Transgender – when your body and you don’t match up

Cathy Stephenson

I recently took the opportunity to read the Youth 12 survey, which studies a large sample of adolescents from around the country.

The survey, known officially as the National Survey of the Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand, is the third in a series that started in 2000, carried out by researchers from Auckland University.

A total of 9,000 young people participated in Youth 12, and the data received provides fascinating and often surprising insight into this age group. Topics included in the survey were ethnic identity, culture, family relationships, school, injuries and violence, health and healthcare, emotional health, food and eating, leisure activities, sexual health, alcohol, smoking, drug and community involvement.

For me, one of the most surprising findings of this survey was around gender identity. Youth 12 asked the question: “Do you think you are transsexual?” This is a girl who feels like she should have been a boy, or a boy who feels like he should have been a girl (or Trans, Queer, Transfeminine, Transmasculine, Transgender)?

The students were then categorized into four groups:

1. Those who reported being transgender.
2. Those who reported being transsexual.
3. Those who reported not being gender dysphoric.
4. Those who did not understand the question.

Around 96 per cent of students reported being not transgendered. Over 10 per cent however stated that they were transgender, with a further 4.5 per cent being unsure whether they were transgender or not. Another 1.1 per cent didn’t understand the question. The students from the “transgender” and “unsure” groups represented a wide demographic and were from all areas of the country.

So what does transgender mean, and what are the implications for this group of young people?

Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex to which they were assigned at birth. Gender identity refers to a person’s internal sense of being male, female or something else, and is different from sexual orientation.

Transgender people have existed around the world, in many diverse cultures, since time began, but not recently in many societies, they are still subject to marginalisation and abuse. It is not possible to explain why some people are transgender.

There are multiple factors that probably come into play, including biological changes, upset or dissatisfaction with early life, adolescence and adulthood, and biological and environment.

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Factors such as genetic influences and personal hormone effects. Transgender people may be of any sexual orientation-straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual or asexual-just as non-transgender people can be.

Transgender people may also become aware of their transgender identity at any age, describing very early memories of “not fitting in” and being aware that something “didn’t feel right” almost from birth, whereas others may become aware much later in life.

One of the most worrying findings of Youth 12 was the increase in the number of transsexual young people and levels of distress and abuse. Significantly fewer transsexual students reported having a person or friends that cared about them.

Students who identified as transgender were much more likely to report being bullied, being involved in fights, being excluded from activities, and being labelled or perceived as gay.

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This data has really highlighted for me how much more we need to do to help these young people feel safe, accepted, loved and included—promote their strengths and resilience in a positive manner. It is the wider community, encouraging an understanding of their vulnerability, and facilitating their acceptance, that is key. If you have young people in your community, role-modelling the following behaviors is a great place to start.

Being mindful of your attitudes concerning people with gender nonconforming appearance or behavior.

Understand that transsexual people will come from all backgrounds, cultures, sexual orientation and ethnicities.

Using pronouns that are appropriate and acceptable to the person’s gender identity, if you are not sure, just ask.

Acknowledge the difficulties that people who identify as transgender may face.

If you know someone who identifies as transgender, keep the lines of communication open—they may be struggling to access help or support elsewhere.

Advocate for transgender respect and rights.

For more information, visit www.rainbowhouse.org.nz

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