

JACOB'S Room to Choose

Note to Parents

by lore m. dickey, PhD

Jacob's Room to Choose is a heart-wrenching account of two elementary school students being denied safe access to their school's bathroom. In many places, kids are denied entry to, chased out of, or harassed while trying to use the restroom. People mistakenly believe that gender nonconforming people will try to access these spaces so that they can prey on other people. The truth is that they are more often the victims of violence than cisgender people. Using the restroom safely is just one of the many challenges gender nonconforming and transgender kids face regularly.

There are many ways to support your child and make them feel safe and included. This book offers tips about how to get support for safe restroom use for gender nonconforming kids in a school setting. The book can also be used as a model for how schools might engage in an affirmative manner when working to address the needs of gender nonconforming and transgender students. As the authors describe, there are interventions that can be made to improve your child's safety as they explore and live their gender identity.

Supporting and Advocating for your Child

Children experience challenges in life, whether from family, difficulties in the classroom, or relating to social-emotional health and wellbeing. For gender nonconforming and transgender children, these types of struggles can be particularly and uniquely difficult. Children need support through these challenges so that they feel safe.

When a child feels supported by their parents, they are more likely to succeed in life. Providing your child with support, regardless of the needs, will help ensure that you are able to celebrate your child's accomplishments. Adults may worry about providing the adequate support for their child, but it's often simpler than you would expect: be an advocate, educate yourself about the concerns they may face, ask others to respect your child's identity, encourage your child to stand up for themselves, use your child's gender pronouns and names, and seek help if you need it.

Be An Advocate

You may not think of yourself as an advocate, but you are! When you attend the parent-teacher conference for your child and you ask the teacher to pay attention to something your



child needs, you have engaged in advocacy. Asking for a policy that allows your child to use the restroom that is consistent with their identity may feel overwhelming, but there are many ways to approach it. You might want to talk to the parents of another child to enlist their help and support. Having allies along this journey can help you feel less burdened as you work to keep your child safe.

You may be saying, that is all fine and good, but the staff at my child's school will never be supportive. Sadly, this situation may be true more often than not. If it is a possibility, you may want to consider enrolling your child in another school. Finding a supportive school can be quite challenging and time consuming. If you live in a state that has a Safe Schools law (there are 22 states with such laws; check here to see if your state is included: http://www.lgbt-map.org/equality-maps/safe_school_laws) you may have an easier time securing support for your child. Safe Schools laws provide protections for children in the school setting against bullying behavior that is based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This is inclusive of violence that might occur in the restroom regardless of the source of the violence (e.g., student, faculty, or staff).



Educate Yourself

If you don't understand what your child is going through, it can be hard to help them through the challenges they face. There are many resources available to parents and caregivers. Learning things like the terminology (Assigned Male at Birth, Assigned Female at Birth, Transgender, etc.) will help you better communicate with your child and community about what they are experiencing. Educating yourself can also help you support them through future challenges like transitioning, if they choose to. The important thing is that you are knowledgeable and able to discuss your child's experience and help guide them through any choices they want to make.

A few great resources include:

Gender Spectrum gendersepctrum.org

Family Acceptance Project familyproject.sfsu.edu

Gender Diversity genderdiversity.org

Trans Family Support Services transfamilysos.org

Lambda Legal lambdalegal.org

Ask Others to Respect Your Child

In general, most children will be accepting of the needs of gender nonconforming people transgender children and adolescents. That support is not universal. You may not be able to change the views of unsupportive people, but you also do not need to tolerate mistreatment. You may need to educate others and advocate for your child. In working with school administrators, teachers, and librarians, you have the opportunity to help create a safe learning environment for all children.

Encourage Your Children to Stand Up (if it is safe to do so)

Your child's support system can help with difficult issues, however, sometimes a child may need to stand up for themselves. One of the most important ways they can do this is to speak up. Having the courage to tell an adult their discomfort with the bathroom choice available to them can go a long way. A parent or teacher can help advocate on their behalf or find an alternative option for them, as explained above. They can also stand up for themselves among their peers by helping them understand things like their clothing choice. For example, Jacob wears a dress to school, which can confuse some students. Jacob can tell his friends what he likes most about dresses, so that others can understand that wearing a dress is not all that different! Just like allies can be helpful for parents trying to make changes, having the support of adults and peers is invaluable for kids, as well. When they advocate for themselves, it helps to create a safe space for them.

Use Affirmed Pronouns

Another way that parents can support their child is by using the child's affirmed name and pronouns. Some children will be very clear about this and others will try different names and pronouns. Your child might also ask you what name you would have given them had they been assigned a different sex at birth. This can be a chance to bond with your child over a basic part of their identity: their name. If your child wants to try out different names, it will be important to be patient with them as they work through this process. Again, being supportive, which in this case means using the right name and pronoun, can be difficult as it is sometimes hard to remember the right name. This is especially true for parents as no one has known your child longer than you have. But as long as you are making an effort in good faith, your child will appreciate the support.

Seek Help

Although this may seem like an obvious conclusion, it is important to emphasize how critical it is for young people to have parental support. As parents, caretakers, and other trusted adults, you are in a unique position to help the children in your care develop in emotionally healthy ways. However, if you find that your child's distress persists or interferes with daily activities, consider taking your child to see a mental health professional, particularly one who works with gender nonconforming children.



lore m. dickey, PhD is a behavioral health consultant for North Country HealthCare in Bullhead City, AZ. His research has focused on understanding the transgender experience including studies on sexual identity development and non-suicidal self-injury. Dr. dickey served as a cochair for the APA Task Force charged with developing *Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People*.