

Changing bodies to match gender identity

Gender-expansive and transgender kids do not have to change their bodies in order to change their gender expression or identity. Some choose to make no changes to their bodies at all, while others know that they must change their bodies to feel complete. One of our roles as parents is to help our children figure out what road is right for them. Expose them to the ideas of different body choices, so they know there are a variety of paths. Just as each child knows their own gender expression and identity, they also know how they feel about their bodies. Some may experience no body dysphoria at all. Some may choose to take hormones but never have surgery. Some may choose to have some surgeries but not others, and many other combinations of choices. Discuss with your child and doctor which treatments are permanent and irreversible and which are not. Physicians won't provide treatment just because your child asks for it. They work in conjunction with a team, including the child, parent, and therapist to help determine if body changes are appropriate for any given child or teen.

Sometimes when a young child is consistent and persistent in their transgender identity, they will experience great dread and anxiety as puberty approaches. Parents of pre-pubertal transgender children are aware of this oncoming physical betrayal. They are fearful of the potential depression their child may experience, and the consequences of this depression. Rightfully so, many parents are worried their child may experience suicidal feelings if forced to experience the pubertal changes not in alignment with their identity. However, parents are often in the dark about the consequences of acting to delay puberty or to offer cross hormones, but there is information available to help you make these decisions with your child.

Medical intervention can be a more difficult decision when your pre-teen or teen suddenly announces they are transgender. This news is almost always shocking and difficult to integrate. We want to protect our children and have them make healthy decisions, yet the changes your child may request can be dramatically life-changing and permanent.

Parents who are just discovering their teen's gender identity may be more than a little confused regarding appropriate medical options for their child. Your teen, on the other hand, may know exactly what they want to do. Take time to let your child know that you support them. Take any non-permanent steps that you can to show your support—name and pronoun changes, clothing and haircuts, etc. You may even consider hormone “blockers” to pause puberty to give you and your child more time. It is OK for you to take the time you need to catch up and do your research.

Keep the lines of communication open and explore options together. Discussing what you learn together can work to make the whole family better informed as well as allow for ample adjustment time. However, keep in mind that a parent and their child may have very different ideas of an appropriate timetable. Don't feel rushed into making decisions about permanent changes, but also keep in mind that your child may feel rejected by you if these critical life decisions are delayed indefinitely.