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The Gift of Hindsight: A Parent Learns about Educating Trans Youth

Denise Snyder



I began to put pen to paper for this series on the same day last January that my husband, Vann, and I dropped off our daughter, Ella, at a semester program at the Oxbow School in Napa, California. We live on the East Coast, in Boston. Ella is our one and only. She was not yet 17 years old at the time. And she is transgender. As her mom, letting Ella go was not easy, but it was the right thing to do. My story here is about the parent experience, about raising a transgender child through an interesting—and maybe fortuitous—time in our society, where we have moved from fear of the word transgender to questioning, to some understanding, where there are allies and peers, even among the youngest individuals.

If you had asked me five years ago if I thought we would ever agree to send our teenage daughter to art school on the other side of the country, I would have said, “Hell, no.” I would have said that there were too many risks, that given her trans status, it would not be a wise or safe move. Yet, five short years later, that’s exactly what we did. We helped her move into a dorm, took a tour of a place we had never been before, met faculty members and roommates, kissed her goodbye, crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, and boarded a flight home to Massachusetts.

I shed a lot of tears during that process, but I also could not have been more proud of—or happy for—my child. We moved from the impossible to the possible in just a handful of years. How did we get here? Back in 2011, Ella was just beginning a social transition, and the country’s awareness about, and support for, transgender youth seemed nonexistent. Everything from social acceptance to health care coverage seemed like a fantasy.

Not that I don’t have concerns about my daughter’s safety or well-being now; I definitely do. However, I used to worry all of the time. I worried when she was at preschool and she was the only boy to play with dolls and put on princess dresses in the dramatic play area. I worried in kindergarten when she

insisted on bringing her American Girl doll to show-and-tell. I worried when she refused to wear pants purchased from the “boys’ department,” and we had to search heaven and earth for flat-front, girls’ pants that didn’t have sparkles, pink trim, or other telltale signs that they were, in fact, “girls’ pants.”



I worried when she told her father during bath time that, “I know I’m supposed to like who I am, but I don’t like what I am.” She was four years old at the time, and it broke my heart. It also broke my heart to tell her she could only play dress-up at home. That she probably shouldn’t choose the Belle lunch box. That she couldn’t be a Girl Scout. That the Hannah Montana-themed sleepover was just for girls. That she had to line up at school with the boys. That she could join ballet, but she could not wear a tutu. It broke my heart to be a part of breaking her spirit. Every damn day.

For years we straddled two worlds, mostly conforming to a stereotypical male world outside our house, but letting our “son” enjoy dolls, dressing up, and playing “shoe shop” at home. All the while, we tried to send a message that we loved and supported her, that there was nothing wrong with her. When she was little, I think she just assumed that it was normal to do things one way at school and another way at home. But over time, how could she not question her differences or the way she was treated for them? Looking back, it’s easy to say we didn’t know what we didn’t know. And while I would make some different choices now, a dozen years ago it was hard to find help for what we were going through. We wanted to be supportive, and we wanted to make our child happy. But we also worried that if we gave in to all her desires, we would “steer” her in a direction that maybe wasn’t the correct one. Or we would “break” her. We were not sure when we were helping and when we were hurting her.



Between the ages of two and ten, we knew there was a strong possibility Ella could be transgender, but we hoped for something less hard for her. So we hoped she was an effeminate male or maybe metrosexual. We hoped she was gay. (It turns out that this is a pretty common hope among parents who begin to suspect their child may be transgender. When faced with the road less traveled, it’s common to choose the path someone else has already paved for you.)

We worked with her pediatrician and went through three therapists before finding one that had solid experience. We also found our way to the Gender Management Clinic at Children’s Hospital. Collectively, they gave us hope. They helped us navigate our journey. We felt very much like pioneers

and, until then, we had felt very much alone. With their help, we found we weren't alone, and we found support for us and for our child.

I won't go into the trials of soccer, coed birthday parties, and gender-neutral clothing options, but suffice it to say that our therapist pushed us to keep our child open while at the same time making space for her to enjoy the things that truly made her happy. All of the experiments were failures in the best sense of the word. They were building a case.

Finally, at age 11, Ella went to a sleepaway camp for transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. It changed her world and confirmed what we already knew. Our child, who was born with male genitalia was, is, and always will be a girl, and she needed to live her life as one—as soon as possible. The need was urgent, but it was August, and she would be starting sixth grade in a couple of very short weeks. We made our child the biggest request I think a parent could make of an 11-year-old who has just had a complete breakthrough: Could she wait a year? That may seem cruel or unsupportive to some, but it was not.

We were ready to do what needed to be done. We let her know that we were completely on board, but with only two weeks before school started, I was pretty sure we could not get everything lined up: we had to navigate school district policies, gain the principal's support, map out school procedures, change names and pronouns, get a whole new wardrobe. Everything needed to be set up so that we did not fail in this effort, and the time was just too short. Rather, we promised to spend the coming 12 months making progress toward that goal, especially since she would be starting a new school the following year. In addition to taking on school policy challenges, we would find ways for her to present as a female more often; we'd also begin using female pronouns at home, do a legal name change, and map out the transition so she could begin seventh grade as her true self.

One of the most amazing (if not most scary) things we did in this process was to host a June meeting with other parents and students from her current school—more than 30 kids—who would be attending the same new school for seventh grade in September. We worked with both the sending and receiving schools and our therapist to set up the meeting. The current school's principal was not very supportive, but Ella's receiving school was helpful, and the head of guidance there attended the meeting to share expectations around inclusion and acceptance at the new school.

Ella's therapist asked her to prepare an art project in which Ella took a paper bag and, on the outside, drew herself as she thought she appeared to others. On the inside of the bag, she placed items that represented who she really was. The therapist walked the kids through the bag exercise and asked whether everyone should be able to have their inside match their outside. It was a powerful moment, as all the kids agreed that this was a basic right. While not everyone accepted our invitation to this meeting, none of those who did were negative. Many parents thanked us for sharing and entrusting them with this information.

So Ella spent seventh and eighth grade at Boston Latin School presenting in her identified gender. Despite nearly three dozen students knowing about the transition, she chose to be stealth at the school and, while I did not agree with that choice, her dad and I fully supported her. As one might imagine, rumors began to spread before long, and although our daughter told us at the time that things were fine, bit by bit we learned that her experience was more difficult than we knew. There was a whisper campaign (which we assumed), but there were also threats, including a time when a boy she didn't know tweeted that he would "find her, knock her out, and pull down her pants" to prove she was a boy. Because the boy didn't go to her school, there was nothing her school could do to protect her or to punish him.

As Ella approached high school, she decided to "come out" and also to transfer to a new school, one that focused on the arts and that was known for an accepting climate. Two and a half years later, she is now a junior at Boston Arts Academy (BAA) and spending a semester studying in California. Her experience at BAA has been amazing, full of support and encouragement—not just for her—but for all the students in the school. When I pause to think about why this community works, it seems that it's made up of all the kids who may not have "fit in" elsewhere. There are no jocks, no "cool" kids, no one who is there against their will. It's high school, with all the typical ups and downs, but all the students choose to be there (it's a free, public school, but there is an audition process). Equally important, all the teachers choose to be there as well. Ella is thriving. She's accepted. She's happy, productive, and expanding her own horizons every day.

We've traveled many miles on our journey thus far. And what have we learned? The experience—and the gift of hindsight—has left me with lots of knowledge and a level of courage I wish I could step back in time to apply. If I could:

1. I would, from early on, let my child express herself more freely in and outside of our home. I'd have let her wear the sparkly shoes to school, the princess dress to Disney, the

fairy wings to the grocery store. It just didn't matter. She was already ostracized by most of the boys. She had enough social cues about what it meant to be a boy, and she consciously decided to ignore them. Supporting her choices would not have made a difference to anyone except to her—and that's what really mattered.

2. I'd push the school harder to examine the practices that hurt her the most. At the time, I thought the issues were ours to deal with. I advocated for her, but only to a point, only within a socially safe space. Now I know that changes in practice would benefit everyone: If we didn't socialize our kids to be girly girls or manly boys, we would find that our kids are all over the map when it comes to their gender, and that's okay. We would learn that on the spectrum of gender, there's a deep pink at one end and a dark blue at the other, and all kinds of crazy shades of purple in the middle. With regard to changes:
 - a. I would work harder to ensure that the adults in schools understand what it means to be transgender. They need to have myths unraveled. With understanding comes empathy and a larger desire to provide necessary supports.
 - b. I would advocate to eliminate lining up by gender. What does this practice accomplish? During elementary school this was one of the most uncomfortable times of the day for my child. It was obvious that our son had to leave his girl friends to get in line with the boys. He stood there with almost nothing to contribute as they chattered about trucks, basketball, and Spiderman. He felt lost in that line. Order is necessary in school, but lines could easily be formed by name or number, or table grouping (the Dolphins, followed by the Lions, and then the Bears).
 - c. I would recommend that show-and-tell be topical, aligning with what kids are learning in school, or maybe be eliminated altogether. I can't even recall the benefits of show-and-tell, if there are any; I just remember the high stakes of bringing in special things that other kids would like—and the worry I felt about what would happen if kids thought my son was weird for bringing a doll.
 - d. I would encourage lesson plans that promote building character and empathy, as our child's amazing second-grade teacher did. We told Ms. Mason early on about our son's interest in dolls and in spending time with the girls, and that we were okay with this behavior at school. She responded by making a point of reading books to the students about girls who liked building forts and boys who liked to cook or play dress-up. She supported our needs, but she also supported the needs of other families who were navigating their own unique paths. She saw

everything that happened in her classroom as a learning opportunity, including the fact that there was no shame in marching to your own drummer.

- e. I'd push to get rid of seating assignments at lunch. For 30 minutes a day, every day in grades four, five, and six, my child sat with boys who barely spoke to him, who called him "UGG" boy (for his pre-Tom Brady fashion trend), and who called him gay. There is simply nothing to gain by mandating that boys sit with boys and vice versa. Moreover, lunch is a great opportunity to give kids voice about how they spend their limited free time at school.
- f. I would say that we should design schools and classrooms with the same creative thinking we employ when we consider students with special needs, using the theory of Universal Design. To that end, we might strip labels such as girl and boy out of our classroom and seek out identifiers that associate with students' interests, cultures, or special abilities. We might encourage children to explore all the activity centers in our early education classrooms, reducing the ostracism of those who don't "fit" in the construction or dress-up area; we might minimize the stereotypical use of pink and blue and purposefully weave in the use of these colors where they are least expected; we might include a more diverse array of books in the reading centers. We would spend more time accounting for children in the margins—whether these students are differently abled, or homeless, or transgender—understanding that those who live in the center will securely be swept up in our best practices. For when we meet the needs of those with the least access, do we not ensure access for everyone?

Maybe that's the whole point. We no longer treat children with disabilities as though they have—or are—a problem. It's time we come to the realization that all our children (truly, all of us) have unique needs and perspectives, and none of these should be seen in a negative light. Rather, how do we use this uniqueness to build a better experience?

We should set our sights on an educational environment that welcomes differences, maybe one that even treats differences as gifts. For many years, our family lived in fear that our child would be a social outcast and that she would be physically harmed for her differences. Education would look markedly different in a setting where each stakeholder viewed differences as an opportunity to contribute a varied and important perspective. Imagine if we raised all our kids, at home and in school, in this way. It took our family a long time to get to where we are now, longer than I wish it had. Certainly, I have

moments of regret, but I also have moments of pride—and I am able to recognize more moments of growth than I can count. Our experience can be an opportunity for others. As a society, we don't have to keep making the same mistakes.

From bathrooms to book selections, lunch lines to curriculum choices, it is time we rethink the education experience for our children. Whether it's through home visits, high-quality parent-teacher conferences, or some other forum, educators need to get to know their students and plan the school experience to address unique needs and assets. Rather than steering away from “difficult” issues, turn towards them, learn about them, and use the teachable moments to develop empathy and understanding in our kids today—and in the next generation of educators, community leaders, business people, and health and human service providers.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my brother-in-law, Jon Snyder, a former Bank Street College faculty member and an unwavering fan of my daughter, for introducing me to the people responsible for this series. I also want to thank my husband, Vann, whose love for our daughter is as fierce as my own, and most importantly, Ella, for openly and honestly sharing her amazing self with us, and for allowing me to share what is really her story.



As assistant superintendent for the public school district in Lawrence, Massachusetts, **Denise M. Snyder** has oversight for community, family, and student engagement. Prior to this role, she led enrollment and school transition activities in Boston Public Schools. Denise earned her bachelor's degree in public administration from the University of Saint Joseph and completed her graduate studies at Boston College. She is the mother to a transgender child, who transitioned while a student in Boston Public Schools.