As a parent, teacher, or counselor we must have a readiness to listen to persons who are both gifted and transgender. However, gifted transgender students may not always be outwardly recognizable for multiple reasons. First, for personal safety, they are used to performing their assigned gender. Second, when they encounter a predicament, they often use their comprehensive knowledge to quietly locate someone to provide answers or find the information themselves. Lastly, gifted transgender youth may hide their true selves using the “chameleon affect” as they may be uncomfortable or even unable to reveal their truth.

That’s why it’s essential that adults who support gifted teens and young adults understand what it means to be gifted and transgender and are equipped with appropriate strategies to support these students. This article provides practical suggestions and ways to create an open line of communication for talking and listening, which is key with these young people, especially when an individual chooses to “come out.”

Creating trans-affirming, thriving schools and classrooms requires strategies to cultivate practices of resiliency. In addition, it’s essential to be aware of strategies suggested by the trans community for navigating climates that can be fortified against transgender oppression. It is important that teachers and teacher preparers within the gifted community take an active role in creating a transgender-affirming educational experience and that they share these strategies school and districtwide as transgender students are in every setting.

Non-conformity to traditional gender roles may be interpreted as questioning authority, misbehaving, or being disobedient when gifted transgender students are just trying to be true to themselves. Also, others may hide or feel distressed because they can’t see any way of getting the support they need from the school system. To address this problem, parents, along with gifted transgender students, should review school policies and, if needed, meet with school administrators and the school board. Some may also want to work with national or local gifted organizations and with transgender organizations that support inclusivity.

For Teachers: Culture & School Policies

In order to create a trans-affirming culture, it’s essential that districts and schools review their policies to ensure they are inclusive and not problematic. Some policies that can be difficult for gifted and transgender students include sports, teams, school uniforms, restrooms, and the simple act of separating activities or classrooms based on gender. Here are thoughts about some policies and practices:

- **Inclusive Curriculum for Gifted and Transgender Students.** Providing a transgender-inclusive curriculum lets the student know that trans people are and have been part of our history and world. This can be accomplished by using gifted acceleration and differentiation strategies to research transgender historical figures in history courses, and including positive transgender issues in sex education classes. People who are transgender and gifted exist in every industry and field. Highlighting trans and gifted individuals through lessons, readings, and classroom discussions (even if the class is not focused on gender) can reveal the importance
of showcasing the diverse expertise of gifted transgender individuals and communities. This curriculum benefits all students by raising awareness of the issues that affect trans and gender-diverse people.

• **School Uniforms.** School codes for uniforms can be extremely restrictive for trans students, which might include skirts for girls, pants for boys, and haircut/hair color/makeup/jewelry restrictions. Advocating for trans students to wear affirming uniforms can assist the student in feeling comfortable, supported, and eager to learn.

• **Restrooms.** Individuals who are not transgender may not understand that even the simple act of using the toilet can become problematic. If schools do not have inclusive policies, including for non-binary individuals, the transgender gifted student may avoid using the bathroom altogether. This can result in serious medical problems that can affect their health and well-being. Supportive strategies can be as simple as gender-neutral bathrooms. This provides privacy and eliminates a potential safety issue for transgender gifted persons. If the school/district does not compromise, parents can work with their child to find appropriate solutions.

• **Respect Names and Pronouns.** Using preferred pronouns is an important way to honor a person's gender (example: she/her, he/him, they/them). There are also many neo-pronouns such as ze/zem/zir and fae/faer being used by individuals who do not identify with the standard pronouns. New pronouns, as well as new names, must be respected. Many trans people refer to their birth name as their “deadname” (as it is dead to them), and try different names and pronouns until they find a combination that feels right for them. Getting used to a person's new name and pronoun can be a difficult process; the best way to deal with any mistake is with a quick apology and correction. Make sure not to make this a big deal. It is more important for best practice to ensure that the correct name and pronouns are being employed.

• **Roll Call.** Administrative, legal, and economic barriers often keep transgender gifted people, especially transgender gifted youth, from being able to change their birth names. That’s why it’s important to stop the traditional practice of roll call using official class lists provided by administrators. Teachers should allow students to name themselves. If they find discrepancies between the name a student shares and the official roll, they should defer to the student. After all, we let students use different versions of their birth names all the time (e.g., Bill instead of William), so this should not be any different for transgender gifted students. Best practices are to hand out a confidential form at the beginning of the semester that asks students for preferred names and pronouns and with whom these can be used, so as not to out your students.

• **Outing.** Outing is sharing a person's gender or sexual orientation without their permission. Being out is still dangerous in many places so trans youth often choose not to come out to their parents or even their friends. If a child tells you that they are transgender, you should ask them who else knows so that you do not accidentally out them to others. Be careful about gifted transgender students’ safety and privacy in the educational setting, especially when talking with other teachers and/or family members. Being outing against their will is a very traumatic experience. Use caution.

• **Safe Spaces.** Transgender students need spaces in academic institutions where they can feel safe. Make sure your school provides such spaces (also known as Safe Zones). Implementing gender-aware practices takes time, so make ongoing commitments to create more transgender affirming classrooms. It is critical that we understand this change needs to occur for our transgender gifted students. Educators, staff, parents, and counselors have a crucial role to play in the movement toward transgender rightfulness, and the school setting is a great place to start.

For Parents & Caregivers: At-Home Strategies

Parents and guardians might have suspected and felt that their child's new gender identity makes sense, while others might be surprised to learn that their gifted child is transgender. Parents, guardians, and caregivers can initially feel ill-prepared to assist their gifted transgender child or may be worried about their child’s safety, happiness, and future. Some parents and guardians might experience confusion or sadness around perceived loss of their child’s assigned gender identity and a disconnect-edness by feeling that they need to get to know their child again. Finding support to positively navigate their child’s different gender, peer relationships, siblings, religious institutions, and their teachers is not always easy. Remember that your child deserves love, respect, and validation along with the assistance to locate affirming healthcare.

(Continues on p. 18)
Food for Thought

Like giftedness, transgender individuals do not fit one mold. Trans, a common abbreviation from transgender, is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people can be straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, demisexual, or any other sexual orientation. Some may even decline to put a label on their sexual orientation. A transgender person can also be intersex, defined as people born with reproductive or other physical anatomy that typically do not fit binary notions of male or female bodies; however, the two terms are not interchangeable.¹

Transitioning is an individualized process in which transgender people move from living aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth to living aligned with their gender identity.² There are three generally acknowledged aspects to transitioning: social (e.g., presentation, relationships, employment, names/pronouns); medical (e.g., hormone blockers, hormone therapy, gender affirming surgery), and legal (e.g., changing gender marker and name on legal documents and identification). Each trans person’s journey is unique to the individual so any, all, or none of these aspects may be addressed.

Currently, there are no data on the number of people in the U.S. who are both gifted and transgender. However, we can calculate an approximate number of transgender and gifted youth using this formula:

- According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), children who are in the top 10 percent in relation to a national and/or local norm is a good guide for identification and services,³ which would mean approximately 5 million students are gifted.
- The U.S. Census does not ask for gender identity, so no official U.S. Census data have been collected on the number of transgender Americans. The Williams Institute documents that approximately 0.6% of American adults identify as transgender.⁴ A 2021 Gallup News poll found that adults maintain that 0.6% number; however, 1.8% of Generation Z (those born between 1997–2002) self-identified as transgender.⁵
- Using the Gallup polling data and NAGC estimates, there may be more than 90,000 gifted transgender children in America.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, parents, students, and all others have seen an onslaught of individuals who are stressed and prone to depression. These issues can bring forth concerns for mental health and physical safety. Transgender gifted students also have dealt with stress and depression. As schools begin to reopen, many trans children, especially those who are gifted and already feel isolated, will be dreading renewed experiences of misgendering (when a person is referred to by their assigned at birth gender instead of the one they are), uniforms that do not fit their identities, cruel remarks, bullying, and even violence.

However, positive steps can alleviate some of the concern. A 2018 study found that transgender children who have support for their gender identity are no more likely to suffer from depression and have only minimal increases in anxiety compared to peers whose gender corresponds to their birth sex.⁶ With support and appropriate strategies, the gifted transgender youth in your life will thrive.

Endnotes

² National Center on Gender Equality. (n.d.)
A Parent View: Love Your Trans Gifted Child Unconditionally

By Rebecca Niederlander

As the mother of a transgender highly gifted individual, I want to share some strategies and resources that I and other parents have found helpful—some essential—to help you in your journey.

The most important thing is to trust that what your child says is true. In the same ways that you learned to trust that their seemingly wild gifted interests were way beyond their age, that their ability to converse with adults was beyond the norm, and that their learning style was to consume information and process it, your trust of your child in their gender identity needs to follow. Become the ally and advocate your child needs at home, in social situations, and at school.

First, read up! Learn everything you can about living a transgender life. Become fluent in the social, medical, and legal options for your child. As you have researched about giftedness to support your child’s specific needs, research about being transgender and necessary accommodations. For example, at school your child may need your advocacy to get the district to accommodate name and gender changes. My district, Los Angeles Unified School District, has a gender policy called Gender Identity & Students: Ensuring Equity and Nondiscrimination, which states that children are always to be called by their preferred name/pronouns and that name should be used on all documents except legal ones such as report cards. This means their preferred name and not their “deadname” is to be used on the daily educational electronic systems that your child uses. (‘Deadname’ is the term used to refer to a person’s given birth name.)

Tell your child you love them and never express to them if you are “grieving the loss” of who you thought your child was. They were always the person they are telling you now that they are, they were just performing the gender they had been told they were until they realized the differences.

You will go through a lot of emotions around this profound shift in your life and the life of your child. This is to be expected. However, do not tell your child if you are having a hard time. Focus on the positives with your child around becoming their full selves. You will need support, too, just like you do with figuring out how to best support your gifted child. So, please work on these issues with your community of friends, family, and/or therapist.

Speaking of therapists, make sure your child has a good gender-affirming therapist if they need mental health assistance. You also may need to change pediatricians, since you will need someone supportive and willing to learn more about the specific needs of a transgender child. And you will need a specialized team of providers to address your child’s gender needs. In Los
Angeles, institutions such as the Center for TransYouth at Children’s Hospital provide comprehensive, gender-affirming care. Unfortunately, some people might not be supportive. Your child needs you to be their number one advocate 100% of the time. If you have family that cannot get on board, let them know that when they can be supportive, they are welcome back. Never ask your child to be the one to tell family about their trans status since they might get an earful of negativity that could be devastating. Be the one to share information with others. Use positive language and tone such as, “Recently we learned from our child that they are transgender! They would like you to use the name Robert, and their pronouns are now he and him. I hope you can be as supportive as I am. He will need your love even more as he finds his footing.”

As well, you may find that you get rude, intimate questions asked about your child. Never reveal your child’s personal information about genitals or sex life. If people ask you if your child is on hormones or is getting “the surgery,” use phrases like, “We don’t share private information like that, but it is a pleasure to share with you our family’s big news!” If they ask who the child likes, girls or boys, say, “When our child has a relationship, they might share that information with you, but otherwise that is really personal information and not relevant to their transitioning. Gender and romantic attraction are two totally different things.”

Remember that their giftedness may make your child even more inquisitive about their gender identity. Given their gifted skill set, they have probably already done a lot of internet research. Aydin Olson-Kennedy, executive director of the Los Angeles Gender Center, refers to this as their “coming in, before they come out.” Support them in this. Be willing to talk with them at any time about their experiences since their sensitivities will make them even more aware and attuned to the nuances.

Expect the classic intense personalities of gifted kids to come out in this arena in triplicate! As you and your family strive to support your gifted and transgender child, know that your child needs you more than ever. Be sure you regularly express your love and support, which will provide reassurance and strength for your child.

**Author’s Note**

Rebecca Niederlander is a Los Angeles-based visual artist, curator, and writer. Her sculptures and site-specific installations are data visualizations that use repetition and the inherent nature of the materials to address the individual’s position within the larger intergenerational community. She is committed to illuminating the broad scope of the asynchronous nature of gifted individuals through her diverse, creative practice. She is a member of the advisory board for GRO Gifted and is a SENG Model Group Facilitator.

**Endnote**

Student Voices: Orion’s View—“Just Listen”

By Orion and Paul J. “PJ” Sedillo, Ph.D.

As educators and parents, we spend a lot of time asking our students/children questions. In the best-case scenario, our questions are designed to stimulate their thinking. But all too often, our questions seem to have a different effect: they teach children that their job is to guess what’s in their teacher’s/parent’s head and respond accordingly. The following questions were posed to elicit what gifted and transgender individuals are experiencing—stretching them into new horizons—and leading them to wonder, explore, follow their own curiosity, and think for themselves. Following are a few questions and answers with Orion.

PJ: Do you feel there are unique challenges you face in being transgender and gifted?

Orion: As a trans individual, one needs to have a working knowledge of neuroscience and biology just to justify my existence. Fortunately, being highly gifted, I find this research compelling.

PJ: What do you think the world needs to know about what it’s like to be gifted and transgender?

Orion: The world needs to know that being transgender and gifted is alienating because so few people actually understand my experience. All day long I see stories on people’s [social media] feeds about the latest bills being passed that take away my medical and human rights. I talk to trans people where this legislation is being passed who are scared to come out to their families for fear of being kicked out of their homes. Even my highly gifted friends have this fear. What I want everyone reading this to understand is that what seems like minor [legislation] to you affects my life profoundly. We talk about gifted people being uniquely empathetic, and I am for sure feeling the hurt in my community.

Living with dysphoria is like living in a dark cave all your life and, someday, maybe there is a cave-in, and you first see a glimmer of light. At first, you are afraid of it; in time you realize that the light is really nice. You keep coming back to the light and you realize you need to live outside in the sun. That sunlight is gender euphoria. There is a similar phenomenon in gifted children. You spend all your time around other kids who don’t understand what you are going through. Eventually, if you are lucky, you find other people who are like you.

I am a gifted person with sensitivities to external stimuli, so even seemingly little things like going to the hospital to get gender affirming medical care are harder because of the extreme stimulation everywhere. There are children crying, glaring lights, bright colors, and endless hallways to navigate.

PJ: Can you share an example where you didn’t feel heard or seen?

Orion: When people spread transphobic rhetoric without investigation it feels like they don’t care enough to look into the issues and are just blindly spreading hate. This is frustrating from both the trans and gifted parts of myself. The researcher inside of me is disappointed and the trans side of me is terrified.

PJ: What advice do you have for parents and teachers who are raising a gifted transgender teen?

Orion: Adult focus more on my gender than my giftedness because many people think being gifted is just smart—and not filled with all the downsides—while being transgender is a hot button topic that they feel entitled to talk about.

Orion: Schools must have a school-approved GSA [Gender Sexuality Alliance] club where students can go to meet other people like them. This is especially important for gifted students who already feel alienated at mixed population schools.

(Continues on p. 18)
Resources for Transgender Gifted Youth and Their Families

READ:

- Read the work of Professor of Biblical Interpretation at New York Theological Seminary Obery M. Hendrick’s scholarly research on LGBT+ issues in the Bible such as this article: www.huffpost.com/entry/dont-blame-it-on-the-bible_b_2884094.
- For families with younger kids, a read-together book is It is Good to Be Yourself by Theresa Thorn.
- A lengthy list of great books to read with trans youth can be found at https://gendernation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Gender-Nation-Book-List-Updated-5-7-19.pdf

WATCH: (INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA)

- Dr. Karen Tang discuss the differences around biological sex and gender: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUw7Jy7ujF
- For a deeper understanding of the true Judeo-Christian openness around gender, watch Unitarian Universalist Church of Santa Monica service on Transgender Day of Visibility: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fslQ20QFQ&l=7ys
- A tip for the parents of trans masculine teens. For binding go to: https://www.gc2b.co and https://transtape.life
- Safe Zones in schools: https://thesafezoneproject.com/about/what-is-safe-zone/
- Disclosure on Netflix. A pivotal documentary that explains the complicated way the media portrays transgender people and how those portrayals affect the community. http://www.disclosurethemovie.com/about

FOLLOW: (INSTAGRAM/FACEBOOK)

- Transgender School: www.instagram.com/Transgenderschool/
- Pink Mantaray: www.instagram.com/pinkmantaray/
- Chase Strangio (ACLU Lawyer for LGBT+ rights): www.instagram.com/chasestrangio/
- International Transgender Health group on Facebook is a compendium of transgender scholar-led research. Well worth joining this group for gifted families who enjoy going deep on the subject. https://www.facebook.com/groups/transgenderhealth

CONTACT/JOIN:

- The LA Gender Center has therapists who will work via Zoom, or they can try to connect you to someone outside their practice who interned/trained with them and has specific knowledge around gender issues. www.lagendercenter.org
- SENG (Social Emotional Needs of the Gifted): www.sengifted.org
- PFLAG: https://www.pflag.org. Think about becoming a group leader: https://pflag.org/owningyourroletoolkit
- Transforming Family (support group): www.transformingfamily.org
- Facebook: Private and hidden group for parents of HG/PG LGBT+ kids. Message Rebecca Niederlander on the platform.
- Explore and find support at Gender Spectrum, a comprehensive site for parents of trans youth. www.genderspectrum.org
- Gender Nation provides gender-affirming books to school libraries for free. https://gendernation.org
- Transgender Law Center has terrific information around the legal issues you may encounter. https://transgenderlawcenter.org/

Many thanks to Rebecca Niederlander who curated these resources for transgender gifted youth and their families.
providers, supportive counselors, friends, mentors, and local support groups.

**Positive Statements**
Providing constructive, helpful, and supportive comments lets a child know that they have a supportive family unit and can more easily see that they have a part in our history and world. For some gifted transgender youth, family support can be the difference between life and death. Parents and caregivers can find resources, peer support, and professional guidance to help them along the journey and to ensure that their child does not just survive but thrive. In many cases their giftedness provides more tools to help them to understand their exceptional, distinctive uniqueness. Below are positive statements for communicating with a trans gifted child:

- **Respect and love are my main goals as your parent/guardian. If others hurt or disrespect you, please come to me so that we can work together on this situation.**
- **Please know that I am trying to educate myself, and I love you no matter what.**
- **Have you decided on a new name and pronouns that you want me to call you? I apologize ahead of time for mistakes I may make, but know that I still love you unconditionally.**
- **Is it okay for me to tell other people about you being transgender? If you want to tell them, when and how would you like to do that...and what can I do to support you? We are on this journey together.**
- **Whenever you feel sad or worried, know that you can come to me and we will solve the problem together. I want you to feel good about who you are.**

**Conclusion**
We hope we have increased your understanding of gifted individuals who are transgender and have offered useful advice and strategies for parents, teachers, and counselors of gifted individuals who identify as transgender. Please read the accompanying parent and student voices columns elsewhere in this issue for further depth of understanding.

There is much work to be done to increase acceptance and understanding that there is no right or wrong gender and, that as a society, we recognize transgender gifted individuals as equals—eliminating all forms of discrimination against them. 🌈

**Authors’ Note**
Dr. Paul J. “PJ” Sedillo is associate professor for the Special/Gifted Education Department at New Mexico Highlands University. He has published numerous articles and chapters on the needs of diverse learners in gifted education. He is a past president of the New Mexico Association for the Gifted, has held numerous leadership positions at NAGC, and is currently an NAGC At-Large Board Member.

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Orion is a gifted and transgender teen living his best life.

**Endnotes**


**(Student’s view continued from p. 16)**
Also, at the beginning of the school year, all teachers should pass out a confidential questionnaire asking for each student’s legal name, preferred name, and pronouns. It should also include where the teacher can use the preferred name since some kids aren’t out at home.

Schools should allow students to access whichever restrooms they feel most comfortable in. Trust me, these students are already worried enough about their safety; the school should not be a contributing factor to safety concerns! 🌈

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