



Commentary


The Transgender Child: A Lesson in Acceptance

Wren Kauffman

ABSTRACT

In this interview, 12-year-old Wren Kauffman shares his earliest memories of “not feel[ing] right” in his body and how he conveyed this powerful sentiment to his parents. Wren and his mother Wendy discuss the transgender journey their family has gone on, which initially started by contacting the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta. Wren recounts how he told friends and classmates that he was transgender, talks about the support and openness he has received from teachers, friends, and schools, and of the critical importance of acceptance. Issues such as bullying, gender-neutral spaces, and diversity are also discussed. In addition, Wendy emphasizes the key role education plays in the inclusion of transgender children: “If we can start from a place of education, and explain that there is a really wide kind of variety of different ways that people can be born, that’s going to help society and people in general understand that transgender people are in the world.”

How and when did you know that your gender identity was not congruent with being a girl?

 knew as early as I can remember, pretty much. It just didn’t feel right...I just didn’t match the body I was in. I always, before I went to bed, I wished to myself, “Could I please wake up to be a boy?” And every morning I was really upset because it didn’t happen, but as early as I can remember it just in any way did not feel right.

Tell us the story about how you and your family dealt with this issue.

Wren: I think it was in grade 4. I told my mom one night and I was crying to her, I said, "Mom, I just want to be a boy!" So, then later she told my dad, of course, and then they both looked up "transgender" on Google because they didn't know much about it, and they found Kris Wells.

Wendy: Avy (our younger daughter) told me one night as I was tucking her in, "Mom, Wren is a boy," and I felt a little bit defensive and said, "I know that Wren is a boy," and Avy said, "No, mom, he is a boy—he doesn't *want* to be a boy." So that was different. The way she worded it, it hit me differently, and then I went and I talked to you and you were very upset and you said that you felt very different and you were having a hard time sleeping because you were thinking about it all the time. And so it was then, that night my husband came home, and Greg, the next day he looked up information on the web, and he found Kris Wells' name and Kris works for the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta. From that point on there was still stuff to sort out, but it helped just saying to Wren that we loved him no matter what and we finally understood. That we would help him. Kris had recommend that we see our pediatrician, and although that meeting was positive in some ways...

Wren: ...it was also really depressing in other ways...

Wendy: ...I think it left Wren feeling like nothing concrete had really happened because the pediatrician said that it was just a phase, and he felt that it would be just a phase, and that the longer we waited, the more likely Wren would, you know, align, and this didn't feel right with Wren...like that he could still look like a boy, dress like a boy, and that...

Wren: ...but I'd have to go through puberty...

Wendy: ...but that he'd have to potentially go through puberty as a girl, and so the pediatrician wouldn't refer us to a specialist in the city, and that was kind of odd that he wouldn't let us see Dr. Warneke even though we wanted to. So, we ended up finding, Kris was able to get us in to see Dr. Warneke. And then, from that point on, after we saw Dr. Warneke, he too was very affirming to Wren, and he said that as parents we were doing all that we needed to

do and that we were going to let Wren lead. It was after that, in March of grade 5 that Wren transitioned at school.

Wren: There were almost no issues or hurdles, everyone was super super accepting, and it was really great to know I had that kind of community at school. It was really nice 'cause all the teachers were very accepting. I think most of them kind of knew what was going on because I'd always dressed like a boy. I think I act like a boy, you know.

How about your friends? Can you tell us a little bit about your friends?

Wren: Oh yeah, all my friends were really good. A couple of them had questions, like, what's the bathroom situation going to be? And I used a staff bathroom because that's what we decided on. But all my friends were really accepting and they called me "he" and stuff, and they accepted me as a boy because that's who I am.

Wendy: That summer it was a transition for our family; there was still some times when people had trouble with pronouns, and so that took a little while, like a few months to change pronouns because that's very hard. And also for parents, it was more permanent. Once you start talking about your child with different pronouns you really feel that this is real and it's changing. I've said before that there is a bit of grieving for something that you really didn't even know you had: I didn't know what Wren would be like as a girl, as a teen or as a woman, but it was what I thought I had been given. And so it was like having a new child, having a son all of a sudden and it was quite lovely and pleasurable, but there was also a bit of a loss and still worry. I was still worried that at some point we would hit a hurdle of him being teased or possibly hurdles at school. Do you want to talk a little bit about what it was like then when you went to Victoria?

Wren: I didn't want classmates to know right away...well it was kind of because they automatically know me as trans, as soon as I started school, kind of felt like they would think of me as a "trans" boy, not the boy who is "trans," right, so I didn't want that to happen. I ran into some people from Camp FYrefly, which is a really good camp for LGBTQ kids, and so we were kind of talking in the hallway and my two friends were there, and so what happened is he asks (Well, I'm kind of forgetting from Camp FYrefly), "Are you LGBTQ...are

you gay or trans?" And I said, "trans," but my two friends were there, which I kind of forgot about, and they said, "Oh, you're trans?" And, yeah, just don't like tell anyone and they didn't tell anybody for a long time...it was about four or five weeks...and then they told their two other friends...

Wendy: ...but it wasn't in a mean way...it was just because they accepted you and they just forgot that it was a secret. And then you just got tired of...

Wren: ...everybody finding out it was a secret, and then so I kind of just told my mom and teachers can I just come out to the class? And as soon as I figured out it would take four weeks for that to happen... I went ahead and said, "Tell your friends and then we'll kind of sort it out from there that I'm trans." A couple of the kids, not knowing they said, they winked at me in the hall, "Mr. Kauffman," or some of them didn't believe it. Some of them were like, "I need proof" and I said, "I'm not going to pull down my pants." And so, they didn't quite get it at first. But then, my really awesome teacher, Ms. Taylor, she had a discussion with the class and she kind of explained it that "transgendered" is a good thing—and we'd been doing this all year.

Wendy: She'd incorporated it knowing she had a transgendered child in the class. She had really started to use the language and talk about it like all other diversities that we mention and learn about. She started including LGBTQ as part of that. The Vic is an art school but it's also an international baccalaureate school, so they wanted a global method of teaching so kids know what's going on in the world, so that was really great that the kids already had the language for it.

Wren: And as soon as everybody...after the conversations with Ms. Taylor, what happened was everybody was really nice and they had a little comment box 'cause some kids could have been afraid to raise their hands and talk to me directly, not because I'm trans, but because sometimes saying stuff about a question you don't really understand can be nerve wracking. And so, a lot of kids put questions in (or comments) and all of them were extremely positive. Some of them were questions like, "Why do gay people get teased sometimes?" And that's just not right. It's not nice that people get teased because of their sexuality or gender. But some of them were like, "I still think of you in the exact same way...you're super awesome...we all love you," and stuff like that. Everyone was really nice.

Wendy: We've had two opportunities where two different Edmonton public schools have really supported us, and really helped to educate those around, and it's really been very seamless. It's frustrating to hear that in other places kids don't have it so easy. And I mean, there still could be a time when Wren's "something" happens, but so far not, and the school has seemed so ready for it—they're ready for any issues that might come up. And, we're ready, too.

Wren: ...meaning if they're mean to me and they don't like transgendered people, then you don't need to be a part of my life. You can just go and, I don't know, continue with yours. Don't be mean to me and I won't have a problem with you.

What kinds of advice would you give to parents of children who are grappling with gender identity?

Wren: My mom, I know she's really accepting and stuff, but you got to keep in mind she never had a daughter. You've always had a son, but you just didn't know it. And so, if your kid is really upset and depressed about what their gender is, then why not just let them be who they are. It wouldn't be any different.

Wendy: And what I've said all along is it's hard sometimes for parents to really listen to their kids. I think now, this generation, does parent differently and we do hear them, but, I think that listening to your child and hearing what they have to say, and also, I think a lot of children are gender fluid too in the beginning and if we can start at a place of just letting them have choices that are *their* preferences and not influence play, not say those things like, "Why are you dressing like a princess? You're a little boy. You need to dress with these kinds of costumes." Or even just lining kids up according to gender. If we can start to look at gender-neutral language or not influence gender-specific play, I think that can also go a long way in helping to let kids know that it doesn't matter. But the world we live in right now is very gendered, and I think that's why it's so hard to wrap your head around, we're very used to gendered individuals and kids, and so it kind of throws us. And one of the questions that I ask people who actually do think they're very open and understanding with their children is, "What would you do if you were shopping for your child and you were in Mountain Equipment Co-op and your little boy really wanted the pink jacket?" And that stops a lot of people because most people would influence in that moment—they would

not allow their boy to wear a feminine colour. I think that's a good lesson for all of us, that it's really about preference and about choice and children should have that freedom to express what they like in their play and in their dress. You know, just in their life they should be able to choose, and so that's kind of the advice that I would give: to just be open.

Before we go on to the next question could I ask you, as the mother—you're obviously a very inclusive family and very supportive—can you give us a couple of tangible examples of how things came up that you were able to support Wren in this transition.

Wendy: He just whispered to me right now that it's the pronouns. If we go right back to that time where he was crying in bed and saying, "I don't feel like I am a girl and I know I'm different," I think from that point on there were all these little steps and one of them was cutting his hair—like for a parent to let go of what is a prescribed idea of what a girl's/female's gender expression should look like, or a male's gender expression. So that, it is challenging, and I guess my advice would be to just be confident in knowing your own child. So, I know I wasn't confident at first. I was just worried—I was worried that people, that kids would start teasing Wren, that he would be alienated because he was looking more and more like a male, and in our situation we were lucky that that wasn't the case. But it is lucky because we know when other kids transition that it wasn't so seamless, and there was a lot of hurt and alienation—and I guess my advice would be to just be supportive of your child and then try to find those places that would foster this individual. It is hard, and I think that's something else that we can't really...it's not really fair to not validate it. You can't just go from a gendered world where we have children that are boys and girls, and then just immediately let it go and just be like, "Oh, great! I had a girl but they want to be a boy, so I'm just going to let them be a boy." I think every parent kind of has to move through the situation at their own pace and they have to go through their own process, and they have to validate that it is a challenge, it's hard, and the whole point of Wren and our family deciding to be open and talk about it is so that someone else can hear me saying, "It wasn't easy." Because I think that seeing it in the media, hearing our story, hearing about it, you are kind of getting the end where we are healed—we've moved through it. Because there was a time where pronouns, that was really hard for me. It felt so real, so permanent. My advice is yes, this is real, and to help them and to listen to them. But also in the same sense I'm not saying it isn't challenging.

Was it any more difficult or easier for your husband in this situation?

Wendy: No, Greg and I, again, luckily we both were very much on the same page in terms of helping and supporting him. I think there are times we might have argued about how long stuff would take, because I kind of felt like if we're doing this, let's just do it, I was just ready. And so sometimes he was a little more cautious because he liked the idea of just having a bit more time to think it through, to maybe plan who he would tell, and talk to the teachers. Wren gave an example of how, when he didn't move to the other school and he hadn't been super open about it, but then when he was ready I really didn't think that it was that big of a deal that he just tell his peers at his own pace and in his own time. Where Greg thought, no, we should have another more formal discussion in the classroom with the teacher to help guide it. Both ways they have their positives and it's kind of nice that we had that...we sort of maybe tempered each other a bit. And, he didn't have any more difficult times. I think sometimes in the beginning for, this is what I've heard for parents who have boys who know that they're actually girls, in our society it's a little more challenging when that happens for men because their peer groups can really frown on boys being feminine, coming across as feminine, wanting to be feminine. We don't have an equivalent word for "tomboy." There is no positive equivalent term for "tomboy" for a boy. That's kind of telling, too, that in our society being more feminine is frowned upon and less accepted. Whereas, I think with a little girl who wants to be a boy, I mean, Wren all along was accepted and everyone was just like, "Oh, she's just a tomboy, or she's just, you know, a rough and tumble kind of girl"—it was sort of celebrated, it wasn't frowned upon. I think that for fathers and for mothers of boys it could be a little more challenging because of how our society and culture is.

How could schools and society in general deal more effectively with situations involving transgender identity? It sounds like you've had a really very supportive situation. In less supportive situations, what might you suggest?

Wendy: It's easy to say the things we could do, but it's hard to actually put them in place partly because of education. Again, that's kind of why we're doing it. I want people to hear that, you know, this just isn't just my husband and I saying, "Oh, you want to be a boy? Ok, go ahead and be a boy and we're not being responsible parents." When you live with someone who is

transgender, it is different than going through a phase. It's not like we're helping Wren to be confused, which we've had people say. So, if we can start from a place of education, and explain that there is a really wide kind of variety of different ways that people can be born, that's going to help society and people in general understand that transgender people are in the world. And so that's one of the things I'm really thinking will help in the future when you hear about schools that are really caught on the bathroom issues.

Wren, do you have anything that you would like to add to that?

Wren: I've had really good schools and stuff, and I know that I have a really awesome school right now, and I had a really awesome school in elementary, too, but one thing is the bathroom situation, which I think we've already talked about. The other thing, is as I said advice for parents, is just accept it. It's perfectly normal. Maybe other people don't have that issue; it might not be common, but it's good. Because it teaches your students about diversity, which is okay. It's just good for everyone because then nobody's upset. And if somebody has a problem with it then they can use the staff bathroom.



Wren Kauffman is a 12-year-old transgender boy who resides in Edmonton, Alberta with his mother, father, and younger sister. Wren always felt that he was a boy. At age nine he transitioned, and now openly identifies himself with the male gender. He is a passionate advocate and activist for LGBTQ issues. Wren has completed grade 7, and enjoys art, riding his bike, skateboarding, baking, and reading books.

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