to think of these limits from the perspective of health and well-being, not gender – for example, too much smartphone use can contribute to anxiety, depression and sleep difficulties. Appropriate messages for an older teenager might be that the router goes off at 11pm or midnight because we all need to rest, or that night-time smartphone use needs to be restricted for health reasons.[178]

Summary of ideas

- Be aware of the potential risks of the internet.
- Conversations about online safety are key.
- Decide on an appropriate route for your family. For younger teenagers, options might include parental controls, keeping screens out of bedrooms, device checks or even delaying the point at which they are given a smartphone.
- Put any restrictions in place with warmth and care.
- Consider health-based limits for older teenagers – for example turning off the router at the end of the evening so everyone gets enough sleep.

Setting limits

Warm, compassionate parenting combined with the setting of reasonable, sensible limits are the cornerstones of good parenting and provide a supportive framework for a gender-questioning teenager. Shrier puts it this way: "Teenagers are supposed to get angry and emotional. Parents are supposed to set limits." Limits are needed in the area of gender, and there should be clear, safety- and health-related reasons for enacting them. Breast-binding and the use of male bathrooms by girls pose physical safety risks. Risks to mental health may come in the form of unlimited screens, social isolation and limited sport and exercise.[179] You might say that medical transition is a health and safety boundary.[180] There is less that is enforceable with an older teenager. Marchiano says: "Don't try to enforce stuff that isn't enforceable, but do if it is."[181]

Limits must be balanced with trying not to exercise too much control. Conflict and power struggles can be damaging. In many cases, it is better not to pick your child up on something or to give them a low-level, matter-of-fact response to pushing boundaries.[182] You are likely to have your own levels of comfort when it comes to limits, and this is fine – you might be clear with your child where your limits are, or you might choose a more flexible approach.[183]

Rudeness is one thing never to accept, advises Davies-Arai, suggesting you respond with something like: "I will not accept that. I will not be spoken to in that way. Thank you." She recommends disengaging by physically moving away and getting on with something else. "Never say 'please' if it's an order," she says. "It's not a request." Saying thank you sends your teenager a message of trust – you believe they have understood what you have said to them and that they will stop speaking to you in that way. Walking away shows that the conversation is closed and that you are no longer interested. "It's the disengaging that's important. If they follow you and keep shouting, you ignore them for a little bit – then you turn round and look at them with slight surprise, and say: 'I think you heard what I said. Thank you,' and disengage. Three times is usually all you'll need."[184]

Crucially, acting like this with your child is great role modelling. It shows teenagers how to express self-respect and to assert your boundaries. "You don't attack. You keep your self respect. You do not take it," says Davies-Arai. "It's really useful for your children to experience."[185] Modelling is also useful when it comes to building resilience. It can be hard to withstand the annoyance, anger or silent treatment you might get from a teenager, but it is helpful to model that you can withstand these things and to demonstrate resilience to your teenager in the face of them.[186] Ideas on how to do this are outlined above under Handling the negatives.

It is important for parents to allow their teenagers appropriate levels of freedom, and to keep increasing these freedoms as they get older. Davies-Arai recognises that this may be hard for parents – worries no longer centre on a child running out into a road, but crystallise instead

in concerns about mental health, drugs, sex, alcohol, trouble with the police or relationship problems. Allowing freedoms, though, gives your child less against which to rebel. "The parents' task at this time," says Davies-Arai, "is to allow – bit by bit – the boundary that the parent has created to widen, and to treat their child as more grown up, to give them more responsibility, to trust them more." The trust is particularly important.

You can negotiate these freedoms according to what reassures you that your child will be safe – for example, if they want to stay out later, you might negotiate regular check-ins by text. Davies-Arai says: "You give your condition very clearly. You are not going completely by what the child is demanding, and in doing so, you are keeping up a respect for yourself and your own boundaries." Being a pushover, she says, will erode your child's respect for you. These negotiated freedoms should be seen "from the point of view that your child needs to push the boundaries, needs to learn, needs to disagree and reject your beliefs. They will come back, because you have done your work as a parent."[187]

Summary of ideas

- Set boundaries on behaviour and appropriate limits relating to gender.
- Be careful, on the other hand, not to exercise too much control.
- Do not try to enforce things that are not enforceable.
- Never accept rudeness.
- Model self-respect and asserting your boundaries.
- Negotiate age-appropriate freedoms with your child.

Connecting mind and body

Marcus Evans describes a sense of disconnect between gender-questioning teenagers' minds and bodies. "There is this dislocation between the mind and the body. The body is the place where we experience the world. If we have a child who is threatened by this experience, they can withdraw into their heads and become very intellectual. The body becomes this other thing that is filled up with desires, anxieties and impulses that they are trying to distance themselves from and control."[188] Parents can approach this mind-body disconnect by recognising that it is happening and observing it – perhaps saying lightly that your child tends to distance themselves

from other people or that there is a degree of fear when it comes to feelings.[189]

O'Malley cautions that helping teenagers to become more comfortable with their bodies is a hard ask: "We're asking parents to be therapists, teachers, clowns and yoga instructors." A more realistic ambition, she says, might be to help teenagers become comfortable with being uncomfortable with their bodies – which so many are. "There are an awful lot of people who are uncomfortable with their bodies who still manage to live productive lives. The emphasis on our looks – through social media, frankly, but also other reasons – has made people so obsessed with their body and becoming comfortable with their body. Arguably, the real liberation is freedom from vanity and freedom from thinking about your body."[190]

This links to a point made by Davies-Arai, which is that building teenagers up with lots of reassurance can have the opposite effect to the one intended and create insecurities. Davies-Arai says: "I've heard parents going on: 'You are beautiful. You're beautiful as you are. You're so stunning,' all the time. But if you reassure the child so much, they are going to be thinking: 'What is wrong with me that I need this level of reassurance?' It's nice to be complimented sometimes, but this… desperate building up of a daughter that she's really beautiful creates the opposite effect."[191]

Similarly, it is worth not making a big deal out of a passing comment about body insecurity. Davies-Arai suggests we do not assume it is how our child feels all the time, as it may just be a transient feeling. "It may just be that she's a bit hot and sweaty after a long day – she feels fat and ugly. So what? We all do, sometimes. It's about not making it into a bigger deal than it is, just having a bit of empathy. Sometimes that is enough." It is also about keeping it casual – not trying to reassure or talk her out of it. "That can mean a simple: 'Uh-huh? Feel a bit rubbish…?', and then moving the conversation on. Acceptance shows her you understand, but it's not a huge problem. It's normal."[192]

Modelling acceptance of your own body is particularly relevant for mothers of daughters. Davies-Arai says that it is better to work on really accepting yourself, which you will communicate to your daughter via that acceptance, than it is to worry about whether she will have body anxieties. "If you as a mother enjoy putting on make-up and getting dressed up to go out in the evening, enjoy it. Otherwise, don't wear make-up, and be confident in yourself and in your body, whatever you are wearing. Don't moan… when you're sitting on the beach about how fat your thighs are. Stop it."[193]

Even if you are not being explicit verbally about connections between mind and body, you can try to be more active together as a family. Many teenagers become less active as they get older. This is especially true for girls, says the Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative, because of emerging self-consciousness. She recommends taking part in activities like conservation work, saying that using their bodies helps teenagers develop confidence overall. "A

lot of our parents try to take walks and take camping holidays – anything that gets them active and out in the fresh air. It can create an easier environment to have a conversation."[194] This connects to the next section on expanding other areas of your child's life.

Summary of ideas

- Be matter-of-fact about bodies.
- Understand that it is normal for people to feel uncomfortable with their bodies.
- The occasional compliment is better than regular reassurance.
- Do not make a big deal out of a passing comment.
- Model acceptance of your own body.
- Be active as a family.

Expanding horizons

We have covered the need to try to expand teenagers' world beyond gender in the Broadening perspectives section. This section looks at some practical ways of expanding interests and integrating other perspectives. The Bayswater Support Group parent recommends "persistently focusing on anything in your child's life that gives them joy and pleasure – art, music – any little thing you can do – horses, walking. Try to find the one thing that they will be prepared to do with you."[195]

Keeping your child busy is important. During term time, this might be in the form of school, clubs, homework and chores. In the holidays, it might be paid work or a summer camp. The more time they spend focusing on other things, the less they will feel that gender is the only thing that matters. These things can also give low self-esteem a much-needed bump.[196] A focus on activities and the rhythms of normal life can help your child to look, as the Bayswater Support Group puts it, "outwards at the world around them, rather than at their internal experiences where gender dominates. Try to keep things as normal as possible: going to school, clubs and hobbies and getting outside."[197] If you are able, it might mean dedicating cold, hard cash to new activities and perspective-broadening holidays that get your child thinking beyond their internal world.[198]

Hobbies requiring the use of their bodies can help teenagers to recognise what they are physically able to do – helping them to move

away from worries about how they look or how they feel inside.[199] New skills or hobbies can also support children to develop their personalities and to have more confidence outside the internal gender-focused world they may currently inhabit.[200] Activities might include learning a musical instrument, films, books, seeing friends and volunteering.[201] Yoga may be especially helpful, even more so – if finances allow – if you can find interesting yoga programmes or retreats to go to together.[202] Getting out into a social environment is important, especially if your child's gender dysphoria is tied up with social-anxiety disorder – the best way to manage fears or anxieties is to face up to them, according to Jordan.[203]

Doing more things as a family is recommended, structured around anything that your child enjoys physically. That might be walks, swimming or other sports. Davies-Arai gives the example of a teenager who is into photography – you might help them to access places to photograph and walk around with them for the day while they do so.[204] Time being active – ideally outside, in nature – is important. When one interviewee's teenager was going through a difficult time, they walked together in the woods every weekend. It was made clear that these walks were a nag-free zone – no questions about school and no reminders. "I really made myself a promise that I wasn't going to talk – not in the sense of giving [my child] the silent treatment, but in the sense of creating lots of space for [my child] to talk." The same kind of approach may work well for a teenager experiencing gender distress.[205]

Media that expands their thinking can also be helpful. O'Malley suggests introducing them to coming-of-age films, TikToks, books and other content, or other media that shows people who have faced and got through difficult challenges. Depending on your child's age, these might include *Stand by Me, Girl Interrupted, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Empire of the Sun* and *The Catcher in the Rye*.[206]

Summary of ideas

- Keep your child busy.
- Gently steer your child towards physical activities and new skills.
- Try to do activities together as a family, prioritising being active and spending time in nature.
- Consume mind-expanding media together.

The wider context

Your family

If your child's other parent is involved in their life, whether you live together or in separate households, it is important to forge a consistent approach. This may not be possible if you feel very differently about the best course of action relating to your child's distress, but your child will benefit if you are able to do so.[207] The Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative says that consistency between parents is not always possible, and says: "If the parents are arguing, or if [the topic of gender] is causing difficulties in the relationship, it can cause even more damage to the family as a whole". She recommends finding a way to agree to disagree, while also focusing on the child's well-being. "Hold that space for listening to their concerns and sharing yours," she advises.[208]

Balance within the family is key. "It's such an intoxicating position when everyone is preoccupied by concerns of what the child is doing," says Marcus Evans. "It takes the parents away from their general responsibilities as a family. You want to restore some kind of balance." He recommends that parents aim to restore their position of helpful authority in situations in which children are wielding huge power.[209] Jordan believes that family needs to play a more central role in teenagers' lives than friends, and that the book *Hold On To Your Kids*[210] by Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté can help parents to reorient their teenagers back towards family.[211]

The question of balance, if you have more than one child, extends to ensuring that everyone is getting sufficient time and attention. It may be that your gender-distressed child is the one needing more time – children whose parents' time and attention are absorbed by siblings' big personalities, special educational needs or neurodevelopmental conditions are more likely to develop gender dysphoria.[212] On the other side of the coin lie siblings whose parents are fully distracted by their gender-questioning child. Younger children, especially, can find the situation confusing and can find it hard to manage their own feelings. You can help with this by keeping them involved and talking to them in a way they can understand.[213] On a related point, your gender-questioning child may need help to realise that other people in the family have needs too, and that everyone's needs are equally important.[214]

Summary of ideas

- Forge a consistent approach with your child's other parent, if they are around.
- If this is difficult, try going to a couples therapist or trusted friend to help come to agreement, or find a way to agree to disagree while focusing on your child's well-being.
- Find balance within the family, including making sure – if you have more than one child – that both or all are getting enough time and attention.
- Restore your helpful authority.
- Read the book *Hold On To Your Kids*.

Advocating for your child

If your child's school socially transitions gender-questioning teenagers and you have chosen not to take this approach, you may need to advocate on your child's behalf. According to Jordan: "We know that some schools are captured beyond reason. Other schools aren't, and respond well to engagement and adhering to parents' wishes." He thinks that the situation in the UK is improving, and schools are becoming more aware.[215]

O'Malley believes that parents need to engage assertively with schools that take an affirmative approach, highlighting that such an approach lacks a long-term evidence base.[216] "You need to have a constructive dialogue with the school," says Jordan. "You need to make the effort to meet the senior leadership team and the safeguarding lead, and make it clear where you stand."[217] Talking may be more effective than (only) following the school's complaints procedure. Davies-Arai advises parents to write down their points before any meetings, to take notes during the meeting, and then to follow up with these notes in an email so there is a paper trail.[218]

Schools are more likely to hear your message if you are calm. "It does generally help not to go in all guns blazing," says Davies-Arai, "but to be really clear and firm – the school has stepped outside of its remit in treating your child with a gender-affirmative, unevidenced approach."[219] The Bayswater Support Group parent advises helping schools to understand that social transition can make a child more distressed –

for example, by creating a situation in which a girl will hate her body, driving a desire to bind her breasts. "If schools are ideologically motivated," she says, "it's different – but most are just naïve."[220]

O'Malley recommends pointing out to schools that they are effectively – given the lack of an evidence base – experimenting without your permission on your child, and that you do not consent to this. "And I think parents should also point out that they are the primary carer of their child. They love their child more, they engage their child more, and any suggestion that their values are something that should be dismissed needs to be challenged."[221] Davies-Arai says: "If the school has already socially transitioned your child without your knowledge, you have a right to… challenge the school on taking away your responsibility as a parent." She advises being really clear about your points and your protections – only the courts have the right to take away parental responsibility; schools are outside their remit and their authority to diagnose and treat a child.[222]

You might also want to mention the Cass Review: its interim report found that social transition is not a neutral act.[223] Highlighting the NHS draft service specification may also help you in directing schools to change course.[224] If your child sees a therapist, you might want (depending on the therapist's approach and advice) to get their support in your advocacy work with the school. Professional assessments can be used to underpin the message: "It is not advised in my [daughter's/son's] case that [she/he] is socially transitioned."[225]

You should insist that your child is safeguarded to the same extent as every other child at school, which means no sharing of opposite-sex facilities. "Girls can get pregnant, whether that is consensual or not," says Davies-Arai. "It's one reason why we don't have mixed-sex facilities." Giving a child licence to use opposite-sex facilities can also mean there is a sense that they are being given privileges for their identity, which may reinforce how they feel. Related privileges might include dictating school policies, school facilities and other people's language.[226] Davies-Arai recommends saying something like: "My child is not allowed to dictate the language of others in the school."[227]

Several organisations have developed useful resource packs. If you are in England, or – in some cases – other parts of the UK, you could share the guidance packs for schools published by Bayswater Support Group,[228] Genspect[229], Transgender Trend[230] or Sex Matters/Transgender Trend.[231] The Safe Schools Alliance has also published an advice note for schools on the specific issue of social transition.[232]

If you are getting nowhere with your school, O'Malley advises becoming what she terms a "polite nuisance". "You go in again, and you go in again, and you go in again, and you show your learning. You ask questions that are thoughtful and also thought-provoking. And then you say: 'I will be back, and… I will send you the information, if you like…. When I next come in, I would hope that you're aware of certain issues.'" She recommends seriously considering leaving the school if the school is not working with you, and if it has reached a point "where

they dehumanise the child and where they've just created policies without seeing the human in the middle of the issue".[233]

Summary of ideas

- Engage assertively with schools that do not take your perspectives into consideration.
- Talk to people – do not simply follow the complaints procedure.
- Meet the senior leadership team and the safeguarding leads.
- Write everything down.
- Remain calm.
- Point to the lack of evidence base around social transition, challenge the school on removing your parental responsibilities, be clear they are beyond their remit and talk about safeguarding.
- Share the Cass Review and specialist guidance packs developed for schools.
- Become a polite nuisance.
- Consider leaving the school as a last resort.

Getting help

The consensus among the experts who contributed to this paper was, in general, to be wary of seeking external support. It is important to draw a line between normal worries, sadness and developmental turbulence, and mental illness. Marcus Evans says: "There is a real problem in the confusion between ordinary mental distress and mental illness. They are not the same thing. To conflate those two things is really unhelpful. We act as if every anxiety, feeling sad or upset is some kind of mental disorder, and it's part of ordinary life. It is very different from someone who has a mental illness. We are too quick to rush in to rescue people from their own mental illness – we have turned into our own version of ambulance-chasing."[234]

Teenagers, not just parents, need to keep this in mind. "So much is normal teenage stuff that all of us go through," says the Bayswater Support Group member. She advises reminding teenagers that adolescence is really hard. "It's really common to feel absolutely miserable, and school is often not a happy place – but it usually resolves." She is very aware that this advice will not apply to everyone – for example, those families who have a child who is institutionalised and self-harming.[235]

At the same time, teenagers need to develop the ability to handle setbacks. "We are trying to internally develop the resources… to manage a life which is going to include quite a few worries, problems, difficulties," says Marcus Evans. "That is not mental illness. That is

ordinary development."[236] O'Malley cautions that engaging a therapist for your child is teaching them to look outside themselves for a solution when they have a problem.[237] As Shrier puts it in her book: "Therapists lead adolescents deeper into the forests of their minds. Is it any wonder, then, that it's so hard for them to find a way out?"[238] According to Brunskell-Evans, "Everything becomes a syndrome… But the syndromes are causing the unhappiness. They are not alleviating it… What we should be doing with our young people is stopping the internal reflection. The interests need to be out, rather than in. I think a lot of the problems would disappear if we didn't overthink it."[239]

How can parents know what are normal worries and sadness, and what is something that needs help beyond that which the family can offer? According to Ayad, just as there are different perspectives in the realm of gender, so there are different perspectives on how to approach teenagers' mental health. There are those who want to pay a great deal of attention to mental health and destigmatise the diagnosis; there are others who think that expanding definitions of mental health lead to increased prevalence of mental-health conditions. While Ayad falls more in the latter camp, she is clear that this is an issue on which parents need to make up their own minds, perhaps by reading about different perspectives. Decisions are linked to parents' own understanding of what represents normal behaviour and emotions in their child, and what falls outside these. "I would defer to the parent," says Ayad, "but the parent needs to gain clarity on what they believe."[240]

Jordan suggests looking at the underlying issues and exploring what else is going on – teenage rebellion, perhaps, or problems in your child's friendship group.[241] Ayad recommends thinking about degree – how long they have been struggling and what else has been tried? The families Ayad has witnessed successfully helping their children have often, she says, make some fairly radical changes. These might involve moving house or, if they have the resources, one parent might reduce working hours so they can focus more on their child.[242]

"Leaning in with that kind of support often alleviates those symptoms," she says. "Conventional wisdom about adolescent mental health tends to point families towards seeking out a diagnosis and finding the right medication. Diagnosis and medication, while sometimes helpful, cannot substitute for the emotional and familial support and connection. And frankly, in most cases parents are better equipped to help their child rather than outsourcing that support to a mental health professional."[243]

O'Malley advises that before a parent thinks about getting therapy for their child, they get family therapy or therapy for themselves. This can help them to help their teenagers. "To send the child to therapy should be quite a considered decision," she says. "I think an awful lot of children have been harmed by becoming the identified patient of the family… Once you bring in the professionals, triangulation occurs very quickly, and the child sees themself as the victim, they see the therapist as the saviour and they see the parent as the persecutor. It

can cause a huge gash in the relationship between the child and the parent."[244]

There are – of course – some times in which parents will judge external help to be necessary. Marchiano advises seeking external support if there is self-harm or a lack of ability to function – for example, an inability to attend school.[245] If you do seek therapy for your child, bearing in mind the cautions above and O'Malley's maxim that bad therapy is worse than no therapy, it is crucial to find a therapist who will not simply affirm your child in their gender-questioning beliefs, but instead will explore the distress that may underlie them. According to the Bayswater Support Group parent: "One of the things I've said repeatedly to parents is not to get a gender therapist. They are generally interested in only one thing."[246]

If you decide that therapy will be helpful for your child, you may want to look at the Gender Exploratory Therapy Association's directory of therapists who are committed to an exploratory approach.[247] If there is nobody local to you, several offer online support.

Summary of ideas

- Be clear about the distinction between normal developmental turbulence and mental-health conditions.
- Teenagers need to learn to handle setbacks – teach them that dealing with challenges is part of life.
- Remember that you know your own child.
- Think about underlying issues and degree.
- Consider radical, non-therapy-based solutions to support your child's mental health, if it is poor.
- Get therapy for yourself or your family before you consider getting it for your child.
- Be aware of the pitfalls.
- If you do seek therapy for your child, find a therapist who will take an open, exploratory approach.

Prevention

This section is for the parents of younger children and teenagers who are not questioning their gender, and whose parents want to minimise the chances that they will later suffer from gender-related distress. As set out in the previous two papers, there is only a limited amount of influence that parents have in terms of prevention – ideas about gender identity saturate popular culture, schools and friendship groups. That said, if you have a younger child, there may be small steps you can take to reduce the chance that he or she will develop gender distress as a teenager.

Simple awareness that gender might be an issue is a useful starting point. "In the past, parents might have been concerned about anorexia and self-harm," says the representative of the Gender Dysphoria Support Network. "Be aware that if you're not in this situation, it could be on your child's radar through friendship groups or being discussed in school."[248]

Being honest about the challenges of puberty, as also set out in the Background work section, is likely to be helpful. The Bayswater Support Group interviewee recommends letting children know that it is normal to find adolescence really hard and to feel that something is wrong, but that most people are fine at the end.[249] Ayad says that among the generation who are now parents, it can be an assumption that we have all been through puberty, so everyone gets through it. "But in the cultural climate right now," she says, "parents may need to be very explicit with their children about how the body develops, what it means to be a boy or a girl, explicitly lay out the facts of biological changes and reinforce the facts that this doesn't mean you can't… love whomever you want, you can't express yourself in your style and aesthetic."[250]

Books may be useful to support younger children to feel connected to their bodies – Milli Hill's *My Period* for pre-pubescent girls, for example, Phoebe Rose's *Sex and Gender – An Introductory Guide,* or Rachel Rooney's *My Body is Me!* for much younger children. While books and conversations can be helpful, balance – as with everything – is key. O'Malley cautions that parents should focus more on helping their children to learn to live a satisfying life than on the body. "All of this emphasis on the body leads to rabbit holes, whether it's narcissism or vanity. Don't forget an awful lot of people become very satisfied about how they look, and it's not necessarily good for them because the rest of their personality hasn't been developed."[251]

Some experts recommend engaging directly with the issue of sex and gender with younger children. This engagement might include saying to younger children that sex is real but that gender stereotypes do not determine who you are, and emphasising self-acceptance.[252] O'Malley recommends making clear that there are two competing theories – one is gender-identity theory; another is a more developmental model in which some people develop distress and while it might last for some, for others it resolves. "And the sooner that children learn that

there's two massively conflicting theories out there, and that they are at war with each other, the sooner children can understand: 'Oh, that's what's going on.'" She recommends informing your child in an age- and stage-appropriate way about the conflict and the position you take. You can say, kindly, to your child: "You are free to think whatever you want. However, you need to know your facts."[253]

For peers who are struggling with their gender identity, the Bayswater Support Group member recommends teaching children to be sympathetic and compassionate, and to recognise that these are children searching for answers.[254] Respect goes both ways, of course. Children need to know that just as it is fine for someone else to have a different view to their own, so their beliefs should be afforded the same respect. "There isn't one right way to think," says the Bayswater Support Group member. Describing gender identity as a belief system can underpin the idea that we should be tolerant of the beliefs of others, just as they should be tolerant of our own.[255]

The Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative says: "Try to have that conversation. In general day-to-day conversation, be curious. 'What do you think? Is there anyone you know who is struggling with their gender?' Try to be open."[256]

Brunskell-Evans warns that we should be aware of all the small and subtle ways – at school, on the television and through friendship groups – in which it is being normalised that children can be "born in the wrong body". She advocates "absolute resistance" to this. How this resistance translates to parents' decisions depends on the family, but Brunskell-Evans recommends being very cautious around environments where social transition is accepted. She describes internal battles in which parents know that common sense or their gut feelings are being undermined, and recommends building parental self-esteem to enable clear decisions to be taken in this area. "My general advice is that parents have almost been numbed or pulled into a situation of utter powerlessness. It is your child."[257]

Parents need to be aware of what is being taught through relationships and sex education in school, according to Jordan. He says: "Take an interest. Be curious in what your child is learning. Make time for them to have discussions about what they are learning, and be genuinely interested – even if it's Pythagoras' Theorem." Jordan also advises having regular family meals together to maintain the connection to your child and being draconian with internet-enabled devices. "A lot of this probably happens in households where there is a great affinity for tech," he says. "The internet is really dangerous for kids."[258]

Marchiano advises being honest about cultural factors, and perhaps even teaching children about the madness of crowds. You could watch *The Crucible* together – depending, of course, on your child's age – or read the *The Emperor's New Clothes* with them. "You want to raise awareness that this is a bit of a mass delusion that you can change sex," says Marchiano. "You can't. Crazy as it sounds, sometimes the

teachers and the doctors and the school administrators and the therapists get it wrong."[259]

You do not necessarily need to engage directly with gender in order to support your child to develop the critical-thinking skills that will serve them well in this area – as well as many others – as they enter their teenage years. Ayad describes a family who spent almost a year supporting their children to be able to evaluate information through a variety of different resources – podcasts, conversations and articles – about things like diversity of thought, diversity of opinion and how to assess whether a claim was accurate. As well as the critical-thinking element, they helped their children to understand that there are lots of competing ways to think about things like the body, identity and gender.[260]

Example resources include the podcasts Think Again: Malcolm Gladwell's tips for changing a stubborn mind, Bari Weiss on The New Founders America Needs and Katie Herzog on Are Lesbians Going Extinct?. These parents started with the bigger picture, says Ayad. "This family said internally: 'We are the adults here. We recognise something is happening culturally that we don't think is good for anyone's ability to think, and we want to inoculate our daughters by teaching them how to evaluate material that they encounter, rather than trying to enforce the parental beliefs about gender.'"[261]

Summary of ideas

- Be aware that gender may well be on your child's radar through friendships, school and wider culture.
- Be honest about the challenges of puberty.
- Use books to support children's connections to their bodies, but be balanced – don't overly focus on the body and help your child to lead a satisfying life instead.
- Engage directly with the issue of sex and gender with younger children.
- Help your child to recognise the need for two-way respect when there are different beliefs.
- Be curious.
- Find out what your child is being taught at school.
- Be honest about cultural factors, and engage with material that teaches your child about crowd psychology.
- Help your child to think critically and to evaluate material independently.

Specific challenges

A child who is highly disengaged

A disengaged teenager may be mistrusting of you or angry over a lack of affirmation. Marchiano gives the example of a 17-year-old with poor mental health and a neurodevelopmental condition, who has been saturated in ideas about gender and who really believes that transition is going to be the only thing to change their life. She says that the first job for parents is to work on the connection, trying to connect over things you both enjoy wherever you can find these, and avoiding battles around gender.[262]

This might mean a lot of listening. It might also mean some apologising – even if you don't agree with the reason for the apology – as it shows that you care about your child's feelings, and gets you both out of the frame of "I'm right. You're wrong". You can probably find something to apologise for in a heartfelt and genuine manner if you reflect enough on it, she says. It might be that you have acted harshly over minor transgressions. Perhaps you have been overly anxious or you haven't listened enough. An apology might be an opening to something else. The message your child may hear as a result is: "I want to connect with you. We are on opposite sides [in terms of the gender issue], but our relationship matters more to me."[263]

For teenagers who are highly disengaged from their parents, Marchiano recommends stopping, slowing down and getting attuned. "You're going to look for those little moments where [his or her] guard might be down, and you're going to want to be in a very receptive state. If you are in a lovely summer meadow and a deer emerges from the edge of a forest, you don't get up and rush towards the deer. You get nice and still, hoping the deer will come out a little bit further."[264]

Similarly, if an angry, uncooperative teenager emerges from their room and seems slightly more receptive, she recommends that parents do not rush in. Instead, you can create a warm, inviting presence, trying to attune with your teenager, perhaps by making a small joke or talking about something they might find interesting. "Look for small wins and build on these slowly," says Marchiano.[265]

O'Malley says that you need to penetrate the wall of the bedroom. "It's like there's an electric fence at the door, and you need to go in, and you need to go in regularly. And you'll get rolled eyes and hostility at the beginning. When you go in, don't tidy, don't clean, don't give speeches, don't turn into an inspirational Hollywood movie." She advises ignoring the hostile atmosphere, and coming in with love and tenderness. The visits should be frequent and short. You might say that you got your child a bar of chocolate, throw it on the bed, and walk out. You might tell them you found a funny TikTok about kittens and send it over. "And it might be their folded washing, and you might just put it down. Or it might be a little blanket that you thought they'd like, or a cup of tea that they don't want. And you say: 'I know you probably don't want it – I'm just trying to reach you.'"

The message you are getting across to your child is that there is distance that you are trying to shrink, while not asking anything of them. "You're in and you're out. And you do it again, and you do it again, and you become a polite nuisance." O'Malley recommends doing this at the same time as getting on top of the online content (see The online world above). "They will be very resistant to this, but every time you put down your phone, there's a multi-billion industry harassing you to pick it up. These kids are being absolutely sold to, and they're so addicted, and they're so in the trenches with it. And our job as parents is to get at that." She recommends positioning internet rules as household rules. "We don't let people who are 18 drink vodka at the breakfast table at 8am, because we have household rules. We don't let them eat McDonald's all day every day, because we have household rules. So you have household rules around your tech, and it's very much in the same vein."[266]

Jordan believes that drastic solutions may be necessary to support your child. "If they are young enough to remove the internet, remove it," he says. "If you are rich enough to go to another country, do it. If school is part of the problem, change it, if you can. As a parent, you have to be honest with yourself – what price are you willing to pay to save your child's health and well-being? Bloody well do it. Drastic positive actions should not be off the table."[267] At the same time, a child who is in crisis does not necessarily benefit most from a crisis-driven response. Within Our Duty, the general consensus when children have run away is to treat it as a normal over-reaction and keep conversations away from gender. While each case is different, general recommendations include peer support for the parent, alongside showing the child that they are loved, that their return is welcome and that the parent was worried about them.[268]

Estrangement is often the ultimate fear for parents of a disengaged, gender-distressed teenager. Parents have to follow their instincts on what and how much to say, says Ayad, balancing the potential for medical harm against potential estrangement. "Some parents are trying to figure out if it is a risk worth taking," she says. "If you have an estranged child, I can almost guarantee they won't slow down medical transition – oftentimes the parents are the last thing holding them back."[269]

For parents who have experienced estrangement, Ayad recommends looking at the work of estrangement expert Dr Joshua Coleman. His line, says Ayad, is that parents need to do whatever they can to maintain the connection. She counsels: "If there is an estrangement situation and a parent has decided: 'I really want to reconnect with my child', then I do think there has to be some willingness on the parents' part to figure out how to integrate the child's demands or requests into their relationship. I don't see any other way around it. Estrangement means that you are in very rocky territory. I would try to express love, openness, a willingness to listen, a willingness to try to understand where your child is coming from. This is about the long-term strategy, so you have to be willing to flex on some of the short-term things."[270]

Summary of ideas

- Strategies might include listening, apologising (searching for a reason to do this if you need to, in order to let your child know you are trying to connect) and looking for the moments where your child's guard is down.
- Be gentle and try to attune.
- Try frequent, short visits to your child's room – dropping off chocolate or clean laundry or sharing a funny video.
- Reaffirm rules around technology.
- Don't rule out drastic solutions.
- If estrangement is a risk or reality for you, look at the work of Dr Joshua Coleman.

Children in foster care

In some ways, ideas to support foster carers looking after gender-questioning teenagers are similar to those for parents and other areas. "It goes back to what I would recommend for parents," says the representative of the Gender Dysphoria Support Network. "Spend… time with them, show even more interest in their activities, be curious about what they are thinking – not just around gender, but in their life."[271]

In other ways, foster carers have to manage particular challenges, including forging a new relationship with a teenager at a moment when they may be experiencing particular turbulence, and dealing with an institutional infrastructure that may take an unquestioningly affirmative approach. Marchiano suggests lovingly, compassionately talking to the child about your concerns and planting a seed – while that seed may not have an immediate impact, it may grow into something the child can come back to later.[272]

O'Malley recommends being proactive. The scenario of being a foster carer to a gender-distressed child within an affirmative institutional architecture "is being replicated all over the world at the moment, and people tell themselves they can't do anything – you can't beat City Hall. And I think it is causing a huge amount of damage." She recommends organising with other foster carers and connecting with social workers who have already organised in this area. Alternatively, or additionally, she suggests doing work with the child. "So there's two very different,

definite paths you can go [down]. And to do neither of those, and to pretend that all you can do is to throw a few petals into this, isn't enough."[273]

If you do not feel able to engage directly with a teenager on this issue, Ayad recommends starting with critical thinking (this is explored in more detail above under Prevention). There are so many examples of how social influence works that have nothing to do with gender and that are interesting to teenagers, she says – for example, programmes on groups and cults, on people who adopt a new identity or do harm to their body, or on the epidemic of teenagers who developed tics after watching videos on TikTok. "Young people often find that fascinating. We are all susceptible to influence. It is why we have social norms, but we should be mindful."[274]

Summary of ideas

- Use ideas from other sections.
- Try planting a seed with your child.
- Do not shy away from being proactive.
- Organise with other foster carers.
- Build your teenager's critical-thinking skills away from the topic of gender.

A child who has socially transitioned

If your child has socially transitioned already and the research has made you question this decision, expert advice suggests rowing back rather than persisting in the use of opposite-sex pronouns and names. This row-back should be done in a way that is sensitive and developmentally appropriate. You might have a conversation and say, lovingly and compassionately, that you thought you were doing the right thing in the social transition but you made a mistake – sex cannot be changed, you have realised that social transition can be a dangerous pathway, and you think it will be best for your child if you return to using their birth name and pronouns. You might spend some time talking about what you were thinking and what you have learned.[275] "You can have those honest conversations even with a teenager," says the Bayswater Support Group member.[276]

It is likely that there will be significant conflict over this. Identity is precious to teenagers. Marchiano says that your teenager will hear your love and concern, even if they are not able to acknowledge them, but that the internet-informed lens through which they view your push-back will not be a friendly one. At this point, beliefs cannot be countered by evidence. According to Marchiano, "There's no amount of evidence that you're going to give your teenager where she or he is suddenly going to be like: 'You're right! This trans identity was totally wrong! I'm going to stop!' It's not going to happen. I do not recommend trying to argue or evidence your kid out of it."[277]

You may be able to reduce the amount of potential conflict through careful preparation, consideration and thoughtful analysis of the pros and the cons of social transition for your child, and assessment of what it is like to live as if you are one sex when you are actually another – the psychological complications, the irritations and defensiveness, the focus on identity to the exclusion of all else and the closing down of further exploration. O'Malley suggests having a clear line with teenagers, with full love and affection. She suggests a message like: "[The social transition] is creating a barrier to our connection with you… It's created a fake distance between us. It makes us feel inauthentic. It makes us feel we can't reach you, and we're changing back." This might just be the pronouns; it might be the name too. The details need deciding on the basis of your knowledge of what is likely to be best for your family. Whatever you do, though, the school should be on board too (see Advocating for your child).[278]

The external messages your child hears are best countered by gentle work on your relationship with each other, listening to them and limiting time online. As with the section above about supporting your child's mind and body, encouraging your child to explore other interests can be beneficial here. During school holidays, family trips away from the internet – camping, for example, or a wifi-free house out of 4G range – may be a good idea, if it is feasible for you to do so. Marchiano says: "I've known families where the parents quit their jobs and took their kid and travelled the world, and it has remarkable effects. We can't all afford to do that – but you might be able to get little injections of that same kind of thing."[279]

Summary of ideas

- Row back rather than persisting with the social transition.
- Be sensitive, and be loving and compassionate in the way you approach this.
- Talk about what you were thinking and what you have learned – be honest.
- Recognise there will be conflict, but mitigate it through careful preparation.
- Get your child's school on board.
- Work on your relationship with your child, listen to them and limit time online.

A 16- or 17-year-old who has self-referred for hormones

"Once your child is 16," says the member of Bayswater Support Group, "you don't have a lot of control." She says that you can keep building on your relationship with each other, making clear that you love them, you want to be part of the outcome and want to contribute to the decisions.[280] Susan Evans says that this self-referral needs to be understood in the context of how it has come about – for example, how have they accessed the money to pay for treatment? What has happened to influence their actions? She advises parents to think about how they would act in other, comparable situations.[281] You might also want to be curious about how your child feels, according to the Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative, asking things like whether they have any concerns about long-term impacts.[282]

One expert's daughter got a referral for medical treatment through a lobby group and is glad, post-desistance, that her parents were firm on not making medical decisions any earlier. "She is [only] now really asking tough questions," says the interviewee. "Why medicalise a healthy body? We planted the seeds. It takes a long time to filter through. In the longer term, the child will be getting something of value, even if there are no instant changes." The interviewee adds: "Don't give up."[283]

Summary of ideas

- Recognise there is not a huge amount you can do to reverse this decision.
- Keep building your relationship, be clear that you love your child and keep talking.
- Be curious about your child's feelings.
- Know that things may shift longer term.

Wanting to bind or tuck

The health impacts of breast binding and genital tucking are explored in part two of this series. Bayswater Support Group offers a detailed advice note on breast binding. It includes advice for parents who have been asked by their daughters to get a binder. The group recommends listening without judgement – "Gentle questioning about how she feels and why can give you an insight into her world, and help her to see that you are trying to understand her distress"; explaining the side effects; expressing empathy; and recommending a sports bra (which causes much less damage than a binder). It also provides guidance about getting the fit right, if there is no way to dissuade a determined teenager[284] who has the funds to buy a binder or access to a willing campaigning charity who will provide one.

Brunskell-Evans says that if she were in a position of being the parent of a gender-questioning teenager, she would not allow it – especially breast binding, due to the danger of soft tissue damage.[285] Another interviewee points out that the dangers of tucking include torsion of the testes and necrosis of the penis.[286] "Ultimately, as the parent, you have to stand firm," according to Brunskell-Evans. While you might have less control out of the house, within it you can say that you are not allowing it, because you love your teenager. "We have to counteract what is becoming so normalised outside of our own families, somehow or other," she says. "It is normal for parents not to want their daughters to damage their breasts."[287]

Summary of ideas

- Understand the dangers.
- Listen without judgement.
- Explain the side effects.
- Consider having firm safety-related household rules about binding and tucking.

School refusal

Parents may face a scenario in which their children refuse to go to school. The Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative recommends trying to find out whether it is gender or something else within the school environment that is leading your child to want to avoid it.[288] This is also advocated by Ayad, who suggests looking out for things like bullying, a painful social dynamic or a difficult situation with a teacher.[289]

If teenagers are saying that they will not go to school until they have transitioned medically, it is a dynamic of evasion and avoidance, according to Ayad. It does not mean, though, that there is not some other underlying reason. "Generally speaking, we do not want to reinforce for young people that they can avoid distress as a strategy," she says. "There might be problem-solving – maybe a meeting, a new school – there might be things that need to change. You need to be willing to listen and be responsive, but be mindful about setting up that pattern of avoidance."[290]

The Gender Dysphoria Support Network representative says: "Some parents do home educate for a while, and when mental health improves, they look to go back into the school environment – even if it's just a couple of days or a couple of hours a day to ease them back in."[291] The Bayswater Support Group has a note on school refusal, which recommends maintaining a dialogue with the school and keeping up good communication between you and your child. They advise avoiding bribes, punishment and inflexibility around bedtimes, and instead being positive, consistent and focused on routines. You may also want to try to spot patterns in your child's reluctance to attend, and to try to address any underlying issues.[292]

Summary of ideas

- Look for what lies underneath your child not wanting to attend school and try to spot patterns.
- Be wary of demands attached to school refusal.
- Keep a dialogue going with the school.
- Be positive with your child and avoid inducements to attend.
- Keep routines going.
- Be flexible.

Signs of self-harm or suicidal ideation

Talk of self-harm and suicide has, according to O'Malley, gone from "being taboo to being used like confetti very easily and often by young people, and this is to their detriment. Once the word 'suicide' comes in, more so than self-harm, everything changes. The parents feel hostage to fortune."[293] The normalisation of this language, the risks of getting it wrong and the specificities of each teenager's situation combine to make this a complicated area for which generic advice cannot be distilled.

Feelings about self-harm or suicidality are often driven by struggles with confusion and psychological turbulence, according to Marcus Evans. These children are looking for an action that gives them a sense of control over their bodies and how they are seen, and to reduce feelings of anxiety relating to the transition from childhood to adulthood. "In many ways, the child is trying to shut the amount of turbulence and change down. It's like puberty blockers – it's like a way of saying: 'I just want the clock to stop.'"[294]

As explored in part two of this series, suicidality is higher in gender-questioning teenagers than it is in all teenagers, but it is not the issue it has been made out to be by campaigning charities. One challenge, according to Marchiano, is that feeling suicidal has become part of the trans identity: "It is almost like you have to be suicidal to prove that you're trans, in some people's minds."[295] Marcus Evans advises parents to be aware of internet scripts: "A lot of the kids are getting tutored online on how to deal with professionals and parents. You spot that there is a rote way that kids will speak. It's difficult when you only have one kid, but when you have a lot, you see certain phrases that they are taught online to get parents and mental health professionals off their back. One wants to be aware of that."[296]

Being able to view conversations about suicidality and self-harm through a critical lens is important – is your child talking about these things because they have been tutored online? Is it because of self-hatred, and if so, what is driving that?[297] It is important to differentiate between self-harm and feeling suicidal, according to Marchiano.[298] Marcus Evans advises taking talk of suicidality seriously, but not allowing it to place you in a position where you give up your authority. "The statistics don't tell you about your kid individually, but they tell you there is tutoring online, and they tell you that this population is no more suicidal [than comparable teenagers with mental-health conditions] – so the parents shouldn't be terrorised into losing their position of being critical friends."[299]

A paper published by the Gender Exploratory Therapy Association finds that background issues may include the environment at home, including relationship issues, trauma or abuse, and social and academic difficulties. "Addressing these environmental difficulties, which might potentially involve family and school interventions, can sometimes dramatically reduce suicidality," it says. This paper advises against using transition as a response: "Rapid gender transition is not

an appropriate response to suicidal intent or threat, because it ignores the larger mental health and social context of the young patient's life – the entire family is often in crisis."[300]

When somebody feels suicidal, it is a sign that they are hurting deeply. Validating this suffering can be a first step; Marchiano suggests saying something like – "I hear that you are hurting so much. You are in so much pain." Lowering the stressors in their life is important – finding a couples therapist to support your relationship if you are arguing with your partner, for example.[301] You may want to consider sharing your own difficulties from your teenage years. "Your relationship is beginning to change as they're coming into adulthood," says the representative of the Gender Dysphoria Support Network, "and you can have more open conversations sharing your own vulnerabilities and the challenges you faced."[302]

While several interviewees spoke about involving a mental-health professional with your child, care should be taken in choosing someone appropriate (see Getting help) and paying attention to the caveats outlined in that section. A balanced approach is important, but hard to get right. According to O'Malley, the fine-tuning needs to happen around helping a child to realise that these things cannot be said lightly while ensuring they feel able to speak about it if they are genuinely hurting, and getting them the help that they need. "It's not easy," she says.[303]

Ideas have not been summarised in this section due to the complexities and nuances involved.

Keeping the long view in mind

Your goal is not simply your child's happiness right now, but ensuring that they are able to function well and happily through the rest of their life.[304] These goals may not be mutually exclusive, but it is important to bear your child's future in mind. Similarly, your child's distress may take a long time to resolve, so it is better to think about it as an ongoing process rather than a short-term fix.[305] Your child will have the independence to make medical decisions once they reach adulthood. They are more likely to take sensible decisions, according to one family therapist, if you have shown unconditional love, with lots of intentionally positive feedback; if you have listened reflectively; and if you have offered appropriate boundaries, backed up by logical, consistent consequences.[306]

As Genspect puts it in its guidance for parents: "When our children are in mental distress, we parents can feel an overpowering urge to jump in and save them with a solution to the crisis. Yet sometimes the most important thing a parent can do is sit tight, offer kindness, love, understanding and boundaries, and help the child to expand their world. This can be a long and complicated process, and many parents need to prepare for the long game. There might be desistance; there might be relapse; the gender-related distress might move in another direction and then boomerang back with even more intensity. Make sure you take care of yourself so that you can weather these storms."[307]

We can think of this as seasons, according to Ayad. Perhaps a child still lives at home, and there are a few years before they become a legal adult; that may be the season of real sacrifice and restriction for the family, and figuring out: "How do we put aside our other priorities for the sake of this project of helping our child?" And then there are times where there is a different season – a season of letting go, a season of accepting what is and accepting things you cannot change, which often happens when the child leaves home and is an adult. "I think it is hard, no matter what," says Ayad.[308]

Brunskell-Evans sees optimism for those families who are able to take a supportive waiting approach. "Of the parents I know who were too frightened to say 'no'," she says, "they still have a young adult totally caught up in it… The mother and young adult get locked in a cycle [of guilt], with the mother being to blame for everything." The families who have not affirmed, though, have seen their children desist. "Parents need to steel themselves to say no," says Brunskell-Evans. "'No, you can't throw yourselves into that fire.'"[309]

Further reading

Three of my interviewees independently recommended the book *Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*, by Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté. Abigail Shrier's book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing our Daughters,* is good for cultural context, and not just for the parents of girls. Marcus and Susan Evans' book, *Gender Dysphoria*, provides useful background for those who want to understand more about therapeutic approaches. Stephanie Davies-Arai's *Communicating with Kids* gives further details on some of the communication skills she outlines in her interview.

Finally, Stella O'Malley, Sasha Ayad and Lisa Marchiano will publish *Is My Child Trans? A Guide for Parents* this summer. If it contains a shred of the fierce wisdom, warmth and compassion that ran through each one of their interviews for this paper, it will be an invaluable resource for parents.

[1] See, for example, Young Minds (2023). A guide for parents: gender identity (accessed 3rd February 2023) and NSPCC (2023). Gender identity: advice to help you understand what gender identity is and how to support a child (accessed 3rd February 2023).

[2] Thornhill, J. & Hyde, T. (2020). *Rapid response to: 'The struggle for GPs to get the right care for patients with gender dysphoria.' BMJ 2020;368:m215.*

[3] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.

[4] Interview with Sasha Ayad, 14th March 2023.

[5] Interview with Stephanie Davies-Arai, 23rd February 2023.

[6] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.

[7] Interview with Keith Jordan, 20th February 2023.

[8] Interview with Susan Evans, 7th March 2023.

[9] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.

[10] Interview with Stella O'Malley, 20th February 2023.

[11] Bayswater Support Group. *Our Top Ten Tips* (accessed 14th July 2022).

[12] Interview with Stella O'Malley, 20th February 2023.

[13] Genspect. *Brief Guidance for Parents* (accessed 19th July 2022).

[14] Interview with Stephanie Davies-Arai, 23rd February 2023.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Interview with Lisa Marchiano, 15th February 2023.

[17] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.

[18] Our Duty (undated). *To Parents, from Detransitioners* (accessed 14th February 2023).

[19] Interview with Stephanie Davies-Arai, 23rd February 2023.

[20] Gender Exploratory Therapy Association (2022). *A Clinical Guide for Therapists Working with Gender-Questioning Youth, Version 1* (accessed 10th February 2022).

[21] Interview with Stephanie Davies-Arai, 23rd February 2023.

[22] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.

[23] Induced from content across a number of interviews.

[24] Bayswater Support Group. *Our Top Ten Tips* (accessed 14th July 2022).

[25] Genspect. *Brief Guidance for Parents* (accessed 19th July 2022).

[26] Interview with Lisa Marchiano, 15th February 2023.

[27] Interview with Keith Jordan, 20th February 2023.
[28] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.
[29] Genspect. *Brief Guidance for Parents* (accessed 19th July 2022).
[30] Interview with Stella O'Malley, 20th February 2023.
[31] Interview with member of Bayswater Support Group, 20th February 2023.
[32] Interview with Stephanie Davies-Arai, 23rd February 2023.
[33] Genspect. *Brief Guidance for Parents* (accessed 19th July 2022).
[34] Interview with representative of the Gender Dysphoria Support Network, 24th February 2023.
[35] Genspect. *Brief Guidance for Parents* (accessed 19th July 2022).
[36] Interview with Stella O'Malley, 20th February 2023.
[37] Genspect. *Brief Guidance for Parents* (accessed 19th July 2022).
[38] Gosling, M. (2022). *Teenagers and gender identity: the evidence base. Part 2: Treatment and outcomes*.
[39] Our Duty (undated). *How can I help my child?* (accessed 13th February 2023).
[40] Interview with Lisa Marchiano, 15th February 2023.
[41] Interview with Keith Jordan, 20th February 2023.
[42] Interview with Stephanie Davies-Arai, 23rd February 2023.
[43] Interview with Sasha Ayad, 14th March 2023.
[44] Interview with Lisa Marchiano, 15th February 2023.
[45] Interview with Stella O'Malley, 20th February 2023.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Interview with Lisa Marchiano, 15th February 2023.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Interview with Marcus Evans, 21st February 2023.
[50] Marchiano, L. *Guidance for Parents of Teens with Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria* (accessed 8th July 2022).
[51] Ayad, S. (2020). *Parenting a Young Adult with ROGD* [video]. YouTube.
[52] Interview with Lisa Marchiano, 15th February 2023.
[53] Our Duty (undated). *How can I help my child?* (accessed 13th February 2023).

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