

# Working Toward Family Attunement



## Family Therapy with Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Children and Adolescents

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### KEYWORDS

- Transgender • Gender nonconforming • Youth • Family • Therapy
- Gender affirmative • Support

### KEY POINTS

- Gender-affirmative family therapy assumes that transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) identities are natural variations of humanity that should be normalized and affirmed.
- Family therapy first seeks to assess and increase family members' attunement to the TGNC child's gender expression.
- Clinicians provide safety for the TGNC youth by working with parents and other family members to better support their child and by creating a gender-affirming environment in therapy.
- When the family is ready, options for gender expression/transition are explored and supported in therapy.
- As needed, the clinician advocates for the TGNC youth in school and other settings and supports families through the readiness process for social and medical gender transition.

*The Suarez family: "Steven," a 7 year old who was assigned a male gender at birth, has been secretly dressing in his mother's clothing and getting into her makeup. On discovering her child's behavior, Steven's mother reacted with shock and disapproval, which resulted in Steven feeling ashamed and in tears. Steven's mother talked with him about why he was dressing in her clothing and Steven replied, "Because I want to be a girl. I don't like boy stuff and girl stuff is so much better." Steven's mother reprimanded him by telling him that his behavior is sinful and that he will go to hell if he does not stop. She sought the assistance of a family clinician to help Steven sort through his gender "confusion."*

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*The Jackson family: “Julie,” a 15 year old who was assigned a female gender at birth, has always hated wearing dresses and has been known as a tomboy, which her parents supported throughout Julie’s childhood. As Julie has progressed into puberty, she has become increasingly uncomfortable with her body resulting in bouts of severe depression and self-harm. Her parents noticed her wearing more and more layers of baggy clothing and avoiding swimsuits. They noted they have been concerned about her body image and self-esteem and have been trying to assure Julie that she is a pretty girl who should be proud of her body. After several months of feeling nagged by her parents, Julie has disclosed to them that she is transgender and that she is really a boy. Her parents suspected that Julie might be a lesbian and were trying to come to terms with that; however, they have no real experience with or knowledge of transgender identities. They sought family therapy for assistance in figuring out what to do.*

As is seen from these case examples, the families of transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) children and adolescents come to therapy at various stages of understanding and acceptance of their child’s gender expressions. For these children to thrive, it is necessary to involve parents, and often other family members, in therapy. Family members often need to process their own feelings about the child’s TGNC expressions and learn how to accept, support, and protect them in a society that is often hostile toward gender diverse people. This article presents a model for gender-affirmative family therapy with TGNC youth and their families, involving two stages: assessing and increasing family attunement (the family’s level of understanding and peace about the TGNC identity), and exploring and supporting gender expression/transition options.

When families enter therapy already demonstrating a high level of understanding and support for the child’s gender expression, they may spend less time in the first stage and may be ready to move into the second stage sooner, as is demonstrated in the case examples when as we follow them through the two stages of therapy.

### **STAGE ONE: ASSESSING AND INCREASING FAMILY ATTUNEMENT**

When beginning therapy with the family of a TGNC child, the first step is to assess how much support for and/or opposition to the gender expression is present in the family. The initial goal of family therapy is to help families more fully understand, accept, and learn to advocate for the TGNC child. The following section discusses this stage of therapy, beginning by defining gender-affirmative family therapy and family attunement. Strategies are then provided for structuring sessions and for working with family members, separately and together, in therapy.

#### ***Moving Toward Attunement: Gender-Affirmative Family Therapy***

The gender-affirmative clinician believes that gender-diverse expressions and identities do not constitute forms of pathology. They understand gender is not binary and instead exists on a spectrum with infinite expressions, all of which are normal variations of humanity. Gender-affirmative clinicians strive to destigmatize and normalize gender-nonconforming expressions,<sup>1</sup> helping TGNC children to live and express gender in ways that are most comfortable for the child.<sup>2</sup> Refer to **Box 1** for key terms and their definitions. Often for families presenting in therapy, what is most comfortable for the child is uncomfortable for the family and sometimes creates a considerable amount of distress for family members.<sup>3</sup> By supporting and validating parents in their emotional process, while at the same time creating safety and affirmation for the child, the gender-affirmative clinician seeks to help the family achieve attunement with their child’s gender expression/identity. The term “attunement” means to reach a level of

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