Affirming vs. Non-affirming Parenting Behaviors*

(This information applies to all types of relationships with children, not just parent/child relationships.)

Parents have a very powerful role to play in a gender-expansive youth's life. Research has shown that affirming parenting can significantly affect our children's positive outlook on their lives, their mental health and their self-esteem. On the other hand, non-affirming parenting behaviors are directly correlated to gender-expansive and transgender youth being more depressed and suicidal. Research studies show that the most crucial thing we can do as parents is to allow our children to be exactly who they are. (TransPulse Project; Family Acceptance Project).

Every family is unique, with different family dynamics, as well as cultural, social, and religious influences. Some families have to consider their child's physical safety in their communities more than others, but all families have to weigh the effects of their parenting approach on their child's long term psychological well-being.

What are affirming parenting behaviors?

Affirming parenting behaviors strengthen a child's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. While some of the parenting behaviors discussed in this section may be challenging for some parents to implement, it is important to take whatever steps you can to demonstrate to your child that you are with them on this journey.

Create a supportive family environment: The ability to make the home a sanctuary of security and support for your child is the single most important factor in promoting lifelong health and well-being for your child. Such an environment creates a buffer for your child from the hardships they may face outside of the home. Creating such a space may not come easily for you, particularly if you are struggling with accepting your child's gender identity or expression. If this is the case, seek help from an empathetic, knowledgeable therapist who provides gender-affirmative care and support.

Require respect within the family: It is imperative with immediate and extended family that you require and accept only kindness and respect for your child. While you may not be able to change people's opinions, you can certainly dictate how you expect others to behave and speak around you and your child. It can be scary to make this demand of family members, yet many parents report that once they've taken a stand on their child's behalf, they feel a great sense of relief and empowerment.

<u>Express love and support for your child's gender expression</u>: What does this look like? It means allowing them to choose, without pressure or unspoken messages, the clothes they wish to wear, how and with whom they play, their favorite toys, the accessories they favor, the manner in which they wear their hair, and the decorations and images with which they surround themselves. It means helping them prepare for any negative reactions they may encounter outside the home by practicing their responses with them and making sure, when appropriate, that there is a safe adult for them to turn to in case they need assistance. It means discussing any negative or conflicting feelings you are struggling with over their gender identity or expression with other adults, not with your child.

<u>Allow zero tolerance for disrespect, negative comments or pressure</u>: A concrete way to demonstrate ongoing support and acceptance for your child is to tolerate absolutely no negative comments about your child, from anyone, whether your child is with you or not. This means following up with the people who make such comments in a firm way that makes clear your commitment to your child's well-being. It may also mean needing to follow up with other parents or the school about the comments made by other parents, children, or school staff.

<u>Maintain open and honest communication with your child</u>: Stay open about this journey, both your child's, and your own. By demonstrating to them that you are a partner in this process, and showing a genuine sense of inquisitiveness about how they see themselves, what they think, and what they are experiencing, you show that you are there for them. This open level of communication will also help you know your child's level of stress or distress, and whether they may need additional outside support or intervention.

What are non-affirming parenting behaviors?

Non-affirming behaviors undermine a child's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. It should not be surprising that many of the children who end up in the foster care system, run away, or become homeless are gender-expansive and transgender; rejected at home, they find themselves with few options for support. Refusing to accept one's child as they are and behaving in an unkind, punitive, or disrespectful manner communicates to your child a lack of value or worth. As you read the list below, try to also have compassion toward yourself. Most, if not all, parents have employed these behaviors at one time or another. What is important is to commit to communicate your love and support for your child from this point forward. We can only start from where we are.

Physical or verbal abuse: One of the most damaging things you can do is verbally or physically abuse your child. It won't get them to change, and it places them at a far greater risk of suicide. If these types of feelings come up internally, work to keep them there, rather than outwardly demonstrating your struggle to your child. Get help and support from a trained therapist if needed.

Exclusion from family activities: The urge to avoid being embarrassed by your gender-expansive child sends a message of shame and implies change is required in order to be a member of the family. Insisting your child "dress properly" or "act normally" makes your child feel that the comfort of others trumps their own sense of well-being and security.

Blocking access to supportive friends or activities: Preventing your child from seeing gender-expansive friends and allies or participating in LGBTQ activities will only generate a sense of isolation and significantly increase risk factors. Blocking your child's access not only cuts them off from a critical support system, it also stigmatizes other people like your child.

Blaming the child for the discrimination they face: Saying that a child deserves the mistreatment they encounter simply for being who they are is incredibly dangerous, an implicit message that they are to blame for the cruelty of others.

Denigration and ridicule: When you speak or treat your child with disrespect, or allow others to, it shows them that they cannot count on you for the love and protection they desperately need.

Religious-based condemnation: Telling a child that God will punish them greatly increases health and mental health risks, and can remove a vital source of solace.

Distress, denial, and shame: When a child sees that they are causing you great distress and shame, they internalize this pressure. It is damaging to openly communicate your denial of their gender identity or expression.

Silence and secrecy: Insisting your child remain silent about their gender identity or expression tells them that there is something inherently wrong them.

Pressure to enforce gender conformity: Even when motivated by a desire to protect your child, asking them to mask who they are indicates there is something fundamentally wrong with who they are.

Things you can do as a parent

- Understand gender
- Explore your own gender history
- If damage has been done to the relationship, work to heal it
- Confront your anxieties so that you're not parenting from fear
- Meet other youth and adults who are transgender or non-binary
- Meet other parents of transgender or non-binary kids
- Tell others (while respecting needs of your child), especially close family friends and extended family
- Find support: parent groups like PFLAG, faith community, friends
- Make sure your child has affirming medical providers, safe school environment, models/mentors

*Much of this content comes from the groundbreaking research conducted by the Family Acceptance Project, which indicates a direct and significant impact of family acceptance on rates of suicide, drug use, HIV-related risk, depression, outlook on life, and homelessness. http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/