

## LGBTQ Parenting Issues

By Santo Barbagiovanni, LMSW  
Director, Center Lane Program  
WJCS

Adolescence is a time for growth and exploration. In the best of circumstances, children are encountering new experiences, making new friends, pushing limits and testing boundaries, and withdrawing from family to be with friends during this time of rapid development. They are learning social skills and cues, and are beginning to feel a sense of belonging to a group of friends/peers. While this period of growth and development can be exciting, it can also be painful and confusing.

LGBTQ youth deal with all of the issues that their “straight” peers experience but too often have the added stress of exploring their sexuality and gender identity within environments that view their identity as “atypical” or “unacceptable.” This lack of affirmation has negative ramifications on the self-esteem and healthy development of LGBTQ youth. If anyone remembers high school as I do, it is a breeding ground for poking fun, rumors and gossip, and last, but certainly not least, harassing one another because of differences. It is estimated that over 20 percent of the US population identifies as LGBTQ, yet data show that there is still overwhelming bias in our schools, jobs, places of worship and in our communities,



Santo Barbagiovanni, LMSW

with the greatest intolerance and bias against the Trans\* community.

Adolescence can be a tumultuous time for both the LGBTQ youth and their parents. In my experience, most parents want to be supportive, but they're not sure what to do. Many parents we work with at WJCS Center Lane, Westchester's only LGBTQ youth and community education center, feel helpless and lost when they find out their child identifies as LGBTQ.

They aren't equipped to deal with the intricacies of their child being gay, queer or Trans\*. They aren't sure how to support their child and how to guide the child along their journey. Many parents believe, or want to believe, that their child is going through a “phase.” Really, most teenagers have felt different from their peers for some time, and possibly have been struggling with it for a while. By the time they tell their parents they are LGBTQ, they have often told some friends, a guidance counselor and possibly a trustworthy family member.

So, why do parents get upset when their child tells them they are LGBTQ? The reasons are different for every parent and family. I have heard from many parents that the reason they were upset when their child came out is they don't want their child to be impacted negatively by family, friends and schoolmates. Parents are also very concerned about how other people, such as family and friends will view them. Will they question their parenting? Will they lose friends? Will they have family members that will treat them differently? What will the community that they're a part of think of them? These are all valid concerns, and most of the time one cannot predict whether their relationships outside of their family will be impacted. At Center Lane, we work with parents to help them understand many important realities: being LGBTQ is not a choice, and it's not something a parent did

to cause it; children are not doing this to upset or challenge their parents; it isn't a defect or abnormality; the child is the same as they were before they told their parents that they're LGBTQ. When they come out, they are telling their truth, and it is a sign of love, trust and admiration when a child feels comfortable enough to disclose this to them.

At our center we provide a support group for Trans\* youth and their parents, known as TransParentcy. These services have become an essential part of our LGBTQ program, and in the past three years we've seen an increase in the number of youth identifying as Trans\*. Approximately, 17-23 percent of our youth identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. TransParentcy is divided into two separate groups, one for parents and the other for youth. This allows parents to share their stories and experiences in a private, confidential way. They are able to talk about their feelings of uncertainty, anger, disappointment and anxiety without affecting their child. Based on our outcomes and observations, it takes parents about six months of consistent group participation to fully accept their child's gender identity, and typically stay with the group for about 18 months.

Parents of Trans\* youth have very unique issues and concerns, and because of this their needs are greater.

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Services have been adjusted to these needs, and having a support group that specializes in providing support to the parents of Trans\* youth is the best way to provide the support they need. Parents of Trans\* youth experience a mourning period and similar to enduring the loss of a close family member, parents will go through stages of grieving. When working with parents, they've shared their feelings and explained that their child's transition

is comparable to a “living death.” It is difficult to wrap their heads around their child's disclosure, and they tend to go through a period of denial. Most of the parents I work with are in this stage of grief. Having a support group with parents that have experienced their child's transition is helpful to new parents joining the support group, and parents are able to share their lived experiences with parents that are just beginning the transition.

Along with the TransParentcy group, I recommend that families of Trans\* youth

go for family counseling. It is important for the entire family to express any concerns that they have with the child's transition and process these issues. A child's transition can have a significant impact on the entire family, including both younger and older siblings. Family counseling and the TransParentcy group combined offer an opportunity for all the family members to reconcile their differences, and move forward to support their Trans\* child's healthy transition.

At Center Lane, it has been our mis-

sion for 20 years to promote a community culture that is supportive of the healthy development of LGBTQ youth. We have made tremendous progress as a community in fulfilling this mission. Yet, both local and national data and our everyday experiences demonstrate there is more work ahead for WJCS' Center Lane.

*Santo Barbagiovanni is a New York state licensed social worker and the director of WJCS Center Lane program, the only youth-serving LGBTQ program in Westchester County, New York.*