



Storm
Clouds
and
Rainbows

The journey of parenting
a transgender child

Kia ora!

Welcome to this resource for **parents of transgender children** in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The resource is based on interviews in 2021 and 2022 with parents of different cultural and social backgrounds, who were asked to reflect on their experience of parenting a transgender child, exploring the challenges they face and the joys they experience.

Drawing on these interviews and international research, the resource offers insights from a parent perspective on **how best to support a transgender child**.

It was researched, written and illustrated by Julia de Bres - a senior lecturer at Massey University and Pākehā cisgender parent of a transgender child, supported by Ia Morrison-Young (Te Ātiawa) - a takatāpui research assistant.

The resource was produced in partnership with the Rainbow Support Collective, a collaboration between rainbow-led support organisations across Aotearoa, and was generously supported by The Tindall Foundation.

Since all the interviewees were parents of transgender children, the term parents is used throughout, but what they have to say is equally relevant to other kinds of caregivers, guardians, foster parents, and **anyone who is caring for a transgender child**.

What does it mean for a child to be transgender?

The term transgender refers to a person whose gender is **not the same** as the gender they were assigned at birth. People may realise they are transgender at any age, including during childhood. Some transgender children are girls, some are boys, and some have a gender that sits outside this binary (e.g. agender or gender-fluid). Some terms cover all these possibilities (e.g. takatāpui or queer).

Transgender children face a lot of **pressure** to conform to dominant social expectations of gender, and it can be a struggle for them to be recognised as who they are. Support from family and whānau is **protective**, improving a transgender child's wellbeing and increasing their resilience in facing challenges outside the home¹.

The best way parents can protect their child is to **accept their gender** rather than dissuade them from expressing it². But supporting a transgender child can be challenging for parents too, who face many obstacles to creating an environment for their child to thrive. Parents **need support** to support their children.

Parents often find themselves in awe of the beauty, vitality and authenticity that emerge as a child grows into their gender identity. The journey is the child's, but parents tend to grow along the way too. Based on interviews with parents of different cultural and social backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand and international research on parents of transgender children, this resource offers **guidance from parents** themselves on how to navigate this amazing journey.

You're about to go on a
journey Take a deep breath
Because it's *quite a trip*



Where do you start?

Perhaps you're at the beach with your child one day looking for sea creatures and they turn to you and announce

“ I'm not a boy or a girl ”

...or you're eating dinner at home and your child informs you

“ I'm a girl ”

...or you receive a text from your child on your way to work saying

“ I'm a boy ”

When a child comes out as transgender, they are not only describing a reality - their gender identity - but are bringing that reality into being in the social world. Coming out to a parent is often a moment of vulnerability, and one your child may have been building up to for some time. They may not have read the research showing that family support has a huge impact on the wellbeing of transgender kids, but they know intuitively that your support or lack thereof will make a big difference to how easy or hard their life will be in the coming weeks, months and years.

This is where your journey begins.



You might be surprised.....

“ It came as a complete surprise, given that we didn’t even know what transgender was. So, from that point of view, it was entirely outside our comfort zone. ”

(Pākehā father*)

“ We didn’t notice anything until puberty with our child. And he didn’t know any better either. He says he hit puberty and he was like ‘what the hell is going on?’ He’s going ‘this isn’t right, this isn’t me.’ But prior to that, we weren’t aware, and he wasn’t aware. ”

(Pākehā father)

...or you might not

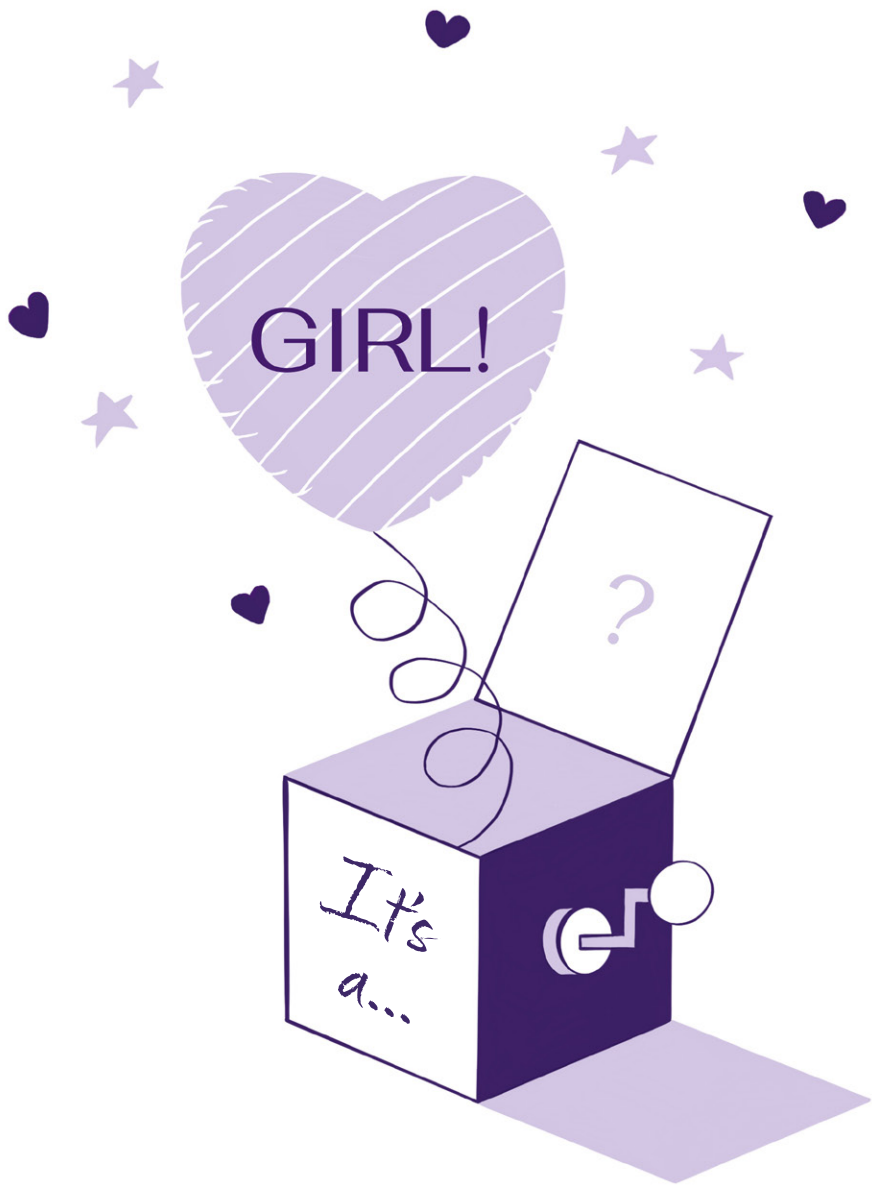
“ It wasn’t that big a deal for me because all the signs were there, we kind of knew anyway. Rather than saying it, we knew by her actions, that was how she was expressing it rather than telling us. ”

(Sāmoan father)

“ Our daughter has always been very effeminate. So, it was no big thing. It was just ‘oh I’m sorry, my bad, we’ve misgendered you.’ It wasn’t an issue. ”

(Māori queer mother)

* When we share quotes from parents, we indicate their gender and broad ethnic grouping. Where parents shared with us that they were queer, we also include this as a further factor among many that may influence their perspectives. Quotes appearing in the illustrations that follow are taken directly from the interviews.



GIRL!

It's
a...

?

For some parents, a child coming out as transgender is **completely unexpected**. Your child might have seemed comfortable in their gender through their whole childhood, right into the teenage years. When they come out to you, it may feel like a bolt from the blue, and hard to make sense of.

But while your child's gender might have been the last thing on your mind, you might have been concerned about them for other reasons. Something might have changed in their mood over the past few months or years – they might have seemed withdrawn, anxious, or depressed. While you were struggling to work out what was going on, they might have been struggling with this too. When they finally understand that they are transgender and share this with you, you may feel relief to know what your child has been going through.

For other parents, a child coming out as transgender is **no big surprise**. You might have been aware of your child's difference from as early as three years old, when gender expression kicks in for all children. Maybe your child, who you thought was a girl, was keen to get a short haircut and play rugby with the boys. Or maybe your child, who you thought was a boy, was magnetically drawn to pink and sparkles and unicorns. You might have attributed such stereotypically gendered behaviour to a transient stage of cross-gender play, or celebrated your child pushing gender boundaries, or wondered if they might be gay.

You might not have considered the possibility that your child was transgender but, when they let you know, you could see the signs were there from the start. The news requires a shift in how you view your child, but it is not totally surprising.

You might feel sad...or you might not

“ I am always a bit reluctant to say grief because what am I grieving? I’ve still got my kid, he’s still cool. If you look at grief in the broadest term of have I lost something then yeah probably, but it was all stuff for me, it was selfish stuff. It wasn’t grief about my kid, it was grief about things I had wanted. And I am thankful that I came to that understanding early, that what I was feeling was not actually about him, it was about me. That really helped me to put those feelings aside. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ Would you call it grief? I mean, there definitely was a transitional phase, where I was suddenly like, oh, I don’t think I have a son anymore. But certainly, there are bigger griefs in my life than that. You find out that something is not what you think. And you think that’s just so big and how can you come to terms with it? But actually, sometimes you can come to terms with something really fast, it just – life shifts. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ I don’t know if grief is the right term for it. It was two weeks where I was trying to understand the world. I think grieving the loss of the life I had imagined for my child, and a bit fearful maybe of what the future looked like for him. Suddenly, you’re in a world that you know nothing about, your child’s going into something that in our case we had never even heard of. What’s it going to mean? ”

(Pākehā father)

“ Your child is still your child in whatever form they present. ”

(Sāmoan mother)

*I never feel like
I've lost anything*

*I've got a
daughter
I never expected*



*I've got this incredible thing
I never thought I would have'*

Parents often experience a **mix of emotions** in the early stages of learning their child is transgender. You may feel confusion, shock, and fear, or gratitude, admiration, and pride³. You may worry about how your child will be treated by others and how much harder their life will be. Parents' worries often come first, and it may be some time before you relax into seeing your child flourish and realise this is how it was always meant to be.

One emotion that sometimes comes up for parents is **grief**⁴. You may feel you have lost the child you thought you had and struggle to integrate what you have now learnt about your child's gender into your sense of who they are.

Parent experiences of grief are best understood as a **loss of gendered expectations** of their child. This might include an imagined future of your child occupying gendered roles (e.g. as a bride or mother) or difficulties letting go of gendered aspects of their past (e.g. the clothes they wore or the name you gave them at birth)⁵. As one researcher observes, 'if sex and gender were understood to be variant and flexible, parents may not experience their child's gender transition as a loss at all'⁶. Indeed, some parents do not experience grief, perhaps because they are more open to viewing transgender identity in positive terms⁴.

Whatever you are feeling, it is important **not to let your emotions get in the way** of supporting your child. You can process your reactions with a partner, family members, or a therapist, but do not make it your child's responsibility to deal with any feelings of loss you experience⁷. They have enough going on right now as they bring their gender into the world, and they need your support.

You'll want to find a good map...and what you find on it might blow your mind

“ You think you're going down this path with your child and then what you thought was green is actually purple, and what you thought was actually purple is orange. ”

(Pākehā mother)

“ It forces you to examine things that you hadn't really thought of, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ Something that I've learned on this journey is that gender is so fluid, and we box it so ridiculously and stringently. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ This experience has helped me understand how much of my gender understanding has been dictated and swallowed without critique. It has made me realise that I am not actually that attached to my womanhood. It doesn't change who I am essentially as a person. ”

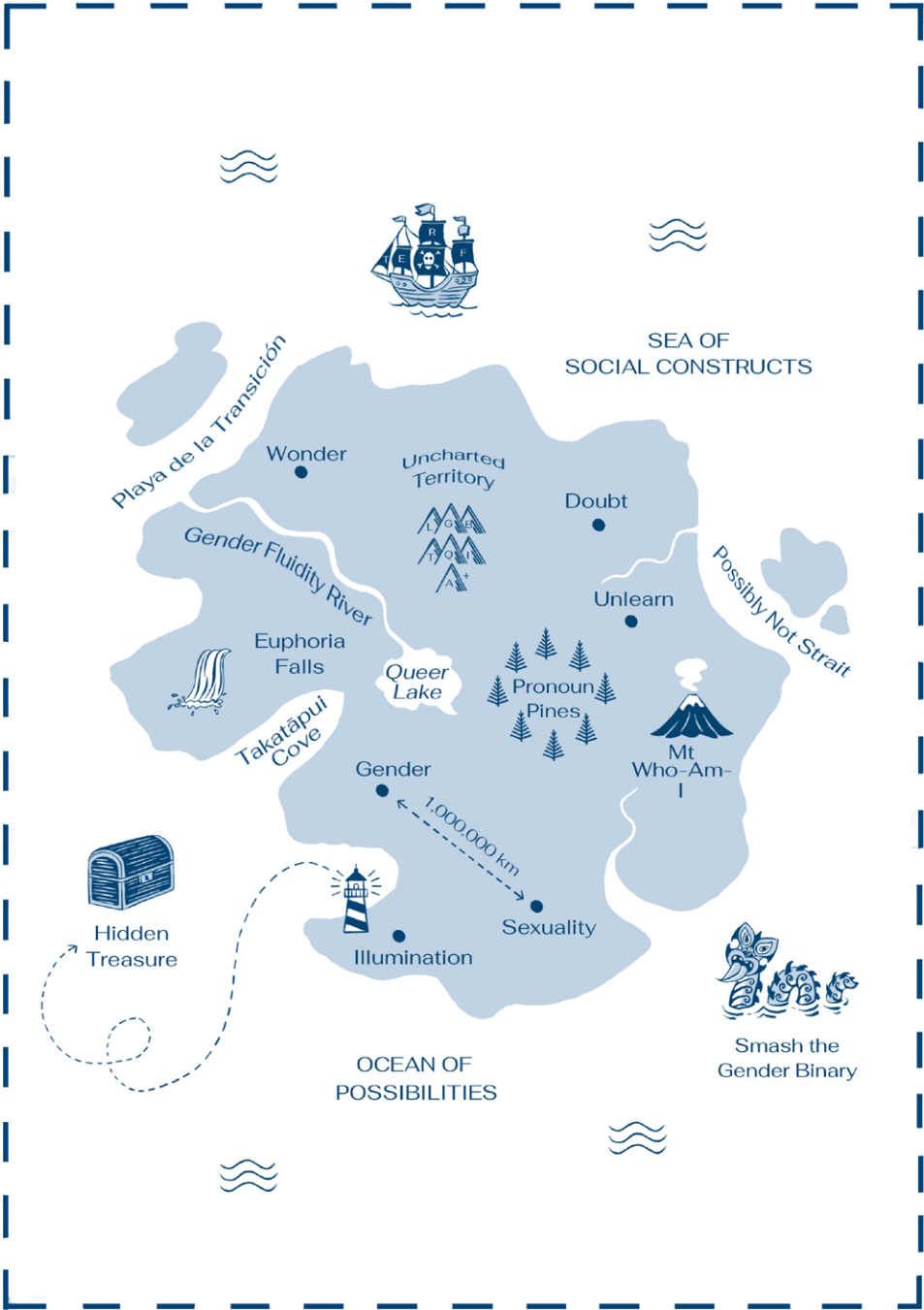
(Māori queer mother)

“ It's really hard for me to relate to not feeling the gender that I'm born with because I'm not even sure what that is to me. What actually is being male? What does it mean, what is it? ”

(Pākehā father)

“ I would be very surprised if there was a parent out there for whom this experience doesn't make them think about gender. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)



SEA OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

Playa de la Transición

Wonder

Uncharted Territory

Doubt

Possibly Not Strait

Gender Fluidity River

Euphoria Falls

Queer Lake

Pronoun Pines

Mt Who-Am-I

Takatāpui Cove

Gender

Sexuality

Illumination

1,000,000 km



Hidden Treasure

OCEAN OF POSSIBILITIES



Smash the Gender Binary

Parenting a transgender child can lead parents to re-evaluate long held **beliefs about gender**⁸. In the process of seeking to understand your child, you might come across new information that surprises you, for instance that:

- Gender is not determined by body parts
- Gender is different from sexuality
- Gender identity is distinct from gender presentation
- Gender is fluid

You might be **overwhelmed** as you try to understand a whole range of new concepts and terms relating to gender. You will likely develop a raised awareness of the gendered nature of society and realise how entrenched the gender binary is.

This learning process can lead to shifts in your **gendered identity** as a parent, as you adjust your conception of yourself as, for example, a father of a girl or a mother of a boy⁹ and may even lead you to reconsider your own gender identity¹⁰.

You do not need to **fully understand** everything you come across about gender but getting to grips with some basic concepts will help you on your way.

You'll need to pick up a new language for this journey...

“ My daughter will come home with a new term, and I'll go oh my God, like, I only just got used to the last one. Sometimes you've just got to give me a minute. Because now there's like six different terms for something that I thought there was only two terms for. It's a lot. ”

(Pākehā mother)

“ My daughter has thrived at high school, meeting other kids, getting the language. She is now able to articulate that she identifies as trans. She came to us and said 'I want to use she/her pronouns'. Earlier we tried using she/her and she was like 'I don't like that, use they'. We used they for about three or four years and then about eighteen months ago she was like 'no I want she/her pronouns' and we went 'boom – done' and about six months ago she told me the name she wanted to use. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ I noticed one person at work had pronouns in their signature. So, I immediately put my pronouns in mine, and the impact that has had has just been amazing. I've had conversations with people where somebody is going 'why have you got that, what does that mean?' And I've been able to talk to them and explain to them exactly what it means. Just opening up that conversation is a massive step to having that person understand what transgender is. ”

(Pākehā father)



Using **gender-affirming language** is one of the best ways to indicate your support of your child. This may include:

- using new **gender pronouns** when talking about them (changing from she to he, or from he to they)
- describing them using the **gender identity terms** they use for themselves (e.g. takatāpui, non-binary or gender-fluid), or
- changing the **name** you call them.

When you use gender-affirming language, you show that you **believe your child** and recognise them as who they are. This can make your child feel wonderful! If you do not do this, it can have the opposite effect, and make them feel invalidated and unseen.

If you find it hard to learn to use new pronouns or a new name, you can **practice** by talking about your child with a friend or family member when they are not around. Your child will understand if it takes a while for you to get the hang of it, but they need to see you trying and improving over time.

As a child explores their gender, they might try **several names or pronouns**, or shift between them depending on the context. It can be hard to keep up, but try to follow your child's lead. Giving them the freedom to explore in a supportive environment will help them find their way.

Your family dynamic might change a bit... or not

“ When an earthquake happens, people go ‘I knew it was out there, but I didn’t spend all my time going I wonder if there’ll be an earthquake.’ You don’t do that. But when it happens, you go, ‘oh shit, that’s an earthquake.’ Well, that’s how we felt. Whereas other parents who have been more closely associated with a more diverse community for longer, it’s less of a shock. ”

(Pākehā father)

“ Parenting trans kids isn’t really any different from parenting any kids. Every part of parenting comes with different challenges. Every child is different. And as a parent, you have to adapt to their needs and use the resources you have at hand. 95% of all parenting of our kids is just the same as you would parent with cisgender kids. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ Is there a difference between a transgender child and a child? ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ I feel like having a transgender child is significant. It’s not for most of the day-to-day. Life goes on. But I think in a psychic sense of your perceptions of your family and your child and the world ahead, I think it is a significant thing. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ It wasn’t that hard for me to adjust. I worked with someone who was trans. That was probably the only trans person I’d known, but I think I had in the back of my mind that this was a possibility for any of my kids, that this could be a thing. ”

(Pākehā father)

*I've always thought the word seismic
was an appropriate
metaphor for the shift*



*Because the ground is uncertain,
things are different*

They'll never be the same again'

The process of making space for a transgender child to express their gender can **alter gender dynamics** in the home. If you have subscribed to conventional or traditional gender norms up til now, this can represent a significant shift in your family relationships and prompt doubt and uncertainty as you advance into an unknown situation. If you have been parenting with more expansive or flexible gender norms to start with, it might be less of an adjustment.

Either way, parenting a transgender child can be a **transformative experience** for the whole family, prompting everyone to reassess the gendered assumptions underlying their relationships.

A metaphor of **family transition** is sometimes used to express this evolution: ‘The process of youth forming a transgender identity and transitioning to their affirmed gender affects all family members. In a sense, families with transgender youth are all transitioning.’¹¹

You might travel at different paces and on different routes.....or you might travel together

“ My wife and I used to be in the middle of the same piece of paper. And then we both moved to the edge of what felt like quite a large piece of paper. If I was here, she was here. And if I was here, then she was here. I said I’m going to expand the piece of paper to make sure we’re both always on it. Regardless of how different it is to mine, I don’t want my wife’s journey to be off my page. So I just have to expand my page, so that we can both be somewhere and find our way home again. Now we are right in the middle again, back where we started. ”

(Pākehā father)

“ It had a really negative effect on my marriage because I was like I am doing everything here. I’m going to psychologist’s appointments, I’m going to the doctor, I’m dealing with the mental health fallout from this for our kid who was self-harming, who was having suicidal ideation, so like what are you doing? Where are you? When we got married you said you would love me and support me, where is my support? Why is this all on me? ”

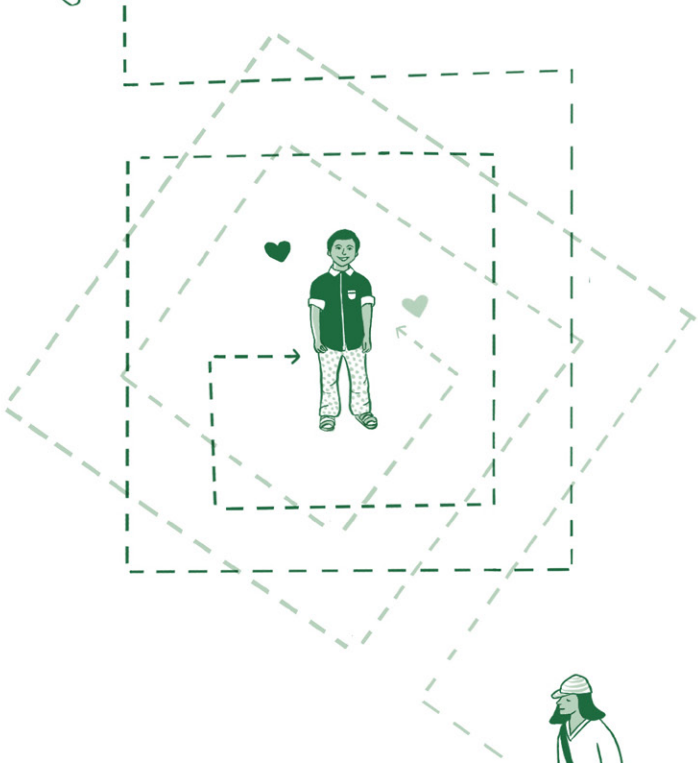
(Māori queer mother)

“ My husband was throwing up roadblocks because he didn’t understand it. One of the main conversations I had with him was you can have whatever doubts you want, whatever thoughts you want, you can talk to me about whatever it is, even if I disagree with you on a very basic fundamental level, that’s fine. But you don’t ever show our child. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ My partner and I are on the same page, in the same book, in the same library. ”

(Pākehā mother)



Parents do not always come to accept the transgender identity of their child **at the same rate**. The best-case scenario is that you work as a team to support each other and your child, but one parent may take longer than the other to get there. If you are not on the same page, this can lead to a lot of stress between you, and between you and your child.

In families with a father and mother, fathers are often more resistant to accepting a transgender identity for their child in the early stages⁸. This can place an **added burden** on mothers, who must then take the lead in supporting their child, while negotiating conflict over this with their child's father. This can be particularly difficult when parents are separated.

If you are parenting with someone who is **slower to move along** than you are, it is important to give them space to adjust in their own way, perhaps by working through their concerns and providing them with the information you are finding about the nature of gender and the positive impacts of family support on transgender children. You can also seek guidance from a therapist or support service where your partner can work through their reactions.

It is OK for a parent to take some time to get fully on board, but you need to make sure that their slower pace does not **negatively affect** your child. Your child's need for support comes before their parent's need to process what is happening.

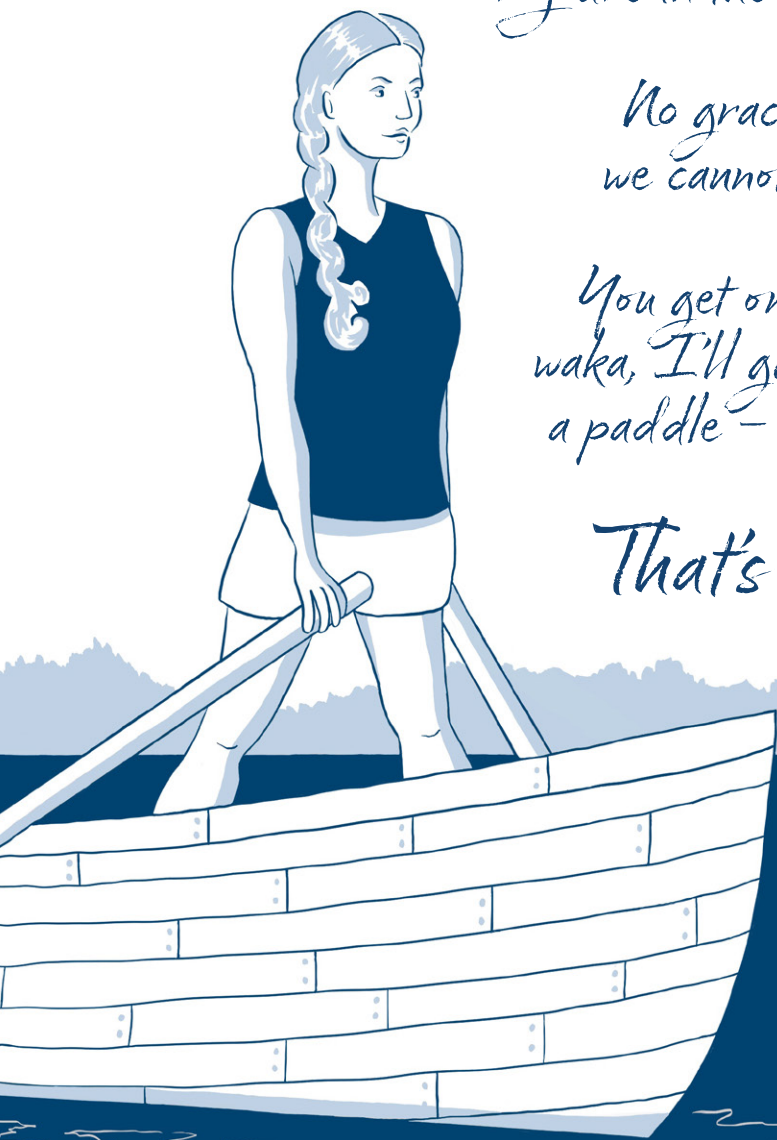
I said to my whānau

*You're on this waka
or you're in the water*

*No grace periods –
we cannot afford that*

*You get on the
waka, I'll give you
a paddle – or not*

That's it



You'll need to choose your travel companions wisely...

“ I had really good friends. I am very fortunate that not one of my friends questioned it, not one of them refused to use the right name or pronouns, not one of them ever even made a facial expression that showed they were not on board. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ We just told them, we didn't invite any discussion, it was just 'our child has this name now and prefers the pronoun they, and that's it'. We made it pretty clear that if they wanted to find out more, we'd be open to that but any critiques we're not interested. ”

(Asian mother)

“ When our daughter came out, and we had to talk to the wider family, we said 'Here's the references. Here's the medical professionals we've seen. You all happy now? Okay, good. This is how we're going to parent and try and watch this documentary, it might help.' So, there was a lot of that and my parents needed all the references. They needed to go away and do their research as well, but once they had, they were pretty good at getting on board, which we were very fortunate about. ”

(Pākehā mother)

“ My husband literally lost his entire family over it. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ I surround myself with the people I want to be with. I don't have the time and energy. I've got my little bubble and I stay in it. We surround ourselves with people who are loving and supportive. ”

(Māori queer mother)

Family and whānau support of transgender children extends **beyond parenting**. Siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, chosen family and friends all have a role to play as part of the village that raises a transgender child. These people may support a child in different ways than parents, and they can help parents too by encouraging their support of their child.

In te ao Māori, a whānau support system is likened to a **harakeke** (flax) plant, where the outer layers (the grandparents) protect the inner layers (the parents), which themselves protect the newest shoots within (the children)¹².

Family, whānau and friends can have a positive impact in this way by forming an '**ecology of support**'¹³ around your child, but they can also cause stress if they are unsupportive of your child's gender or negatively judge how you are parenting them. Some people in your circle may need time to adjust, but engaging with these people at length may take up energy that could be better spent supporting your child.

It is important to set **clear expectations** of how you want others to interact with your family, and you may need to stand up for your child and put healthy boundaries in place to protect their wellbeing. This might mean taking a break from communicating with some people until they are willing to get on board.

Sometimes it can be hard to know who to trust. Finding **people who encourage you** and accept your child as they are can feel like a breath of fresh air and a weight off your shoulders. This support can make you feel stronger when you encounter discrimination outside the home.

The route may be rocky and muddy at times...

“ Every year it’s hit and miss whether school is going to be good or not. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ When she started school swimming I had to go along because I didn’t feel she was kept safe, it was awful. I actually cried in a meeting at school. I said my child is not that good here at this school. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ There’s a lot of unsaid resistance. We thought that the medical system would be an affirming model, so it was quite a shock to realise that it wasn’t. There were these interactions where it felt like they were gaslighting us. The delays and miscommunications have caused a lot of mental anguish. It’s been extremely disempowering. ”

(Pākehā parent)

“ You stress when they’re younger about the medical stuff coming, but now that we’re here, she hasn’t wavered. This is her. And for her to be a functioning member of our family in the community, for her to be happy, she needs this medical treatment. So why are we told no? Why is it constant anxiety and barriers every time we have a bloody hospital appointment? ”

(Pākehā mother)

“ We had someone call Oranga Tamariki (child social services) on us. They walked in and talked with the kids and spent the entire time saying he was a good little sister, using his old name and misgendering him. The reason they had come was that apparently I was forcing him to be a boy. He spent two weeks after that pretending to be a girl. ”

(Māori queer mother)

It's like driving along with a *dirty* windscreen and trying to figure out where the road is, in terms of navigating the healthcare system and the things you need to do



I remember at the start, getting pointed to the wrong place, unclear policies, different DHBs doing things different ways, and trying to find - what's the pathway?

Social systems are not always set up to be inclusive for transgender children. The struggles parents face frequently derive not from a child's gender but from the **reactions of others** within schools, healthcare services and other institutions.

Transgender young people in Aotearoa New Zealand face high rates of **discrimination, bullying and violence**, and often experience stress as a result¹⁴. As a parent, you will feel some of this stress too¹⁵. You may have to fight for your child's rights at school, in sports teams, and with health professionals, all while your attempts to support your child are thwarted by those who seek to limit the full participation of transgender people in society. Lack of information and unclear pathways may frustrate you and make it hard to know how to proceed.

Fortunately, there is **growing awareness of transgender rights** in Aotearoa, and institutions are adapting their policies and procedures to reflect this. Many schools are creating space for transgender children to bring their full selves to school, and gender-affirming medical care is becoming more accessible. Organisations and peer support groups working for transgender youth, such as those listed at the end of this resource, can advise you on how to go about getting what your child needs and support you in doing so.

Some of you will face extra obstacles...

“ I am a Māori queer woman – that’s why I was being targeted, not my husband. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ I’ve been out for such a long time. I know what discrimination feels like. And I can kind of deal with it as an adult, but I don’t want my kids to have to. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ For me, what has triggered so much anger is being cast as the difficult mum, which just pushes all my buttons. All those tropes of the mother really make me so angry. What on a gut level annoys me the most about it is I don’t even identify as mother. And that’s what really, really makes me angry, because there are these perceptions that are so entrenched about what is a mother? What is a father? What is a child? What is a girl child? What is a boy child? ”

(Pākehā parent)

“ We just wanted to make sure that it came from her. I guess we felt quite conscious being lesbians...it was very much only led by her. Maybe I worried myself, like is it that she thinks women are cool or...you’d never put it on someone else but when it’s yourself you do go, is there any chance this is...? You want it not to be about you. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)



QUEER
BLAMING

MOTHER
BLAMING

RACISM

Being transgender is not a problem – it is part of the natural diversity of human experience. But in a society that treats transgender children as a problem, parents are often blamed for their child’s transgender identity, or **criticised for supporting them**. As one researcher puts it, ‘in supporting their children’s Otherness, some parents become Other themselves’¹⁶.

This parental blame often takes **racist, sexist, and heteronormative** forms. Parents from majority ethnic groups (e.g. Pākehā) may view state institutions as sources of support for their transgender child. In contrast, parents who have experienced institutional racism may feel under scrutiny from these institutions and view them as a threat¹⁷. Mothers are more likely to experience parental blame than fathers¹⁸, and queer parents may experience queer blaming on top of generalised parental blame, for having somehow influenced their child to ‘become transgender’¹⁹.

Internalising attributions of blame can lead to you **blaming yourself** and make it harder for you to support your child¹⁸.

...But your uniqueness will also bring you strength

“ Something for me coming from a te ao Māori perspective is the belief that we inherit wairua from our ancestors, from our tūpuna. Being able to look at it from that perspective and to say to my son ‘you are your ancestor, there was someone in our ancestry who was like you and you’ve inherited that and that is totally natural and normal’ has really helped me to understand and accept a bit more. It is very affirming for my son, the belief that that is where his wairua has come from. Because we have so many trans cousins, at least one of our tūpuna was, and that has passed to him. He looks at that as an affirmation of his Māori identity. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ Being Sāmoan, gender fluidity is a lot more normal. We all know about fa’afafine, right? It helped me a lot because I already knew that different gender expressions were accepted in that culture. ”

(Sāmoan queer mother)

“ My son has felt more acceptance being able to participate in cultural activities, share his culture, and be respected by his peers. Being accepted by the Sāmoan boys was when I feel like he kind of relaxed, when he got his boys that would stand up for him, I think it made him feel like he belonged. ”

(Sāmoan mother)

“ I draw strength from examples where people have been gender-diverse since history began. Look beyond the panic and the stress, transness has always been there. ”

(Pākehā parent)

“ All the LGBTQIA activists and allies have laid such groundwork for them. ”

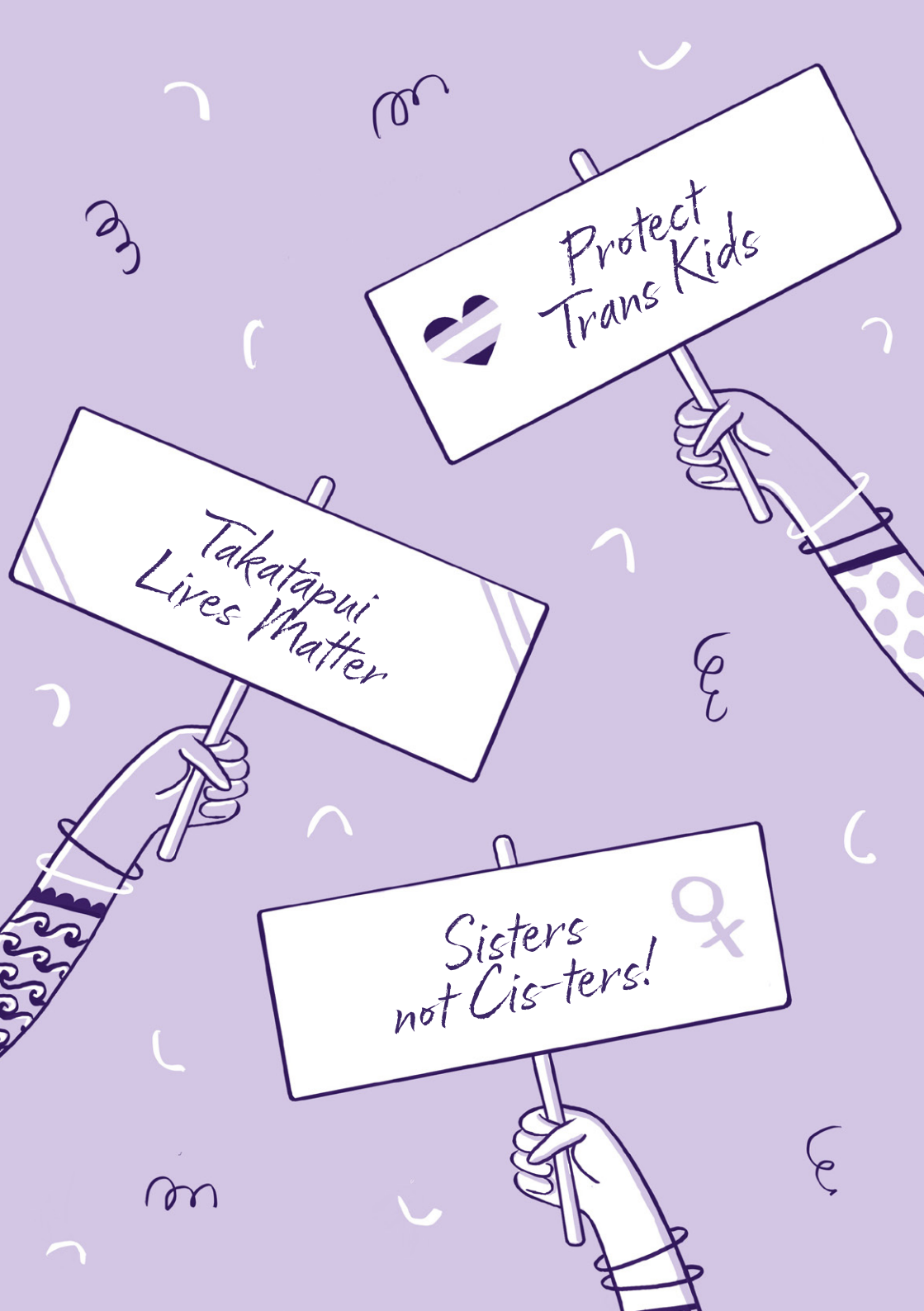
(Pākehā queer mother)

Protect
Trans Kids



Takatāpui
Lives Matter

Sisters
not Cis-ters!



Prior to colonisation, Māori and Pacific societies were **open to gender fluidity**, but the colonists suppressed this to assimilate Indigenous populations into Western society. Many Māori and Pacific people have since internalised restrictive norms of gender and sexuality, but there is a contemporary movement in Aotearoa to rediscover and celebrate takatāpui (Māori queer) lives, as part of decolonisation²⁰.

Understanding that transgender people have always existed in te ao Māori can help takatāpui children feel **strong in their gender and cultural identity**, as well as providing insights for non-Māori regarding the possibilities of alternative and more freeing concepts of gender.

Although parents with minoritised gender or sexual identities of their own face interconnected forms of discrimination, they can also **draw strength** from feminist or queer world views.

Your own experiences of **being different** can help you to understand the importance of accepting your child's gender and to advocate for their rights¹⁹.

The weather will be turbulent...

“ We try and keep it from her, the sense that there are people who are really anti. We’ve tried to protect her from that world. There was something on the news the other day and we were just driving to school, it was something anti-transgender and I just thought oh my god, and she didn’t say anything. We’ve tried to keep it from her, but sooner or later we won’t be able to. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ It’s probably the closest you can get, being triggered by transphobia, without being a trans person. I am not wanting to say that it’s the same. But I think when it’s your kid, you feel it like it’s directed at you. ”

(Pākehā father)

“ Do I experience stress as a parent of a trans child? Absolutely. And that is mostly around how my son is being treated. Having those little interactions where you’re constantly on heightened alert for what have I missed? I’ve had flow on effects to my health from that. Having an anxiety disorder, I’m always like, oh shit, when’s the brick gonna drop? And then actually, there is a brick that’s gonna drop, but I don’t know where it is. So, my blood pressure is not good. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ The tough stuff...It comes and goes, but it’s always sitting there on the outside. There are also good things that are happening outside of your control, like watching the cultural shift and acceptance of LGBT people. There are awesome things that you’re waiting for your child to have as well. ”

(Pākehā mother)

...Debate over
transgender athletes
at the Olympics...

...Texas prohibits
puberty blockers...

...Law bans
conversion practices
in Aotearoa...



...Largest Pride March
ever in London...

...Gender centre
burnt down...

Parents and children encounter **negative attitudes** about transgender people in politics, media, and society. These attitudes treat gender diversity as abnormal, reduce gender to biology, and restrict gender identities to only female and male. They reflect a perspective that values cisgender (non-transgender) experience over transgender experience⁴.

For some families, these attitudes are **at a distance**, in the form of the removal of laws protecting transgender people from discrimination internationally, misinformation about transgender people on social media, and attempts to reduce access to gender-affirming care.

In this context, parents and children alike are at risk for mental distress¹⁵. To look after your child, you need to **look after yourself**. If you feel overwhelmed by worries for the present and future, make sure you do what you need to do to care for your own wellbeing. This looks different for everyone, but could include going for a run, spending time in nature, having a massage, or listening to music. It can help to talk to a therapist about your worries, and practice techniques of living in the present, being grateful for what is going well, and accepting what you cannot control.

You can also turn your attention to the many **positive and uplifting stories** of transgender people overcoming adversity and living happy lives. This can help you visualise such possibilities more clearly for your child.

You'll need your umbrella with you...

“ These kids are my kids – and they will be protected. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ I managed to find some literature that talked about protective factors for gender-diverse kids. And this piece of literature basically said that the single biggest protective factor for gender-diverse kids was feeling that unconditional love and acceptance of their family. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ It's my job to keep them safe – as safe as we can – and give them a soft place to fall. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ Part of this journey of navigating has been trying to proactively protect my child from bullshit her whole life - prepping teachers to say the right thing, trying to talk to my family to make sure they use the right pronouns and the right name. There's a lot of trying to intervene before anything bad happens. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ The focus has switched very much from academic achievement and things like that to mental and personal wellbeing. It's always in the back of your mind. Statistics aren't good. But I was like, well, there are many things that swing those statistics in your favour, and a lot of them are in my control, and I'm doing all those right. ”

(Pākehā father)



Transgender children often struggle from living in a world where they feel different and where others treat them as such. This can have adverse mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health impacts. The good news is that parents can form a **shield of protection** for their child that helps them to thrive.

A child feeling their parents' unconditional love has a significant impact on their positive sense of self. When a transgender child feels supported in their gender by their family or whānau, their risk of poor mental health is greatly reduced, and they can fare just as well as cisgender youth³. For this reason, researchers agree that the best way parents can protect their children is to **affirm their gender identity**: 'gradually, parents realize that acceptance is protection'².

When your child needs help, **reach out** to peer support services, health professionals and community organisations, and persist until they get what they need. Your support of your child is likely to ease their passage through the world. Focusing on your protective powers may help you feel less helpless when faced with adversity.

But there will also be rainbows, sunshine and fireworks...

“ When she became more confident and comfortable with who she was, she was suddenly physically closer. Our relationship was harder in some ways than with my other kids, but there’s been this wave of awesomeness in the last eighteen months. I hope we’ve laid the foundations for a really good relationship. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ He was always shy and crying and reserved, but when us adults clicked and started using ‘he’ we suddenly had a child who was really confident, joining in with everyone, being part of the team, being a boss, really extroverted now all of a sudden. It was a totally different child. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ My child is just the most multicoloured child ever. He’s quite an effervescent soul. He is a beacon of light drawing people towards him. ”

(Pākehā mother)

“ We should celebrate their resilience, their bravery, how articulate they can be at such a young age, how empathetic they are about others’ struggles, because they know what it’s like to be a little bit different. ”

(Pākehā mother)

“ That journey at the start was as profound as any experience I think I will have. I was as enriched as I was challenged. ”

(Pākehā father)

“ Obviously this is going to be a lifelong journey for me and I’m never going to be at the end of the rainbow, but to have that spectrum of colour around me, I think it’s beautiful. ”

(Māori queer mother)



A child's transgender identity is something to celebrate.

Parents often notice a leap in the **happiness** of their child when they affirm their gender²¹. It is a joy to watch a child become their authentic self, with all the exploration, creativity, and freedom this entails.

Parents frequently admire their child's **resilience** in finding their path in the context of an oppressive society. Some describe their child as brave, empathetic, and committed to social justice, feeling that their desire to make the world a better place comes in part from their minority experience.

Parents often develop **improved relationships** with their child as they support them in their gender identity²².

Parents also speak of gaining an increased sense of purpose and experiencing **personal growth**⁴.

Supporting a transgender child can be an experience filled with hope, connection, authenticity, and positivity. Attending to the joyful aspects of your and your child's experience can help you be more resilient when dealing with challenges²³.

Mostly you'll listen to the person who knows this journey best, and they'll show you the way...

“ Listen to your kid. They know what's best for them. They know what they need. If you try and direct them in a direction that they're not willing to go, you're going to make their journey harder. If you can talk to them about what they're going through, you make their journey so much easier. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ I say to other dads 'do you want to be a dad, or do you want to be a great dad?' At the end of the day, they're your kids, they're constantly evolving and changing and finding their way in the world, and it's our job as dads to make that easy, it's not our job to make it harder. ”

(Asian father)

“ We are surrounded by love through this journey. We're taking on the world, and we're holding hands because we're going through the journey together. It's her journey, but she's taking me along for the ride. It's all about supporting her. ”

(Pākehā queer mother)

“ I'm totally ok with not understanding everything. I don't need to understand my son's transness, I just need to trust my child and support him. ”

(Pākehā father)

“ We don't know what to expect, so we need to be more led by our child that we would have been otherwise. ”

(Pākehā father)

“ We talk about things a lot and where we want things to go. ”

(Pākehā father)

*You're still there to
support and guide
your child*

*The only difference is
you might not
know the way*



*Trust your child -
Let them lead you'*



Children know who they are.

Some parents might have had a more directive parenting style in the past, but they are quick to learn that they do not have clear directions for this journey. Instead, the best approach is to **listen to your child**.

Parents of transgender children often speak of being guided by their child, rather than by their own ideas of them. This reflects a philosophy of **child-centred parenting**, in which parents are led by a child's needs and seek to foster their unique individuality¹⁶.

The Māori concept of **ako** conveys the idea that teaching and learning are interconnected, and it is true that, when it comes to parenting a transgender child, parents learn from their children just as much as their children learn from them.

You will need to:

- recognise your child's autonomy
- respect their views
- honour their choices
- consult them about next steps, and
- check in with them frequently to make sure you are proceeding in the direction they need.

Every transgender child's journey is different, and you will soon learn that the best person to show you the way is standing **right beside you**.

And, whatever happens, remember – you’re not traveling solo.

“ The support group that we’re in has been really valuable for me, to see other parents who are on the same journey. We’re not alone. We’re all having our own struggles. But also seeing positive examples of trans people as adults and as young adults starting living and doing stuff and being in relationships and having jobs, all really mundane stuff but things that at the start I felt were lost to my child. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ It’s important for parents who are in this process to talk and cry and share some of the emotions and difficulties and celebrations for other parents who are coming into this. Parents need permission to feel their feelings. That’s OK. It’s not wrong to be scared. It’s not wrong to be uncertain. And it’s not wrong to be overwhelmed. It’s really important to just give people permission to feel what they feel. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ I reached out to trans people online, particularly transmasculine people, because I didn’t know any. I reached out to people in the community who I hoped would help me. ”

(Māori queer mother)

“ The parents’ group is just brilliant. It’s lovely to be in that group and see so many different ways of handling things. It’s just that support. I love that we’ve got that group. I really do. I think we’re just really, really lucky. ”

(Pākehā mother)

Just
being there
for one another
is what it's all about



The journey is easier
if you're
not alone'

In a journey filled with joys and challenges, parents need support to support their child - and there is **lots of support** available for you.

In the following pages, you can find a list of organisations who are committed to creating a safe environment in Aotearoa for transgender children to flourish. You can draw on the expertise of these organisations to help you:

- obtain **psychological support** for your child or yourself
- engage with **schools** to put transgender-inclusive policies in place
- find opportunities for your child to meet **other transgender children**
- access gender-affirming **medical care**
- connect with **other parents** to share advice and experiences, and
- benefit from the feeling of belonging to a **supportive community**.

Kia kaha! With this crew at your side, you're all set for this journey of a lifetime!



More information and support

Here are some resources and organisations that can help you in your journey supporting your child:

Be There is a website and awareness campaign that aims to support the parents and whānau of trans, non-binary, takatāpui, queer, intersex, and rainbow young people to be more inclusive, affirming and safe.

www.be-there.nz

NZ Parents and Guardians of Transgender and Gender Diverse Children is a parent-led group that provides information, guidance, advice, and companionship to help parents and guardians who have transgender or gender-diverse children. They provide support through a secret Facebook group.

To join or find support visit www.transgenderchildren.nz

InsideOUT Kōaro provides a range of services that support rainbow young people to have a sense of safety and belonging in their schools and communities. InsideOUT specialises in supporting schools to be rainbow inclusive and can support students, family and whānau around any challenges you might be facing with schools, or help you choose a more inclusive school for your child.

www.insideout.org.nz

RainbowYOUTH provides 1:1 peer support to queer, gender diverse, intersex and takatāpui youth and their whānau across Aotearoa, with peer support groups and in-person support available in Northland, Auckland, Taranaki, and Bay of Plenty. They can help with housing, support for parents and whānau, transitioning, accessing gender affirming care, coming out, information and resources.

www.ry.org.nz

OutLine Aotearoa provides a nationwide, free, and confidential support line (0800 OUTLINE - 0800 688 5463) and online chat service at outline.org.nz/chat between 6pm-9pm every evening, for people who want to speak to a trained volunteer from rainbow communities. OutLine also provides specialist counselling for rainbow people and their whānau and an Auckland-based trans and non-binary peer support service which can provide whānau support.

www.outline.org.nz

Gender Minorities Aotearoa is a nationwide transgender organisation. It is run by and for transgender people, including binary and non-binary, intersex, and irawhiti takatāpui. GMA supports transgender people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds, and provides one-to-one peer support and information nationwide.

www.genderminorities.com

You can find more organisations working locally in your area on the

Be There website: www.be-there.nz/groups-and-support

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