

Experiences of adolescent and young adult siblings of transgender and/or nonbinary youth

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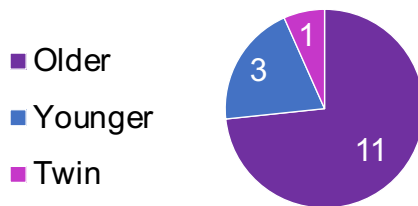
Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project



Background

Studies (including this project) have looked at the family experiences of transgender and/or nonbinary (TNB) young people and their parents. *We wanted to find out what it's like for teens and young adults to be the sibling of a TNB young person, including how they support their TNB sibling and what supports they need themselves.*

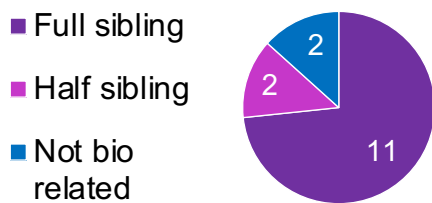
Age Relative to TNB Sibling



Participants and Methods

We interviewed **15 cisgender siblings (7 female, 8 male), ages 14-26 years**, from families with TNB youth ages 13-17 years, from **throughout New England**. Participants identified as White (11), Asian (2), Native American (1), and White and Black (1). Some other characteristics are shown to the left.

Biological Relationship to TNB Sibling



We asked participants about their sibling's transition, family dynamics, and their own experiences. *We then looked for patterns in the interviews to see what experiences and feelings siblings had in common.*

What We Learned

We found three main patterns (or themes).

Theme 1: "FAKTs" Matter

Siblings' **Familiarity with, Awareness of, and Knowledge about Transness** ("FAKTs") affected how they processed and responded to their sibling's gender identity and transition.

"It made so much sense once it came out, because when he was a kid he wore boxers, and his entire room was blue, there was Spiderman everywhere."

-Older sister of a trans boy

"I didn't believe it for a long time. I just thought something would change when like, "Oh, he's a male." Maybe [he] would start being more aggressive, more sporty, more.... But he stayed the exact same which is why I was like, "No, I don't see the change."

-Older brother of a trans boy

Siblings seemed to adjust more easily or quickly if they:

- had more prior knowledge about TNB people;
- had **less fixed ideas about gender roles**; and/or
- had **"seen it coming"** because their sibling behaved in ways stereotypical of their affirmed gender.

Theme 2: Assessing Responses

Siblings were keenly aware of how people, including themselves, responded to their TNB sibling. They paid attention to these responses from two main points of view: concern for sibling and concern for self.

“Some of my really close friends use ‘they’ [for my sibling] and I know that made me respect them more I guess and want to stay friends with them more.”

-Older sister of a nonbinary person

“I worry sometimes...that something bad is going to happen to him because of this eventually, that someone who is not as accepting is going to be violent against him. I worry about that a lot.”

-Older brother of a trans boy

Siblings expressed concern about anti-trans violence or discrimination in their sibling’s life, and about stigma in their own social spheres due to others’ biases. They noticed the usage of affirmed pronouns and names and interpreted that as a sign of support.

Theme 3: Unique Experiences

“I think it's really brought us all a lot closer....there’s just a lot more talking going on...”

-Older sister of a trans boy

Participants described ways that their lives had changed in unique ways due to having a trans sibling. These included positive changes, such as better family communication, and negative changes, such as feeling left out of family therapy or discussions.

“Everybody was going to counseling and I was just trying to figure out what was going on.”

-Younger brother of a trans girl

Implications for Families and Professionals

Families and professionals can support both TNB young people and their adolescent or young adult siblings in several ways:

- Recognize that siblings are also impacted by the gender transition journey, and thus may need support and resources from family, providers, and their communities.
- Provide spaces where siblings of TNB young people can meet and speak with each other, such as sibling-only spaces at gender conferences or sibling support groups in practices or organizations serving TNB youth and their families.
- Consider greater inclusion of adolescent and young adult siblings in family therapy and/or discussions regarding the gender transition journey, when appropriate.
- Provide supports for siblings who may be serving as advocates or defenders of their TNB sibling at school or in other community settings; they may need help from parents/caregivers or school professionals.
- Role-play ways that siblings can handle situations outside the home (e.g. disclosure, inappropriate questions) in ways that are acceptable to and safe for all family members.