

Support at Home and Beyond: Finding the Right Therapist for Your Trans-identified Teen

By Sasha Ayad, M.Ed, LPC



In a long, handwritten letter, your teen daughter has just confessed to you that she is “actually a boy”. Perhaps your son has tearily told you he is in the wrong body and begs you to let him start hormones. Some parents find out about their teen’s trans-identity by looking at posts on their social media accounts, or even by reading their child’s personal diary. It could be that your teen has identified as trans for some time now, and you are worried that they may take the next steps towards medically transitioning with hormones and surgery.

Of the hundreds of parents I’ve talked with, all of them want to support and guide their children in a loving way that also encourages physical safety, emotional exploration, and overall well-being. While I began to do this work for those same reasons, I have been met with a flood of worried parents who are often in a panicked state of desperation.

With a stable, loving, and calm approach, you can support your child. You can honor the important developmental work they are doing in exploring their identity, and help them navigate their very real feelings of pain, suffering, and self-doubt. The most important thing you can possibly do for your child at this time is listen, try to understand, and provide them with love and structure. That doesn’t mean you have to explicitly affirm their identity, but it does mean that you should keep in mind the most important factor in this situation right now: your relationship.

As you walk alongside your child during this journey, you should continue to gently and lovingly pose questions that foster a sense of curiosity and raise healthy doubts, while also supporting their self-confidence. Who is your child as a person, what talents do they have, what gifts do they bring to the world? Keep reminding them of all that is special, unique, and good about who they are; because those things are true regardless of their body, or their perceived gender. Continue building positive experiences with your child, and make a point of looking back to savor the cherished memories you’ve made in the past.

While you continue to do these things, you may feel it’s important to seek out other support for your child in the form of professional mental health services. This article outlines some helpful tips in seeking out counselors, therapists, and other helping professionals. You will need to think outside the box: as you might have realized, most “gender therapists” seem to affirm identities without thorough psychological assessment, without treating comorbidities,

and without a nuanced reflection about how the identity formed in the first place. If deeper therapeutic work is not done with care, it may lead kids (sometimes quickly and forcefully) down a road to medical intervention. This one-size-fits-all approach may be inappropriate for many gender-questioning teens. As I've learned in the last few years of private practice, with caring support and nuanced therapeutic conversations, many kids develop insight and self-respect, which leads them to an organic resolution of their gender-questioning.

Finding other therapists who will individualize treatment can be a challenge. So here are some methods you can apply to your search:

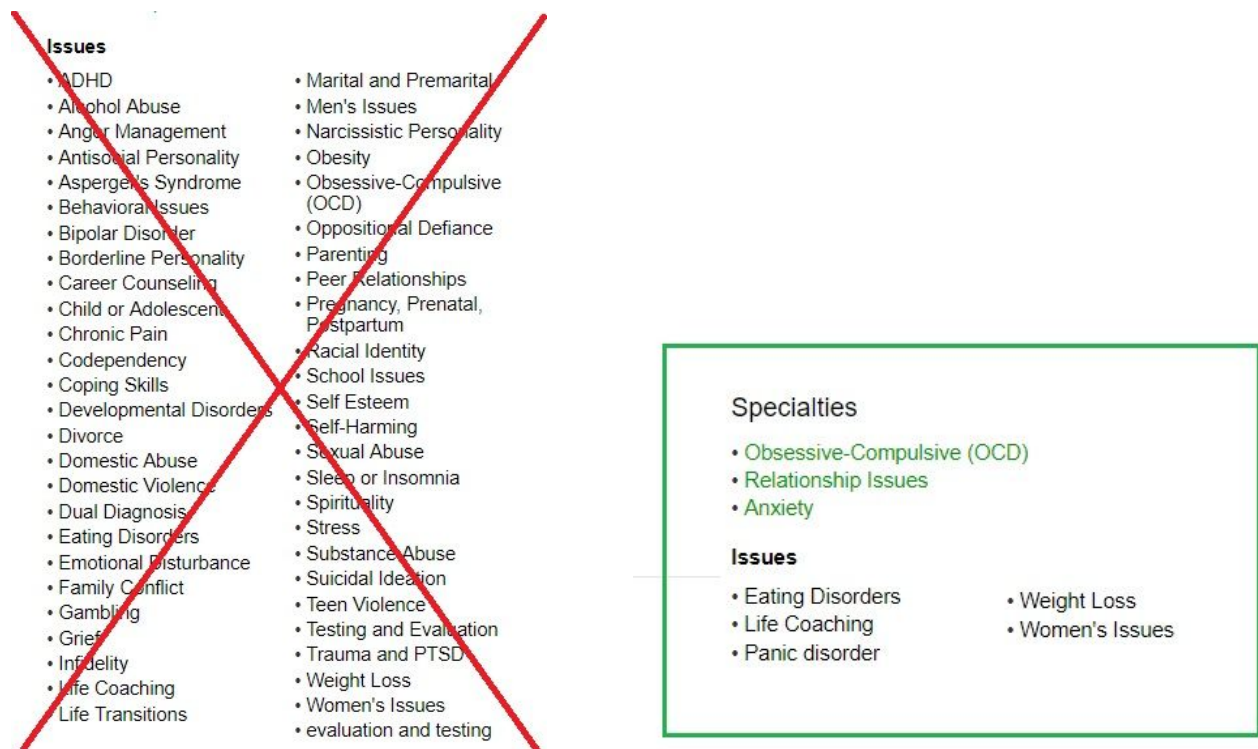
- 1. Other Specialties and Approaches:** Many therapists who specialize in a particular problem or focus area have a very valuable understanding of how traumatic interpersonal experiences, media influences, or other factors can manifest in dissociation or identity development problems. Consider searching for experts in body image & eating disorders, self-harm, trauma, anxiety disorders, women's issues, sexual abuse & domestic violence. You know your teen best. If they've struggled with depression their whole life, seek out an expert in teen depression. If they have obsessive-compulsive tendencies, seek out an OCD expert.

Therapists who practice ACT therapy focus on helping clients accept natural emotions, like pain and suffering, and live value-driven lives. Jungian analysts or psychodynamic therapists may take a more nuanced and symbolic approach to your child's declaration, viewing it as an attempt to seek meaning and validation in their life. Somatic therapies are particularly adept at addressing dissociation which is a disconnected relationship with the body. A psychiatrist, on the other hand, would likely perceive the identity through a highly medical lens, and may recommend medical treatments. I suggest caution around a purely medical view, and encourage parents to pair psychiatric services with other forms of therapy or family support.

Seek out specialists like these by going directly to the website of the approach itself, then search local providers. For example, here's the [C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco](#), where you can enter your zip code to locate nearby practitioners.

- 2. Limited Number of Focus Areas:** If you are searching on directory sites like [Psychology Today](#) take note of how many issues in which the therapist claims to be an expert. In the field of psychology, true expertise is developed by spending years focusing on a more narrow set of issues or life problems. There are always exceptions, however.

- a. The next page contains two examples: one list seems to indicate too many specialty issues and one list focused on just a few specialty issues:



3. **Be careful with religious approaches to therapy:** Regardless of your faith traditions, for your teen, now is the time for open-minded exploration and curiosity, not moral judgements or absolutes. I recommend caution, especially with counselors who claim to practice “reparative therapy” (AKA gay conversion therapy). Some of these religious-based therapies (though they claim to be secular) seek to enforce patriarchal sex-role stereotypes, which can create even greater dysphoria and confirm your child’s suspicion that they are in the wrong body. These “therapies” may also rely on shame, threats, and punishment, which are not a loving or kind way to support your teen’s development. Many religious based therapies *are* compassionate and exploratory, so just do your homework carefully.

4. **Interview your potential therapist:** This is the most important of all the tips. I often tell parents, it may be better to give your kid NO therapy than to give them bad therapy, depending on the individual’s situation. So take your time, be very careful, and consider the following points as you interview the therapist.

- a. The goal of this interview is to determine whether the therapist believes trans identities are *innate, fixed, and treatable only with medical intervention*.

If you feel the therapist is manipulating you with “transition or suicide” rhetoric, it may indicate a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, seek out therapists who

practice therapy based on thorough assessment, treating comorbidities, symbolic perspectives, and holistic and nuanced approaches.

- b. Two ways of asking questions: if you ask very broad and neutral questions about how the therapist treats trans-identified kids, they may hesitate to be honest about the nuance in their work, due to some of the fear clinicians have about working with this population. However, if you ask very specific questions, providing context around your child's situation, it may become clear that you are skeptical of medical transition, and the therapist may tailor his/her response to suit your concerns. Most likely though, this second approach is more helpful, as therapists are ethically obligated to be transparent when describing their therapeutic approach or methods.

As you seek out support, try not to think of this as a win-lose situation between desistance and a trans-identity. I often hear parents say they've lost their child. If your daughter's personality seems to change overnight, and you barely recognize the young person hiding away in baggy clothes, or locking herself in her room all day, I invite you to do something incredibly difficult: try meeting her where she is right NOW. Rather than clinging to the memory of who she was last year, last month, or even last week, get to know who she is becoming right now, even if it scares you - even if you desperately miss the more familiar girl from your memories.

Be patient, take it one day at a time, and remember that she is doing the best she can with the tools she has right now. By being open to her thoughts, ideas, and feelings, you will help validate her as a person. Take a calm, level-headed, and curious approach: in seeking out therapy, you don't want to send the message that there is something wrong with your child for feeling the way she does (remember she is likely one of many kids at school who is trying on a new sexual or gender identity). Many kids I've talked to feel very uneasy and insulted by the way their parents rush them into therapy at the first sign of a trans-identity. It may not make sense to you right now, but your child likely sees changing her identity as the best way to managing her pain, fit in, and find value in her life. Partnering with the right professional, you can facilitate a deeper level of curiosity and self-compassion in your teen's gender exploration.