

Chapter 14

Transgender and Gender Expansive

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on using the child life competencies to support transgender/gender expansive children and their families. The chapter highlights challenges families face and addresses the important support they need, helping families identify coping skills and model peer interactions related to gender identity. Additionally, it is intended to provide child life specialists with foundational knowledge about gender identity which will guide and influence their work when they support children who are transgender or gender expansive.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a five-year-old who was assigned male at birth, but has explained time and time again that he loves “girl things.” His preference for all things pink and sparkly is accepted by his family. They reassure him that girls and boys play with all sorts of toys, he can choose whatever toys he likes, and they will always love him. The five-year-old is a smart, creative, kind-hearted, cooperative child and a wonderful older brother.

Then the five-year-old starts kindergarten and struggles to make friends. He isn't interested in playing with the boys, and the girls think that it's strange that a boy wants to play princesses. The five-year-old becomes more and more aware that he is “different” from his classmates. With this increased awareness comes great anxiety and loneliness; the once happy, secure child slowly disappears. This child comes home in tears, begging not to go back to school. He begins to have difficulty sleeping, and for the first time in his life he is beginning to have massive tantrums almost daily. He starts asking his par-

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ents, “What is wrong with me? I hate myself! I hate this world!” His parents have a feeling that all of this is related to their child’s gender expression, but avoid the complicated possibility. Then one night, crying in his mother’s arms, the five-year-old states, “I wish that we could go to Disney World and meet a Fairy Godmother and ask her to turn me into a girl. It’s too hard to live like this.” The parents must face reality and recognize their child may be transgender.

The statistics on suicide within the transgender community terrify these parents. They know every year transgender people are assaulted and killed based on their identity. They fear their child and family may be rejected and harmed. They are consumed with anxiety. How will our extended family react? How will our community respond? What will our coworkers think? What does the future hold for our transgender child and family?

These are just a few of the many questions and fears parents may ask upon discovering their child is transgender/gender expansive. Unfortunately, there are limited resources for young children and families trying to better understand gender identity. Parents may search the internet for helpful information, but when one’s child suffers with gender dysphoria, often what a parent seeks most is someone who can guide them through their unique journey. They need someone who knows their child, who understands child development, gender identity, and who can provide individualized care. Such specific psychosocial, developmental support can be difficult to find, even in large metropolitan areas. However, child life specialists armed with knowledge regarding gender identity have the clinical skills to fill this unmet need in any setting.

In 2019, applying supported evidence and personal experience, a child life specialist and mother of a transgender child created Caterpillar Child Life, a non-traditional child life practice that helps meet the needs of young transgender/gender expansive children. Caterpillar Child Life provides individual and group support to children, parents, and siblings navigating transgender/gender-expansive identity. Using play, education, expressive arts, coping techniques, and connections with peers, Caterpillar Child Life helps transgender/gender expansive children thrive despite the many challenges stacked against them. This chapter highlights the common needs of this population, resources available, and how Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) can serve this unique population. Additionally, the chapter provides specific information needed to best support transgender/gender expansive children and their families.

SERVING AN AT-RISK POPULATION: TRANSGENDER/GENDER EXPANSIVE CHILDREN AND THE ROLE OF CHILD LIFE

Identifying Risk Factors

People who are transgender have been recognized all over the world in different cultures for centuries. A brief list includes the third gender of Greece in 380 B.C., eunuchs of biblical times, the muxes of Mexico, the hijras of South Asia, and the two spirit indigenous people. However, despite transgender people existing across cultures for centuries, transgender/gender expansive children continue to have their identities questioned, judged, and rejected. In the United States, transgender youth have alarming rates of suicidal ideation. In a national survey conducted in 2021, the Trevor Project (2021) found that 52% of transgender and non-binary youth seriously considered attempting suicide within the previous

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