

Simple changes supporting gender diverse students

Two years ago, Ester Vallero's family entered a new journey with their middle child, then aged seven.

"Our child was unwell. He was really sad, crying every day and had constant tummy aches. He went from being a really happy child, a real extrovert, to being more and more withdrawn. One day, he said 'you don't understand me', so I thought I was missing something."

The pieces fell into place for the parents when they watched a Louis Theroux documentary on young transgender children. It was part way through the school year, and during the school holidays, when they sought support from LGBTQI not-for-profit Q-topia. Ester rang her child's principal at Beckenham Te Kura o Pūroto (formerly Beckenham School) to inform her that her child was struggling with their gender.



Principal Sandy Hastings said she knew very little around how to provide support in school to a child who was gender diverse. "It was not something I had ever really needed to look at. I knew in the back of my mind that one day I would probably be in this situation, but life is also busy, so you learn stuff on a need-to-know basis," said Sandy.

Within 48 hours of Ester's call, Sandy had pulled together literature from around the world, which gave her a starting point on how best to support gender diverse students. The school board then began the process of making practical and policy changes within the school to help prepare the child for a "more public" gender transition in a few months' time.

"I had a lot of difficulty finding local information, and I think that has changed in the last two years. I couldn't even find a document that was going to give me a 101 on leading a school to support a family with a transgender child."

Ester says the school response to her call and leadership on the situation was "amazing". Simple changes were made immediately to allow the child, parents, teachers and everyone to "breathe comfortably".

"One of the easiest things was to go to our uniform guide for parents. We went through it and asked, 'why have we got boys and girls here'. We just needed to take the 'girls' and 'boys' off and say, 'these are the options'," said Sandy. "We just took the attitude of 'let's not make it complicated'. We want all of our kids to be themselves."

Sandy said the matter provided a much-needed wake-up call regarding the gender binary expressions that were regularly used out of habit and with good intention. "I was doing my best to be kind and supportive and I began to notice how much gender bias many of my comments had. Those situations are great learning situations. It took us many apologies to get it right – as it does when changing any habit."

School staff and the family had been preparing for the child's social transition after the Christmas break. The child reverted to a state of unhappiness when faced with the prospect of continuing to go to school as a boy, and the school supported her social transition with only half a day notice. Sandy sent an email to staff and the board to inform them of the child's situation and new name, alongside a short paragraph from Ester and her husband Matt.

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Ester had expected her child's first day at school as a girl to be nerve-racking. It was anything but thanks to Sandy's leadership and the welcoming response from teachers and school staff. Friends and the other children in the school naturally accepted the change, with simple explanations from teachers on gender identity and gender diversity.

"From the very beginning, we've always felt completely and unconditionally accepted and supported, which made it possible for us to concentrate on supporting our child, rather than having to argue with the school," said Ester. "Our child's teachers supported her in conversations with her friends around her gender identity. Some moments were hard for her, but she always felt that somebody at school cared for her, and she has maintained friendships and gained new ones. Schools have an important role to normalise diversity and create inclusive environments, so that all children can be themselves."

Sandy said schools need to have an openness and willingness to work with everyone involved in the child's life, to support them at school. "My relationship with Ester and our relationship with the child has been so important. I have been really open with Ester and said, 'I know nothing and we're willing to go the whole distance with you and we'll hold each other's hands on the journey'. It's also about acknowledging that we won't always get it right."

The family and the school work together to plan potentially challenging situations, such as swimming lessons or health classes, to make sure that all children feel included. When the child made their debut as a girl in the school kapa haka photos, Sandy immediately sent a photo of the child in her new costume to Ester. Little things that showed the school cared were the ones that meant the most to Ester.

Resources on gender diversity

- [Qtopia](#).
- [Making schools safer for trans and gender diverse youth](#) (Inside Out).
- [Ministry of Education guidelines and resources](#).
- [Takatāpui: Part of the Whānau](#) (Mental Health Foundation).
- [Gender Minorities Aotearoa has information for young people and families](#).
- A peer support group for parents and guardians of gender diverse children is run by Sharyn Forsyth (nzparentsoftransgenderchildren@gmail.com).
- [Families in TRANSition: A Resource Guide for Parents of Trans Youth](#) (Central Toronto Youth Services – Canada).

Small changes can make big differences

Q-topia educator Ari Nicholson said significant changes in a school are not required to better support gender diverse students. "Small changes to the school structure can make a huge difference to someone's life."

Nicholson works with schools to give teachers the knowledge and skills needed to support students. Those small things include ensuring there are safe spaces for children on site, including bathrooms and changing spaces, and being aware of simple messaging. "When they say 'line up', do they say 'two lines, one girls, one boys' or do they say just line up." Posters on the wall should also be inclusive of all genders and sexualities, as should everything a school promotes.

"Are they promoting the All Blacks and that strong male culture? Or are they promoting wider, more diverse sports? Lots of schools have got behind the Commonwealth Games and that's great because not only does it promote all genders, it also supports disability within the mainstream."

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Nicholson said children are much more aware of social structures in society from a younger age, and it is important to prevent them from being impacted by harmful language. “Some of that damaging messaging around ‘you’re not male enough and female enough’, ‘this is what you should aspire to’ ... can be really harming and can lead to body dysphoria in quite young children. That can be prevented when children are in an environment where they are allowed to be who they are.”

Nicholson met with Sandy, her team at Beckenham Te Kura o Pūroto and Ester when the child transitioned at school. The organisation gave them support and guidance on the information Sandy was using and reviewed an article for the school community looking at the key messages and safety for the child. “We also met with the after-school programme to ensure they could provide a safe environment when she entered their programme.”