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TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSE PARENTS GUIDE

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Introduction

This guide details the personal stories of trans and gender diverse (TGD) parents, their partners and children. Each story is unique – reflecting a very individual journey – but collectively, these stories provide insights into shared, common experiences.

These stories provide practical advice and answers. They also offer the opportunity for identification and a strength that comes from knowing that someone else has walked this sometimes difficult path before. No one need ever feel alone in their journey, or that of a loved one, to be their most genuine selves.

The guide explores a number of questions:

- How do you explain gender affirmation or transition to your child? How do you reassure them they are not losing a 'mother' or a 'father' but gaining a happier, more authentic parent? How can you best support them through the transition process?
- What's the best approach to take with school? How do other parents react and how do you manage their reaction? How can supportive teachers or principals help?
- What impact does transition have on a partner or co-parent? How might it affect the family dynamics? What support is available for partners and children?
- What's it like to negotiate fertility clinics and IVF as a TGD person? How does pregnancy affect a trans man? How do you balance dysphoria and breastfeeding?

A careful reading of these stories provides answers to many of these questions.

We hope that the resource will be of value to health and human service providers who work with TGD parents. We know there are currently very few supportive and informed health practitioners who can work effectively with TGD people and their families. Any practitioner reading these stories will gain a detailed insight into the lived experiences of their clients or patients and some guidance about how they might best support them.

All the parents in this guide have faced enormous challenges and celebrations, and developed incredible resilience; many of their strategies and approaches are outlined in this guide. Ultimately, these stories explore how TGD parents balance their own needs with those of their children and other important people in their lives.

These are stories of lived experience that have not, until now, been readily available to other people who might benefit from reading them. Indeed, all the parents in the guide have highlighted the importance and value of connecting with other TGD parents, either in person or online. To this end, the guide includes a list of support organisations and groups as well as links to other useful information. We know that reading about and connecting with other people in similar circumstances can break down isolation, provide a pathway forward, and give hope.

Our aim is to provide other TGD parents and their partners with that connection, that pathway, that hope.

About us

Rainbow Families

Rainbow Families is a volunteer-led organisation that provides support to children and families within the NSW LGBTIQA+ community. We run playgroups, parent education sessions, discussion forums, picnics and a whole range of other social activities. Our events are designed to bring together lesbian mums, gay dads, bi parents, trans parents, gender diverse parents, adoptive parents, foster parents and all types of rainbow families to connect, learn, support, make friends and help build resilient families.

Rainbow Families also works to address discrimination and other social disadvantage faced by LGBTIQA+ families and to promote the affirmation and celebration of rainbow families. We do this by working with LGBTIQA+ parents, their children, government, businesses, schools, the broader community, and other not-for-profit organisations.

Rainbow Families is led by a committee of passionate LGBTIQA+ community members and supported by parent volunteers. Together, we are focused on making Australia a better place for all LGBTIQA+ families.

Head to **rainbowfamilies.com.au** to learn more. While you are there, subscribe to our newsletter to stay informed about events and programs that support our families.

Jacqui Tomlins

Jacqui Tomlins is a writer, trainer and advocate with more than 30 years' experience working in the LGBTIQA+ field and was one of the founding members of the Rainbow Families Council (now Rainbow Families Victoria). She has campaigned on a number of issues over the years including access for lesbians to fertility treatment in Victoria, legal changes to birth certificates, marriage equality, and has represented rainbow families in the media many times.

Jacqui has written on a broad range of topics for both LGBTIQA+ and mainstream press, including researching and writing *Outspoken Families: A resource kit for rainbow families*, and two previous Rainbow Families support guides.

Currently, she runs professional development workshops for health and human service providers who work with rainbow families and the LGBTIQA+ community. Most recently, she coordinated the successful Rainbow Tick Accreditation at VincentCare. She is a member of the Victorian Ministerial Taskforce's Health and Human Services Working Group.

Jacqui lives in Melbourne with Sarah, her partner of 27 years, and their three children.

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LUSH Fresh Handmade Cosmetics not only makes a beautiful range of ethical cosmetics, but is a company that is proud to swim against the tide and support causes its people believe in. We are grateful that LUSH believes all families deserve love and respect and has provided funding for this guide.

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Thank you to the current and past Rainbow Families Committee, especially co-chair Mat Howard who tirelessly fundraised for this resource, and to the many, many people in our community who made donations to the 'All families' crowdfunding campaign that started this project.

We also acknowledge and thank Jacqui Tomlins for her work researching and writing the *Trans and Gender Diverse Parents Guide* and Naomi Murphy and Carlie Jennings for their work editing and designing the guide.

Heidi

Heidi describes herself as a ‘late 30s, lesbian, non-binary, trans femme – with a dash of intersex for good measure’. Heidi has been with her ‘amazing wife’, Emma, for more than 20 years, and legally married for more than 10 of those years. They have a 10-year-old daughter, Penny, and two sons, Jeff and Robin, who are eight and five. Heidi’s day job helps fund the rest of their lives: running a rural property, looking after rescue animals, volunteering in numerous ways and, occasionally, travelling.

Heidi is slowly learning to focus!

Part 1: I’m finally comfortable with this

Uncommon

When I was growing up I had no concept that it was possible to be trans. I recall playing with ‘girls’ toys’ (I hate that description, but that’s the reality) as much as ‘boys’ toys’, and until Year 3, my best friends were pretty much all girls. Over time, I started to realise that this was – not sure if I would say ‘wrong’, exactly – but certainly uncommon.

I went to an all-boys high school and, not being around girls throughout my teenage years, I had very few females to compare myself to and, as such, I think I missed the chance to discover my actual identity. It's like the journey I'd started in primary school was interrupted. I had no out LGBTI people in my life at that time, and the only thing I had to compare myself to was drag – and that was something I didn't identify with at all. When some of the boys started to identify as gay in late high school, that didn't fit, either. I just didn't know that it was possible to be trans, or to transition.

I made closer female friends again through uni, where I met Emma, to whom I eventually proposed. We were married as 'man and wife' – something I'm immensely proud of, but feels somewhat odd in retrospect. I'd love to have another ceremony one day, properly this time! Our first child arrived the following year and Emma and I found little time for each other – and there was even less time for me to self-examine.

Talking

I actually don't remember a single tipping point, but after our third child arrived, I finally registered that people could be transgender, and the more I looked into it the more it started to feel like it could be right for me. Chelsea Manning was one high-profile case I remember and I also recall the Tiwi Islands Sistagirls becoming visible.

I'm not sure what led me to dress up one day; I'd done it perhaps four times in the 16 years Emma and I had been together. Regardless, I didn't clean up the makeup on the sink in the bathroom properly and she saw it. I have wondered if, subconsciously, I left it there to provoke discussion, but I think it was probably just a mistake. Emma asked me if I liked to dress up as a woman and I knew I couldn't lie to her.

From that point, we talked a lot. I had no idea that I was trans at the time and for a long while we talked mostly about me crossdressing. For me, crossdressing felt dirty; stealing your wife's clothes to prance around in, all made up, is not what it was about for me. Throughout this time, Emma and I put everything on the table and became much more open with each other. I think that definitely brought us closer.

Deciding

I fought all this horribly, but eventually started seeing a counsellor at the Gender Centre and, after several months, I asked him directly whether he thought I was trans. He said 'Yes', and coincidently, in that same week, Emma said the same thing. I still didn't want to believe it, but was spending so much time obsessing about my gender, there wasn't much space to think about anything else. Looking back, it feels surreal to have been so

undecided, but at the time my brain was absolute mush.

I thought about my options: I could continue to live in denial, I could get a divorce, and I even thought about suicide. I had a career, a family, a new house and, most importantly, my wife. I felt like I had so much to lose, so why would I transition and risk it all? But it turns out that last part of my life was critical; I needed to change so I could actually be happy with everything else. When it came down to it, transitioning was the least bad option.

The Gender Centre was the place to explore my identity. I'd drive all the way from the country early in the morning, park my car around the corner and go to work in male mode like I always had. In the evening, I'd come back to the car, get changed and put on makeup, and walk into the session with other trans women at various stages of their journeys. On one occasion, a friend from the group pushed me into the pub next door, my first step out *en femme*. It was simultaneous panic and joy!

At some point in this process I realised I couldn't go back.

Tribe

I started seeing a psychologist, then a psychiatrist. I was hoping they would talk me out of going down this path, but they didn't. Emma and I were slowly coming to terms with the fact that I may need to transition, but we didn't want to start going out in public in our local area where we knew so many people. So, for our first outing, we went on a rainbow camp – a safe 100 kilometres or so away from home.

We thought there would be an even spread of people across the LGBTI spectrum, but it turned out there were around 100 lesbian couples, no gay male couples, and no other trans people! We had hoped this would be our tribe, and while everyone was lovely, it was clear we didn't share much of a life story with them. We'd spent our lives as a straight couple, legally married, and now one of us looked to transition. In theory, this would make us a lesbian couple, but we hadn't had any of those formative lesbian experiences. We felt like outsiders at best, frauds at worst.

Telling

Once I was 100 per cent sure I was going to transition I started to tell people, including my parents. I wrote a letter, printed two copies and sat with them while they read it. I was expecting the worst and so I had written things like, 'If you can't bear to see me again, can you at least commit to seeing my kids?' But as they finished they became teary. 'What made you think we wouldn't accept you?' they said. They've been wonderful ever since.

When I chose my new first name, I felt a little bad discarding the old names they had chosen for me at birth, so

I let them choose my new middle name. They loved this and it was an important part of our journey together.

It has been a bit odd though; they had to process their own transition from having a son to having a daughter. When I was growing up, I recall mum often lamenting that she didn't have a daughter, but now that she's gained one more than 30 years after giving birth to me, it's been hard for her to process. At first she didn't seem to know how to interact with me in the way I see other mothers interacting with their cis daughters, but we are gradually spending more time together. My parents have accepted the transition and now it's largely just normalised, and we don't really talk about it much.

Transition

Before I started Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), my oestrogen levels were already in the female range. I never investigated why, but under some definitions this makes me intersex. So at birth, I feel I wasn't actually 100 per cent male physiologically, and certainly not mentally. Now, I present neutral-ish, but mostly *femme* – it's pretty hard to pull off *butch* as a trans woman without being clocked, but I'm working on it. I'm completely happy being read as female and I am lucky enough – and have put in the effort – to pass pretty much wherever I go.

But in my head it's more complex. I never 'felt like a girl from birth', and the concept of full binary transition – seemingly endless surgical interventions to feel and appear more fully like a woman – just isn't for me. I'll never be a cis woman, so I don't feel I need to try to be one as I'll just end up disappointed. I eventually stumbled across others online who identified as non-binary trans women (or femme), and their descriptions of themselves absolutely matched mine. The term fits, and I'm now proud of it.

However, most of the world isn't ready to process the concept of non-binary, so I've told many people simply that I've transitioned 'to live my life as a woman'. Thanks to some recent high-profile trans women in the media, this is a concept people can now begin to process and I've found wide-scale acceptance. I've also learned that absolute non-binary with they/them pronouns and androgynous presentation isn't right for me, either. It's hard to move through society like that, and even if I did, it wouldn't feel like it matched my identity. Presenting femme-ish feels right. Identifying as partially non-binary also feels right. I'm finally comfortable with this.

PART 2: Can we go shopping for dresses together?

Kids

Emma and I talked a lot about telling the kids and how and when we would do that. In fact, like everything else in my life, I planned and micro-managed it. I wanted to tell each of them in the way I thought best. We decided to tell them over a school holiday so they had time to process it.

We told our eldest, Penny, first, when she was six. Emma and I were anxious, but we managed to find words that were right for her. We were really concerned about the possible consequences – we had certainly heard stories about children being bullied – and wanted to reassure her that she would have plenty of support, not just from us, but from organisations like Rainbow Families, where she could meet other children with trans parents.

She took it pretty much in her stride and said something like: 'Oh, so you mean you are going to change your outside to match your inside?' And then, 'Can we go shopping for dresses together!?' She didn't have any immediate questions, but we continued to check in and reassure her. She is very comfortable in the LGBTI community now and is very proud of having 'two mums'. She has an amazing friend, Alex, who has a very similar family, and that's been really important.

Our youngest, Robin, was only a few months old when I transitioned, so doesn't remember any different. He's pretty proud of his family and loves being a Rainbow Family. He knows he has two mums and has some great lines about me being a sort of boy/girl, which fits okay with my non-binary identity. He saw a doll that had had its hair cut off and said: 'It looks a bit like a girl and a bit like a boy; just like Heidi!' We talk about 'girls' bodies' and 'boys' bodies' and how that is distinct from whether the person inside feels like a boy, girl or neither. He's made a great friend at our playgroup who has two mums and is very used to the concept of LGBTI families. On a recent holiday he told us excitedly about a new friend who had 'a mum and a dad!'

Our middle son, Jeff, was four when we told him and has found it hardest to process, though he's now broadly okay. He has been teased in the past and we know there must have been some horrible playground talk. He came home one day and said some horrible thing to me in anger that he couldn't have learned anywhere else.

And, yes, he initially thought he'd miss out by having his dad disappear, but over time he has realised that I'm still in his life. We still do the things he thought he'd lose like going to the hardware shop or playing sport together.

School

Once we'd decided to tell the kids, I booked some time with the principal and explained that after the break our kids would return with two mums. I was a little worried about how she might respond, but I wasn't asking for permission, I was explaining what was going to happen. Despite it being a tiny school in the country, the principal's first response was: 'Well you aren't the first!' I certainly wasn't expecting that!

We are currently the only LGBTI family at our school, but have immersed ourselves in the community and found broad support. Quite a lot of parents, and most of the teachers, have approached us directly with messages of support. One parent said that it was great that her daughter was heading into the world with a tangible example of someone who was transgender in her life.

Shopping

Once I was presenting female full time, there were a few situations we had to manage. We switched from the term 'Dad' very early on as it was difficult for the kids to call me 'Dad' while I was presenting male and something else while presenting female. And we didn't want them yelling out 'Dad' across a crowded food court while I was presenting female. We let them work out names among themselves. They tried a few things, including 'Maddy', but ultimately it was my name that stuck. They now have two mums – Mummy and Heidi. If they call out 'Mum' and Emma isn't around I'll respond, but basically that's her term and I don't want to take it from her.

We did need to make some adjustments after an incident when we were travelling. I was still new to presenting female and I'd taken Jeff into the female toilet. When we were in the cubicle he started talking about my anatomy. I was shocked as I realised what could have happened if there had been anyone else around – which, luckily, there wasn't. I still avoid taking the kids into public toilets wherever I can.

Partners

There have, of course, been a lot of challenges for the love of my life, Emma, too. She has been utterly amazing and supportive from the start, but this has been bigger than just the two of us and she has needed other support. She went to some groups for partners, which weren't especially helpful. In one session there was a huge split between people who were angry at their partner for transitioning, and people who wanted to support their transitioning partner and maintain their relationship.

We kept in touch with some of the latter group and started to make friends. There was a real gap in the support available for couples

like us, so eventually, I decided to create something – a positive space for couples who want to try to stay together. It's a closed Facebook group where we currently have more than 30 members.

We also established a group just for the non-transitioning partners, who hold monthly meet-ups and share challenges and experiences online. There are around twenty partners in the group, and it is growing steadily. These groups have provided the most successful support many of the members have found. Everything else has lacked a key element: the capacity of those involved to fully empathise with what is going on in our relationships.

Identity

Before we had the support groups, we struggled to work out exactly who we were. We had gone from a married, straight couple – a mum and a dad – to a couple of women with a huge shared history, but not a lesbian one.

Does this make us lesbians? Do we refer to each other as 'partner' or 'wife' now that 'husband' doesn't feel right? What happened to the marriage we had as 'man' and woman? What do we tell new people we meet? How do our kids describe us? Where do we put our photos? Does staying with me mean that Emma is bi now? Or perhaps pan or lesbian? How does Emma explain her relationship to new people she meets when she hates exposing details of her life? When she says 'partner' and they assume male, does she speak up? What about when people hear that we have kids and assume we must have used IVF?

It's even odd when people from the LGBTI community assume we are two cis lesbians, which happens all the time. Because some know our actual history and others don't, we often don't know how people read us. It's taken a while to realise that it doesn't matter; we are accepted regardless.

In the end, we basically had to forget everything other than the two of us. We looked each other in the eye and said honestly that we wanted to stay together no matter what. We no longer care what label someone else uses to describe our relationship.

Family

Now, when we are out and about as a family, we are pretty much like most others. I imagine that most people guess that we are just two mums, from two separate families, on an outing together. We still love to travel, and our weekends are filled with family experiences making memories together; one of the people in the photos looks a little different now but it certainly feels like we have made it work. Our kids were a huge part of our lives before I transitioned and this hasn't changed – staying together was as

much about Emma and I wanting to be together as it was about providing the best outcomes for our kids in a situation not of their making.

They are pretty open with their school friends about our family – we have tried to teach them that they have nothing to be ashamed of. They are quick to say they have two mums, and we point out that they get to choose whether it's appropriate for them to provide the extra piece of information that one of them used to be their dad.

Five years ago, I imagined I'd be losing pretty much everything by transitioning, but becoming part of the LGBTI community has been such an incredibly uplifting experience. My life now is far better than my wildest dreams and Emma has been a huge part of that. It certainly helps that our relationship was very strong before I transitioned. There's no question that my story would be very different without her. I'll never stop loving her for that, no matter what the future holds.

Emma

Emma is 38 years old and grew up in the suburbs in Sydney and now lives in a semi-rural area. Emma and Heidi have been together for 21 years, married for 12 and have three children. Emma decided to remain in the relationship after Heidi told her she was trans and wanted to transition. Emma previously identified as straight, and now considers herself pansexual.

Have you been wearing my makeup?

Heidi and I had been together for 15 years, and married for six, before I first realised something was going on. I remember the day quite clearly. Our third child was five months old, and I had been to the airport to pick up a relative. Heidi was home when we arrived and there was something about her that was different, but I couldn't work it out. She wasn't Heidi then, of course, she was my husband.

I walked into the bathroom and saw makeup spilt on the sink, and then I realised she looked different because she had had eye makeup on and hadn't cleaned it off completely. And then I saw she had shaved her legs. A quiet question from me: 'Have you been wearing my makeup?' And an even quieter reply, 'Yes', from Heidi. That was the start of our journey together through her transition.

The next few hours/days/weeks/months are much more of a blur.

Heidi, being the avid researcher she is, gave me articles, books and stories to read about this new part of our lives. I learnt all about crossdressing, gender dysphoria, and what it meant to be transgender. To begin with, Heidi thought she might just be a crossdresser, but looking back on that confused time, I think we both knew quite quickly that she was trans. We were in denial and scared to admit the truth, because it all seemed frightening and difficult. It was more than a year after that first makeup episode that Heidi finally managed to say the words, 'I think I'm transgender'.

Staying

Before all this, Heidi and I had a very strong relationship. We had three young children; our eldest had nearly finished her first year at the little local country school that we loved. We had made some great friends in the area, and had just finished building our house. If our relationship failed now, I worried about what that would mean for our lives, for our kids, for our family. But at the same time, I worried about the impact of this change on the children: how would they cope? How would family members, friends and our local community react to this news?

We are both quite stubborn and were both very determined to make things work. We had always got along so well. We really loved spending time together and had several shared interests and passions. Heidi made a big effort to take things slowly, to change slowly, so that I had time to adjust.

She was very afraid that I would find such huge change too difficult and would choose to end the relationship. There were times when emotions ran very high for both of us and I didn't think we'd manage to work things out. We saw a counsellor together whose message was basically 'just take things a day at a time', which became a mantra of sorts for me.

I found it difficult not knowing anyone else who was going through a similar experience to us. Occasionally, we found couples where one partner was in the process of coming out as trans, but mostly these couples ended up separating. It was very hard to find couples or families who stayed together through a partner's transition. It was often a lonely experience for me. Heidi was very understanding, and frustrated – as I was – at the lack of support for partners of trans people.

Telling

For a long time, we didn't tell anyone what we were going through. I didn't talk to anyone at all until nearly one year after that first makeup episode. I spent most of that year feeling very lost and alone. I didn't want to tell anyone because I was so unsure what their reactions would be. I now know that we could have told friends and family

sooner; we were trying to sort out our own feelings at the time, as well as being fearful of others' responses.

The first person I told about Heidi was a close friend. Her reaction was about as perfect as you could hope for and she was very supportive. Telling her is one of the hardest things I remember, not just because I was telling a friend, but because it was the first time I said it out loud. There were lots of tears and hugs and relief that I had finally told someone.

Both Heidi and I developed our own 'coming out' story. I'm an emotional person as it is, so there were often tears, but I found it helped to have a consistent narrative to explain what was happening with Heidi and our family. The first time I told a friend without crying, I announced proudly: 'You're the first person I've managed to tell without bursting into tears!' And promptly did just that!

Heidi found that people's first question when she told them was often, 'How's Emma?' I think she became a little frustrated with this, feeling that perhaps they didn't really appreciate what a huge process transition was for her as well as me. I was (and am still) often asked, 'Has Heidi had a surgery?' Before I knew anything about trans people, I probably would have asked the same question, purely out of curiosity. I now know that most trans people don't appreciate questions about their anatomy and I tell others that intrusive questions aren't okay.

Friends

Family and friends have generally been very supportive and caring, if quietly curious. At the start, I was anxious that people would not be accepting, but I needn't have been. For the most part, people's reactions have been positive. Although I've been telling people about Heidi and me for a while now, I still find it difficult 'coming out' at times. I have a story that tells most of our tale fairly concisely and I find this helps when I meet new people. It has felt very difficult at times, telling people over and over again. But seeing how happy Heidi has become as she transitioned is such a positive thing, and that makes telling people much easier.

I now have some very supportive and lovely friends who, as partners of trans people, have been through the same experience. We catch up regularly, and they have had a very positive influence on my life. Several of us have children who also love to meet up.

I think one of the hardest things for me to process with Heidi's transition was that I had married a man, had had children with that man, and had always thought of myself as hetero. Now, I have a wife, we're a family with two mums and three kids, and people who don't know our full story think I'm a lesbian.

Sometimes I feel a bit of a fraud. I didn't go through the process of working out I was gay as a young

person, I didn't need IVF or a sperm donor to have children, and I was able to get legally married to my 'wife' long before marriage equality happened in Australia. My identity has changed and now I probably view myself as pansexual, but as time goes on I also feel that I'm just 'me' – I don't have to have a label.

Kids

We also took a while to tell our children. We told our eldest daughter first when she was about six or seven years old. Essentially, we said that although Daddy had a boy's body on the outside, on the inside he felt he was a girl, and that he wanted to be able to dress like a girl to make the outside match the inside. We held our breath, but we needn't have; our daughter gave Heidi a big smile and a hug and said, 'That's okay. I can help you look like a girl!' And asked if she could help Heidi shop for a dress.

Before our first outing in public with Heidi, we needed to work out what the children would call her in public, because 'Daddy' was a bit of a giveaway! We let them choose, and in the end, they went with her new name. Heidi was very firm about not being called 'Mum'; she didn't want to take my name. That first public outing was nerve-racking, but everything went well, apart from one small slip-up. We were in a small shop with no other customers and all of a sudden one of the kids calls out 'Daddy!' There was a very curious look from the shop owner and a hasty retreat from us.

For our eldest child, having a trans parent has not been much of an issue, and it's the same for our youngest who doesn't remember Heidi as her previous self. Our middle child has struggled the most and this has been made harder by some bullying by other kids at school. The teachers have been wonderfully supportive, which was important for our son. Seeing the school counsellor has also helped. We talk openly at home and encourage the kids to ask questions and share any worries, and we always offer them the option of speaking with a counsellor or family friend if they prefer. All three children are now happy and thriving.

We are aware that our children may have challenging times ahead, as they enter their teenage years and need to explain our family to others. But they know we are here to help them through any difficult times, and that counselling is always an option. I intend to stay in touch with other families with trans members, as that has been such an important part of this journey for me. I like to hope that our small community of supportive partners of trans people will continue to grow.

Advice

My advice to partners of transgender people is: although your partner needs lots of support, you do too.

Telling someone what is happening is one of the most helpful things you can do. Speaking with friends and family, and having someone who understands that you are going through a journey of your own, is important. You need to get some love and support from people other than your partner. Finding other people who have a partner who is transitioning/has transitioned can be really helpful, as they will have a much better understanding of what you are going through.

Your trans partner may be self-absorbed with their journey for some time, but it's okay to let them know that you need love and support too; you're also going through a transition of sorts. Having a partner who is transitioning can be very demanding, emotional and difficult at times. Self-care is important: making sure you spend some time on yourself and doing things you love will help your own emotional and mental health.

People are generally very supportive of my decision to continue my relationship with Heidi, and often say things like, 'You're amazing!' But I don't feel like I've done anything amazing. Heidi and I have worked hard at keeping our relationship going through a very difficult time in our lives. We love each other and neither of us wants to spend our lives apart.

Leigh

Leigh is a 34-year-old parent of two and life partner to Amber, an 'amazing trans woman'. Leigh has been part of the rainbow community herself since her teens when she began to identify as bisexual. A few years ago she came across the term 'pansexuality' and now identifies as pansexual, because it feels truer to how she connects to people. She has always loved the saying 'hearts not parts' in relation to identity, so it might make sense that when her partner came out as trans, it was no great shock to her.

PART 1: It felt good to understand I was not alone

Identity

My gender identity has always been something of a blur. I never felt I belonged anywhere and there were times when I forced myself to belong somewhere despite the discomfort of that. I embraced total femininity at one stage, felt like a 'tomboy' at another, and then disassociated myself with the gender binary altogether.

My gender expression has gone through phases, though I prefer to say it has 'evolved'. I like to try different things and be open-minded. I don't like people assuming my gender; it makes me feel frustrated,

angry and uncomfortable. Often I don't feel like any gender at all. I just feel like ... being me. Why should gender define who I am?

I actually don't like using labels, but there are some situations where it can be helpful – for example, when educating someone, or trying to explain how you might fit into the world. I acknowledge that, for some people, having boxes or labels works, so I try to adapt, depending on who I'm talking to.

I came across the term 'non-binary' when I was educating myself about trans issues and I feel comfortable that I sit somewhere in there. 'Non-binary' is a huge umbrella term though, and everyone's journey is so unique. Transitioning is not part of my own personal journey, although part of me does feel like we are all transitioning as that's just part of life. I feel like I have never fitted anywhere, and understanding what it means to be non-binary tells me that it's okay *not* to fit anywhere, and that makes me feel less isolated. I started exploring my gender identity and accepting who I am as I was learning more about my partner's gender identity. I have read a few stories of other people also coming out as non-binary during their partner's transition. It felt good to understand I was not alone.

Babies

Amber and I met when I was 20 and studying at university. I took a part-time job at our local bakery and I met her there. We worked together for about three years before we started dating. I had no idea Amber identified as trans. At that time, Amber had a male name and was the epitome of 'maleness' – into motorbikes, rugby league and the Army Reserves.

We dated for about a year and I fell pregnant with our first child, Alex. When I was twelve weeks pregnant, Amber proposed. We wanted to get married before our baby came and so we wed – as 'man and wife'. I still didn't know Amber identified as trans; she didn't even know herself. This was back in 2012, and even then, trans issues were not talked about as openly as they are today. She didn't know why she felt the way she did and she couldn't stop the feelings she had.

When Alex was born, I struggled with nursing and didn't really have much support. I had just turned 24 and my friends were all out partying and I tried to keep up. It took me a while to understand that partying and parenting were hard to maintain. Also, I started to develop postnatal depression. It was a tough time for Amber, too, and a difficult time for our relationship. When Alex was about three, things came to a head and we separated.

A letter

A few months after we separated I found a letter in my mailbox from Amber. In it, Amber told me how they felt – about wanting to be a woman, about how these feelings just

wouldn't go away, and about having suicidal thoughts. I might refer to Amber as 'they', especially when I'm talking about the past. Not having yet transitioned, I feel non-binary pronouns best reflect who Amber was to me at this time. Amber also told me that they had started crossdressing in their own space and experimenting with their female identity.

I was the first person Amber told. They wanted to get back together and said they would do whatever they could to make our relationship work. I was confused and didn't know who to turn to, but we arranged to meet and talk face to face. It was a really hard conversation to have, but we talked about what we'd need to do to make our partnership work, including how we'd parent.

I also said I wanted to have a sibling for Alex; that was really important to me, and Amber agreed. I made a commitment to being with Amber, though, at the time, neither of us knew about transition – or whether that was something Amber wanted. I wanted to be with Amber to support them navigating these feelings and getting the support they needed. At the end of that conversation we decided to reconcile.

At this point I was still unsure of my own gender identity and of what any of this meant for us as a couple. Is my partner still attracted to me? What does this actually mean? What will my family think? Is this just a phase? Will Amber get over it? I later found out that many of these questions are common, and that partners go through their own personal transition.

After we started living together again, Amber showed me their clothes and started crossdressing at home, just around me. We did have some fun, dressing up and experimenting with makeup, but I also had lots of questions and no-one to talk to; Amber didn't want me to tell anyone and that was hard. Soon after we moved back in together, I fell pregnant with our second baby. Sam was born in the following January and Alex started primary school soon after.

Fresh start

About a year later, we had the opportunity to relocate to New Zealand. The idea was appealing because we thought we could leave all our painful memories behind and have a fresh start. After we moved, it seemed like Amber started repressing their feelings of being 'like a woman', and they stopped crossdressing. They felt it was too difficult to do any of this and that their happiness wasn't worth all that effort.

New Zealand actually turned out to be quite difficult, because Amber couldn't get work and ended up getting a job back in Sydney and doing a kind of 'fly in fly out' thing, which was really hard on everyone. But, during their time in Sydney, Amber did start seeing a psychologist.

Hormones

Amber and the psychologist talked about starting hormones, which I thought might be good idea, and we both agreed that Amber needed to move forward on this journey – in whatever way – for our relationship and family to remain intact. We both knew if Amber didn't progress, we would be broken again. And probably for good this time.

The hormones affected Amber's moods; they were more emotional, sometimes crying, sometimes laughing, but more relaxed and far happier with their journey. The physical changes took longer; Amber started growing their hair and developing breasts over the next couple of years. Because Amber was happier generally, they started eating more healthy foods and exercising more – all of which had a positive impact on their mental health. A combination of the hormones and being true to themselves really helped Amber connect with the kids and become a more loving, responsive parent.

Amber joined a group at the Gender Centre and started hearing about other people's journeys, but it was hard because they still couldn't find anyone they connected with – someone in their 30s who was a parent of young kids. They also went to the Seahorse Society – a group that aims to bring crossdressers together socially, though not necessarily trans folk – but it was the same story: no-one with young kids.

Support

It was about four years from when Amber first told me about their feelings to when they started seeing a psych. During this time, I felt like I really needed to talk to someone as well, but Amber didn't want me to. Eventually, Amber agreed, which was a huge relief, and I told a sibling. My sibling was coming to live with us temporarily and I thought it best to be open. Plus, they are part of the LGBTIQA+ community and identify as non-binary, and I felt they would have some understanding and compassion. And they did. They congratulated Amber; we sat and talked and they said we had their full support.

Telling

Very slowly, we began telling people. Amber told their sister, who was very positive and supportive and said she was glad Amber was happy. Amber also told a close family friend who is a makeup artist – they wanted some tips! Then, over time, we would add another person and another. Everyone, 100 per cent, was supportive! They embraced the news with love and acceptance, and now, almost everyone knows.

We also acknowledge that everyone navigates this journey – and copes with grief – in different ways. As a partner, I have become very well acquainted with the cycle of grief and I am still in it – it comes and goes. There are some days – weeks

even – where I still have to process a lot. The lack of support for partners doesn't help. Recently, some friends and I started a peer-to-peer support group for non-transitioning partners. The group has become a real positive in my life and I cherish the friendships I have made. It has been really helpful for my mental health.

PART 2: When are we having dessert?

Kids

We decided to move back to Sydney for lots of reasons and I got in touch with Rainbow Families. It's been hard to meet other trans and gender diverse families, but we did meet one who we are now very close to; our eldest kids are the same age and connect very well. We are slowly meeting other families now, but I guess these things take time.

After Alex was settled into their new school and Sam, who was four at the time, had started pre-school, we felt we should really tell them. Amber discussed it with their psych who said it can be helpful to tell kids when they are younger as they seem to be generally more open. Since our eldest was nine at the time, we felt we needed to get cracking!

A few years earlier, Alex had talked about feeling like they 'had a boy brain and a girl brain', so we'd had some previous discussion around gender identity. Amber and I role-played and rehearsed what we would say and how we would explain things. As a family, we had always talked about being true to yourself and loving whoever you wanted. We'd never encouraged gender stereotypes and just let the kids have their own interests. I think the fact that we'd been having these types of discussions for a while really helped us to explain it to the kids, and influenced their response.

Telling

We chose to tell them after dinner, then celebrate with ice-cream – a family favourite. Amber wanted me to do the talking because they felt I could explain things better. My background is in social work, so I have some experience talking about these things. I kept it simple. I reminded the kids that we had always talked about how everyone is different, and how important it is to be true to yourself.

I explained that sometimes people are born and told to be a certain gender – we call this 'assigned at birth' – and that when they grow up, deep in their heart, they don't feel like that gender. I said that some people who feel like this know it is best for them to change from the

gender they were assigned at birth to the one that makes them feel truly happy, and that a person who feels like this is called 'transgender'.

I explained that Amber felt this way and, to be truly happy, they needed to become a woman because that is how Amber had always felt inside. I also told them that everyone's journey is different, and that's really important to remember. Alex, who has an intense imagination – and an intense love of foxes – said something like, 'That's okay because sometimes I feel like a fox', which made us all laugh. We use humour a lot in our parenting and in our family life generally. When I'd finished explaining everything, I asked if they had any questions. They gave Amber a hug and said, 'When are we having dessert?'

I also talked to them about my own gender identity, which I did one-on-one. With Sam, I used very simple words: 'Sometimes I feel like a girl, sometimes I feel like a boy, and sometimes I feel like neither. But mostly I am just me.' With Alex, I talked more about the spectrum and, because they have similar feelings about their own gender identity, they understood what I was talking about. I also told both kids that I was not transitioning, and that everyone has their own journey. I think it is really important for people to know that no two stories are the same.

I feel like the term 'non-binary' is a bit confusing for the kids. I'm not sure they really understand, and even if they do, they forget. It's an ongoing discussion; in fact, all of this is. I think it's important for parents to remember you need to keep checking in with your kids, to keep talking about it. The more we talk about this stuff the less of a taboo it feels.

School

We knew then we had to tell the school, but Alex beat us to it! Alex had a lot of trust in their teacher and did a very brave thing in disclosing this information. We checked in with the teacher afterwards to confirm what Alex had told them. Then, Alex wanted to tell the whole Year 4 class – 80 or so students – so with support from the teacher, Alex addressed the whole year group and told them that they had a transgender parent. Alex's teacher then explained some terms and read the story *I am Jazz* to the class.

We know that, now and again, mean things are said in the playground, but Alex has always been able to let the teacher know and the school has dealt with these situations appropriately. Alex has always felt comfortable talking about Amber with friends and is extremely proud to have a transgender parent.

Sam is equally proud and expresses her feelings as any five year old might – through drawings, imaginative play, and proudly saying 'I have two mums'. She has said, with pride, 'My dad is now my mum'

and ‘My dad wears dresses’. Amber feels very comfortable at the school, and when meeting other parents, and is so proud of the kids.

Father’s Day

We had to navigate a lot around Father’s Day last year. We didn’t think it would bother our kids, but Alex was quite upset when the school had a Father’s Day breakfast – they saw lots of fathers coming to school to take part in the celebrations. We spoke to the school about this and they said that actually anyone is welcome, but their advertising and messaging was still very gendered and not inclusive.

We told the kids from now on we will celebrate two ‘Parent Days’. We’ll still acknowledge ‘Mother’s Day’ and ‘Father’s Day’, but we’ll call them ‘Parent Days’ and we’ll attend the school as ‘parents’. I also said that on Father’s Day they could invite their grandad, who they are very close to, and who has been supportive of our family.

Names

My name hasn’t changed and my kids call me ‘Mama’, but when I introduce myself to others I say ‘I am X’s parent’. I do prefer to be referred to as a ‘parent’, but sometimes this doesn’t happen. Our kids refer to us both as their ‘two mums’ and they are very proud of that. Their friends refer to Amber as ‘the other mum’.

After Amber had surgery I checked in again – I am always checking in – and asked whether their pronouns had changed. Amber said she uses ‘she/her’ pronouns and that she is my ‘wife’. So this is what I use now. The kids call Amber, ‘Amber’. We tried ‘Mum’, but it got confusing. We also tried ‘daddymumma’ and that worked for a bit, but it’s long and the kids just gravitated towards using her actual name. We know this might change. I sometimes get called by my actual name as well. In our family, we have never asked the kids to call us something in particular; they have organically formed their own words. They still check in with Amber though, and ask, ‘Is it okay that we call you … ?’ When Amber was choosing her middle name, the kids were involved in the process, with everyone giving suggestions and then a name drawn from a hat!

Grief

I carry a lot of grief inside. I actually attended a session with my wife and her psychologist so that I could talk about how I was feeling. It was really good for me and it was like I was given permission to grieve. I think the grief cycle is a huge thing that many partners go through, but not many people talk about. We talk a lot about grief in our partners’ group. I am still working through a lot of this stuff.

Amber and I communicate 100 per cent better than we did in the past. We are honest and compassionate.

We keep discussions flowing and we learn a lot from each other. We still have our tough times, but that is like any relationship. With regard to my own identity, I am at peace and happy to just be myself and explore.

Now

As parents, we maintain open communication with our kids. We remind them that home will always be a safe space for them. We check in a lot to see how they are going. This is really important. We have found having conversations separately with each child helps a lot because of their different ages. In particular, our eldest needs a lot of one-on-one time. If they say they don't want to talk about it, we totally respect that as well. We allow conversations to start organically and flow naturally. We also remind them that if they ever want to talk, or if they have any questions, they can always come to us.

Penny and Alex

Penny and Alex are 10 years old and are good friends. They both have a transitioning parent – Heidi and Amber – and met through a group that supports trans families. Penny and Alex sat down with their respective non-transitioning parents, Emma and Leigh, to talk about their families.

Leigh: You guys are doing a really good thing – the information you share is going to help other kids.

Emma: What we wanted to know first of all is: Do you think of your family as different from other families, or not? Does it feel different?

Alex: Yeah, because I have two mums?

Emma: Yeah. Any other reason?

Penny: It just doesn't really feel different. I got used to it after a while, so it feels like it's been like this my whole life.

Emma: What did you get used to?

Penny: Heidi being a girl.

Emma: So, when you talk to your friends at school, you feel like you have the same sort of family?

Alex: Yeah.

Emma: All right. Well, what do you think transgender means? How do you explain that?

Alex: I don't think it really means anything – just that you can be whoever you wanna be.

Emma: So, if someone at school

asks you what 'transgender' is, what do you say?

Penny: I think that it is somebody who looks like they are a boy or a girl but they feel like they are someone else.

Emma: What about 'non-binary'? Have you ever heard of someone who's called 'non-binary'?

Alex: I don't know what it means.

Penny: Is it like someone who's a bit of both?

Emma: Yeah, it can be.

Penny: Yeah. I was just guessing …

Leigh: How did you feel when you first found out that your parent was transgender or non-binary?

Alex: I was really confused because I didn't know what transgender was at the time.

Penny: I can't remember.

Leigh: How did you feel when your parent changed their name, or when they started dressing in a way that reflected their true identity?

Alex: I felt happy for them because I like to see people happy and they were very happy.

Emma: How did it feel to see Heidi dressing as Heidi?

Penny: Well, that was a while ago so it's hard to remember, but I think I remember thinking 'What is she doing?' or 'Why is she doing that?' or something.

Emma: Okay. What happens if someone asks you a question about your parents?

Penny: I would probably tell them … I don't know what I would tell them, but I would figure it out at the time.

Emma: What about you, Alex? Did you tell your friends at school?

Alex: No, I only told my teacher at first, but it took a long time before I wanted to tell her because I didn't want to feel like everyone was whispering about me.

Emma: Did you end up telling any of your friends at school?

Alex: Yes, I did. I wanted them to know because they're my friends, and they might need someone to talk to if they have problems at home, too.

Emma: That's very generous and thoughtful of you.

Leigh: Alex, do you think you could talk about when you spoke to the whole year group?

Alex: I explained what was happening at home and I felt happy.

Leigh: And the teacher read the book, *I am Jazz*?

Alex: Umm, I can't really remember.

Emma: Do you guys remember anything you get taught at school?!

Alex: I'm very forgetful by the time the weekend comes.

Leigh: Well how about this question: If you made a new friend, what would you tell them about your

family? Or would you wait until they asked you about it?

Alex: I would wait until they asked.

Penny: I'm kinda worried that they might not be my friend anymore if I tell them.

Emma: Are you? Why do you think that?

Penny: I've known some of my other friends for at least two years so I know what they might do, but with a new friend, I'm not sure.

Alex: You could probably just tell them.

Emma: What do you think you would say if someone asked why you have two mums?

Penny: I might say, 'Because that's what one of them wanted to be – she didn't feel like she was a boy, she felt like she wanted to be a girl'.

Emma: Do you remember any time when you've actually told a friend, or someone else?

Alex: Yeah. It was my best friend, my very close friend. They didn't react; they just, like … they gave me a hug.

Penny: Well I've explained it to Ben quite a lot because he asks questions. He just kind of came up to me and wanted to know, 'Why did your dad turn in to a mum?' And stuff like that. And I said, 'Well, because she wanted to and she didn't feel like being a boy was right'.

Emma: Okay. And then does he ask anything else?

Penny: No, he sort of just goes away.

Emma: Does that make you feel sad or scared?

Penny: No.

Leigh: How does it feel to know other kids who have a transgender or non-binary parent?

Alex: It's good because you know you're not alone, and you've got people who look out for you as well.

Leigh: So, the friendship that you and Penny have, would you say it's the same or different from the friends at school?

Alex: Different.

Penny: Yeah, different.

Leigh: And is it different in a good way?

Alex: Yes.

Penny: [nods]

Emma: Do you like catching up with each other?

Penny: [nods]

Alex: Yes, it's so much fun. [smiles]

Penny: [leans on Alex's shoulder]

Leigh: What is one tip you would give another kid who has just found out their parent is transgender or non-binary?

Penny: Umm, if you need anything come to me, because I know what it means.

Alex: If you, umm … I'm here if you

want to talk about problems that have been happening. Yeah. [laughs]

Leigh: Would you find it helpful to connect with other families that also have transgender and non-binary parents?

Alex: Yeah. It would be good if the group was a bit bigger.

Leigh: Do you have some ideas on how we could make the group bigger? Is there something Rainbow Families could do?

Alex: So when there's new people we can, like, ask if they want to join the group?

Emma: Yeah. So like a trans family group that met up now and then.

Alex: That would be cool.

Penny: We could even have, like, a pool party.

Leigh: A pool party's a great idea!

Emma: There's one last question and this one you might have to think really hard about, okay? What do you love about your trans or non-binary parent?

Penny: I just love them.

Alex: I love them lots because they help me. If there's, like, a Mother's or Father's Day thing it makes it extra special because you've got two mums. I love my whole family, my cat, but I also ...

Penny: What's your cat's name?

Alex: Winnie.

Penny: [sings] Winnie the Pooh! Winnie the Pooh!

Emma: Do you have anything else you wanted to say?

Alex: Oh I do, because, well maybe it's a good question to ask them – how does it feel, like, what's it like being transgender?

Leigh: So you would like to find out more from your own parents how it actually feels for them?

Both: Yeah.

Alex: And how you feel, like, walking into town or whatever.

Penny: With a dress on. [smiles]

Emma: So do you think that would be helpful – to have some information from the trans or non-binary person saying how it feels?

Penny: We could interview Amber or Heidi!

Leigh: Kids interviewing adults, I like that.

Emma: Anything else you want to say?

Alex: No.

Penny: Nah.

Emma: Thank you girls. That was a good job.

Leigh: Thank you!

Michelle

Michelle was raised in the Evangelical United Church of Christ in the bible belt of the mid-western USA. She moved from St Louis to Melbourne when she was 25 to marry a woman she had met online. Michelle is a woman who has 36 years of lived experience as a man, and happens to be transgender. She is a father, a friend, a mentor, and approaches life altruistically.

Surprise!

When I was in primary school I used to tell the other kids I was supposed to be a girl but came out a boy by surprise. I remember the first time I 'pretended' to be female, when I was around four or five. I would wear a towel on my head for hair and rub strawberries on my lips for lipstick. And I would use tennis balls for breasts. I loved going to girlfriends' houses and playing with their dolls.

I was often threatened by my parents when I wanted to do feminine things like cooking or sewing. They would punish me and threaten to send me to school dressed as a girl. As I grew up, I was told to be more manly and forced to do more masculine things like sport and, eventually, to date girls. My stepfather was very much a man's man and misogynistic.

As a child, crossdressing was more about makeup and wigs. I played around with this for most of my

primary and middle school years, but stopped when I started high school. I wasn't able to express my femininity in any way after that. In fact, I felt shame and was an anxious and stressed-out teenager. It wasn't until I was kicked out of home that I started to explore crossdressing more, but only in private.

Marriage

At nineteen, I started dating Aimee and we were married two years later. Aimee was Catholic and I converted and became a youth minister. The marriage only lasted two years and by 23 I was divorced. When Aimee and I separated, I was asked to leave the ministry and was invited for a weekend away with the priest, who was sexually inappropriate. It was the last time I had anything to do with the church.

After Aimee and I split, I started to explore my sexuality, but then I met Jane online. I went to see a psychiatrist to try to understand why I felt the way I did, and why I needed to crossdress. The psychiatrist talked about transition and what that would involve. I met some other trans people for the first time, but I couldn't relate to them. I felt very ashamed and I had a degree of transphobia and homophobia from my religious upbringing.

I decided to walk away from it all. I went to the gym, shaved my head, and became as masculine as possible – I would live my life as a heterosexual man. At 25 I moved to Australia to be with Jane. I was very honest with her about my past and the crossdressing and explained that it was just a form of self-expression. But I made it very clear to her that I wanted to have a family and live a 'normal' life. I blamed the crossdressing on an abusive upbringing at the hands of my stepfather, and forced myself to hate anything feminine.

Bear and Bug

We had two kids, Bear and Bug, three years apart. Having children was an amazing highlight in my life. I was there when they were born and watched them come into this world. I still vividly remember the moment they were placed in my arms. When I held Bear I started to cry and I sang 'Somewhere over the rainbow' to her. I fell in love instantly.

Since then I have made the majority of my decisions in life based on my love for them. I was so happy when they were born and even today am in awe of the fact that I made them from love with their mother. Each day spent with them is a miracle and I love my role as 'Daddy'.

When I first moved to Australia, I had no friends or family, so it was especially hard. Over the years, my relationship with Jane became strained and I struggled with severe depression and anxiety. We separated for a year and I started crossdressing again – but still very

much in private – and seeing a psychiatrist. We got back together again and in the midst of everything I had a 'D for Daniel' (my former name) party and I went in drag.

Everyone at the party was pretty shocked; they laughed at first, but they were clearly very uncomfortable. Jane was mortified and we didn't talk for a week afterwards. Eventually we had a big fight and I moved out and that was the end of my marriage.

But by this stage, I had met some like-minded trans people who supported me and I was seeing a psychiatrist to try to work out why these feelings were getting stronger. The psychiatrist said I really needed to take the time to understand what I was going through, and that if I didn't it would consume me and may lead to suicide. So I took several months to explore what all this meant and where my life was going.

Transition

Eventually, I made the decision to transition socially. I was 36. Three months after I started, as I was slowly introducing blockers and very low doses of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), I was outed on Facebook by a family member. It was a social media circus that I had to work hard to contain. It forced me into transitioning fully and I lost my job as a result. Being outed and having no control was really hard and led to some uncomfortable conversations. Over time though, when people saw the work I was doing and how I presented in public, they started to listen and many have since become amazing friends and supporters.

When I first came out, I made a conscious decision to be patient with other people; I'm not a forceful person by nature and I just let time be my guide.

It wasn't until I started having physical changes from the HRT that I started dressing full time as a woman, and that took about seven months. The girls were seven and four years old at that time, and we would do our nails and makeup together, or I would let them play with my hair while I sat on the floor watching TV.

The first time I went out in public with them as a woman, we had spent the entire day doing girlie stuff. I had become certified as a makeup artist and it gave the girls a chance to play and explore. They wanted to play dress-ups and so I let them dress me. Then I asked them if it was okay if I went out with them like that. They were a little apprehensive at first, but we went to a friend's house for drinks – a small social gathering – and from that moment on they have been comfortable with me. Now, if I ever attempt to dress in a masculine manner they remind me, 'Dad, you're a girl not a boy!' I let these changes happen organically, and slowly introduced more and more female things into the house.

My girls were the only ones who didn't say they lost their dad or that I had 'died'. Their mum asked if they wanted to use another name for me and the girls kept saying, 'Why? She's our dad'. I let them guide me on this this journey; I wanted to make sure they were with me every step of the way. Their mum is their mum and, in her mind, she lost her husband; she didn't deserve to lose being called 'Mum' as well, or to have to share that title. I have been 'Dad' since they were born, and I will be 'Dad' until the day I die. The only time it becomes tricky is when we use public toilets, and the girls know not to say 'Dad' there. I believe my kids are quite proud of the fact they have a dad who is female, and they even correct people when they use the wrong pronoun.

Father's Day

When I first transitioned, Jane asked me not to go out in public in our local suburb, or to pick the kids up from school. I ended up going to the school to talk to the counsellor and principal after I was outed on social media. I wanted to make sure the girls had the right support in place if they needed it.

The school was very responsive in the initial meeting, but didn't get back to me afterwards; I think they were uncomfortable. That was disappointing, but two years later they reached out to me to speak on International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), which was great.

The very first time I was allowed to go to school was for a Father's Day breakfast with my youngest, which was really special. It was an interesting experience! There were a few people there who knew me and I chatted to them as I always had done. I have never gone out of my way to make other people uncomfortable, and I work around their misunderstandings, which has made them gravitate towards me even more. Usually my height is what makes people double-take; I'm 191 centimetres, or six foot two!

So at the breakfast we stood around playing with a ball, and eating our egg and bacon sandwiches with laughter, but no drama. When Bear came home from school that day, she laughed and said kids kept asking why her aunt had brought her to Father's Day breakfast. She told them I was her dad and they accepted that and no further questions were asked. For the first time this year, I walked Bear to class and there were a few odd stares from kids in the playground, but she took no notice.

My relationship with my daughters has always been good. If anything, our bond is stronger now and they love staying at my house. Jane and I have worked hard to make our family life as harmonious as possible. Over time, I have taken the girls to school and picked them up more and more,

and this year I will be going to the parent–teacher conferences for the first time.

Ever since I started living socially as a woman, and living a more authentic life, there's been no pushback nor any concerns expressed by my daughters; they are happy and bright and living life to its fullest.

Jane

My relationship with Jane was very difficult for some time. I had to give her a lot of space to vent her feelings, and for a while she made numerous demands, with which I complied. As time went on, though, she became calmer and things got better. She would pass on clothes or makeup, and sometimes take the kids shopping so they could buy gifts for me. Last year, I was invited to her family's Christmas Day, and to birthday and holiday events. Now, we have regular dinner nights at her house with the kids and her boyfriend.

I have always said people need to allow their families to transition with them if they want them to remain in their lives. People sometimes said things like 'Daniel died', or 'I miss Daniel', and although it was hard for me to hear, I respected that. I have always allowed people to ask me whatever they want, however personal. I do think there is a danger that we can come across as aggressive sometimes and that makes people back off. I think we need to have some patience and accept that people make genuine mistakes.

If I am talking to someone, or doing an interview, I try to make them relax and reassure them. I want them to be informed. I know my reaction to any situation will determine its outcome and I want to make sure it's the best possible outcome.

Transitioning is a slow process and it doesn't happen overnight. It's important to keep the channels of communication open with your friends and family, and to acknowledge that it's a journey – a transition – for everyone.

Rainer

Rainer doesn't like labels much; they feel constrained by them and constrained by other people's interpretations. But some useful descriptors for Rainer are: third gender, Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB), bisexual, gender fluid, trans guy, butch woman – also Jewish, neurodiverse, parent and partner. Rainer's pronouns are *he*, *she* and *they*. Rainer is the partner of Fi and parent of Jessi, their eight-month-old daughter.

Part 1: I originally came out as 'neutrois'

Small town

I grew up in a small town in regional NSW and went to primary school in an even smaller town. The school was in a converted house and there were fifteen kids. We had a paddock and a river and we raised chickens and went yabbying. Here, I wasn't different; in such a small group, we were all as different as each other, and we were all good friends.

Having said that, for most of my life before puberty, I was seen as a boy and I fought hard against that – 'I'm a girl', I'd yell. I fought for my womanhood, and I still do. I didn't grow up with your typical gender norms, though. In the country, girls had to be strong, sporty, and smart,

so that was never an issue. But other things were.

I was faster than the best male athlete in the school and I'd hear comments like, 'The doctor got it wrong: you're really a boy'. Or, as I proudly spoke my mind in front of the class, people would say, 'I don't get it – why weren't you born a boy?' As if a girl wasn't allowed to speak with such conviction.

My Grade 6 teacher took my mother aside to let her know I wasn't exhibiting appropriate behaviours for a girl. That was mostly because I wore pants and sat comfortably, not with my legs crossed at the knee or ankle. My mother rebutted, 'There is no right way for a girl to sit; you will leave her alone'. I had two older brothers and I lived in their hand-me-downs. I'd beg them to come outside and cycle or wrestle in the dirt with me, but they liked playing with dolls and Lego more than rough-and-tumble.

Bras

Puberty was hard – growing into a body that was different from the one that gave me all this freedom. I was terrified of my body changing and I didn't understand why it had to happen; why couldn't I just get taller and that be the end of it?

I was afraid of bras, and didn't wear them for as long as possible, which made physical activity somewhat painful. As I kept growing, I was forced to wear them if I still wanted to play sport. Once I got my first bra, I never took it off. I made it as tight as possible and slept with it on so that I could ignore the fact that my body was changing.

As I got older, though, and boys and men made advances towards me, I was forced to see myself as a woman. My chest became an invitation for abuse and unwanted attention. I struggled with the physical changes themselves, but also with what these changes meant about my place in the social hierarchy.

Youth Bible

This was all compounded by being raised in a very conservative, religious family. I didn't know much about sexuality, and in our household, being gay was an affliction that affected some men and meant they had to live celibate lives. Women were not a part of the discussion. My house was grossly homophobic. I knew my parents hated this thing – whatever it was – but I wasn't really sure how it all related to me.

My teen years were hard and I was bullied daily at school – about my clothes, my hair, about how I walked and talked, about being too masculine, too academic, too athletic. I was suicidal for much of the time. But even with all this, I spent as much time at school as possible, so I didn't have to go home. Home was the place I feared most.

The Youth Bible I had in high school had a section on 'Homosexuality', which didn't tell you much except that it was wrong. It also had a section on 'Suicide' and said that was wrong, too. I had no way out and I felt trapped. And then, on my fifteenth birthday, my parents kicked me out.

I managed to finish high school, and the day after graduation I moved to Canberra, where I experienced various forms of homelessness. I was taken in by a number of families, who housed and fed me, and I eventually got into supported accommodation and tried to complete some study. For fun, I joined a circus skills class, which is where I met Fi. Fi was the first person I ever came out to, as bisexual, and we were married (non-legally) three years later.

Researching

I picked up a gender studies course and started obsessively researching transgender people. I was struggling with my chest and the discomfort of having periods, but whenever I expressed this to anyone, I was told, 'All women feel that way about their bodies.' But that discomfort is very different to feeling like you want to rip off your own skin. Lots of butch women, for example, experience some level of dysphoria. While I do also identify as a butch woman, I think perhaps my experience of dysphoria is turned up a few notches. Learning the difference between sometimes feeling uncomfortable with your body, and the constant and pervasive sense that your body and identity are misaligned, was key to understanding myself as someone who needed support and medical transition.

I had started seeing a psychologist – a straight, cisgender woman – who I thought would have no preconceptions and, eventually, I felt able to say, 'I think I'm trans'. I didn't want to discuss it; I just needed to say it, and we didn't talk about it again until many months later.

I began binding my chest at home and knew I had to tell my wife. I feared this would be the end of our relationship, but to my surprise, it wasn't. I originally came out as *neutrois*, a non-binary gender identity, and the only term available that expressed something of how I felt. Later, I was diagnosed as gender fluid, something I found very hard to accept. It seemed like a place of flux, a place without certainty, a place I didn't want to be.

But my experience of dysphoria and my trans-ness aren't like most. I've done a lot of research and have managed to find a few people like me – people who experience both female masculinity and male femininity, and the need to express and live as both, simultaneously and separately. The phrase, 'Too camp to be butch' expresses this well, or a concept such as Schrödinger's gender, being both cis and trans, both man and woman.

Testosterone

I started low dose testosterone hoping it might help my dysphoria, and that it might help me avoid top surgery. It didn't and I ended up having surgery the following year. For me, this means I can be a guy and also a woman with a flat chest, from society's view. I can be comfortable in my own skin and be who I need, when I need.

There's an additional factor to my dysphoria: since I was seventeen I suspected I may be autistic. I knew my sensory experiences were very much a part of my dysphoria – causing it maybe, or adding to it. I organised an assessment and was identified as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and being on the autistic spectrum.

This explained so much for me. My experience of social exclusion, bullying and abuse was a complex overlay of neurodiversity and gender non-compliance. My inability to conceptualise gender the way others see it; my inability to understand social nuance; and my inability to follow the unspoken rules of our gendered society – all made sense now. I have never felt part of a gendered society; I have always been the third gender and people have always seen me like this. And now this is how I see and understand myself.

Before my top surgery I had a small party – 'bye-bye-boobies' it was called. We shared this time with some friends, told a few stories about my 'girls' and really just said goodbye. I have a nickname my friends gave me before surgery, and they continue to call me by that name now. I don't feel the need to really talk about trans stuff, I am just me, I was me, and I am planning on still being me, and nothing really changes.

Part 2: The most validating and amazing experience

Fi and I always wanted to have kids, but *how* was the big question. Do we collect the data (sperm) from family or friends, or do we take the anonymous medicalised path? We approached my brother to start with and then a friend, but that didn't work out so we decided to look into assisted reproduction.

We did not share my personal story with the IVF clinic and they assumed we were a same-sex couple. We found a lovely doctor, an older straight man, who was super supportive of same-sex couples having kids.

We chose our donor from those available at the clinic. We imagined our future 10-year-old wanting to meet their donor and the two of them sitting in a café having a conversation. Each donor writes a letter to the unborn children and we chose the one who

sounded most like the person we would want sitting in that café having a conversation with our child. Even if our child never wishes to meet with her donor, we're glad we chose him to be part of our child's genetic makeup.

Our experience with assisted reproduction was excellent. We had two failed cycles of Intra Uterine Insemination (IUI), which is basically a medical turkey baster, and then moved to In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). On our third cycle we conceived what we liked to call our 'Gumnut baby'.

Surgery

I was worried about bonding with a child that I didn't carry and that was not biologically related to me. I wanted to induce lactation and breastfeed to create that bond. But I also wanted to be the best – the happiest and healthiest – parent I could be. It was a difficult decision. I could have delayed my surgery and induced lactation, but that would have meant a two-month period after surgery where I wouldn't have been able to hold my child, and that seemed much worse. So I decided to go ahead.

In the same week that we got our positive pregnancy result, I had top surgery. Our first response to pregnancy should have been excitement, but it was blended with this absolute terror that this was the point of no return. We were going to be parents and that was all there was to it. It made recovering from surgery goal oriented; there were things I needed to do for this impending child so I found it easy to get up every day and do what I needed to become the parent I wanted to be.

Top surgery for me was a necessity; my breasts were stopping me from living my life to the fullest. It wasn't that I didn't like my 'girls' or my body, and I tried really hard *not* to have surgery. But in the end I needed to be free and live in the body I sensed I should have. Post op I had more sensation in my chest than ever, even with scar tissue. I no longer thought about missing the breastfeeding and just focused on moving forward. I planned my chest tattoos and felt the best I could in my body.

Pregnancy

We started in the public hospital system and I struggled with the poorly worded forms. We were asked about the father's culture and ethnicity, but mine was irrelevant. Fi also had some medical issues that were not being addressed. So we moved to private midwives who ran queer birthing classes. This was the most validating and amazing experience. They supported us for the six months up to the birth and then for two months after Jessi was born.

Before Jessi was born, our midwives told us that skin-to-skin contact after birth was really important for bonding with your new baby. So I had to explain that I had had top surgery, which was pretty confronting, but

they responded by double-checking my pronouns and making sure they had been referring to me the way I needed. I knew I was safe and respected and had no issues not wearing a shirt in front of them when Jessi arrived.

When Fi went into labour, I knew I had a role to play and my wife had a job to do. But when we got to the hospital I felt useless; the midwives were better at massaging Fi, they were better carers, and I was just standing around. But then Fi was in the birthing pool with her head in my lap and that's all I needed.

Jessi arrived not breathing, and all of a sudden there was a team of fifteen doctors and nurses – all the lights came on and it was terrifying, but we knew we were in good hands. I stood next to Fi and watched my child get taken to the other side of the room on a miniature bed to receive emergency care while I stayed with Fi, who was bleeding.

After 10 minutes, Jessi was returned to us breathing and healthy. Then everyone left the room again, the lights went off, and it was quiet. Fi and Jessi were kept under observation in the hospital until the afternoon — I was sent home without them, which was the worst feeling; I hadn't planned on leaving the hospital alone. I cried all the way home and then relived my trauma with a few friends on Messenger. I couldn't sleep. I was now a parent, but had no family next to me. But they came home happy and healthy later that day.

Parents' groups

Being a new parent without the support of family is tough. Fi's parents are in another city, and we didn't know people with kids in Melbourne. We were allocated a council parents' group with thirteen heterosexual couples, which was really hard. There were constant references to 'mothers' group' and 'dads' nights' and I really didn't know where I fitted in – or perhaps I knew exactly where I fitted, which wasn't there. Also, I am the full-time parent, but I didn't have pregnancy stories to tell, either. But I chose to make myself fit and I told all the dads they were welcome at 'parents' group'.

Our midwives also ran a group, which was great, as we knew they expected all their clients to meet their standards of respect for queer and culturally diverse families. This was a safe space where we were referred to as the gender neutral 'parents', a relief in itself. There were couples from all walks of life – not a queer-only space, not a straight space – just a blended, normalised space focused on creating community for the first year or so of your child's life.

Educating

When Fi told her mother we were pregnant we got that dreadful

question: ‘Can I ask who the father is?’ So the very first time we shared this news, we experienced the overwhelming heteronormativity that is involved in creating and raising a family. But this has given us the opportunity to educate people, to teach them how to ask questions in a way that doesn’t demean our family.

And we have removed some taboos and exposed the heterosexual couples in our group to a different type of family. Some of the parents have even asked for our help in supporting their children to explore gender and sexuality. We are all learning together and engaging in more respectful ways of addressing our differences. People are becoming more aware of families like ours.

My wife uses they/them pronouns for me so Jessi can learn them and they will be normalised for her. Jessi will call me Ima (ee-mah), the Hebrew word for mother. I am writing and illustrating a book that describes how our family came to be: how I was born with another name; how my experience is different from that of my wife’s; and how Jessi – and, hopefully, future children – was conceived.

Our connection to community both online and through Rainbow Families Victoria is strong. We are not alone. It’s been a huge journey from a small town in regional NSW, isolated and alone, to the heart of Melbourne, surrounded by trans and gender diverse families.

Kalen

Kalen is the sole parent of a 16-year-old son, Connor. Kalen is a trans masculine non-binary guy who is read as male and assumed to be cis by the general public, though he doesn't think anyone has ever thought he is straight! How he describes himself depends on who he is talking to; mostly he describes himself as 'gay', 'super gay', or 'fabulously gay', unless the person he's talking to is queer. Then, he can be more specific, with the expectation of being better understood and less likely to experience a negative reaction. More accurately, he's attracted to people, not their genitals, but if he is talking to cishet people, he just goes with 'gay' and leaves it at that.

This is Kalen's story. It's a powerful, but challenging piece that includes reference to drug and alcohol abuse, intimate partner and sexual violence, homelessness, trauma, loneliness and suicidal ideation. And (spoiler alert!), survival.

My childhood sucked. My family were abusive and neglectful, and generally awful people – very religious and very into enforcing gender roles: gays will burn in hell … and all that crap. My earliest

memories are of anxiety. I was bullied all through school – kids knew something was not 'normal' about me. In high school I got called a dyke a lot, even though I was mostly attracted to males. I have autism, so have never really fitted in socially. I spent most of my childhood alone, lonely and wishing for death. My parents kicked me out when I was 17; it was terrifying, but also a relief to just be away from them.

Being homeless was a constant low-grade terror, but uplifting in the way people helped each other out, and it made me really grateful for the small stuff. More than 17 years later, I'm still grateful for a roof over my head, food in the cupboard, and a warm place to sleep. Homelessness services are so gendered, which was distressing, even though, at the time, I couldn't put my finger on why. Everything is divided into binary genders. Toilets were a nightmare.

I've done a fair bit of substance misuse/abuse. Binge drinking, smoking a heap of weed, taking any drug I had access to; anything to numb the pain, really. I was suicidal from the onset of puberty, and just plain miserable before that. I never got addicted to anything though, probably through luck more than anything else, so I just took a bunch of drugs and didn't really care if I woke up. My behaviour was really reckless and self-destructive for a while there.

It feels like I've been misdiagnosed with one of everything from the DSM! (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.) My son's birth was traumatic and, combined with the violence I experienced in my relationship at the time, I was left with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The PTSD was misdiagnosed, and once a psych writes 'schizophrenic' on your file, no-one believes you when you tell them that the diagnosis is wrong. The autism was overlooked because I'm not a cis male (boys are estimated to be four times more likely than girls to have autism, the diagnostic criteria are skewed towards the typically male presentations of autism, and people assigned female at birth are often only diagnosed in adulthood). So I was medicated for bipolar, schizophrenia and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder etc., and I reacted really badly to all of it.

Nowadays I don't even drink; after a decade of being sedated by psych meds, the idea of mind-altering substances has *really* lost its appeal. This makes me great as the automatic designated driver! I still have anxiety though, and probably always will.

Kiddo was conceived with my first husband through coerced sex under threat of violence and homelessness. I didn't want kids, and I didn't want to be pregnant. I didn't know I was pregnant until it was too late to do anything but carry to term, which seemed like a cruel cosmic joke, but the way things

were going, I'd probably have ended up dead without the impetus to change things in my life. In hindsight, agreeing to marry that guy was really dumb, but when you're 21, pregnant and vulnerable, the choices available to you seem limited.

Interestingly, while obviously pregnant, I seemed to have less push back from the world about not performing femininity correctly. Being pregnant seemed to give me a free pass on being 'too butch'. As soon as I had given birth, all that push back returned with a vengeance. I hadn't figured out back then that 'trans' was a label I could apply to myself, so at the same time as feeling gross for having femininity shoved at me even harder while pregnant, it was also a relief not to have to try as hard to perform it.

My husband got increasingly violent and after an incident that escalated, I figured I either had to leave then or end up in the Emergency Room. I took my then 14-month-old child and the few things I needed for him and moved out. After I left, I dated a few people and eventually remarried to a guy who was less physically abusive, but he was emotionally abusive.

I finally came out after playing a series of gender-ambiguous Dungeons & Dragons characters, and my second husband yelling at me to stop being stupid. The rest of the group thought it was hilarious, but my ex was really angry. He was very invested in me not being blokey and, as it turns out, is super homophobic. So, he yelled at me about that, and I yelled back that maybe I was more comfortable like that than trying to be a chick, and it all kind of exploded from there. A few weeks later we were finished.

It's really hard when you grow up with abuse to even know what love looks like. I've since gotten therapy through Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, which was really helpful. It was pretty hard to find somewhere that would do domestic violence/sexual assault therapy for a trans guy, though. I kept getting told to call Mensline, no matter how much I explained I was the victim and the perpetrator was male. Domestic violence services really need to do better.

When my son, Connor, was three, just as the diagnostic process was getting underway for him, I met his stepdad and we started dating. He's been a great dad for kiddo, even after we broke up several years later, and has been a good friend to me too. Connor's stepmum married his stepdad several years ago and has just parented Connor like one of her own ever since. We all get on well, which is nice. Connor is now 16 years old. He has autism, an intellectual disability and epilepsy, plus some other genetic diagnoses. He has anxiety and self-injures. He lives with me and sees his step-parents most weekends; we live about 15 minutes away from each other.

Despite his multiple disabilities, Connor's a funny kid and I love him to bits. He's sassy and has an off-beat sense of humour. He flirted with three women in the space of a one-level escalator ride recently (and got away with it!). He can light up a room with his grin. His sheer joy at being alive is contagious. He's also a lot of hard work: sass turns into argumentative rage and his anger can cast a cloud over the whole house. On balance, though, he's hilarious.

Because of Connor's intellectual disability, I've not been able to explain being trans to him in much detail. I've told him that pretending to be a girl made me sad, so I was going to take some medicine to make me look like a boy, because I'm a boy on the inside. Which is a gross oversimplification and rather inaccurate, but you gotta meet kids where they're at. I didn't tell him until I started T (testosterone), and I tried to relate it to music artists he likes (Human League, Boy George) and tried to make it fun by saying we'd have a race to see who grew a beard first. He was 13 and just starting puberty, so it was kind of cool that I started Puberty 2.0 at that point in his life.

When I first told him I was trans, he listened and then asked if we could have junk food for dinner. He's continued to just not care, though he still checks sometimes that I'm not a girl and talks about when I used to have long hair. He's got a pre-transition photo of me in his room with my birth name on it, and while I hate it on a personal level, I also realise it's just his way of processing change.

It's funny who has and hasn't been supportive. I lost a lot of friends when Connor was diagnosed with autism, so I wasn't hugely surprised to lose friends when I came out. And it's not always the people you think will bail on you that do. I thought that Connor's stepdad might be weird about it, but he's been really supportive.

Transitioning has been hard because the world is often transphobic, but it's made me a stronger, happier person. Doing this for myself has made me a better parent. I was running myself into the ground, focusing on all of Connor's needs and leaving nothing for myself, and I was completely burnt out. Some people say that transitioning is a selfish act; I don't believe that it is. But if it is, it's the first selfish thing I've done since I found out I was pregnant, and I'm okay with that.

Transitioning has improved my mental health; I had no idea how much I was impacted by dysphoria until it started to lift! I go to an art class every week and I love it. I'm at uni now and I'm doing really well. I'm happier in myself and that comes through in the way I parent.

I'm physically a lot stronger, too, which is handy since Connor is taller than I am and has no idea of his own strength. One unexpected bonus of

transitioning is that I can go into the guys' toilets without anyone freaking out, which is helpful when we're somewhere without a disabled loo.

Connor likes to dress up and has flexible ideas about gender presentation; sometimes he goes to school in a rainbow tutu, with cat ears and tail. Other days, he wears a long-sleeved button-up pale blue shirt with a fluoro vest and peaked cap and is the 'Flight Centre Captain', and I just let him. He's a funny kid and generous with his affection. If someone wants to give him a hard time about finding joy in life in ways that don't impact others, they can go through me to do it.

One of his favourite things is to go to the depot where his school buses 'live' so he can look at them through the fence. We've had security come out and ask what we're doing, but as soon as they see Connor they apologise and talk for a bit, because they know him quite well now. We also go to a washing machine repair place, so he can look at the older style top loaders. Yeah, we have pretty non-standard ideas about fun at our house!

I've been through quite a lot of adverse life experiences, and statistically it's amazing that I'm still alive. I try to look at that in a 'glass half full' kind of way. The autism spectrum diagnosis is, in a way, a little like working out that I'm trans – I'm not broken because I'm not cis or neurotypical, I'm just different and part of a community of people who are different in similar ways. And I've gotten really good at advocacy, which is always useful as a trans person, the parent of a child with disabilities, and a future social worker!

Rochelle

Rochelle is a 48-year-old trans woman who married young. The marriage was unhealthy in a number of ways and ended after seven years. Rochelle has two adult daughters from that marriage, Louise, 24 and Jo, 22. Later, she married Heather, a wonderful person who was a positive influence on her two older girls. They had a child together, Hope, who is now 12. Rochelle's marriage to Heather ended after she came out and began to transition.

PART 1: Nothing short of an abomination

Punishment

I was born into a conservative family of Sydney Anglicans where I was taught being queer was nothing short of an abomination. I knew I was trans from about three years of age and I used to dress up in my mother's clothes and play with her makeup. I learned very quickly that this was unacceptable.

I was smacked severely and never allowed to engage in any activities that could be seen as remotely feminine. I wasn't allowed to cook or clean (beyond tidying my bedroom), or learn to sew or knit. I was expected to be a stereotypical

1950s boy, and grow up into a good Christian man. Any deviation from this was not tolerated. Harsh punishments from my parents taught me that I was probably evil.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of all this was that I never really understood my place in the world in terms of gender. I repressed my true feelings and played the game of being male, but I never really understood boys. I couldn't relate to what they talked about and I couldn't connect with them. I found the way they talked about and treated women reprehensible. I always just seemed more able to connect with girls and more at home spending time with them; that just kind of worked.

Telling

I was pretty late to the party; I was in my early 40s before I really started investigating what all this meant. I found myself connecting with trans and gender diverse folk online, and in real life, and started to actually listen to their stories. These stories resonated strongly with me and I felt that, in the midst of their stories, was my story.

As I began to think about all this, I realised that it had all been forbidden territory for me, but I couldn't really see any reason *why* it was forbidden. It was time to say, 'Stuff it! Let's look at this'. Suddenly, I was awake and free of the chains that had kept me from being who I was. But I was married, and this is the tricky part of the story, I guess. Here I was with this bright, wonderful new understanding of who I was, which was poles apart from how my partner understood me. I suppose I had been good at the whole 'playing the male' thing.

For months I rehearsed scenarios of coming out to her, of trying to explain everything that had been going on for me, and what that all meant. But it was just too hard to actually get the words out. Then one day we had a coffee together and I found myself blurting out, 'I think I am trans'. As you can imagine, Heather was shocked and didn't really know how to respond. She had always supported me to be the best person I could be, but she certainly wasn't ready for this.

I tend to be a bit of a bull at a gate, as the saying goes. After all the years of repression, I just wanted to say, 'Well this is me now. I need to go on a journey, and the sooner I start, the better!' That was all well and good on my side, but for Heather, it was too much, too fast, and she wanted me to go slowly – as slowly as possible.

She was concerned about how it would affect the kids, and how they would cope, and I totally understood that. I naturally wanted to ensure they were okay too, but I needed the freedom to explore, and to work out my gender identity and expression. After all these years, I needed to do

that in a timeframe that suited me, not one that suited everyone else.

We'd been having some issues in our relationship – surprise, surprise – and were seeing a therapist to help us work stuff out, but the focus quickly turned to what my gender identity meant for us. What does this make me in Heather's eyes? What does it mean for my sexuality? What does it mean for her? This was really difficult and we spent a lot of time talking through those issues.

Heather

For a number of months I felt like I was in limbo. Heather asked me not to talk to the girls about it yet, and I was confined to experimenting with my expression in my own room. This meant taking clothes and makeup on and off. This was exciting and fun, but constraining too. I had this great feeling of finally knowing who I was, and I didn't want it to be a secret any longer. If I was good with it, it was time for the world to be good with it, too.

Heather is one of the most accepting people I know. I suppose, when I came out, I had this feeling that we had a tough road ahead, but we would make our way through it. I was wrong. Heather accepts me, though she would rather I was not trans, and still loves me as a good friend, but she is 100 per cent straight, and having a relationship with another woman is a step too far for her. Plus, there was the issue of attraction. I wanted to change so many of the things about myself that she found attractive. In the end, Heather made the call that the relationship was over.

This was super hard for me as I had thought deep down we could get through it. I was on the cusp of being the new me, the best me, and suddenly the person I loved most did not want to be with me any longer. Now, two years down the road, we consider ourselves friends, though it has been hard and we've had a fair number of difficult and heated discussions.

We still do all the family activities together: celebrate significant events, go to football games and the like. It has been hard but here we are now in a much better place than where we were before. It's worth sticking with it.

PART 2: All I can do is love them

Heather

In many ways, the break-up was more difficult for the kids than my transitioning. The fact that I was no longer in the house was hugely significant. What we realised, though, is that Heather and I needed to be on the same page. We were the adults and, regardless of

anything else, we were parents to our kids. They hadn't asked for any of this and we had a responsibility to maintain a positive, civil partnership and make co-parenting work as well as it could. This is still very hard and, at times, we have to talk through how to make it work. Sometimes we make decisions that I don't necessarily like, but I know it leads to the most stable situation for the kids.

Kids

I told the two older girls one night when we were doing the dishes. I think it was less confronting this way. So there we were, standing in the kitchen together, doing the dishes, and I kind of said, 'Hey girls, you might have noticed some things recently, like makeup and clothes and some of the ways I refer to myself. I imagine you must be wondering what is going on. It turns out I am transgender and that I am beginning to live as my true gender.'

I really needed them to know the truth and to understand what was going on. I needed them to know they could say whatever they wanted, and that I was there to talk and listen. But I knew they would probably need to talk to someone else as well. I made sure there were therapists and support people available for them.

I don't think the news was a huge surprise for them. I had been somewhat private, but in the context of a family sharing a home, not much is really private. The girls didn't have much of a response initially; they didn't say a lot other than they loved me. They've never really asked questions and sometimes I am sad about that. I just really don't know what they think about my transition. I hope they have talked to others and got answers that way. I want them to be informed and, of course, supportive, but I can't control any of that. All I can do is love them, be the best me I can, and ensure they know I will always be there for them.

I told Hope, the youngest, when we were out together one day. Our conversation was a little different to the conversation I had with the older girls. I kicked it off by asking if she had noticed anything different about me. She said she noticed I was wearing different clothes and she thought that was a bit strange. I told her I'd changed my appearance because really I was a woman and not a man. Her response was hilarious, but also probably pretty typical for a kid her age: she talked about body parts, and said that because of those, I couldn't be a woman. There were some follow-up conversations, and after a few of those, she accepted that I was transitioning. She found it much more difficult than the older girls, I guess due to her age, but she was quick to accept it; to her it was all about love. She loved me and knew I loved her, and that was all that really mattered.

Wild ride

If you come out and transition when you have kids, and are able to maintain those relationships, then just get ready for a wild ride. It's certainly an interesting situation when you go to celebrate family events, like Father's Day, for example. There you are, with all the other families, receiving 'Father's Day' gifts, and there are people who give unkind looks and make snide comments within earshot. There's not a lot you can do about this, other than just suffer through it – smile, laugh and make the best of it. You do it because the kids want to continue to celebrate these days. It can be a real emotional roller-coaster; you are sharing a special moment with your kids, and at the same time, you're being thrown back into a past you've left behind.

All three of my girls continue to refer to me as 'dad'. It is not something I like, but it is what they want, so I deal with it. I have had to gently explain to them that when we are out it might be best just to call me 'Roe'. Sometimes they forget, and we've had some interesting responses from people, especially around public toilets.

I don't have much involvement with Hope's school, but we have open communication. I haven't had a full and frank discussion with them, but haven't felt the need to; so far there haven't been any real issues. I have found that other kids generally don't even think twice about me – they take it all in their stride and treat me the same as their other friends' parents.

Schoolyard

Some of the parents are great, some not so much. I don't have to deal with them often and I just try to hold my head high and be the real me. Some of them have made a point of reaching out and saying, 'Good on you for being you', or made other, similarly supportive comments that mean the world to me.

I do get some funny looks in the playground when I rock up for school events. They range from interest and curiosity to disdain and judgement. I don't know that there is much I can do about that other than hold my head high and walk boldly through the situation. It's not that I am some super-courageous person, it's just that I consciously choose to walk through that playground and be who I am.

I guess I am the kind of person who is always open and happy to have a discussion – well, almost always. The difficulty is that a lot of people just don't know how to ask. It would be great if people just said, 'Hey Roe, I wonder if we could we catch up for a coffee some time?' It's okay to ask questions, but it needs to be done in a respectful way.

The kids don't say much and we don't really talk about it; it just is what it is. The eldest and youngest I think are going pretty well. The middle one, I am not so sure. She

has a pretty strong, conservative faith, and I think on some level, she struggles to reconcile the parent I am with the parent her faith says I am supposed to be. It is hard to know; she doesn't give much away.

Relationships

I think my relationship with all three kids is stronger. It is certainly different, but it is stronger. We've had to talk through a lot of things we never thought we would.

If I am honest, I think Heather probably wishes I had never come out and things were as they were before. But at the same time, I think she also sees how much happier and more fulfilled I am now.

We are still friends, but our activities tend to revolve around the kids. At times we will just call or text. Late last year, her dad died and she really leant on me. It was the most natural thing in the world to support her through that, not because we used to be married but because I care about her, because there is genuine care and love.

Advice

The best advice I can give is to get ready for a wild ride – second puberty is always eventful!

A transitioning parent will be going through something of a roller-coaster as their body adapts to physical changes: hormonal levels, body shape, skin and fat distribution.

Try to hang on and remember you are doing this to be the very best you can be. You are on the journey of being your authentic self, being an even better parent than you already are and feeling the most complete in yourself.

Try to develop a thick skin because no matter how accepting or diverse an area you live in, there will be people who have issues with you. You will need to deflect or ignore looks and comments; hold your head high and walk your truth with pride!

Transitioning is hard; it takes tenacity and patience but it is just so worth it. A person who is supported through the journey of discovery, of working out their actual gender identity, will most certainly be a stronger, more whole person than they were before.

To allies: try not to make assumptions. Be open, listen and don't be scared to ask questions, respectfully. But don't be offended if someone doesn't want to talk; it takes energy to answer questions. There's a degree of risk in personal exposure and a dropping of armour, and some days that's just too much.

It's great to hear lived experience and yes that's really important, but beyond that you can educate yourself: there are great resources out there. Most importantly, when you're talking with or about a trans or gender diverse person, remember to centre the conversation around their humanity.

Al

Al has known he was different for as long as he can remember. He moved out of his family home after coming out as gay when he was 20. He realised who he really was after seeing the Hilary Swank movie, *Boys don't cry*. His journey of trying to understand his body dysphoria, and what it meant for his gender and sexuality, was long and difficult. In his mid-30s, he set about finding some happiness. Now, at 38, he is in the process of affirming his male gender. He is father to a baby daughter, Iris, to whom he gave birth.

Pregnancy

In my mid-30s, I changed my name to 'Al' and started using male pronouns in the workplace and on social media. I did that for about 12 months and the plan was to start Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) after that year. But that's not quite how it worked out! One evening, I went online and hooked up with a lovely bisexual man. We had a nice time – we used protection – and then we went our separate ways.

About five months later, I noticed I was feeling very tired and getting heartburn. I'd always felt disconnected from my periods so I didn't even notice that I hadn't had one for a while, or I put it down to stress and changing some medication. After all, I was 37, I

suffered from Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome – which can reduce fertility – and I was preparing to begin to transition. And I'd had sex using a condom. There was no way I could be pregnant!

But deep down, I must have known. I went to see the GP to get my iron levels tested and my bloods checked, and at the end of the appointment I just blurted out, 'Better check for pregnancy, doc'. A couple of days later, the doctor called to tell me I was 23 weeks pregnant.

I had an ultrasound to confirm the due date, and by then I could see my baby's little hands and feet. I realised I had a living human being inside me. It was time to set aside my gender dysphoria and transition plans and focus on having this baby. I have the same triggers as many other transgender men, but I knew I had to care for this child. It kind of blew my mind, but I'm proud of myself for making that decision.

Hospital

Not long after I found out I was pregnant, someone told me that the baby can really feel it when you are stressed, especially towards the end of the pregnancy. I was already five months in, so I tried my hardest to reduce my anxiety and mange my stress. It was difficult; I'd never imagined that I'd end up pregnant. Pregnancy – having a baby and being a mother – was the epitome of femininity. I never thought I'd be able to manage being a trans man and giving birth, but I surprised myself. I still experienced all the gender and body dysphoria, but I blocked a lot of that out, and I also talked it through in therapy. I recall regularly telling myself to relax and that I would get through it okay.

For my hospital appointments, I decided it was actually less stressful (certainly for me, and hopefully for the baby, too) to present as very female, and not to use my new male name or insist on male pronouns. I understand that it's important to be visible and to make people aware that we exist, but at the time I didn't give two hoots how these people – who I was never going to see again – referred to me. The most important thing was having my baby, taking her home, and being safe.

The only time I really got triggered was before the birthing class and I left the hospital without going. We were meant to come with the father of our baby and I realised I would be the exact opposite to all the men in the room and that was just too confronting. None of this stuff is really mandatory, so if you think it's going to trigger you, just don't do it; that was my attitude throughout.

Birth

I didn't have to have any intrusive examinations; there were ultrasounds, blood and urine tests, and a stethoscope on my belly. And I obtained a letter from my clinical

psychologist requesting a caesarean section (C-section) as I felt this would make me feel less dysphoric about giving birth. My doctor was happy to agree.

I went into hospital for the C-section and everything went smoothly. The moment I felt my baby being pulled out of my body was surreal. The doctor lifted her up (and she did a little wee on me!) and I knew then that nothing else in the world would matter to me as much as this beautiful little baby. I would do anything for her. Any baggage I had now came second to this little person. It was at that moment I really understood the definition of unconditional love. It was, truly, the happiest day of my life.

Breastfeeding

I didn't want to feel pressured about breastfeeding. I had heard from friends that midwives and people generally could be a bit pushy about breastfeeding. I decided I would try, but also bottle feed so that other people could feed Iris if the need arose. Breastfeeding can be very frustrating. The day I gave birth I remember Iris had trouble latching onto my nipple and the nurses had to come in and show me a different technique. I recall just whipping out my boobs and getting them to show me, because it was important and that's what I needed to do for her. I didn't care that I had a bit of chest hair. I didn't care that I had breasts. At the time they were my feeding bags of milk! It was all about feeding Iris and I focused on that.

I ended up breastfeeding more than I thought; it was a real bonding experience. I loved being able to provide for her and I just set aside any dysphoria I felt. I understand that not everyone can do that, and the most important thing is to do what makes you comfortable. If you are comfortable and relaxed, your baby will feed off your energy and be relaxed, too.

When I first started to lactate it was a bit odd. To cope with the dysphoria I would make a joke out of it and chase my girlfriend at the time around the house, squeezing my breast milk at her like a water gun. I thought it was hilarious (she didn't), but finding the humour in it helped me manage.

In the end, I just thought it was a profound thing that I was a man who was getting to experience birth and all the effects: the big stomach, the lactating breasts. It was all necessary to bring my daughter into the world, so I took it on the chin and kept the bigger picture in mind.

I recall happy crying a couple of times. I was a little bit mystified, but also grateful that I had the opportunity to transition and be a parent at the same time. It was like the universe gave me these miracles, these joys. I had lost my brother to illness and I felt that with great loss, had come life, and with great sadness, had come happiness.

Iris was a gift – to my family as well as to me – at a time when we all felt hopeless. She was the source of new-found light in all the darkness. She gave us hope for the future.

Transition

A year and a half after Iris was born I decided it was time to start my transition. I had established a good daily routine and I was very comfortable parenting her by myself. I felt confident that I could give myself some TLC and take the next step.

I booked an appointment at the Equinox Gender Diverse Health Centre to have my initial consultation with the doctor. I didn't tell anyone about the appointment; I had Iris by my side and she was all I needed. I got my hormone levels checked and set a date for my first testosterone injection.

I also had an appointment with my clinical psychologist who formally diagnosed my gender dysphoria.[1] On 28 November 2017, I had my first testosterone injection. I had begun my transition and it was very exciting. The long, long wait was finally over and the next chapter of my life began.

Now, after almost a year on testosterone, my voice is deep and I have lots of hair everywhere. It's very exciting and feels so natural. I love my facial hair/stubble, even if it's getting a little grey. Hopefully I can pull off the wise old man look! My body shape is changing and I've started doing weights to lose the belly and get some mass on my shoulders. I'm shaping a body that I'm comfortable with and the testosterone is definitely helping.

I'm more and more dysphoric about my breasts. I believe this is because I'm starting to see results from my HRT and I'm getting super excited and a little anxious. My chest surgery is not for another six months, but I just want the transition to move more quickly so that I can pass in public and get a job as male. It takes a lot of patience and some thick skin to hang in there and let things take their course.

Having a toddler to keep me on my toes definitely makes time fly, though, and I am far less self-conscious than I was; it's all about Iris now. I'm busy with her 24/7 and exhausted from doing all the parenting stuff!

Daddy

From the beginning, Iris has referred to me as 'Daddy'. I'll always be the person who gave birth to her and I'll always be her mother on the

1 A formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria is not required in order to start gender affirming hormones; this process can be managed by a GP. – ACON

birth certificate. I'm okay with that. When it comes to Iris there are more important things for me than names and titles. If she wants to call me 'Mummy' when she is older, it won't bother me at all. I understand it will be hard for her to say she hasn't got a mum, and that she doesn't know who her biological father is – it's confusing for a child. Whatever hurdles she faces, I will bend over backwards to make it as easy for her as possible.

Currently, I don't pass as male when presenting face to face, though I do on the phone. Right now, I am conscious of possible safety issues in public, because I look relatively female with my breasts still on board. I do find myself consciously scoping out the environment before referring to myself in the third person and quietly saying things to Iris like, 'C'mon, Daddy has to take you home for sleepy time now'. Iris could call me 'Bucket' for all I care – I'm still the person who gave birth to her and she's still the most important thing in the world to me, and nothing will ever change that. I just want us to be safe, but have the courage to be our authentic selves too. All in good time, I say. There is a time and a place to challenge society's prejudices, and it is definitely not when you have a small child in tow and are in public, in a potentially dangerous situation.

Iris

Iris is such a beautiful and charming little person. Her joyful energy is infectious. She loves to joke around and have a laugh – definitely inherited that from me! We have so much fun together. We love being outside and active. She loves the park and going on the swing, and loves to go really high; she's such a daredevil. At home, she loves our dog and two cats. She loves all animals actually; she's got such a kind soul. We often go to the local children's farm so we can spend time looking at the animals, it's an awesome day out for us both. One thing she definitely didn't inherit from me is a sense of rhythm; she loves to dance, too. And she's a real bookworm – she adores reading. She will grab one of her books and run to me with the biggest smile on her face. She loves how I do all the voices of the different characters and she is slowly starting to read out different bits on the page, too. She is so clever for her age – it's unbelievable how much of a sponge she is. She loves visiting her grandparents and her aunt, and we visit them most nights – luckily we are only five minutes away. They love her to bits and she loves them, too.

Support

My family's response to my transition has been great. It started with my mum, and then my sister, and now everyone else is slowly getting on board. Names are a difficult habit to break and I understand that. When an uncle refers to me as Iris's 'Mummy' and then corrects to 'Daddy', I think that's fantastic, and

it's all I ask for. It shows love and respect, especially when I still don't pass as male. I think once I do, it will be easier for everyone around me.

Rainbow Families playgroups are the best, and I feel safest meeting other parents and carers with their kids in that setting. At other playgroups, I tend not to say much. I'm waiting for the day Iris says, 'That's not Mummy, that's Daddy!' and seeing the confusion on people's faces. But by the time she is old enough to say that, I will have had surgery and been on HRT for a while, so it may not be the drama I imagine.

Being a trans man and having a baby is challenging, and I'd imagine more so for some than others, but there's a lot of support out there: therapists who have experience working with our community, and organisations like Rainbow Families, Transgender Victoria and Equinox. You'll be okay; if I can get through it, so can you. Transgender families and parents are valid, and we are as dedicated as everyone else to doing whatever is required to create and nurture our families. I used to regret that I hadn't experienced life as a young man, but now I love that I've been through those experiences as a woman. It's made me the unique man I am today.

Everything about Iris makes me smile. When she goes to bed at night, even though she's just in the next room, I reminisce about the day we had and I just smile to myself at how much fun it was. I'm so happy this little person is in my life. She brings me so much joy and a new sense of purpose and hope. Then, when she wakes in the morning and calls out 'Daddy, Daddy', I jump out of bed and shuffle down the hallway to be greeted with the most adorable grin as she holds out her arms to me. It gives me a feeling of gratitude I couldn't imagine living without.

I did think at some stage in the future I would help other LGBTIQ people, whether that was queer youth or transgender folk, but I never thought I'd be sharing my story of giving birth and becoming a transgender parent. I hope my story empowers other trans men, parents and potential parents, and like-minded people in the LGBTIQ community. I want trans people to be less fearful about becoming parents, because it really is a miracle.

Dr Rachel Burdon

Rachel is a General Practitioner who currently works at the Taylor Square Private Clinic in Sydney. Rachel has worked in sexual health and HIV for over 15 years and has considerable experience working with trans clients. Rachel supports clients in the medical management of their transition journey. She takes a holistic approach, which includes addressing the psychosocial, emotional and practical issues of transition and ensuring clients are supported as much as possible over the course of their journey.

How easy is it to find a GP who can work well with trans people?

Many of my patients report that it is difficult to find a GP who meets their needs in starting and maintaining transition.[2] Some trans people don't want to talk to their local GP about transitioning. Even in major cities, there are only a couple of clinics that offer good quality services for trans people. Most of the services

2 All GPs should be able to support their trans or gender diverse patients to initiate and manage gender affirming hormones. – ACON

are located in the inner city and there are very few (possibly none) in rural areas.

We get many referrals from counsellors at the community-based non-government organisation, Gender Centre. We also get a lot of referrals via word of mouth (friends, blogs, social media), with the occasional referral from a psychologist, psychiatrist or GP.

By the time most trans people reach us, they can feel quite traumatised and overwhelmed – they have been wanting to transition for a long time. They are usually enormously relieved to find a GP who treats them respectfully and knows how to manage their transition. Some trans people prefer to see an endocrinologist to manage their transition, but in general, I think most trans people benefit from seeing a GP who can provide holistic medical and mental health care.

There has been a massive increase in trans people accessing services over the past 10 years and there can be long waiting times to see a GP or endocrinologist who specialises in trans health. We need to train GPs to ensure they are confident and skilled in providing good-quality, non-judgemental care to trans people.

What can a person expect when they first come to see you?

There are no standardised guidelines or protocols in Australia to manage adult trans people as they affirm their gender, although such guidelines do exist for children and adolescents. We use the international guidelines developed by organisations such as the Centre of Excellence for Transgender Health, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) and the Australian and New Zealand Professional Association for Transgender Health (ANZPATH).

At our clinic, we offer a long first appointment (40 minutes), so there is plenty of time for a trans person and GP to get to know each other. We take a full medical history, and we check to see if there are any particular medical issues that might interfere with gender affirming hormones (if these are sought by the patient). We usually run some blood tests to check the patient's baseline hormone levels and to monitor blood count, liver function, cholesterol and diabetes.

We talk about past and current mental health. Lots of trans people have experienced difficulties in their lives and we want to make sure we can support them with any ongoing issues.[3]

3 Some trans people may benefit from mental health support prior to initiating hormones; many will access mental health (if needed) and peer support during the course of medically affirming their gender. – ACON

We also discuss psychosocial issues so we can get a broader picture of the person and their life. Where do they live? Who do they live with? Are they currently working or studying? Are they out of work or looking for work? We try to get a sense of whether they are they socially isolated or well-connected. We talk about relationships, sexual partners and family, and offer a Sexually Transmissible Infections (STI) screen. We also discuss fertility preservation (see below). All of this helps us to know what support we need to put in place as they begin medical transition.

We also spend some time discussing gender dysphoria[4] and where they are on their journey. This not only includes where they are themselves, but also how involved their partners and kids, extended family, friends and colleagues are in their transition journey.

I explain the transition process in some detail so people know what to expect: how gender affirming hormones work; the possible side effects, health risks and ongoing monitoring we can do; timeframes; and different ways of taking hormones. We offer the patient a referral to an endocrinologist if they request this, or if there is a medical issue we feel may be negatively affected by HRT, but this is very rare. Most transition-related medical care can be done by trained GPs.

We try to make sure we record people's correct name and pronoun, although we still make mistakes from time to time! It's frustrating that we can't change people's names or gender markers in the files until they have changed them with Medicare. We can provide people with some information and guidance on name changes for legal documents, including a birth certificate, passport, driver's license and Medicare card.

Finally, I talk about the costs and logistics of transitioning and we give people a consent form, which we ask them to take away and bring back on a subsequent visit. We wrap up with lots of questions and a timeline of follow-up appointments.

Can you talk about fertility preservation?

Fertility preservation is a challenging area, particularly for younger people, who may not be at a point in their lives where the idea of creating a family is of much relevance. I usually discuss fertility preservation in terms of 'preserving options for the future'. It is expensive – particularly for younger trans people who may not be working. I often suggest that extended family members might be willing chip in and help out financially.

4 Many trans people do not experience gender dysphoria at all and seek to medically affirm their gender for other reasons. Transition is a personal and unique journey. – ACON

For trans women, the procedure for collecting and storing semen is relatively straightforward and affordable. For trans men, the process is complex, medically invasive and very expensive. It involves taking high doses of hormones to stimulate ovulation – which can be very stressful generally, and particularly for people who may be experiencing dysphoria – and then a surgical procedure to extract the eggs. In my experience, very few people do this, and only when financially supported by family.

However, it is important to note that being on HRT doesn't rule out the possibility of a person who has transitioned parenting in the future. There are many options available, depending on their particular circumstances and personal relationships. Many of my patients discuss their desire to adopt, foster or co-parent without necessarily having to be the biological provider of reproductive material.

Can you talk about some of the challenges of HRT?

HRT is generally well tolerated with few side effects. We do encourage people to stop smoking and keep in good physical health. Perhaps the biggest challenge for trans people starting HRT is that physical changes to the body can be slow at first, which is frustrating.

In my experience, trans people are generally well educated on all aspects of HRT and transition. I encourage my patients to be involved in the process, to understand how to read their results, and to make their own decisions about treatment. It's important that the relationship between doctor and trans person is a partnership.

In many ways, the medical side of things is quite straightforward – it is the psychosocial issues that are the most challenging: coming out to children, family and friends; negotiating the workplace; dealing with stigma and discrimination; being out in public; and developing confidence in the expression of their new gender. Many of our trans patients have experienced some level of trauma over the years and may benefit from mental health support.[5] The first twelve months especially can be a bit of a roller-coaster.

5 'Many statistics show alarmingly high rates of depression, anxiety and suicidality within the transgender community. Mental illness is often not associated directly with being transgender, but with the stigma and discrimination that transgender people face in daily life. These same statistics also show better mental health outcomes for those who are able to transition, as well as those who engage with transgender communities.' – A Gender Agenda, 'What is Transgender?' <https://genderrights.org.au/information-hub/transgender/>

And the positives?

Mostly, the outcomes of starting gender affirming hormones are extremely positive. Most of our trans patients report that their mental health improves markedly once they start HRT, and many feel quite euphoric. In general, they report 'feeling a whole lot better in their bodies' pretty soon after starting, even though they may not experience physical changes for around six months.[6]

Can you tell us about surgery?

Options for affirming surgeries are very limited in Australia.

The majority of trans women go to Thailand for surgery where there are a number of clinics/hospitals that specialise in this field and provide excellent care. It's still very expensive. I always recommend that my patients travel with a family member or good friend; the surgery is daunting and overwhelming and the post-operative period can be tough.

Trans women may seek breast augmentation, facial surgery and genital reconstruction surgeries. There are some surgeons who provide some of these services in Australia, but they are very expensive as there is currently no Medicare rebate. Most of my patients are very happy with their surgical outcomes and there is a significant positive impact on quality of life. Having said that, it's important to remember that surgery is not for everyone and that being trans isn't dependent on accessing medical or surgical intervention.

The options for trans men to access bilateral mastectomy (top surgery) in Australia are reasonable. A very small number of surgeons include it on their public hospital operating lists, which makes it much more accessible, especially for those with limited incomes. However, currently there are very long waiting lists.

Many of my trans male patients seek a hysterectomy – removal of uterus and ovaries – for a number of reasons, including chronic pelvic pain, bleeding or, in some cases, because we are worried about cancer. This surgery can be provided in the public hospital system, but can be difficult to arrange, depending on where you live.

Genital reconstruction surgeries are very limited in Australia and trans men seeking this option often

6 Trans people report that accessing the care they need and being affirmed by their families, friends and communities is a profoundly positive experience. – ACON; ' … [it is clear] that transgender people are safer and happier when allowed to express themselves in a manner consistent with their gender identity.' – A Gender Agenda, 'What is Transgender?' <https://genderrights.org.au/information-hub/transgender/>

travel overseas to some European countries or America. The procedures can be complicated and involve multiple operations and skin grafting.

What are the issues that arise for trans patients who are parents?

We see a number of trans people who are parents or co-parents. In my experience, children of trans parents adapt very well to their parent transitioning. It's often harder for the partner than it is for the kids. We don't have any data on this, but from my experience about half of couples stay together and about half don't. Any breakup is difficult and traumatic, but I find that most couples think about this deeply, and separations are often amicable.

I think the impact of any big change in a family – whether it is related to transition or any other issue – depends on a number of factors, including: the developmental age of the children; the strength and resilience of the family; their support networks; the mental health of the parents; any drug and alcohol issues; and the quality of communication.

Thankfully, having two mums or two dads is not really that unusual for most kids these days. Most of the families with kids I see do really well. The families I worry about are those that are socially isolated, with few support networks, and where there are underlying serious mental health issues.

I see families with both older and younger children who have coped very well with their parent transitioning, regardless of whether the trans person's relationship with their partner survives. Kids are resilient – they need unconditional love and support, respect, care and boundaries.

There are fabulous organisations like Rainbow Families that help kids and families stay strong and positive. If families are really suffering as a result of transition of a parent or co-parent, I strongly recommend accessing a GP or mental health professional. My preference is to support the family as a system with counselling and psychological support, but at times individual care is needed. There is no need to go through this journey alone – there are people out there to support you and your family!

In a better world …

A small group of people representing a cross-section of parents, co-parents and families with trans and gender diverse (TGD) members met to discuss the question: What would the world look like if it was better for us and our families? Here's what they came up with – in no particular order. Some of these changes are readily achievable; some will require significant long-term lobbying, advocacy and financial backing, education and social change.

Language

Language is important, and everyday language often excludes non-binary people: boys and girls, ladies and gentleman, male and female. More inclusive language would ensure all TGD people felt acknowledged, respected and affirmed: hello children, welcome everyone, non-binary, gender neutral, unisex.[7] 'Educating friends, family members and the community on what it means to be trans, along with correcting people when they make mistakes with names and pronouns,

7 See *A language guide: Trans and gender diverse inclusion*, ACON 2018 <https://www.acon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/TGD-External-Language-Guide-_Text-Version_V13.pdf>

is often a full time job for a trans person. [Friends] can help ease the load by taking on some of this responsibility.'[8]

Children with TGD parents need to process any changes of names or titles in their own way and at their own pace. Acknowledgment and support of this from extended family, other parents, schools and the broader community would help children manage these important changes.

Connection

Connecting with other TGD families is critically important for transitioning parents, their partners and their children. Peer support can be invaluable in managing both the roller-coaster of emotions and the practicalities involved in the transition process. Private Facebook groups can provide opportunities for peer discussion, advice, referral or just plain venting. Limited support groups and services are available in some inner cities, but outside that, support can be hard to find. Many TGD families experience significant isolation. Some support groups and online spaces are listed in the Resources section of this guide.

Partners

In a TGD family, the needs of the transitioning parent and the needs of the co-parent (where there is one) can be very different. There is no research that explores the impact of a transitioning parent on families. All we know is that there are many factors that come into play when a parent affirms their gender while in a relationship. Online and face to face spaces that support couples wishing to navigate the transition journey together are invaluable. Groups or spaces where non-transitioning partners can get together to talk about their unique lived experience are also extremely helpful. Trans Pride Australia runs a Facebook group for partners of trans and gender diverse people. Details are provided in the Resources section of this guide.

Kids

The impact of a transitioning parent on a child will vary enormously depending on their age and developmental stage, the support networks of immediate and extended family, the support or otherwise in the child's school and local community and a range of other factors. Most kids respond very well to their affirmed parent and others seek counselling to help them navigate the journey. A positive, knowledgeable and affirming teacher is also incredibly helpful. Greater access to fun, age-appropriate

8 A Gender Agenda, 'Transgender for Friends' <https://genderrights.org.au/transgender-for-friends/>

activities with other children who have a transitioning parent would be great. These might include: picnics, parties, outings, or groups – anywhere kids can have the opportunity to talk and share their experiences, or just play.[9]

Services

General medical and mental health services that can work effectively with TGD parents can be few and far between. Like support groups, some exist in inner cities, but access to knowledgeable doctors, surgeons and allied health professionals can be very limited. Many TGD parents travel long distances for appointments. Trained GPs and other local support options in regional and rural areas would make life much easier and ensure parents and families are better supported.

Schools

The willingness and capacity of schools to create supportive and culturally safe environments for children with TGD parents varies enormously. Even schools that consider themselves open and progressive – perhaps because they supported marriage equality in the postal survey – may have little or no understanding of the issues for TGD parents, and especially for their children. Plain English written information that outlines the issues for children and describes best practice for schools would be helpful. Such information would ensure teachers, counsellors, support staff and principals have a good basic level of knowledge.[10] Advocacy training for parents to help them navigate the issues with their children's schools would also be extremely helpful.

Passing or blending as cisgender

In our experience, parents who blend as their identified binary gender (male or female) – and their partners and kids – experience fewer problems when presenting in public than parents who are seen as visibly trans. Passing may also be dependent on circumstances: for example, it may be safer to pass when using public toilets with children, but may matter less at a rainbow families picnic. Passing or blending as cisgender is

9 See, for example, the Under 12s events organised by A Gender Agenda <https://genderrights.org.au/aga-event/under-12s-3/>

10 See, for example, Student Wellbeing Hub, 'Guide to supporting a student to affirm or transition gender identity at school' <https://www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/docs/default-source/guide-to-supporting-a-student-to-affirm-or-transition-gender-identity-at-school_oct-2015-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=0> A similar resource related to supporting children with TGD parents would be invaluable.

not necessarily the ultimate goal of transitioning and is not what makes someone more or less trans – something that is not well understood or reflected in mainstream thought or commentary about TGD people. All gender identities are valid and important, including women, men and people who are non-binary.

Whatever the circumstances or situation, it is never okay to out, discriminate against or stigmatise a TGD person. All people have a right to be affirmed and celebrated as who they are – this is a marker of a society's progress.

Diversity

It is important for our health and wellbeing that LGBTI and broader communities acknowledge and celebrate the diverse array of rainbow families. Rainbow families can include: families with a sole parent; families with a trans or gender diverse parent; families with a parent who uses a wheelchair; families of colour; families with more than two, or more than three parents; families with a parent who has a chronic or mental illness; and families that are just as messy, flawed and chaotic as any other family. In an ideal world, resources and representations of rainbow families would include all of the above.

Pride

Increasingly, TGD people are demonstrating pride in being TGD and are expressing their identity publicly in a variety of positive ways. This is arguably even more important if parents want to instil pride in their children and empower them to refute any suggestion that they should feel ashamed or embarrassed at having a trans parent. Children will follow the example of their parents in how they feel about being part of a TGD family; if parents are proud of their family, children will be proud too.

Resources

Australian Capital Territory

A Gender Agenda

genderrights.org.au

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/australian-capital-territory

New South Wales

Rainbow Families NSW

rainbowfamilies.com.au

The Gender Centre

gendercentre.org.au

Taylor Square Private Clinic

tspc.com.au

ACON

acon.org.au

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/new-south-wales

Trans Pride Australia

facebook.com/groups/TransSydneyPride

Inner City Legal Centre

iclc.org.au

Twenty10

Twenty10.org.au

Northern Territory

OUT NT

outnt.info/darwin-rainbow-families

Northside Health

northsidehealthnt.com.au

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/northern-territory

Queensland

Rainbow Families Queensland

rainbowfamiliesqld.org

Australian Transgender Support Association of Queensland (ATSAQ)

atsaq.com

Brisbane Gender Clinic

brisbanegenderclinic.com.au

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/queensland

Transcendence Social and Emotional Support Group

raq.org.au/services/rainbow-program

South Australia

South Australia Gender Dysphoria Unit

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/south-Australia

Trans Health South Australia

transhealthsa.com

SHINE SA

shinesa.org.au/community-information/sexual-gender-diversity

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/south-australia

Tasmania

Rainbow Tasmania

rainbowtas.org/rainbowfamilies/rainbowfamilies.html

Working it out

workingitout.org.au

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/tasmania

Victoria

Rainbow Families Victoria

rainbowfamilies.org.au

Transgender Victoria

transgendervictoria.com

Equinox Gender Diverse Health Centre

equinox.org.au

Monash Health Gender Clinic

monashhealth.org/services/services-f-n/gender-clinic

Seahorse Victoria Inc

seahorsevic.com.au/main/

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/Victoria

Western Australia

TransFolk of Western Australia

transfolkofwa.org/parents-family

Gender Health Service Providers

anzpath.org/about/service-providers/western-australia

National

Australian and New Zealand Professional Association for Transgender Health (ANZPATH)

anzpath.org/about/about-anzpath

FTM Australia

facebook.com/ftmaustralia

Genderqueer Australia

genderqueer.org.au

Trans Health Australia

transhealthaustralia.org

National LGBTI Health Alliance

lgbtihealth.org.au/hub

International

World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH)

wpath.org

Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health

cpath.ca

European Professional Association for Transgender health

epath.eu

United States Professional Association for Transgender Health

wpath.org/uspath

Gender Identity Research & Education Society

gires.org.uk