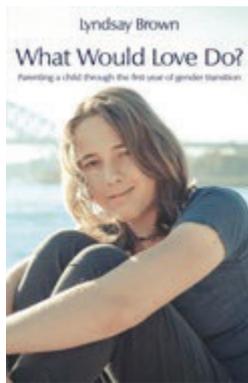


BOOK



What Would Love Do? Parenting a child through the first year of gender transition

Dr Lyndsay Brown

(Ginninderra Press, 2020)

The journey started at 8.15 pm on 25 October 2017 when Olivia, then 13 years old, revealed to her twin brother a secret with which she had been living for years: that she was transgender. Olivia was experiencing the tiger of gender dysphoria: the dissonance between the gender assigned at birth (with the associated sex characteristics) and a person's self-perceived gender identity. The storm or tsunami of gender dysphoria can occasion severe anxiety, worthlessness, debilitating self-hatred, depression, and suicidal ideation. It can be impossible for a trans person not to see themselves as they once were, so aligning the inner and outer selves demands a fundamental revolution.

Olivia's mother, Lyndsay is the author of this book. She describes her initial shock, unpreparedness, uncertainty and sadness at losing her parental hopes and dreams for her brilliant 'son', as well as her fears of a marginalised and stigmatised future life for her daughter who would likely have to deal with an often transphobic world. Lyndsay describes her intense feelings of loss as her accepted world view became 'scarred and bleeding, numb and silent'. She takes us through the journey she went through until, a year after Olivia's explosive revelation, she is able to express wonder at Olivia's personal liberation and extraordinary courage, able to acknowledge that 'I was the parent of a trans child and that it was OK'.

When a child transitions, then family life irrevocably changes. Parents, siblings, relatives, friends and others react differently and not always positively. Inter-familial relationships are tested, parental loads changed, memories and senses of individual self are erased, and collective family identities fundamentally altered.

The uncharted task of constructing a gender identity involves 'a perilous journey in a perilous world'. As Paulo Coelho has remarked, a personal journey is 'more about unbecoming everything that isn't really you so that you can be who you were meant to be in the first place'. Gender transitioning is a steep learning curve on both a social level (involving presentation, behaviour and speech) and a physical one (involving hormone treatment, medical procedures and changing identification documents). Pursuing the 'chemical expression' of one's true self also exposes the barriers posed by medical regulation and practice ('gatekeeping').

Olivia chose to live authentically on a full-time basis, thereby building resilience and avoiding the psychological pain of secretly closeting her trans identity ('going stealth'). The book traces traumatic school bullying and exhaustive hypervigilance in social settings for intolerance and the potentially transphobic 'curious' gazes of strangers in the streets. Through all of this, Olivia established herself as an independent adolescent, built alliances within her peer network, continued to shine in her academic world, celebrated her validation during Mardi Gras, and demonstrated courage for being her true, authentic self.

If parenting is ordinarily about self-sacrifice, then trans parents must dig deeply. There is no sense of whether or when things will get easier. Parents must be prepared for unpredictable, lengthy and sometimes untriggered meltdowns or 'hormonal hurricanes' when a child becomes miserable, rageful, tearful, despairing and hostile, terrified of potential rejection everywhere. The dominating feeling a trans parent becomes accustomed to is the omnipresent fear of transphobic violence against their child for being who they are.

This book offers many practical tips for parents navigating challenges: be open; get educated; network with other trans parents; provide the freedom to customise a child's own version of themselves; don't

over-accommodate needs; identify and engage with positive trans role models; provide comforting pets; demonstrate unconditional love and acceptance; and be a constant accepting presence. Although being trans is not central to their identity, a child's existence is fundamentally denied by accidental or intended misgendering (e.g., incorrect pronouns) or using former names ('deadnaming'). Lyndsay documents how, although protective choices and strategically designing safe and anonymous environments can often entail substantial financial costs, trans parents can access support services from multiple medical professionals and organisations including the Gender Centre, online trans parent support groups and inclusive and diverse school settings.

Lyndsay's experiences in unfamiliar territory are useful for getting 'over the hump' when parenting a child who is significantly different. It takes some time before mourning for a 'lost' child ceases: as a rule of thumb, around 6 months is required to process and internalise a new gender for every 2 years a parent has known their child in their former gender. The early stages of gender transitioning are especially difficult, but the journey is life-long and readers will hunger for an updated account.

What this book reveals is that the multiple unexpected challenges to a parent's self-perception, behaviour and parental skills can be positively life changing for a trans parent. Trans parenting offers a heightened awareness of pervasive but covert gendered socialisation, the influence of controlling aesthetic standards and the binary 'other'. The transitioning process ought to be normalised in Australia, particularly given an increasingly open transgender community 'living very ordinary ['invisible'] lives as trans people, with lovers and partners, friends and family, and working in rewarding jobs'.

In a final chapter, we hear Olivia's voice. She encourages other trans children not to lose sight of who they are and not to change in order to fit in but instead to find their passions and to find self-love. Trans children are self-empowered individuals who boldly follow their dreams to be who they really wish to be. That is a valuable lesson for all parents.

Stephen Tully