

## **5 Things Your Transitioning Child Wants You To Know**

There are so many difficult feelings that come with being the parent of a transgender, gender nonconforming or non-binary child — frustration, worry, self-doubt, grief, even anger come to mind.

It can be hard to navigate dealing with all those feelings while trying to best help and support our child and keep them safe - often with no roadmap. It can be very isolating.

This parenting journey can take a toll on our relationship with our child as we often find ourselves

- Taking their behavior personally or
- Feeling like we're walking on eggshells

We can feel lost trying to sort out typical age-related issues from gender issues and overwhelmed figuring out how involved to get in their process.

I'm Kathy Whitham a Registered Nurse, Trauma-informed Parenting Coach, Mom, Grammy and Poet who specializes in helping parents like you because I was that struggling parent. My now 32 yr old son, is on the other side of his transition and doing great as a teacher at a high school for the deaf. He came out as transgender 12 years ago on the stoop of our Queens apartment after our weekly pizza date - Pizza dates that had been crucial to the much needed relationship repair that had begun only the year before.

Since then, our relationship has gotten better and better, as has he. I've gone on to work with hundreds of parents in both workshops and one-on-one, in-depth coaching sessions, helping them nurture better relationships with their kids and families.

Today's workshop was created in collaboration with my son to offer you both his perspective and mine.

I'm guessing you'll have questions along the way. Jot them down and save them. Instead of taking time away from what you came here for, I'll be devoting a whole 50 minutes to a virtual Q&A to answer all your questions. I'll be hosting it exclusively for you and other parents who have taken this class. The most important thing you can do to stay connected is to legibly put your name and email on the list that's going around. I'll be in touch next week.

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Here's my philosophy. I believe in a parent-centric approach vs. a child-centric approach. What that means is that I believe the power lies in the hands of the parents to be the change-agents. Imagine this. Your child is like a boat tossed about on the waves. Rather than jumping in the boat, especially when a storm is raging, and getting tossed about with your child, a parent-centric approach invites you to be the anchor - tethering your child and helping them feel safe.

There are 7 principles that inform this approach. They are rooted in brain science, attachment, family dynamics and mindfulness. They hold and nourish the tree that is your family.

1. Connection matters more than perfection
2. Behavior is an SOS, not an attack
3. The better you do, the better your child does
4. Families are dynamic systems where all members affect each other
5. Your child wants to please you
6. Small changes lead to big results
7. What you focus on increases

Now let's go through each of the 5 Things Your Child Wants You to Know - as put into words by my son. We'll start by looking at some of the challenges we share as parents of our amazing children.

★ 1. I wake up at 3 in the morning, my head spinning with self-doubt, guilt, worry and sadness...

○ **Your child wants you to know...**

- *It's not about you.*
- *I'm not doing this because you did something wrong*
- *It's hard to pretend and not live my truth*
- *Part of me was scared that if I told you, I'd lose you.*

○ **I want you to know...**

- All your feelings matter and are OK to have
- You're not alone

○ **Parent-centric strategies**

- It's helped a lot of parents to remember that ***Behavior Is An SOS, Not An Attack***
- *Get Support - You've already started by being here. Congratulations!* Support is a requirement for self-care and for helping your child.
  - Contact PFLAG. There are several PFLAG support groups in the Boston area specifically for parents of trans and GNC kids.
  - Talk to a therapist who is experienced in dealing with families like yours.
  - Talk to me about emotional support, anchoring strategies and parenting guidance through coaching

## ★ 2. I'm not sure how to sort out age-related issues from gender issues

### ○ **If your child is transitioning after puberty, they want you to know...**

- *I'll probably emotionally regress because I missed out on going through puberty as the girl or boy I am. I missed going through that self-discovery the way I wanted.*
- *When I won't do what I'm supposed to do (like college applications, etc.), it doesn't mean that I don't realize how important it is. It means it feels overwhelming and I'm not able to be emotionally present for it.*

### ○ **If your child is transitioning before puberty, they want you to know...**

- *When I'm stressed or overwhelmed, I may not "act my age" but it's not an act. It means I'm feeling overwhelmed and need your help.*

### ○ **I want you to know...**

- **Connection Matters More Than Perfection** - I had to repair the connection with my son before anything else I did or said could get through and make a difference
  - *Tobi story: If you had thrown me out..*
  - *The voices around me were loud, but somewhere inside i knew -it was the turning point*

### ○ **Parent-centric strategies**

- *The best path to connection is to meet your child where they're at in their emotional age.*
- *Connection leads to co-regulation - everyone is more OK. It's easier to sort things out when you can think clearly*
- *It can really help to have a gender inclusive coach or therapist help you sort the issues - they can remain objective and are trained in child development*

### ★ 3. I feel like I'm always walking on eggshells

#### ○ **Your child wants you to know...**

- *When you walk on eggshells, it feels so insecure and scary*
- *I'm overwhelmed. I need you to be ok*
- *Don't lean on me for your emotional stability*
- *I can't be responsible for your happiness. I feel so much guilt and then I get resentful*

#### ○ **I want you to know...**

- I understand how hard you're trying to say and do the right thing and how much it sucks to live like that

#### ○ **Parent-centric strategies**

##### ■ ***The Better You Do, the Better Your Child Does***

- So when you're walking on eggshells it blocks your child's ability to connect with you. That can feel scary to your child and cause them to push back in self-defense. Then, as you well know everything can explode out of nowhere
- Your child needs you to be the anchor
- One strategy is to put on your own O2 mask first. Before you talk to your child. Pause, take 2-3 breaths like this.

- *Lets do this together now. Rate stress from 1-10*
- *Sit up, place feet on floor, hands on belly.*
- *Breathe in through your nose, filling your belly like a balloon*
- *Breathe out through your mouth - deflating the balloon all the way.*
- *Repeat 3 times. Rate your stress level now.*
- *It's like magic, but it's not magic, it's physiology. When you're calmer and more regulated, you're more available for connection*

- Don't make your child responsible for your emotional stability
- GET SUPPORT - you see a theme, right? Patterns that lead to walking on eggshells are deep and rooted in our history. It's very difficult to de-activate triggers on your own

## ★ 4. I want to support my child, but I'm unsure how much to get involved and how much to step back

### ○ Your child wants you to know...

- *I need both agency and guidance*
- *I don't want to decide everything on my own but I don't want you to rush me. It's too much pressure.*

### ○ I want you to know...

- Your child needs you - and what they need is an anchor when they're tossed on the waves

### ○ Parent-centric strategies

- ***Small Changes Lead To Big Results***
- Give them space to set the pace
- Space is not the same as just letting them decide everything on their own. That's overwhelming.
  - Validate them,
  - **get curious,**
  - do research,
  - offer options without expecting answers. For example, "I found this. You can think it or do some research or we can talk more, if you want."
- Talk Less, Listen More -
  - *Overall, I believe we can take a step back as parents. In our desire to help our kids, sometimes we stress them out more, right?!*

## ★ 5. I really want to know they're sure before they do anything drastic

### ○ Your child wants you to know...

- *There are lots of things I'm not sure about.*
- *It's such a hard question for me.*
- *I may not be sure where I'm going is right - even about the next step - but I know where I am is not where I want to be and is NOT ok.*
- *I can't reassure you*
- *I'm just trying to be happy - and the thing I think will make me happy is making you sad*
- *I feel guilty about making you sad, but then I get resentful of you because I don't know what to do.*
- *Sometimes my feelings change day to day and I can be very inconsistent*

### ○ I want you to know...

- You don't need your child to be sure in order to be OK or in order to know how to help them
- Which principles would be helpful here? What could you draw from to empower you?

### ○ Parent-centric strategies

- **Your Child Wants To Please You** which can feel like a lot of pressure
- Stop asking them if they're sure.
- A better question may be "What do you need?" or "What do you want to do?" This come from a more solid place than needing them to be sure in order for you to be OK. It positions you as the anchor rather than jumping in the wave tossed boat with them
- Transition by its very nature is inconsistent. Take one day at a time-EXPECT inconsistency from your child

**What's the most valuable thing you're taking with you today that will help you and your family?**