

THE ACKERMAN INSTITUTE:

## 5 Tips for Raising Gender Nonconforming Children

Parenting is tricky enough, but what if your six-year-old son asks you if he could dress up as Tinkerbell in the school play? Or, if your daughter wonders if she could attend school as a boy?

Psychotherapist Jean Malpas deals with such dilemmas daily as the director of the Gender and Family Project at the Ackerman Institute for the Family, a training facility for family therapists in the U.S. And while he offers no cookie-cutter answers, his approach -- a combination of coaching, education, parent support group, and family therapy -- underscores the need for mature communication.

Malpas shares five insights from his new Family Process paper for parents to use when they talk with their potentially transgender children. It turns out, as with most parenting issues, love, acceptance, and support go a long way.

**#1: Acceptance is protection.** There is not much you can or should do as a parent to influence your child's gender identity. But there is a lot you can do to give them a sense of self and security. Accepting them for who they are will make them stronger and prepare them for potential harsher reactions. It will help them know that everyone is different in some way, yet deserving of love and respect. Research shows that this parental stance improves the future mental health of your child.

**#2: Let your child lead the way.** Do not hold them back or push them forward before they know who they are. You can't make or change their gender identity. It is specific to each child. Let them show you how they see themselves and who they are becoming. To the extent that it is safe and acceptable for everyone at home, let them decide on what clothes they wear and what toys they pick.

**#3: Remember that gender nonconformity is not a psychopathology.** It is a part of the normal diversity of children's behaviors and expressions. If it is, however, persistent over time and consistent throughout contexts (home, school, friends), it is likely to be important to your child and to his or her identity.

**#4: Ensure safety and support for your child.** Children who show strong differences can sometimes be bullied, teased, or harassed in school. Sometimes, kids feel ashamed of how they are treated and do not report these experiences. They might even fear that you agree with the negative judgments. Make sure to gently ask how things are going. Let your child know that they should not be bullied or teased and that you would want to be informed of such incidents so that you could help.

**#5: Connect with a community.** Many other families are raising gender nonconforming children. Reach out to them, find support, and learn from their questions, struggles, and solutions. You are not alone.