

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When North American transgender and transsexual (trans) people began to seek medical assistance to transition in the 1960's, the accepted practice in newly established gender identity clinics was to advise them to sever contact with their established lives, often including relationships with their own children.¹ While this practice is no longer endorsed, the notion that a child will be harmed by a trans parent lingers. The limited research that focuses on trans parents and their children has often assumed a deficit in trans-led families. Negative perceptions of trans people as parents appear in fertility journals where assisted human reproduction clinicians debate whether it is ethical to assist trans people to become parents². These same transphobic perceptions are repeated in US family court rulings in which trans people are routinely separated from their children.³ It is clear that trans parents have been poorly represented in the discriminatory accounts of their lives. What is less clear is how trans parents experience this discrimination and how they might understand their strengths as parents.

The *Transforming Family* project was launched to respond to these concerns, filling an important gap in knowledge by documenting the impact of transphobia on trans parents and drawing attention to the strengths that they bring to parenting. The project was led by the LGBTQ Parenting Network at the Sherbourne Health Centre in collaboration with the Re:searching for LGBTQ Health team at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH). Financial support was provided by the Centre for the Study of Gender, Social Inequities and Mental Health at Simon Fraser University and the Community One Foundation in Toronto. Four focus groups were held in November 2010, with a total of 18 trans parents in Toronto.

Findings

Participants in this study had distinct experiences in relation to the timing of when they became parents. In the first two sections of this report, participants are separated into two groups in order to highlight their unique experiences: section one speaks to those who were already parents when they came out as trans or transitioned; and section two speaks to those who embarked on becoming parents after already identifying as trans or transitioning. Section three, Navigating a Transphobic World, and section four, Parenting Strengths, include the experiences of all participants.

¹ Green, R. & Money, J. (1969). *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*. John Hopkins Press.

² Baetens, P., Camus, M., & Devroey, P. (2003). Should requests for donor insemination on social grounds be expanded to transsexuals? *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, 6(3), 281.

³ Flynn, T. (2006). The ties that (don't) bind: Transgender family law and the unmaking of families. In P. Currah, R. Juang & S. Minter (Eds.), *Transgender rights*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Parents coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition

Trans parents, their children and partners lack adequate support during transition.

Trans parents overcome substantial fears and come out as trans or begin to transition out of a desire to care for themselves and their children. Despite this they are often accused of harming their families. Transition can be a time of high conflict and if family break-down occurs, it often coincides with a number of other losses for trans parents. While many trans parents find ways to communicate with their partners and their children about their identities, and many partners and children find ways to understand and adapt, most do so without the benefit of community supports and resources.

Societal transphobia is a threat to trans parents' ability to maintain child custody and access.

The majority of those who were parents before coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition had access to their children limited or removed. Whether this occurred through formal legal avenues or through informal practical barriers, at the heart was societal transphobia. Trans parents are pathologized and discredited in custody disputes and they face emotional injury and financial barriers that disadvantage them in their attempts to maintain custody of, and access to, their children. It is imperative that training programs are implemented to address transphobia among professionals working in the family law system. In addition, resources are needed to provide separating or divorcing trans parents with accurate information about the legal issues facing them.

It gets better: trans parents' relationships with their children improve over time.

Through coming out or transitioning, trans parents eventually experienced an improved sense of well-being and often began negotiating new names and roles with their children. Together with the growing social acceptance of trans people, these negotiations allowed many children to develop a new relationship with their trans parent. Trans parents said clearly: It does get better.

Trans People Becoming Parents

Family planning is poorly facilitated for prospective trans parents

Many trans people do not pursue adoption due to an expectation that they will be unsuccessful. Adoption services must become more accessible to prospective trans parents, including effective outreach to trans communities to counter this perception. Fertility services are inconsistent in their treatment of prospective trans parents; there are varying barriers and levels of support. Some clinicians fail to distinguish between the biological contribution that prospective trans parents might make to the conception process and their lived experience of gender (i.e. a trans woman might freeze sperm before transitioning; a trans man may want to get pregnant with his own eggs). Standard clinical forms and practices must be adapted to accommodate the reality of trans bodies.

Trans people who are new parents have difficulty establishing legal relationships to their children.

Some trans parents are unable to enter their family information into the on-line Ontario Birth Registration system. Existing parental designations do not accommodate the realities of trans people's bodies, as some trans women may contribute sperm to their child's conception and some trans men may opt to become pregnant and give birth. Within the existing system, these parents must choose: to register as their child's legal parent but as the wrong gender; to attempt to remedy the problem by assuming a significant advocacy burden; or to forego parental rights. It is the responsibility of Service Ontario to provide a birth registration process which accommodates all parents.

All Participants

Transphobia and erasure have real effects on trans parents and their children.

Trans people in general experience public scrutiny, harassment and discrimination. For those who are parents this occurs in multiple settings and can cause pain and confusion for children. Trans parents experience not only active discrimination but also more subtle forms of *erasure*, rendering them invisible and unrecognizable to service providers. Trans parents and their families struggle on more than one front, often with very little support.

Trans parents and their children exercise agency in how they respond to transphobia.

Though trans parents and their children are deeply impacted by transphobia, they are not passive victims, instead actively strategizing to address discrimination. Trans parents protect themselves and their children by making choices to be or not be visible, by advocating for themselves and their children and by educating their children about transphobia. Creatively navigating unfriendly environments, trans parents challenge assumptions about gender through everyday acts of activism.

Trans parents teach important lessons.

Trans parents demonstrate a number of parenting strengths, at times because of, rather than in spite of, their identities and experiences as trans people. As they journey to express their unique selves, they become role models for diversity, acceptance and authenticity. As they struggle and learn the difficult skills of self-advocacy, they pass on vital lessons about strategy, endurance and courage. And as they create options for their children to express their authentic selves, they raise a new gender literate generation, contributing to building, as one participant put it, "the world that needs to be."

Recommendations

We recommend the following actions to address some of the needs identified by our participants:

- **LGBTQ Community Support Services** should create resources to support parents who come out as trans or transition, as well as their partners and children;
- **Trans Community Trainers** should incorporate the specific concerns of trans parents and prospective parents into existing programs which train service providers on trans issues;
- **Legal Support Workers** should build their capacity to offer legal resources to parents who are coming out as trans or beginning a gender transition;
- **The Family Law System** requires education programs to address both the specific legal issues facing trans parents and to address transphobia among legal professionals including: judges; lawyers; mediators; and family court support workers;
- **Schools and Early Years Centres** require training and resources to effectively welcome trans parents and their children;
- **Adoption Services** should ensure all staff are appropriately trained to work effectively with prospective trans parents and should conduct outreach to counter the perception that trans people would be considered ineligible to adopt;
- **Fertility Services** should adapt existing forms and documents to accommodate the realities of trans bodies. Staff should be trained to ensure that trans clients are treated in a non-discriminatory manner, consistent with their lived gender;
- **Service Ontario** should review the Ontario Birth Registration process to determine if it contravenes the Ontario Human Rights Code and how it can be adapted to accommodate trans parents.

Contact

For information about this study or for additional resources for trans parents, please contact:



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To download this report and for more information:

<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/socialchange/TransformingFamilyReport.cfm>