

## PARENTING A QUEER GIFTED CHILD: A CELEBRATION, NOT A CRISIS

### **Introduction**

I'm the parent of two gifted children: T and D.

T., the oldest, also has been diagnosed as ADHD. Technically we call gifted, neurodiverse children like T. 'twice exceptional' but in truth T. is *triple* exceptional: at age nine they identified as non-binary or gender neutral. In other words, T.'s biological sex is no longer relevant to them as they are neither male nor female.

Like many parents of gifted children, I was a gifted child myself: so naturally I've done some reading. I was not prepared for how universally negative it was. The theme is that this is a *situation* that must be *managed*. That you must do everything you can to *protect* your child from *the negative consequences of their identity*.

My purpose in writing this article is to counter this narrative: to help us *celebrate* the fact our children have found their true selves, not to be afraid of it, to *support* our children, not *protect* them from the fall-out of being queer. I'm focussing more on the experiences of parents of transgender young people – partly as it reflects my own experience, partly because trans issues present us with larger existential questions about human nature, and partly because trans issues are critical to the current discussions both about what it means to be queer and about larger political issues of our society.

In preparing this article I spoke with parents of queer children and queer people of various ages and backgrounds, and also some straight people with queer parents. I would like to acknowledge their help and their generosity of spirit in taking the time to share their thoughts and experiences with me. Particularly I'd like to particularly mention the people I live with. The many, many conversations about the life of early 20s-something queer nerds has been enormously valuable not only in writing this article but in my own personal growth. Similarly talking to T.; their insights and ideas have been key. Lastly I'd also like to acknowledge the patience of my straight friends and family in listening to me endlessly work through many of the ideas I discuss here.

Throughout I have been aware throughout of my privilege as a heterosexual cisgender person, and the guidance and inspiration I've received in my thinking from the queer people around me means a great deal. In writing this I'm assuming most readers will be, like me, heterosexual and part of the straight world. Please forgive me this does not apply to you. It's important to note that when writing something like this it's hard not to speak in universals and generalities. Experiences are individual, and no generality represents everyone. My ideas and opinions are my own.

### **Terminology and nomenclature**

Firstly, I'd like to clarify some of the terms I'm going to use.

*Gay* has a fairly specific meaning – referring mainly, although not solely, to same-sex attracted men – and the group of people we're thinking about is much larger than that. (And also gay now seems to have pejorative overtones for some young people).

Community groups often use *Rainbow* as an all-encompassing term – for example the Rainbow Youth network.

The acronym many people use in officialdom is *LGBTQI+*: it stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex and others.

To clarify, in this context *Lesbian* refers to same-sex attracted women, *Gay* refers to same-sex attracted men, and *Bisexual* refers to men and women who are attracted to men and women. *Transgender* refers to people of a gender other than the one they were born with. *Questioning*

refers to people who are still in the process of determining their sexual and gender identity, or may move from one to another. *Intersex* people were born with both male and female physical characteristics. *Others* includes (but is not limited to) *non-binary* people like T. who identify as neither male nor female, *asexual* or *aromantic* people, who have no sexual identity, and *polysexual*, *pansexual* and *omnisexual* people who do not consider any gender identity a factor in sexual attraction.

In the New Zealand context *Others* also includes identities from Māori queer communities like *takatāpui/whakawahine /tangata ira tane/ia*, and many different traditional identities from Pasifika communities. Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern and other migrant communities also have their own terms and identities.

*LGBTQI+* is useful but it does feel bureaucratic and there are always issues of who is included and who might be excluded.

Without exception the young people I talked with use *queer* as an informal catch-all that best describes their experiences, so I have respected this practice here. If like me you were born before the mid 90s you might find it an uncomfortable word as it was such a word of abuse. Not to worry – it's an extremely good example of how language changes over time.

Here's a couple of other concepts you might find useful, particularly when you're talking to your queer child.

You may have heard the phrase *cis* (pr. *sis*). *Cis* is short for cisgender and it refers to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, whose gender identity is the same as their birth gender. It's from the Latin for 'same as' and it's literally the opposite of 'trans' – ie a cisgender person is someone who is not transgender.

*Heteronormativity*. This is an extremely important concept to understand – it's not the same as heterosexuality, although it's linked to it. Rather, it's a term for the ways in which we define and enforce ideals of masculinity and femininity in a social context. Examples include representations of sexual and romantic relationships, mainstream sports, the gendering of children's clothing and toys, ascribing particular beliefs, emotional states, and behaviours to one gender, etc. While heterosexuality is a key part of traditional male and female roles, other complex social indicators are at play and not all heterosexual people by extension adhere to a heteronormative social existence.

Many of the young people I spoke with saw their queerness as having a social and political component, in that it was partly a conscious rejection of heteronormativity. Sometimes this was a result of negative experiences they had as individuals who did not meet these expectations. In the same way that transgendered is the opposite of cisgendered, queer can encompass all the groups that do not fit the heteronormative mould. Heteronormativity is what we would informally call the straight world, and so where appropriate I'll use the word *straight* to mean both heteronormative and heterosexual.

As a sidebar, I'll talk a bit later on about how closely aligned non-heteronormativity is with the experiences of other gifted children who are not queer.

*Ally*: The concept of having allies is an important one to queer communities. An ally is a straight person who actively supports their queer friends and family members. As parents we are naturally first in line to act as allies for our queer children: to let them tell their own stories and practice self-determination, and to support them and advocate for them where we can. Sometimes it can have overtones of condescension, so it is important to note that as allies we are respectful of our queer children's lives and experiences.

Lastly, two interlinked ideas that are also significant. First, you'll notice that I sometimes talk about queer communities in plural, rather than just one homogenous community. From outside in the straight world looking in, queer people may appear to be a single group. In fact there are many separate groups that can have little in common in upbringing, life experience, political ideas and social and financial expectations.

(And there are many divisions, rivalries, miscommunications. For example, a friend of mine who is a trans woman was very dismissive about T. identifying as non-binary as it wasn't a 'real transition'. Some cis women feel that focussing on trans issues has moved attention away from the still-necessary discussion of women's rights; some, famously like JK Rowling, view transgender women as posing a potential sexual threat to cis women.)

In part these differences can be cultural and also generational. The life experiences of a gay man who is a successful Wellington public servant in his fifties are not the same as a transgender woman from the Hawkes Bay in her late teens.

A corollary of generational difference is an extremely important point I'd like to reinforce and that I'll return to later: namely, that the experiences of the queer people we, as parents, grew up around are extremely different to the experiences of young queer people growing up now, in ways which are both obvious and subtle. Our reaction to the discovery our child is queer is at least partially based on a culture which has profoundly changed in the intervening time.

Second, as I said, there are many different kinds of queerness and in talking about it we can be hampered by the underlying assumption that sexual identity and gender identity are the same thing. It is true that many trans and non-binary people are attracted to people of their birth gender. However the discussions I've had with trans and non-binary people show that many of them regard the discovery of their sexual identity (and subsequent coming out) as being a separate process to the discovery of their gender identity.

All that said I'd like to emphasise that that we are all one people. There's a danger in talking about specific social demographics that we treat them as being different or separate – but, as one of my friends said to me, there is no 'them' and 'us'. We should also acknowledge every individual, and every family, has their own complex journey.

And that leads me into the really big question.

#### *WHAT DO I DO WHEN I HAVE A QUEER CHILD?*

- Firstly, relax. There is nothing to be afraid of.
- Secondly, celebrate. Your child is amazing.
- Thirdly, validate and accept. This is now a part of your day-to-day reality.

I'll step these out in some more detail.

Many parents, no matter how progressive their ideals, react with anxiety at the news their child is queer – that they are 'painting a target on their back'.

Let's acknowledge that this is still a legitimate concern. Statistics on homophobic and transphobic bullying and abuse vary but always make for grim reading. New Zealand may not as bad some other places, but we have a long way to go. As a society we need to take responsibility for addressing the fact that we aren't very kind to those who don't conform to our heteronormative standards.

It's also an unfortunate fact that many of our gifted children have already experienced bullying well before the issues of their sexual and gender identities arise. Some parents may be accepting of their child's queerness, but be anxious of the reaction of their extended family and their community.

Some worry that not only will their child be rejected by family members but that they themselves may be judged as being bad parents by critical grandparents or uncles and aunts. Some parents may also have anxiety for their children based on their own experiences of social rejection and bullying as young people.

However, to return to my earlier point, we are in the middle of slow but significant social change.

As adults, it can be easy to forget that the landscape has shifted since we were teenagers ourselves. For example, in his book *The Naked Civil Servant*, about life as a young gay man in post-war London, Quentin Crisp says that 'bodily shame is the essential experience of the homosexual' – and this would still have been true for those of us who were children and young people in the 1970s and 1980s. Contrast this with modern attitudes of queer communities: there's a very good reason why *pride* is a key term in queer activism. Several young people I spoke with were surprised to discover homosexuality was still illegal when I was in my early teens, and that the world before the Homosexual Law Reform Act cast a long shadow. None of my peers who were queer came out until after they left school. Certainly there were no openly gay staff as it would have meant losing their jobs, due to our openly homophobic principal who, amongst other things, threatened any potentially queer students with expulsion.

Today this situation is – perhaps not unimaginable, but certainly much less likely in a mainstream New Zealand school. While there are still very critical voices in popular media and there is still much prejudice, in many ways on the whole we are becoming a far more open society. Even if your child ends up being as straight as a die, avoiding being homo- and transphobic as a parent doesn't just provide your child a safe space to develop their identity and a model for their interactions with queer peers, it makes you a better person yourself.

It's worth acknowledging also that some parents may be reluctant to recognise their child's sexual development, however it looks, and some children may be anxious about discussing it with their parents – and this can impact on a child being open about their queerness. Certainly there is a strange tension in our society between our hyper-sexualised popular culture (which presents its own issues) and an often unexpressed fear of our children's sexual development. Everyone has to find their own comfort level in this, but at the same time we need to create an environment where our child can talk about sexuality and gender identities without feeling afraid of rejection. It's also important we can talk to our child about their queerness so we can ensure they are properly informed about queer sexual safety.

For some young people, discovering their queer identity and coming out is one of the most profound parts of their formative years. For others, it's really no big deal. In either case, they are one of a large number of amazing individuals who are queer. A cursory Google search reveals your queer child has some impressive role models. In modern times, Megan Rapinoe, Elliot Page, Sam Smith, Georgina Beyer, Phoebe Bridgers, Bella Ramsey, Karin Dreijer, Shaneel Lal, Kay O'Neill, Blu del Barrio; historically, Oscar Wilde, Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Florence Nightingale, Alan Turing, Virginia Woolf, Michelangelo, David Bowie.... just to name a very small number of examples. Queer people have always played significant roles in the social and cultural lives of their societies.

It's worth remembering too that many of our ideas about queerness are socially determined, and people in other places view queer people very differently do New Zealanders. In parts of Central Asia, for example, trans people, Hijira or Kwaja Sara, have important social and spiritual roles and are recognised as a third gender by their state. Many traditional Pasifika cultures have separate pronouns for trans people, recognising genders other than our Western binary male/female split. Historically European social attitudes toward queer identities were relatively relaxed, and ideas that can be seen as homo- or transphobic have been held commonly only in the last couple of hundred years.

We also need to consider that as parents, our experience of our child coming out is very different than it is to them. For us, it's an event, perhaps expected, perhaps a sudden surprise. For the queer young people I spoke with, it's an important part of what may have been a long process of discovery, self-examination and emotional maturation. As such we should take it seriously. T. and their younger sibling D., along with other queer people I spoke with, emphasised the need to also respect the bravery and self-determination our children show by coming out.

Gifted children in particular often can be capable of deep self-analysis; discussing T.'s thought process that led to them identifying as non-binary was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Talking to T. and D. about T. being non-binary has not only strengthened the bond between us, it's also helped me further develop my own understanding and ideas about gender and the role it plays in all our lives. I strongly encourage you to do the same thing.

Critically, understanding your child's thoughts and feelings about being queer helps avoid the 'it's just a phase' phenomenon. It is true that some mainly heterosexual young people experience same-sex attraction during their sexual development (and some same-sex attracted young people have heterosexual experiences), and it's also true that a few young people who transition during their adolescence return to their birth gender later in life. Given the widespread discussion of trans issues currently, and the fact that more young people are transitioning earlier and more openly, there is a temptation to dismiss your child's transition as being nothing more than a passing fashion statement.

However, for most queer people, their queer identity is a component of their true self, and it's a one-way path. All the young people I talked to in preparation for this article, including T., emphasised this point emphatically: the need to respect the fact that their queer identity is intrinsic to their self-worth. As one person I spoke with said, hiding away is a lot more harmful than being rejected. Dismissing or disrespecting this identity is a fundamental part of the reason why some queer young people display the destructive behaviours that as parents we become anxious about. It is far healthier for your child to live their identity as they determine, however that looks, than for them to remain in the closet.

It's also worth remembering that after your child comes out, they are still, in many critical ways, the person who they were two months beforehand. They still like the same breakfast, they still use words and like music you don't understand, they still need to be reminded to do their homework and they still need your love and attention.

This is particularly important to keep in mind for trans and non-binary children whose name and appearance may change along with their gender: they are the same person.

Once your child has come out, there is much you can do to support them – what this looks like is very individual. Accepting and facilitating your child's self-determination are key. T. and other young people I spoke with had a range of suggestions, including

- Remembering that everyone has a different story, and the person at the centre of the story is your child.
- Validating your child's queer identity, and teaching them resilience and confidence in themselves.
- Avoiding 'othering' your child by treating them as being different or separate to your other family members.
- Being comfortable with discussing your child's same sex attractions and crushes (although as one person noted they couldn't think of anything worse than talking to their entirely supportive parents about whoever they fancied).

- Using their preferred pronouns and name, and helping them with changes they may wish to make with their appearance with wardrobe, make-up, hairstyle etc. (And realising that they too may take some time to get used to their new identity).
- Helping them access queer positive books and media.
- Doing your own research and showing support for your child by educating yourself.
- Modelling good behaviour not only with your immediate family, but also with other adults in your extended family, your workplace and your community.
- Supporting and advocating for them if they experience homophobia or transphobia.
- Taking into account the experiences of your other children who may be impacted by the shift in your family dynamic.
- Remembering your child's queerness isn't the only thing going on with them. Your child has many other attributes and interests which also impact on their life.
- Ensuring your home is a safe space not only for your child but for their queer friends and peers.
- Ensuring they have places where they can comfortably use the bathroom and change clothing.
- Confronting and discarding any internalised prejudices we may hold.
- Remembering that your child's digital existence can be just as important site for socialisation and finding both queer and straight peers as the 'in real life' world.
- Etc.

### ***Social attitudes toward giftedness and heteronormativity***

Changing tack a little, I'd like to discuss how heteronormativity works in the lives of all gifted children, queer or not. (To reiterate, heteronormativity is a term for what we can also call traditional sexual and gender roles. In this context it can be helpful to consider the ways our child fits, or does not fit, heteronormative ideals and how that impacts on their social existence and self-identity).

I've been unable to find any useful research on giftedness and queerness, and common sense says there's no reason for more gifted young people to be queer than the general population. However the links between the experiences of being queer and being a gifted child play out in some really interesting ways.

In our culture being gifted and being a geek are virtually synonymous. There is an entire culture around geekdom: science-fiction and fantasy novels, tv and movies, cosplay and fandom, superheroes, gaming, and so on. Almost all gifted children at some point are engaged with geekiness and how it impacts on their social identity, interactions and self-perception.

As a straight person I am struck by just how prevalent geek culture is in the queer world. Here are a few entirely personal examples.

- I spend a great deal of my spare time making and listening to electronic music, which is about as nerdy as any art form can be and really satisfies my own geek brain. I'm fascinated by the way the development of electronic music is closely intertwined with the story of modern queer rights. Many electronic music producers, DJs and audiences are queer, and club nights are historically significant queer spaces, from Stonewall downwards. There is

much that can be said about relationship between the physical pleasures of dance music and queer resistance.

- As I'm separated from T. and D.'s other parent, I live in a mainly queer house – two of us are cis and straight, the other three are trans or non-binary. The sometimes passionate discussions about the politics of the game Elder Scrolls: Skyrim in our kitchen and the fact there is a flat Minecraft server attest to the deep level of nerdiness in my house.
- Fascinatingly, almost every single queer young person I spoke with noted the important role in their life played by Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson books. For many of them, attracted by its world based on ancient Greek and Roman, Egyptian and Norse mythologies (catnip to geeks) the Percy Jackson books were the first place they discovered representation of queer and neurodiverse people like themselves.

Another interesting sidenote. As you may be aware diagnoses of ADHD and other kinds of neurodiversity are not uncommon in gifted children. Another fact of queer life I have been surprised by is the high incidence of neurodiversity among queer people. To use the flat where I live as representative sample, I've had at least a dozen queer flatmates, almost all of whom have been neurodiverse. Currently I'm the only person living here who is not ADHD.

Again, I could find little good research on this topic, although a recent report into London's Gender Identity Development Service estimates that around a third of its clients are neurodiverse – and other similar percentages appear elsewhere. From my own experience it may even be higher.

I find the intersection of giftedness, queerness and neurodiversity fascinating, although I'm hesitant to come to any conclusions about the reasons behind this phenomenon. It's clear geek culture provides people who feel they don't fit in with an imaginative space where they can re-imagine themselves – and this applies to both many nerds and many queer people. Various kinds of geek and nerd culture – fandom, activism, multi-player gaming, underground music – provide them with peer communities which can literally be a life-saver.

I'm also aware that is quite speculative and subjective: at the same time I think there is definitely something there.

I'm a massive nerd myself, and as someone who doesn't fit the heteronormative mould, I've had my fair share of assumptions about my sexual orientation: sometimes this is flattering, sometimes dangerous. As a result for a long time I've thought about the ways masculinity and femininity play out in the geek world are an interesting variation on queerness – particularly in conjunction with giftedness.

Many gifted children presenting as geek de-sexualise themselves or have very low sexual confidence – often as a part of their overall social awkwardness. Certainly 'geekiness' is seen as being actively sexually unattractive in mainstream culture. Others may establish their sexual identity in a way that is more individual to them. Some may take on or present social behaviours opposite to that proscribed by their gender – a sensitive and artistic boy, an aggressively ambitious girl. Some punk out and are defiantly socially non-conforming. Some may even over-compensate by taking on beliefs and behaviours that reflect the worst aspects of heteronormativity. I can say with experience, for example, that unfortunately male geek communities can be destructively competitive and sometimes viciously misogynist places. Stephanie Tolan's helpful article *Sex and the Highly Gifted Adolescent* ([http://www.stephanietolan.com/hg\\_adolescent.htm](http://www.stephanietolan.com/hg_adolescent.htm)) discusses gifted children's sexual development in more detail.

This is a good example of what I meant before about how queer issues, dealing with gender roles, present us with existential questions about human nature and identity. To what extent do gifted children consciously assume non-heteronormative gender indicators as a result of not 'fitting in'? –

and to what extent are they assigned non-heteronormativity by the people around them as a result of their inherent qualities, queer, gifted, or otherwise? This is a complex issue, and there is no straightforward answer – for most individuals it's a matter of both.

For queer gifted young people who already feel they don't fit in, geek culture can provide a pathway to expressing their queer identity, and this may be one of the reasons it is so common.

It's worth taking a slightly closer look at the role mainstream sport plays in the lives of gifted and/or queer young people. In New Zealand sport is part of our national identity and one of our primary drivers of heteronormativity, male heteronormativity in particular. Along with intellectual ability, being bad at or being uninterested in competitive contact sports is one of the most significant aspects of male geek social identity. In fact, the two are seen as being antithetical to each other, and 'rugbyhead' is one of the most damning terms of abuse in geek culture. The male mainstream sports community has been notoriously slow in recognising its queer members. Conversely it's interesting how sport has historically been a social haven for queer women.

If you have a queer child who wants to be involved in physical activity but may feel hesitant about taking part in mainstream sport, it may be helpful to encourage them toward other activities that may be less competitive or 'macho'. On the other hand, some parents may have feelings of distrust toward mainstream sport held over from their own negative experiences as young people (as I certainly do). If our queer children want to play rugby, that's okay too.

So while not every geeky gifted child is queer by any means, it's helpful for us to consider our child's life in this respect as it provides us with some insight into what they are experiencing.

### ***Postscript***

This article has taken me several months to write, partly because I've been struggling to find a way to end it. It's now the last week of March 2023 and the events of last weekend have been something of a flashpoint in New Zealand's transgender rights history.

To summarise, last Saturday the British anti-trans rights activist Kelly-Jay Keen-Minshull (also known as Posie Parker) spoke at a rally in Auckland. Keen-Minshull has embraced many of the other issues fashionable in the contemporary far-right alongside anti-trans activism, and appears to enjoy support in far-right groups (in Australia the preceding week a group performed Nazi salutes at her rally in Melbourne). In Auckland Keen-Minshull met with fierce resistance from counter-protesters and left the country, cancelling the rallies she had organised down the country in the following days.

The next day a group of us attended the protest that had originally been organised against Keen-Minshull's speech in Wellington. I was nervous: the protest at Auckland had been rough at times, and the organisers of the Wellington event had warned us to travel in a group and expect the possibility of physical confrontations. However, it was really important to me to lend my voice to support the people who are an important part in my day-today life.

In the end, the confrontation was minimal at best. A couple of crowd invaders were gently led away without incident; I think maybe some people could have stood at the edge and shouted but I was near the middle and didn't see them. The crowd was huge and very diverse. Many members of various queer communities: same sex partners comfortably cuddling and holding hands, trans people dressed to the nines and looking frankly gorgeous, older veterans looking proud at this flowering of their long, hard work; also many straight people – friends, siblings, parents and grandparents, or there just to lend support.

There was a series of heartfelt speeches which were inspiring and moving, and often tinged with messages of working class solidarity which was interesting and, for me, a little unexpected. I shouted myself hoarse, saw some people I really like, and had a great time. At the end some DJs took over



the PA and the entirety of Civic Square had a massive dance off for an hour or so. It reminded me of the great lesson of queer activism: that celebration, humour, pleasure, fun – enjoying your life in front of the people who want to bring you down – is an as important act of resistance as throwing a brick.

And that's the image I'd like to leave you with: us with our kids dancing with their partners, their friends and their communities: defiantly, fiercely, proudly themselves.