



## **AM I THE ONLY GOING THROUGH THIS? A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON PARENTS RAISING A TRANSGENDER YOUTH**

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There is a paucity of research on transgender youth, but there is even less research conducted on parents with transgender youth. This research focuses on exploring what the parents' experiences are like and how they cope while raising a transgender youth. It is done through a focus group format to extract themes that emerge. The main goal of this qualitative research is to explore the experiences and challenges that these parents have while raising a transgender youth.

Our results showed that once a youth's transgender identity is disclosed, parents are forced to face with many questions and decisions. Parents often report feeling confused, anxious, overwhelmed, and lost. For instance, they do not know what the best way to respond to their youth is. They fear for the safety of their youth, the stigmatization in our society, and their youth's future. They also do not necessarily know how to work through their own emotions. While there are limited resources and support available for transgender youth, there are reportedly lesser available to these vulnerable parents in our current social systems (Lev, 2004). Moreover, they also do not know from whom or where they can get help.

**Keywords:** transgender, youth, parent, family, coming out

### **Introduction**

"Trans people represent one of the most marginalized groups in our society" (Bauer, Hammond, Travers, Kaay, Hohenadel, & Boyce, 2009, p.349). They often face many obstacles as they transition to the gender that they see fit. They also have to overcome obstacles from our society that is often established with rigid gender binary rules, which are two types of bodies, such as male or female, and two types of gender expression, such as masculine and feminine (Green, 2000, 2003). Transgender youth who do not fit in these gender-binary rules often find themselves being ostracized by others that cause them with significant social emotional stresses.

Kosicw, Diaz, and Greytak (2008) reported that an overall of 85% trans-students had reported verbal harassment, nearly 49.4% had reported physical harassment, and 34.1% had reported physical assault. Other research suggested that sexual minority youths, especially among transgender youth, suffered more emotional distress than their peers, which could lead to increasing rates of substance abuse, homelessness, depression, and other mental health issues (Bontempo and D'Augelli 2002; Clements-Nolle et al. 2006; Murdock and Bolch 2005). Some suggest that sexual minorities may have worse health-related outcomes during adolescence because they report lower levels of family connectedness which is often a key protective factor for these youths (Eisenberg and Resnick, 2006; Ueno, 2005).

With the intolerant nature of our society, it is arguably that transgender youth may need more support and guidance from their parents more so than other (non-sexual minorities) youths

(Wong, 2011). Unfortunately, many parents with a transgender youth do not seem to be emotionally ready, trained, or educated for such tasks. They are often in the dark, unaware, or overlook of their youth struggling with gender identity issues. It is not uncommon for these parents to find out these issues only when their youth has openly “come out” to their families. Lacking the support and guidance from their parents may affect the future development of these trans-youth. When youth discloses their transgender concerns to their parents, many parents find themselves feeling lost and overwhelmed with fear, as they are also aware how intolerant society and others can be to their trans-youth.

### **Lack of Education and Understanding**

As mentioned earlier, trans-youth need extra support from their parents compared to other non LGBT youths. However, there is a lack of education and support available for these parents. Without education and support, it is difficult for these parents to identify and understand their trans-youth’s unique challenges. They often find themselves feeling isolated and overwhelmed. They also report experiencing confusion, frustration, deep sadness, and pain as a result (Poe & Garcia, 2009). It is also important to note that trans-youth go through different developmental stages just as any other youth do, and each developmental stage has its own challenges and tasks that need to be achieved. Without proper education and support being available to them, these parents may continue to feel confused and overwhelmed, not just at one stage of their youth’s development, but at many different developmental stages while raising their trans-youth. At each new developmental stage, parents may find themselves struggling with a new sense of marginality, vulnerability, and stigmatization. (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Herdt & Koff, 2000).

### **Parents’ Acceptance and Societal Pressure**

Our society often enforces rigid gender rules (Lev, 2004). At times, parents conform with these social values and information, which, in turn, affects their ways in viewing and perceiving their youth’s transgendered identity. They tend to see their youth’s transgender identity negatively and do their best to conceal their youth’s transgender identity. Very often, it is believed by some that when youth come out of their “closet”, their parent’s go into their closet as they feel that they must keep their youth’s identity a secret from their family and friends or risk for being ostracized (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991; Willoughby et al., 2008). Unfortunately, such action prevents these parents from reaching out for support and resources that may have been available to them, which in turn make them feel isolated in dealing with the transgender issues of their youth.

In order to conceal their youth’s transgender identity, many parents have put strict boundaries on how their trans-youth can express and experience their transgender identity. Such restrictions not only affect their youth’s gender identity development, it also increases conflicts between the parents and the youth. The youth interprets such concealment as refusal and shame that their parents are feeling about them, which in turn affecting the qualities of their relationships. Unfortunately, at such a vulnerable time, the closeness of their relationship perhaps is the key ingredient to help them through this crisis.

While some parents may try to accept their youth’s new gender identity, they also find themselves feeling ostracized by others and pressured to defend themselves to others on the support of their trans-youth. Lev (2004) points out that these parents become the target of being

“bullied”. In order to avoid such societal pressure, parents may choose to disconnect some parts of their social circles and family members, which further isolate these parents from others.

### **Buffer Effect**

There is a positive association between social support and one’s well being which Meyer (2003) describes it as the buffer effect. For example, the buffer effect is often a tool that parents of ethnic minorities use to protect their youth against social discrimination. The buffer effect that is provided by the family can be a protective factor and acts as a buffer from stressful events. Therefore, when parents are able to provide support and guidance to their youth by helping them deal with intolerance or discrimination that they may experience in social situations, these youth may still develop positive sense of self (Cohen & Willis, 1985).

However, unlike other ethnic minority youth, transgender youths do not always have this buffer effect. Their parents may not be aware of their transgender concerns, and as a result, these parents may have failed to guide and to provide their trans-youth with skills on what it is like to be a transgender person in a discriminative society early on. When these parents eventually become aware of their trans-youth’s transgender concerns, they find themselves struggling internally and feeling overwhelmed with emotions which may paralyze them from making decisions in helping their youth. As a result, they may fail to provide this buffer effect for their youth that they desperately need.

### **Parents’ Stages of Acceptance**

Parents of trans-youth go through stages of acceptance. The five stages of acceptances are very similar to Kubler-Ross’ (1969) five stages of grief. The five stages include Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. The stage of Denial is characterized by struggling to believe that such event is happening to the person, and the stage of Anger is characterized by one who is questioning why this is happening to him/her. The stage of Bargaining entails with one seeking to negotiate a compromise to lessen the unpleasant event. The stage of Depression refers to one grieving for the loss of the emotional attachment and yet, working towards the final stage of Acceptance.

When parents learn about their youth’s transgender identity, they often go through different stages of acceptance. They may not be necessarily going through these stages chronologically. Instead, they sometimes see themselves shifting from one stage to another with limited predictive factors. Different stages of acceptances affect the parents on ways they react to their youth’s transgendered identity and the support they may provide. For instance, parents in the stage of Denial are less likely to seek out information needed to support their trans-youth versus parents in Anger stage may possibly be in frequent conflicts with their youth at home. While these parents may seek out information and support for trans-youth in different stages of acceptances, Kubler-Ross (1969) suggests that, when they reach the stage of Acceptance, these parents are more likely to take on an active role in seeking more assistance for their youth and for themselves.

## Fear

Once parents learn about their youth's transgender identity, different kinds of fear come to their realization. Very often, their youth's safety is often their first concern. With the high statistical rate of bullying and hate crimes, parents raising a trans-youth tend to experience a high level of fear (Kosicw, 2008). They fear for the physical safety of their youth, finding themselves constantly guarding their youth's social environment, preventing their youth from getting hurt physically as well as emotionally. If their youth is in transition, they fear about their passing<sup>1</sup>, worrying others may harm their youth upon discovering their youth's birth gender. It is especially the case when the trans-youth is at the early stage of transitioning (before the Hormonal Therapy) and living the Real Life Experience (RLE)--as the gender that she /he sees fit. It is because these parents understand that their youth secondary sexual characteristics may expose the youth's birth gender which may lead others to induce harm to their youth.

Many parents also feel pessimistic about the future of their youth. Given many negative ways that the media portrays transgender population, parents may believe that their youth will not be experience "a normal life," such as finding a job, having a partner and friends, or living an independent life.

## Purpose of This Study

There is very limited research conducted on parents who are raising a trans-youth. How a parent reacts to his/her trans-invariably affect the identity formation and other developmental areas of the youth. The purpose of this study is to explore what these parents' experiences are like and to examine the challenges that they face when raising a trans-youth at home.

Because of the paucity of research conducted with this population, using qualitative methodology, such as a focus group, seems to be appropriate for this type of study. Qualitative research methodology allows rooms for exploration of a relatively new phenomenon that is relative to social and behavioral science (Patten, 2002)

## Participants

There were six participants in this study, NJ's father and mother, LR's father and mother, MG's mother, and PU's mother. The ages of these youth ranged from 14 to 17 years old and these parents knew about their youth's transgender identity ranged from 3 months to 6 years. While NJ, RH, and MG are males to females (MTF), PU is female to male (FTM).

All six parents are Caucasian, middle class living in different suburban areas of British Columbia, Canada. In term of the stages of Acceptance model (Kubler-Ross, 1969), based on their self-reported information and the pre-group screening interview, LR's father, PU's mother, and MG's mother were between Stage 1 (Denial) and Stage 3 (Bargaining), NJ's mother and father, and RH's mother were between Stages 4 (Depression) and Stage 5 (Acceptance).

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<sup>1</sup> Passing refers as one ability to be regarded as the gender he/she identities with or is trying to convey. It is usually used for a transgender person to pass as the gender he/she sees fit.

## Procedures and Data Analysis

Parents were self-referred to this study. They all expressed having stress in raising a trans-youth. They were informed about this study such as the purpose of this study and their rights as participants. To meet the explorative nature of this study, data were collected through a focus group, examining their challenges in raising a trans-youth. By using constant comparison qualitative method, we were able to draw different themes (Glaser, 1992). A list of questions about raising a trans-youth was developed by one of us (see appendix A). Answers from these parents were then recorded and were eventually transcribed. Through the process of constant comparison<sup>2</sup>, different themes were merged.

## Results

### Overwhelmed with fear

One of the salient themes is the fear that all participated parents are experiencing. Their fear ranges from their youth's physical safety, being bullied, passing, transitioning to his/her future life. All parents expressed concerns for the safety of their youth because they recognized that our society and others could be discriminative towards their trans-youth, especially when their youth presented with gender variant behaviors.

*"My number one fear is safety, because our community is not very kind to people who are different". (MG's mother)*

*"...so when some called him a fag a couples of weeks ago, he wanted to take a knife to school. He's so angry, very angry...he says, I don't care, but I think he got to be really aware". (LR's mother)*

*"...I don't want to see him to get hurt. I'm so scared of this, some body's going to, there are some mean kids walking around". (LR's father)*

Parents also expressed their fear for their youth being able to pass as the opposite gender. All the trans-youths in this study had already reached puberty and their secondary sexual characteristics had already developed. Their parents feared that their child could not pass successfully, which often could lead to being bullied or ostracized by others.

*"Passing...like we are already struggling with the feet thing...she is like 5'9" and 110lbs...we are having a hard time like buying shoes...it's like OMG, it's a nightmare. So I think passing...because there is a fear that they don't pass they are going to get bullied". (NJ's mother)*

*"He is a nice looking male and he won't make an attractive looking female. No, he is not...he's got one hell of hair on him. He's got more hair on his arms and legs than I do". (LR, father)*

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<sup>2</sup> Constant comparison method is a process in which newly collected data is continuously being compared with previous collected data until themes are formed and emerged.

Five out of six parents worried about the future of their youth. They were concerned that our society in large would not accept their youth, and if their youth would be able to have a good life.

*“Mostly I feel fear, not fear based on the diagnosed, but fear of the future...my fear is a lot around society and he will integrate into society”. (LR’s mother)*

*“It’s like picking the hardest route possible for a human being, you know. If you think you are being ostracized before, guess what is going to be worse”. (NJ’s father)*

With all the uncertainties ahead of their youth’s life, all parents present a high level of distress, fearing of the unknown and fearing what might happen to their youth’s day-to-day life.

### **Depression**

All parents reported that their youth had developed depression due to his/her transgender concerns. They sensed the despair and hopelessness that their youth was experiencing, and the frustration for not knowing what they could do to make it better for their youth.

*“I haven’t had much sleep. She is very upset... she is agitated... wants to go out...irrational things. Call the crisis line. There have been different police officers at the house. I guess I didn’t realize the full effects of that for her, she is very depressed and that’s led to our trips to hospital and ambulance and all that. (PU’s mother)*

*“He called me at work last night and he said, mom I hate my body, I hate my acne...I hate my hair (all over my body)...I don’t know if it’s the depression or it’s the disconnection”. (LR’s mother)*

These parents explained that there was nothing more discerning than watching their youth suffering and feeling helpless at the same time.

*“Initially we thought he’ll just grow out of it... that is just a fad or a phase. For myself, I couldn’t see my child being depressed...this situation is not going to change...as a parent, I love my child...and I am going to do anything to support my child”. (NJ’s father)*

*“He started to get depressed in the fall. I thought it was because of his dad...that’s what I thought it was...until I found out he wanted to transition to be a girl. My number one fear is safety, because our community is not very to people who are different”. (MG’s mother)*

### **Sense of isolation**

The sense of isolation was being identified by all parents. However, it was more apparent for parents who were in the earlier stages of acceptances

*“I want to find other parents who want to meet on somewhat regular because it’s just me, myself, and I. Nobody knows...I have never known anyone who has been transgendered in my life so I am on the journey with him...he won’t tell his dad, he will never tell his dad”. (MG’s mother)*

*“I kind of like just want to be connected to people. I don’t want to be alone and stuff and you know, the worst thing is if your child alone with this, that’s even worse”. (LR’s father)*



*“I too feel alone...because he is working so much and stuff and I’s doing all of the telling...I get emotional every time I tell people. I don’t know what they are going to react”. (NJ’s mother)*

They also reported feeling lost especially when their trans-youth reached different developmental stages. They see new challenges were surfacing as their youth entered another developmental stage. Without knowing what to do and who to turn to, they expressed feeling a sense of loss and helplessness, as if they were the only parents struggling with these issues.

*“I think that is going to be challenging because all of a sudden she will have boobs or something and you go for a hug...you are probable going to feel a little awkward. I’m sure things are still coming”. (NJ’s mother)*

*“How do you give them independence and yet protect them...I feel the loss. I feel angry, but I try not to show the anger”. (NJ’s father)*

*“I think everyone is looking as it’s just a phase. It’s just something to look into or pursue...I kind of have that question about why does it have to be this or that... maybe it’s just your idea of being a female, you know. Of course, she has always wanted to be a guy...I don’t know...I just don’t want to have to do that”. (PU’s mother)*

### **Lacking support and resources:**

As stated earlier, their sense of isolation could be related to a lack of support and resources from our society. All parents expressed that there was a lack of support from their families and their communities. They had difficulties turning to their friends and families for support. They also felt uncertain where they could get the resources that they needed in their communities.

*“It’s kind of like, as a female you get pregnant. And every female knows where to go and buy the first book, about what to expect when you are expecting...It would be great if someone could actually put like everyday information for transgender. Like transgender for idiots. Seriously, it’s so common stuff. So it’s like when a question pops I’ve got no one to answer”. (NJ’s father)*

*“I feel like I’m missing the practical stuff and I get concerned. We are at a practical stage, we need education and information”. (NJ’s mother)*

*“Both of us are recovering alcoholics...it feels like you the only person in this world who has alcoholism or drug addiction,...and then you go to these AA meetings and there are other people who are just like you...that’s what you were talking about...we don’t have that...we are totally lost as you can see”. (LR’s mother)*

Because of the limited support and resources available, 5 out of 6 parents feel that they had to advocate for their youth, so that their youth could have protection that they needed.

*“We have a meeting with the school last month...our view is that, if we get it out there, there will be more eyes watching the situation, if something is to go wrong. There are a lot of eyes watching. I ‘m very protective; I know I’m going to have a tough time if someone touches my son or daughter”. (NJ’s father)*

*“People don’t get it. They are like...what is he? Because of that ignorance, I feel the sense to protect him”. (LR’s mother)*

*"We are educating them (people at the high school), they are not that progressive". (NJ's mother)*

These parents shared that they were in desperate needs to get support from others, especially from those with youth struggling with similar issues. All parents suggested to form their own support system and to meet regularly.

*I think this group would be a phenomenal place, to share, to process, and to connect. In terms of other resources, I'm trying to get some books." (LR's mother)*

### **Discrepancy of stages**

Parents in this focus group appeared to be at different stages of acceptance. While some of them were at the earlier stages of acceptance, others were at the more advanced stages in accepting their trans-youth. The different stages that they were at apparently affected the way they reacted and how they handle their youth's transgender identity. LR's father and PU's mother were between the Denial and Bargaining stages.

*"Is it possible...are you absolutely sure...I am still in shock. I want him to be gay (instead)...why me...it's kind of like the death of somebody who is a part of your life and the shock of it like when I found out my (other) son got killed...I 'm not ready for this and I don't; want to be forced into this...you know, I feel like I'm a jerk here". (LR's father)*

*"With the idea that you are raising a transgender child...what if you don't know. I just discovered this a month ago...She is obviously very unhappy and it's causing a lot of stress for not her but everyone...I do not have anything to say right now". (PU's mother)*

Being at the earlier stages of acceptance, they reported having more conflicts with their trans-youth on issues ranging from their gender identification to their choices of clothing. They stated that their interactions with their youth had been relatively negative since they had learned of their youth's coming out. They often found themselves to be in an almost dichotomous conflict between working through their own emotions and attending to their youth's transgender concerns. Being in shock and not knowing what to do, they reported feeling more stressful and having less positive interactions with their children.

LR's mother and MG's mother were at the more advanced stages. While they were still struggling in accepting the idea that their youth were transgender, they shared that they had tried to maintain an open communication with their youth and to make an effort to understand them.

*"We are a little awestruck. I will do everything in my power to support and be here as a mother. We are having a hard time still...I am trying to call him a girl but we don't have a name, but I allow him to dress within the house...so I guess we are just learning. It's a process of acceptance and working through those steps". (LR's mother)*

Both NJ's parents appeared to be at the Acceptance stage. They passed the Denial and the Grieving stages when they learned about their child's transgender identity six years ago. Currently they were at a stage where they were ready to take more action and to make changes for their youth; such as getting information on hormonal therapy and getting the support that their youth might need.



*“We have a lot of years to think about it; sort of mentally prepared ourselves and we have gone back and forth in previous years. Like I have said, it took us a while to get there. We would say we are accepting of it, even at that young age we did said stuff that didn’t align with the belief that we accepted it...we went to support groups and now the issues that are coming up are telling the family, telling the school and finding practical means like finding breasts that she can pass as a girl”. (NJ’s mother)*

With these actions, they both reported having more positive interactions and better relationship with their youth and seeing their youth feeling “happier” than before.

## **Discussion**

The themes emerged in this study are consistent with early literature reviews. The results support that parents raising trans-youth are overwhelmed with fear. The fear that they have experienced is more than just the physical safety of their youth. It extends to multiple levels of their youth’s life. Having the fear and not having a safe place to turn to for help have made the situation more stressful for these parents. It is evident that they feel isolated, overwhelmed, and confused at times.

Once their youth has come out to them, they do not seem to have the luxury to wait for help. They have found themselves being pressured to act. Sometimes, they are forced to make decisions that they are not sure if they are the best for their youth. It has become a process of trials and errors. Unfortunately, the mistakes that they make may damage along the process of trials and errors may damage their relationship with their youth. At times, these errors may cause long-term effect on their youth’s development. While these parents see the need to help their youth but they are also facing the process of working through their own emotions. Trying to attend to both tasks successfully can be exhausting. As a result, all parents feel stressed out and overloaded at times.

In terms of the stages of acceptances time may be one of the factors that can assist parents moving towards the Accepting stage. In this study, parents who have recently learned about their youth transgender identity reported to have more difficulties in accepting. On the other hand, parents who have acknowledged their youth’s transgender identity early on have more time to work through their own emotions, to seek information, to be educated, and to mend their relationships with their youth. With more time to observe their youth’s behaviors, they can witness the gender consistence of their youth’s transgender presentation.

Another factor to developing acceptance appears to be exposure and having an open-mind. Parents such as LR’s mother and NJ’s mother reported that they had friends of different sexual minorities. Not only had they received support from these friends, they were also able to learn about the sexual diversities in different people. In addition to having been exposed to sexual diversity, having an open mind seems to help. For example, MG’s mother had just learned about her youth’s transgender identity recently, she was able to handle the situation relatively well in comparison to other parents. She contributed her success to her open-mindedness and how it helped her work things through with her youth.

Trans-youth are often misunderstood by many social service professionals, such as teachers, doctors, and administrators of agencies (Burgess, 1999). As a result, they find it uncomfortable to address their transgender concerns with them. Thus, when they disclose their identity to their parents, they are hoping for more receiving positive responses and support from them. When parents at an early stage of acceptance are not able to receive the disclosure positively, their

youth may take it as a sign of rejection. Consequently, the quality of the relationship between the parents and their youth can be adversely affected.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are other variables that may affect the ways that these parents accept their youth's transgender identity and they are not fully explored in this study. For example, all the participants in this study were Caucasians from the suburban areas with middle-class background. Their views may not be generalized to parents of other backgrounds such as various ethnic minorities groups and different socio-economic groups.

This study has a small sample size. Thus, caution should be taken when generalizing findings to different groups. More research study with the trans-youth and their parents are desperately needed. These youths are a vulnerable group. They rely on their parents for support and guidance. A well informed parent can make a positive difference for their youth's gender identity formation.

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