February 26, 2016

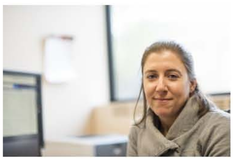
Transgender children supported in their identities show positive mental health

Deborah Bach
News and Information

Studies of mental health among transgender people in the United States have been consistently grim, showing higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

But almost nothing is known about the mental health of a new and growing generation of transgender Americans — prepubescent children who are living openly as transgender with the support of their families. How do those children fare in an environment of openness and family support? When their gender identity is affirmed, are they happy?

New University of Washington research suggests the answer is yes. Published Feb. 26 in Pediatrics, the study is believed to be the first to look at the mental health of transgender children who have "socially transitioned," changing their preferred pronouns and typically, their names, clothing and hairstyles.



Kristina Olson

The research found that the 73 children, age 3 to 12, had rates of depression and anxiety no higher than two control groups — their own siblings and a group of age- and gender-matched children. And their rates of depression and anxiety were significantly lower than those of gender-nonconforming children in previous studies.

The findings, said lead author Kristina Olson, challenge long-held assumptions that mental health problems in transgender children are inevitable, or even that being transgender is itself a type of mental disorder.

"The thinking has always been that kids who are not acting gender-stereotypically are basically destined to have mental health problems," said Olson, a UW assistant professor of psychology. "In our study, that's not the case."

Co-author Katie McLaughlin, a UW assistant professor of psychology, called the findings "incredibly promising."

"They suggest that mental health problems are not inevitable in this group, and that family support might buffer these children from the onset of mental health problems so commonly observed in transgender people," she said.

The study involved having parents complete two short surveys under the National Institutes of Health's Patient-Reported Outcome Measurement Information System. The surveys asked parents whether their children had experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety during the past week — for example, feeling sad or being worried when going to bed.

The research found that the transgender children's levels of depression averaged a score of 50.1, almost the same as the national norm of 50. Their anxiety rates were 54.2, only slightly higher than the national norm.

The higher anxiety rates aren't exactly surprising, Olson said. Though transgender children are becoming increasingly visible in the mainstream media — the most well-known, 15-year-old Jazz Jennings, is the subject of a new documentary series — their reality remains little understood even within the medical community.

Transgender people were long classified under the umbrella of "gender identity disorder" by the widely used Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The term was replaced with "gender dysphoria" in 2013, after considerable debate and lobbying from advocates to remove the word "disorder" from its name.

"It is hard to be transgender in 2016 in the United States," Olson said. "If peers know that a child is transgender, they often tease that child. If peers do not know, the transgender child has to worry about being found out. It's not surprising that transgender children would have some more anxiety, given the state of the world for transgender children right now."

The researchers acknowledge that the positive mental health among study participants might be explained by factors other than just parental support. Parents could be biased in their reporting, for example, wanting their kids to appear healthier than they are. Or the children themselves might have personality traits, such as confidence, that correlate to a healthy emotional state. Future studies will investigate these possibilities.

The study is part of the TransYouth Project that Olson leads. The initiative is the first large-scale, longitudinal study of transgender children in the U.S. It currently involves more than 150 transgender children and families from about 25 states, and Olson is recruiting additional participants. The project's initial study, published in 2015, found that transgender children's gender identities were as deeply rooted as those of their non-trans peers.

The researchers next plan to look at how factors outside of the family, such as treatment by peers, might predict mental health in transgender children, and whether the age of transition makes a difference.

"It will be important to follow these children over time, particularly during the transition to adolescence, to understand patterns of mental health and positive adjustment across development for transgender youth who are supported by their families," McLaughlin said.

Olson said while there is still a tremendous amount to be learned about transgender children, the study's findings suggest it's possible for them to live happier lives than previous generations of transgender people.

"I think they're proof that you can be a young transgender kid today and be happy and healthy and doing just as well as any other kid," she said. "It's some good news, finally, which I don't think there's much of it in what we hear about transgender kids."

Other co-authors are Lily Durwood and Madeleine DeMeules, the project coordinators of the TransYouth Project.

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Transgender children fare well when allowed to live openly

Lindsey Tanner, Associated Press Published 11:42 a.m. ET Feb. 27, 2016 | Updated 3:30 p.m. ET Feb. 28, 2016

In a first of its kind ruling, the Colorado Civil Rights Division sided with the family of a transgender child who was denied use of her school's girl's restroom.

(Photo: Susan Osborne via AP)

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CHICAGO - Young transgender children allowed to live openly as the gender they identify with fared as well psychologically as other kids in a small study that suggests parental support may be the key.

Rates of depression and anxiety were equal in the study, which compared 73 transgender kids aged 3 to 12 with 73 nontransgender youngsters. The trans kids also fared as well on both measures as a group of their nontransgender siblings.

Rates of anxiety among trans kids were "a smidge higher" than national averages for children of the same age, but otherwise they matched national norms, said lead author Kristina Olson, an associate psychology professor at the University of Washington.

She said it's the largest study to examine the psychological health of transgender youths who have socially transitioned. Parents recruited from support groups, conferences and a special website rated their kids' well-being on a standard mental health scale.

The parents weren't randomly selected, and Olson acknowledged that parents of kids who aren't well-adjusted may have opted not to take part.

The study "certainly suggests that family support is linked to better mental health," although that idea wasn't tested directly and Olson said the results don't prove that is the explanation for the children's well-being.

The results were published Friday in the journal Pediatrics.

The findings are "truly stunning," given previous studies showing high rates of mental health problems including suicidal behavior in transgender children, Dr. Ilana Sherer, a Dublin, California, pediatrician, wrote in a Pediatrics editorial. Most previous research is in children who haven't come out, Olson said.

Study children had not had any sex reassignment treatment, and some parents initially opposed letting their kids come out.

Olson said the results don't apply to all transgender kids, especially those whose parents oppose their change in identity.

Opponents of allowing these youngsters to adopt names, hairstyles, clothes and pronouns opposite their birth gender have argued that kids so young "cannot possibly know their gender at such an early age," said Sherer.

Letting these kids live openly as the gender they identify with "can be an incredibly affirming process, showing the child that their identity is supported," Sherer said. She was not involved in the research.

One child's story

Micah Heumann, an academic adviser at the University of Illinois's Champaign campus, was among study participants. His 10-year-old child, Daniel, was born a girl and named Naima, but has identified as a boy ever since he knew about gender, Heumann said.

In second grade, the family agreed to let Daniel legally change his name, and, at the boy's request, his school agreed to go along with the change, even letting Daniel use the boys' bathroom. "He is very well-adjusted" but still feels stress because he knows not everyone is so accepting, Heumann said.

Heumann said the family reacted to Daniel's choice with mixed feelings, mourning the loss of a daughter but never wavering in love and support for Daniel.

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PUBLIC HEALTH

Probing The Complexities Of Transgender Mental Health

March 23, 2016 - 10:21 AM ET

TARA HAELLE

Trina Dalziel/Getty Images/Illustration Works

Experiencing the world as a different gender than the one assigned to you at birth can take a toll. Nearly all research into transgender individuals' mental health shows poorer outcomes. A study looking specifically at transgender women, predominantly women of color, only further confirms that reality.

What's less clear, however, is whether trans individuals experience more mental distress due to external factors, such as discrimination and lack of support, or internal factors, such as gender dysphoria, the tension resulting from having a gender identity that differs from the one assigned at birth.

Transgender people are often treated extremely poorly by their parents, by their schools, by society at large, and that can lead to problems in school and at work, as well as poverty and increased risk of substance use, according to Ilana Sherer, assistant medical director of the Child and Adolescent Gender Center at the University of California Benioff Children's Hospital in San Francisco.

"The biggest question we need to answer about transgender mental health is this," Sherer wrote in an email. "Is there something inherent about being transgender that makes one more at risk for poor mental health, or is it about how society treats transgender people?"

The study published Monday in *JAMA Pediatrics* reveals the difficulty in picking apart this question. It examined mental health and substance use among nearly 300 young transgender women in Chicago and Boston.

Only a quarter of the women were white, and all were between ages 16 and 29. The researchers, led by Sari Reisner, a research fellow at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital, found that the rate of psychiatric disorders and substance dependence among these women was 1.7 to 3.6 times greater than in the general population.

Four in 10 of the women had a mental health or substance dependence disorder, and 1 in 5 women had at least two diagnosed psychiatric conditions. More than a third of them had experienced depression, and 1 in 5 women had contemplated suicide in the past month. Rates of anxiety, post-traumatic stress, alcohol dependence and other substance dependence also was higher than average.

At the same time, most of these women were unemployed, more than a quarter lacked health insurance, and many lived in extreme poverty — all mental health stressors and potential effects of discrimination, said Johanna Olson-Kennedy, medical director of the Center for Transyouth Health and Development at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, the largest transgender youth clinic in the United States.

Those findings contrast significantly with those of another study published this month, which looked at the mental health of 73 transgender children between ages 3 and 12. This younger group did not experience any more depression, and had only slightly more anxiety, than their siblings and nontransgender peers. But the differences between the two studies' participants are vast.

The study of younger children, which was published in *Pediatrics*, focused on a much younger and more emotionally supported group. These transgender children were "affirmed in their gender identities in all aspects of their lives," with parental, peer and other social support for their identities, according to that study's lead author, Kristina Olson, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The majority came from homes with household incomes above $75,000. By contrast, nearly half the Chicago and Boston women had annual incomes below $10,000 a year. And although the participants in both studies had transitioned, the children had not yet entered puberty.

"I think both of those studies, as all good studies do, leave us with more questions than answers," said Olson-Kennedy. "And that's good — that's a sign of good science, and that shapes the other things we need to look at."

One of those things is how the experiences of children with supportive families change as they enter adolescence, especially since many mental health problems emerge then, Olson said in an email. In the newer study, both depression and risk of suicidal thoughts increased with age. Younger women had the lowest rates of mental health conditions, while older women had the highest. But it's unclear why mental health problems increased with age, and whether those findings mean anything for the prepubescent children.

"A lot of the trauma that gender dysphoric children particularly experience is the lack of validation, the kind of ongoing, 'No, you're not what you say you are; you are what the church says you are and what your grandmother says you are and what the doctors say you are,' " Olson-Kennedy said. That can also include conflict over use of pronouns, for example.

The young trans children in the *Pediatrics* study do have validation of their identity as well as other social and economic advantages. No one has studied a population like that into adulthood, and those children might face a different set of pressures, including those that come with not being identifiably trans to casual observers.

"What we don't understand is what gender dysphoria looks like over a lifetime in kids who are supported," Olson-Kennedy said. Difficulties could include higher rates of infertility, deciding when and how to disclose a trans status to a potential romantic partner, finding appropriate health care and covert discrimination, Olson-Kennedy explained.

That could include hearing a transphobic person's ignorant commentary when the speaker doesn't know the trans person's status. "It would be very important to understand those problems to arm people with resiliency tools," Olson-Kennedy said.

"With time, as more research attention is focused on transgender individuals, we will start to get a better understanding of the factors that are associated with better versus worse mental health, and use that information to improve the lives of all transgender people, both before mental health problems emerge and to provide support to reduce or eliminate their impact later in life," Olson said.

Indeed, there is a lot researchers can learn about what not to do by studying transgender people who were socialized in the wrong gender while growing up and only transitioned in adulthood, Olson-Kennedy said.

"What I would love for people to understand is that we are really just starting to get a small understanding of trans youth," she added. "What's exciting is that the data is helping to validate what we know as clinicians, which is that people who are validated and supported in their selfhood are happier, have less mental health challenges and are more successful. We need to stop making people be who we think they should be and start letting them be who they are."

Parents wrote about their transgender five-year-old, and readers had strong reactions

By Emma Brown Yesterday at 6:00 a.m. ET

Kris and Shannon Hall at the pumpkin patch in a year-old photograph. Hall said they usually wrote for The Washington Post about why their appreciation and support for Shane, a transgender child, helped them to be better parents to their transgender students. The Hallers have spoken at a Facebook forum Hall and other authors created, and they participated (shown here) in an experiment that tracks other transgender students to see behaviors that correspond to their gender identity.

For the Hall family, the debate about bathrooms access is really a debate about transgender people's existence and the government will not tell our children discriminatory messages about them.

Kris is an assistant manager. Shane wrote: "Fifty years ago, in many places across the country, it would be illegal for a transgender person to have a name, pronouns, gender expression and gender identity that are not what the government assigned to them at birth. Nationwide, many people are, a fundamental part of our day to anywhere offensive and painful.

Photoshop of transgender child. Our sympathy is just will a set a thread to the pumpkin patch.

Hall said readers wanted to talk to her about the transgender issue in another self-help Hallers. There were many people who had a wide range of views and strong feelings that have characterized the discussion about transgender people's existence.

Shane and Kris Hall wrote the book on parenting a child's dilemma, and they questioned whether such a young child is capable of deciding that her gender doesn't match the one she was assigned at birth. Here do the Hallers see the best strategies isn't going to change that?

Tamera Ford posted on a transgender forum of research on transgender children who are supported and affirmed by their families — a population that has been studied little. The research shows that the acceptance of transgender children is a relatively recent phenomenon.

One recent study from the University of Washington — published in Pediatrics and Pediatrics in 2015, and part of a larger longitudinal study of transgender children younger than 12 — suggested that transgender children's gender identity is real, and not the result of confusion or acting out. Another published in February in Pediatrics, showed that transgender children who are supported by their families have the same rates of anxiety and depression as children who are not transgender — and they have much lower rates of anxiety and depression than gender-nonconforming children in earlier studies.

Ford said that people who want to know more about their decision to support their transgender children should read the Hallers' book and the study. Ford said, "I'm a parent, I'm a doctor, I'm a researcher, I'm a mom."

Here are a selection of responses The Post received from readers to their Friday original story, who wrote about how the debate about transgender rights affected their parent-child rights bodies. Some have been edited for length and clarity.

Giving transgender myself, I spent my childhood, youth and most of my adult life in denial and hiding my true self

I fully agree with the article and the readers' response. Being transgender myself, I spent my childhood, youth and most of my adult life in denial and hiding my true self, resulting in self-loathing, self-harm and two suicide attempts. Fortunately, I was able to transition at age 50 and live a decent, stable life, although a rich and rich — and with two open-minded children. We had, as youth, so which life happens to have been should be discriminated against. Bathroom bills aren't about bathrooms, aren't about safety, they are about discrimination. "A trans-gen, the marriage of my mother and my father would have been. Magical. I would have been and is a transcendent, unique gorgeous right into the gen-mashers which is why I am very sensitive to discrimination against people who are different. I am a human being, an author, an artist, a gender, sexual orientation, whatever.

— 39-year-old, Germany

People who are transgender have confronting social prejudices?

Here you be having the courage to show your body's story. Your children are lucky because you are a parents.

Have your story was personal, I wanted to add a comment to readers who were not affected by the issue. Not that people who are trans are "lucky" to have parents who have chosen to be open-minded. Children who are trans are "lucky" to have parents who are open-minded because they are still children, and children are lucky to have parents who are open-minded, period. Children who are trans are still children, and they are lucky to have parents who are open-minded, because children are lucky to have parents who are open-minded, because children are lucky to have parents who are open-minded, because children

American Girl

Kate Aurthur
BuzzFeed Contributor

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Dakota Fanning was 10 years old when she was cast in the movie Hounds of Love, a role that required her character to be kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. Fanning's parents had her read the movie's screenplay, and she was so taken with the story that she convinced her mother and her agent to let her take the role.

Fanning's mother, Tony Fanning, and her agent, Ellen Sidney, had her read the movie's screenplay because they had to be sure that the movie was not exploitative. Hounds of Love was based on the true story of the Australian serial killers Ivan Milat and Paul Peter Dennis, who tortured and murdered at least seven young people between the late 1970s and early 1990s. Fanning's parents had to be sure that the movie was not exploitative because they had raised their daughter to be a good girl who was not exploited.

Fanning's mother, Tony, and her father, Steve, had met and married in Los Angeles in the late 1970s and had been together since then. Tony had been a dancer and Steve had been a stuntman. Tony had been a stay-at-home mother. Steve had been a stuntman and had worked on movies such as Rocky and Rocky II, Cannonball Run, and Cannonball Run II. Steve had also been a stunt double for Burt Reynolds, Kris Kristofferson, and Jackie Chan, and had been a stunt double for Chan in movies such as Rumble in the Bronx and Rush Hour.

Dakota Fanning was born in Los Angeles in 1994. Her parents had decided that she would be a performer when she was two years old, and they had her start taking classes in singing, dance, and acting. Her first movie was Hide and Seek, in which she was cast at age 6 as the daughter of Robert De Niro's character. She then appeared in movies such as Man on Fire, Uptown Girls, and War of the Worlds, in which she was cast as the daughter of Tom Cruise's character. Fanning's parents had her read the movie's screenplay because they had to be sure that the movie was not exploitative. Hounds of Love was based on the true story of the Australian serial killers Ivan Milat and Paul Peter Dennis, who tortured and murdered at least seven young people between the late 1970s and early 1990s. Fanning's parents had to be sure that the movie was not exploitative because they had raised their daughter to be a good girl who was not exploited.

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NOT KIDDING

For the first time, scientists show that trans kids with family support can be as happy as their peers

It doesn't have to be a curse. (Tim Evanson/Flickr, CC-BY 2.0)

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WRITTEN BY
Kate Groetzinger

OBSESSION
Life as Laboratory

March 10, 2016

Studies consistently find that large numbers of transgender adults suffer from high levels of depression and suicide due to social stigmatization. But a new study shows this may not be the case for children who undergo a gender identity transition with familial support.

Researchers at the University of Washington have found that pre-pubescent children who are supported by their parents in making a gender identity transition have normal levels of depression and anxiety. The study, published online this month in Pediatrics, is the first to look at a large sample of transgender children from across the United States.

Seventy-three prepubescent transgender children who had changed their social identities, but not undergone a surgical transition, were recruited to participate in the study. Parents reported children's depression and anxiety levels with a survey developed by the National Institutes of Health. No difference in depression levels and only a slight difference in anxiety levels appeared to exist between control groups of siblings and unrelated children, and the transgender children whose families supported their identity transition.

This study begins to fill a gaping hole in the landscape of child psychology. Most doctors in the field have very little empirical research on which to base recommendations to families with children who experience gender dysphoria, or do not identify as their anatomical gender.

Previous studies on children with gender dysphoria have associated the condition with depression and anxiety. But the findings in this new study suggest things are different when kids are supported in making a gender transition."These data suggest at least the possibility that being transgender is not synonymous with, nor the direct result of, psychopathology in childhood," the researchers write.

Whether or not parents should support their children in making a social gender transition is still hotly debated in the field of child psychology. Advice not to allow young children to transition is based on the belief that children can grow out of gender dysphoria during puberty.

In a 2015 op-ed for the LA Times, two doctors from University of California at Los Angeles and Northwestern University cite research showing that more than 80% of gender dysphoric boys became "young men content to remain male" after going through puberty. But, as the authors point out, this research was conducted "at a time when parents almost always forced their children to remain their birth sex," so there is no way to know how they would have developed were they supported in making a gender transition at a young age. Not to mention the roughly 20% who did not grow out of their gender dysphoria.

Today, more parents are open to the idea of allowing their children to transition, according to Diane Ehrensaft, a leading clinical psychologist who specializes in pediatric gender dysphoria. "I've noticed a dramatic difference within the last five years," she tells Quartz. "I've noticed this explosion of a better understanding of children who are transgender."

Ehrensaft uses an "gender affirmative model" in her practice, which means she recommends parents to support their children in making a social gender transition if it is safe for the child to do so. The finding in this new study supports her model, which is gaining popularity in the US.

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