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Gender Diversity Transcript

Cindy Lopez: *Welcome. My name is Cindy Lopez, the host of this CHC podcast, Voices of Compassion. We hope you find a little courage, feel connected and experience compassion every time you listen.*

Join our guest host, Natalie Tamburello, Community Engagement Manager at CHC in a conversation with CHC expert, Dr. Tracy Cavaligos, a licensed psychologist, as they discuss navigating terminology and supporting children around exploring gender identity. In this episode, you'll learn about different terms and when to use them, how to support your child's natural gender exploration and resources to support their journey. As a result, you'll see the joy of your child becoming comfortable expressing their true and authentic selves.

Natalie Tamburello: I'm Natalie Tamburello, and I'm excited to guest host today's episode discussing how to support your child through gender exploration with Dr. Tracy Cavaligos. Tell us a bit about yourself, and why is this topic important to you, Tracy?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: Thanks for having me, Natalie. I'm a clinical psychologist, and I work mostly with LGBTQ adolescents and young adults so I'm super excited today to be here to talk to you about gender diverse youth and how their parents can support them and their mental health.

Natalie Tamburello: So I first want to start off with talking about language, and there's lots of different language around gender and sexuality. So what are the terms that we're going to be using today and that we should be using in our homes?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: Language changes frequently as we better understand ourselves, the world, as well as how words are used in different contexts, and how it changes over time, it's always going to be a little bit different. So this is a non-exhaustive list, but there's some terms that you might want to know as you're listening to our podcast today. So first up would be gender identity, which is our internal sense of gender. This is if we feel like a woman, a man, non-binary, or another gender. Then we have gender expression, and this is how someone expresses or displays their gender. This could be things like what you're wearing, your clothes, jewelry, things like that. Assigned gender, or what you hear as gender assigned at birth, it's what's placed on a birth certificate when we're born. It is our assumed gender. Affirmed gender can be described as like our lived gender or how we're living and what we would describe our

gender as and what we'd like to be known as. Then we have some descriptors, cisgender and transgender that mean, like, if you're cisgender you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth. And transgender means you do not identify with the gender you were assigned at birth.

Non-binary is also a descriptor, and this is for someone who does not identify within the binary of woman or man. They may identify with combinations, between a binary or even beyond a binary. You could also hear this being interchangeable at times with things like gender queer, gender fluid, gender diverse, or gender non-conforming, for example.

Next up, which is a common one that we get confused a lot about with is sexual identity or sexual orientation. This is different from gender identity, and sexual orientation is used to describe someone's sexual attraction and interests towards other people or to know other people. There are also different types of attraction as well that you may hear, such as romantic attraction. This could include someone's like interest in another for romantic relationship or feelings; aesthetic attraction – that includes visual preferences, interests; or like what we find appealing or aesthetic from what we like. We'll mostly be talking about gender, but I wanted to be sure we clarified some of those differences because a lot of parents have those questions of what's my child's sexual orientation, what's my child's gender identity, and how do those interplay. So I hope that helps a little bit today.

Natalie Tamburello: If you look at gender identity, gender expression, and lived gender, are there instances where those are different, and what does that look like?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: So when we describe our gender identity, again, that's like someone telling you how they identify. And then your gender expression is how you're showing that to the world. What can kind of get muddled is when people make assumptions about those things or how they align. So they may see somebody and make an assumption of their gender identity based off of, like, what they're wearing, for example. So a lot of times, for other people, it may feel like a confusing or different thing, but for the person they're knowing and showing what they feel and how they identify. So it can a little bit feel like it's different to outside people, but they're really showing these different ways of like, how am I describing my experience, and how am I showing that experience. And really it's up to the person to tell you what those things are and for us not to make assumptions based off of what we might think it could be.

Natalie Tamburello: That's helpful. Thank you. So how do we start conversations around gender and sexuality, as parents?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: So, with most topics our kids are going to be sponges. They're really aware of like, how we're talking about things and taking in all of that all the time. So being mindful of like, how you speak about yourself and how you speak about others is really important. A starting point is really to be consistent and, like, modeling affirming language and acceptance in your daily life. So not only when you're talking directly to your child, but kind of like, walking the walk. So demonstrate being open, curious, non-judgmental, and showing respect for others. Your kids are really going to be aware of the way you talk about your friends, neighbors, co-workers, you know, celebrities, and they're really going to take that in. This will set an example of what your kids are going to assume about how they'll respond to you or how you're going to respond to them. So you can really help create that safe container for your child to feel safe to share with you their authentic selves.

And it's also appropriate to talk about gender and identity throughout development in your child's life. They don't have to be big, serious, sit down conversations that have a lot of pressure on you and your kid. They can really be some of these openings where you just kind of like check in about their feelings, their interests, thoughts and questions that they might have, the things that they like and don't like. I always recommend if you're looking for, like, little openings or opportunities to use day to day events or even current events; you can always use that as, like, an intro into gender to just see where your kids are at and get the conversation moving.

Natalie Tamburello: And not make it so personal.

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: Mm hmm. Doesn't have to be a big weighty thing.

Natalie Tamburello: So what if, I as a parent would start to notice my child exploring their gender? How do I support them in that exploration?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: I would say your first reaction is not to panic. Gender exploration and engaging in what we would say is non-stereotypical gender behavior or interests in the, like, loosest terms, this would be, like, a boy playing with dolls or a girl playing with trucks when we were little. It's all part of normal development throughout our life. People are curious, and we want them to be provided with a safe container, like I said earlier, to like explore and know themselves, and know that they're going to be loved and supported for who they are and what they like, and just find that out safely in a way that they can starting out like gender expression can be a great point to support them with. Helping your kids to just like wear what they want to wear and be comfortable with that; having the hairstyles or the toys and activities that they want to engage in and play in. Also their name and their pronouns. So thinking back to times

like in your life: when have you had to wear clothing that you didn't want to wear? Maybe it was like a really stiff suit or an uncomfortable outfit. How did that interact with you and like the way you went about your day, how did you feel in that? How did you show up or talk to people? And then think of the change of when you got to wear something that you did want to wear, like, what did that shift do for you just in that simple option that you had. You can help your kid kind of do that in their day to day life with some small things.

And then back to the pronouns, conversations, and names. So like, if your child shares with you that they would like to use a different name or pronouns, follow their lead: use their name and their pronouns. This can also be a really great point to find out where they would like you to use them. Is this something that they just want to do between you, at home, would they like it in front of their friends, at school? You can really support them in those different avenues, and it might be different throughout time of where they want those names and pronouns used to encourage themselves. But always encouraging parents to really continue to be open to learning about your child as they learn more about themselves. It's a really great opportunity.

Natalie Tamburello: I like that suggestion as like a safety/testing area of where you want to try out a pronoun or a name that you might not be comfortable sharing in school yet. I think that's really helpful.

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: And when your kid brings it up, that's a great opportunity to say, like, "Okay, where would you like this to be used?" Because we might make an assumption of like, "Oh, we don't want it to be used anywhere," "We want it to be used everywhere." and see where they're at.

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Natalie Tamburello: So what suggestions do you have to guide a kind of more hesitant parent that might be uncomfortable or fearful when their child starts to maybe express gender incongruent traits? So, you know, as a parent, I think we might be very progressive and agree with things on paper or politically, but we might start to feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped when it becomes our child. So how do you manage that or suggest parents manage that?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: I would really love for parents to like hold space for their own emotional reactions in their own space and time. So it is not your child's job to like process or hold these reactions for you. It's your job to show up for them and know like you may feel scared or worried or confused, or even feel some grief around the expectations or ideas that you've had for your child's life. And you're not alone in that. You know, give yourself care and time to work through these emotions in spaces that can provide you with the support and education that you need. You can find some of these spaces in our resource list as well, but also talking with your friends, your community members, there's lots of wonderful parent support groups, there's spaces like Q Corner, PFLAG that have resources and community, as well as your own individual therapy because you're going to have reactions to all of these changes and support, so making sure you're getting that support for yourself. You know, like putting your mask, your oxygen mask on first before you help everybody else. That's the same situation here, as well.

Also knowing, like, you're not expected to be the expert here. It's okay to acknowledge there are things you don't know about or you're not aware of. And again, remember, modeling this for your kids, like, it can be so powerful to show your kids how you react to new information and experiences. Are you going to kind of like freak out and lose it and have a really hard time? Are you going to try and then follow their lead and, you know, gain that space to process and gain that research and new information and adapt to new information? That could be very powerful for them to see you do this as well too. And remember your child is showing you like who they are today. This is such a gift, your child wants you to be known. And they want to be known and loved by you for, like, who they are, and they don't want to hide. So just remembering, like, you've created that safe container for them to share this with you; that is a lot of special work and love that you've already put there, that they're opening up in this way for you.

Natalie Tamburello: You said something about, which I really loved, was that it's not your child's job to hold your emotions for you or your reactions for you. I also wonder if you're really coming in new to gender identity and you have a lot of questions for your child, is it okay to burden them with all of those questions as a part of like you processing and processing with them, or how much do you recommend kind of doing your own research?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: I would say as a general thing, not for each specific answer, each question that we have, right, because it's going to depend on family relationships and a child's. But as a starting point, if you're looking for your child's experience or their preference, like we were talking about earlier, like, "Okay, you brought up a name that you want me to use, you brought up these pronouns. Where would you like me to do

that?” You know, those are good questions because you want to be asking your child for their experiences and their preferences and their interests and safety points. So they’re not being the expert here and trying to say here’s what this word means or here’s what this and this and this and this looks like, but they’re sharing their perspective and helping to kind of tailor that one-on-one relationship. Those are great. Those can be really wonderful entry points too, or even just talking about experiences together can be really helpful, but I would say if it’s more around trying to understand, like, history or medical questions or societal community questions or definitions, things like that, that can be some research and things that we can do on our own or that we can search out and get those answers that we don’t have to put onto our kid, as well.

Natalie Tamburello: So what do you say to parents who are concerned that their child will change their mind, or are less understanding of queer identities? What advice do you give to that child or give a child who has a parent like this? What tools would you recommend?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: So, for youth, if you’re not feeling supported at home, I would really want to emphasize to find that community, find the spaces and relationships that you do feel like you can be yourself in safely. There are people who will love you for who you are, and there are lots of resources and spaces for building these relationships, especially if it’s feeling hard to do in your school or in your immediate community or family. There are spaces like PFLAG, Outlet, and Q Corner that have groups and services to connect. These are some within the Bay as well as nationally too, but really trying to build up that community where you can be yourself.

Natalie Tamburello: I guess as an extension to that—I assume kids are a lot more comfortable talking about gender and sexuality today because of all these resources, but what’s another reason compared to previous generations? Why are kids so comfortable expressing themselves this way?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: Trans people have always existed, across time, across culture. This is not a new lived experience, but like you said a little bit earlier, with this increased visibility, we have language, we have awareness and acceptance and community support. We can describe and understand our experiences better. So we have new increased knowledge of these perspectives. And like I said earlier, right, like that language can really express, How do we talk about how I’m feeling? How do we talk about what’s going on inside of me and give us the words to do that? It kind of equates, you know, back in the day, as a society, we would really, like, actively discourage and kind of, like, train out being left handed. And then, once that practice stopped, there was this huge boom and, like, surge of people who were left handed.

This didn't mean, like, all of a sudden, oh my gosh, people are changing and everyone's left handed now, there's some big thing going on. It's just that they weren't left handed being forced out, like they were able to be accepted of who they were and just live, and they were always there, and we're seeing that the same way within our trans youth and trans community too.

Natalie Tamburello: Yeah. That's a great analogy. So as a clinician, what are the risks that you see for students who are part of this community? And what do you look for that might be concerning and how do you mitigate those risks?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: I want to make it first very clear that the risk for gender diverse youth are not due to their gender identity. It is not causing them harm that they're trans. What is harmful is the oppression, stigma, and marginalization from society. We're especially seeing, like, an increase in hate towards the trans community that's being shown through, like, legislation, reduction or elimination of access to services and care, violence and even the debate of their very existence. Some risks, like, when they're not accepted by their families, their schools, their communities, they're being discriminated against within education, career, medical, and mental health care, and they're just trying to navigate the world safely. Then they're going to be more likely to experience things like depression, anxiety, self-harm, or suicidal ideation or behaviors. And we see this across communities who have been marginalized. So, for parents listening, I really want you to hold this, that research has shown one of the most important and powerful protective factors we have for our gender diverse youth is to have supportive parents. You can actually save your child's life by honoring who they are in that moment.

Natalie Tamburello: So on the flip side, what are the biggest wins for this community, or benefits for students who are a part of the gender diverse community? What do you look for from students who are on a positive track?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: That is such a lovely question. I know especially we tend to focus on some of those risks, so taking the time to highlight all the beauty and benefits, because like you said, there's so many for gender diverse youth and their family. I'd really say like this strong sense of community, the joy in getting to see somebody experience their sense of self and living their genuine and true self is so, so powerful. Seeing that reduction in depression, anxiety, and self-harm when they're like building that life that's worth living, the joy and freedom and creativity that comes through just exploration and being yourself. Also like the strength for communicating who you are and like being bold and doing that across spaces is so huge. Also like when we've been talking a lot about parents and relationships, seeing the depth of love that parents and community members and peers show up for and being able to, like, experience that is

so, so powerful. Along all those lines as well, right, there's so much growth and change and curiosity for parents, for kids, like, the willingness to be uncomfortable and ask yourself hard questions and really do a lot of, like, self-insight and knowledge and growth within that. It's such a joy and such a privilege to be able to do it. And I think one of the ones that we've been talking about a lot today, but just to kind of hold and highlight as one of those biggest benefits and kind of beauties of this trans community is like the acceptance of ourselves and our loved ones. That's the light I think we have to hold on to through all of this growth.

Natalie Tamburello: Well, thanks so much, Tracy. Is there anything else, like last thoughts for our listeners, that you'd like to share?

Tracy Cavaligos, PsyD: Just really highlighting, like, you can feel so scared or so alone as youth or as parents. And you do have a lot of power and wonderful options to live the life that you'd like to and be able to support yourselves and support your loved ones. So CHC is here for you as well as all these, like, wonderful organizations and resources that we've talked about today and that you can find on our website, as well.

Natalie Tamburello: Thank you, Tracy and as a reminder, and as Tracy said, CHC is here for you. We do have many free resources in addition to these podcast episodes, including our resource library, which actually has a whole section on gender inclusivity. So many great articles there. We have parent support groups, collaboratives for school counselors and learning specialists if you're listening. So if you're in need of any additional support, please go to chconline.org. Thank you so much.