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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Over the past 5 years in Canada, clinicians have observed an increased number of gender diverse and trans children and youth (GDTCY) accessing clinics for gender affirming care and support.¹ That GDTCY are usually accompanied by their families (parents and caregivers) when accessing care provides a unique opportunity to integrate them into the treatment team. GDTCY have better health and social outcomes when strongly supported by their parents/caregivers.² To optimize this, it is essential that we learn more about family experiences in supporting their GDTCY and in overcoming challenges and barriers to accessing services.³ *Stories of Gender-Affirming Care: Learning from Children, Youth and their Families* is one of the first qualitative research projects that aims to develop a deeper understanding of GDTCY and their parents/caregiver perspectives on the strengths and challenges within their experience of a gender-affirming care setting. This paper presents the findings on parent/caregiver experiences in accompanying their GDTCY and accessing care at Canadian clinics offering gender-affirming care to pre-pubescent, pubertal and post-pubescent youth.

Materials and Methods: A Grounded Theory methodology and a social determinants of health framework were used for the project. 36 semi-structured interviews and socio-demographic questionnaires were completed with parent/caregiver of a GDTCY between the age of 8 and 17 at one of the following three clinics: Meraki Health Centre, the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg. Data were analyzed through open and then axial coding to identify emerging themes in their narratives.

Results: Preliminary analysis of parents/caregivers narratives revealed five themes: the importance of support groups for parents/caregivers and GDTCY, the complex yet essential process of recognizing and accepting the child's gender identity, parents' experiences with clinic staff, parents' unmet needs (e.g. counselling) and the central role played by clinics as a gateway to other services needed to support the GDTCY and the family. Findings emphasize the importance of accessible services within the clinics to support the GDTCY's overall gender journey and improve their access to other services.

Conclusion: This study sheds much needed light on the experiences of parents accessing specialty clinics with their trans and gender diverse children. Parents in this study described the importance of getting support for themselves so they could effectively support their child. Increased support and education for parents might be achieved through closer collaboration between clinics and community organizations and groups, supplemented by additional resources.

RESULTS: PARENTS' RESPONSES TO CHILD'S COMING OUT

Resistance and Denial

And I said, and of course my reaction was just like, um, it wasn't a good one, it was like, "No, this is how you were supposed to be born, and like, just because you like girl things doesn't mean you're a girl, it's okay to like both things" and it was just like I didn't know what to do, I was just in a panic, right? (Kylie, parent of a transfeminine 11-year-old)

Surprise

Before coming here, I said, "You know, I don't really relate to a lot of transgender parents because it wasn't that hard for me to accept the change." I was surprised. It wasn't something that I was expecting for him to say to me, but at the same time, it wasn't heartbreaking or conflicting for me. (Jessie, parent of a transmasculine 15-year-old)

Supportive

I looked and I said to [youth] "I am proud that you are my child... I am proud of the courage you had to express and to say what you were feeling and I am proud of the courage you display to move forward in all of this." (Jackie, parent of a transmasculine 15-year-old)

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS OF ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORTING THE CHILD

Grief

Lack of Information

Co-parenting

Right Name and Pronouns

FACILITATORS OF ACCEPTANCE

- (1) Education;
- (2) Realizing that support would contribute to their child's well-being;
- (3) Allowing themselves time to integrate the new reality;
- (4) Support from other parents of trans and gender diverse youth
- (5) Support from professionals.

BACKGROUND

- Parents/care givers have been observed to react both positively and negatively to their child's assertion of gender diversity.^{4,5,6}
- Lack of parent/caregiver support, family-based rejection, as well as stigma and discrimination significantly increases adverse health and well-being outcomes for youth.^{7,8,9}
- Youth who experience family acceptance and affirmation of their gender identities experience greater overall quality of life.^{10,11}
- Parent/caregiver perspective on accessing GA medical care is limited:
 - > Parents' concerns about accessing care relate to issues of safety and acceptance after transition¹²
 - > A gender affirming, trans competent clinical environment can foster improved parent/child relationships, increase self-esteem and reduce stress for parents¹³

METHODS

- N = 35 from 3 clinics
- 36 semi-structured interviews and socio-demographic questionnaires were completed with parent/caregiver of a GDTCY between the age of 8 and 17 at one of the following three clinics: The Meraki Health Centre in Montreal, QC, The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa, ON, and The Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg, MB.
- Household income tends towards higher values compared to provincial census data.
- Relation with the youth: 4 fathers and 32 mothers, 2 of whom described themselves as a foster parent or guardian
- 29 families were covered by private health insurance

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH CLINIC STAFF

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Overall, parents reported very positive experiences:

- Staff were helpful, access to the clinic was fairly rapid, access to services within the clinic after intake was rapid;
- Staff were knowledgeable and parents didn't feel pressured but rather felt guided towards informed decisions;
- Parents felt supported, at ease, that they were not being judged by staff.

Oh, extreme respect. I mean he [GP] looked me right in the eyes. He understood, he felt, he was non-judgemental, he explained statistics, facts to me. (...) He didn't judge me at all. (Natasha, parent of a transfeminine 16-year-old)

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

Some described negative experiences:

- Wait times to access care (one site)
- Lack of mental health services for their child
- Delay related to protocol restrictions linked to age

[The clinic] still rejected him, and [the staff member] was still like, "Well, I guess you'll have to wait," and I'm like, "Are you guys insane?" Talking about, you read any of the documentation, you don't fucking wait. [...] And, at times of times of extreme frustration, probably closer to rage, I often think "Do I send the funeral bills to [clinic]?" (Sophia, parent of a fluid transmasculine 13 year-old)

It has been a good experience once we could see them. I think it's unacceptable that you have to wait over a year, and part of the problem with that is also initially, your child is super happy to be out in the open and it's freeing, but there are other issues involved once you are out that immediately come out, and you have to face in society because you're trying to be yourself. (Jessie, parent of a transmasculine 15 year-old)

KEY POINTS

- Parents' processes of acceptance continue after seeking gender-affirming care for their child: resistance/denial, surprise, support
- Parents who struggled to accept their child's gender identity usually drew on 5 main pillars of acceptance to move forward in their journey: (1) education; (2) realizing that support would contribute to their child's well-being; (3) allowing themselves time to integrate the new reality; (4) support from other parents; and (5) support from professionals.
- Generally, parents reported positive experiences with clinics. A few expressed negative experiences with wait times to access care, lack of mental health services for their child, and delays related to protocol restrictions due to age
- Supportive contact with other parents and with affirming health care providers helps facilitate parents' journeys towards acceptance
- A more systemic, family approach to care in clinics that work with youth would be desirable

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