

Protect Our Trans and Gender Diverse Youth

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I met JJ and their mother for the first time during Pride Month. I remember this because of their fingernails. Painted in different swirls of light blue and pink, their nails were reminiscent of the transgender pride flag.

“I got them done for Pride.” JJ happily fanned out their hands and beamed up at me.

JJ, newly 18 years old, was transitioning care to our Med-Peds clinic. They have a complex medical history and have spent most of their young life in and out of hospitals. They are also trans.

“I’m already different,” they paused slightly. “And I’m afraid how people will treat me if I medically transition. I already get made fun of.”

Soon after our visit, on the last day of Pride Month, the Supreme Court ruled a devastating blow to our LGBTQIA+ community,¹ paving the road for discrimination of all forms to be protected under the guise of free speech. This ruling was the latest in a series of recent attacks against LGBTQIA+ individuals. Most notably, a coordinated political movement has been underway to dismantle gender-affirming care for the most vulnerable within the LGBTQIA+ community—transgender and gender diverse (TGD) children and adolescents. Prior to 2020, no such legislation existed.² Since then, nearly half of the states in the U.S. have passed legislation or policies that restrict gender-affirming care for TGD young people.^{2,3} Some proposed bills have likened gender-affirming care to child abuse.²

The Williams Institute at UCLA estimates that these new laws will affect more than 100,000 young people or about one-third of TGD youth in the United States.² The threat and the reality of these bills have already caused upheaval in the lives of TGD youth and their families. TGD young people have reported heightened safety concerns and worsening mental health in light of these anti-transgender policies.⁴ There are also increasing reports of families traveling or moving to more accepting states to seek care for their trans and gender expansive children.⁵ Unfortunately, these policies will likely exacerbate health disparities for young people who live at the intersection of other marginalized experiences—for example, those who do not have the financial means to seek care elsewhere.

In a designated refuge state for TGD youth,⁶ where already 50,000 adolescents (ages 13-17) identify as transgender and gender expansive,⁷ California and its health providers are uniquely positioned to mitigate the devastating effects of these recent changes. Countless studies have shown that gender-affirming care for minors is associated with reduced suicidality and overall improved mental health and general functioning.^{8,9} In short, **gender-affirming care is life-saving.**

For pediatricians, these attacks against TGD youth and their families should be a call to action. As someone who was once a young person who struggled with their queer, non-binary identity, I offer these initial thoughts and ideas in advocating for change in our own interpersonal and clinical spheres:

- Normalize gender-affirming care: Start to reimagine what gender-affirming care can look like. How can we shift away from the idea of gender-affirming care as “specialty care” and move towards a more comprehensive and inclusive care model? For me and for so many other transgender individuals, **gender-affirming care is primary care.**
- Cultivate safe spaces: Gender-affirming care begins with a welcoming space, one in which young people can feel safe to be themselves and to tell their stories in their own words. Consider the holistic experience of a young person walking through a healthcare space. The entire healthcare team, from the person greeting them at the front desk to the phlebotomist, should be aligned in using their correct name and pronouns. Consider how bathrooms, signage, and paperwork could be more inclusive.
- Use intentional language: Challenge ourselves to use gender neutral language and to move away from reinforcing gendered stereotypes. This is helpful in caring for all children and families, not just those who identify as transgender.
- Practice cultural humility: Practice cultural humility, but do not expect your TGD patients to teach you how to care for them. And if you are new to gender-affirming care, be gentle with yourself but be honest about your growth areas.
- Implement practical action: Remember that advocacy can take many forms, and often begins with a single conversation.

“I’m already different. And I’m afraid how people will treat me if I medically transition. I already get made fun of.”

JJ and I explored these fears together. They expressed confusion and sadness, but also joy at the prospect of celebrating Pride for the first time with their friends from work. We then talked about how queerness provides us with the spaciousness to be our authentic selves, including the permission to dictate the tempo of our own queer/trans journeys. JJ told me that they were not yet ready to medically transition, but that they will be trying out different names with their friends.

“I will keep you updated,” they said with a smile.

Gender expansiveness has existed throughout history, and despite attempts in modern history to silence us, our community has persisted, fought, and loved. Our transgender and gender diverse youth need adult allies who will fight and care for them; who will nurture their growth and protect their right to lead whole, safe lives.

In writing this reflection, I returned multiple times to a note that I had saved on my phone. Another transgender young adult shared these thoughts with me on her one-year anniversary of initiating gender affirming hormone therapy. Her words are a love letter to all transgender and gender diverse people.

*I love being trans. Being trans is beautiful.
Transitioning was the best thing that happened to me.
I am so happy and I love myself.*

Moments like this remind me why I decided to become a pediatrician.

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