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The High School Environment and Its Impact on Cross Gender Teens

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The High School Environment and Its Impact
on Cross Gender Identification in Teens

Homosexuality was once kept a hushed secret from the world, viewed by a majority of society as immoral and intolerable. A new era has emerged in the past decades. A greater acceptance for gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual individuals has been witnessed within society. More and more men and women are openly expressing their sexual preference and proudly announcing their gay or lesbian lifestyle without shame, further opening the door for those who experience cross gender identification, also known as transgender, to step out into the light more freely. Of course, just like racism, socio-economic prejudice, and religious or cultural intolerance, there will always be individuals who harbor a preconception towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, and especially cross gender identifying men and women. As freedom of expression progresses into this new era individuals are beginning to openly convey their cross gender identification at an earlier age posing a need for awareness within the school system. With efforts already in place for anti-bullying in the school system it is ever important that education and promotion of peer acceptance extend beyond racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity to encompass sexual and gender identification diversity as well. The lack of support, understanding, and acceptance in the high school for cross gender adolescents promotes victimization and isolation of those students coping with cross gender identification.

Cross gender identification refers to an individual whose birth assigned gender does not match the gender they identify with; individuals born male identify themselves as female and individuals born female identify themselves as male. Recognition of cross gender identification in

one's self usually takes place during the adolescent years, as discussed in Timo O. Neider and associates' in depth research study posted in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender adolescents battle depression and internal conflicts as well as external obstacles while experiencing their sexual identity development (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds). As the sexual identity of cross gender students emerge, a desire to have access and to utilize the school facilities and activity programs assigned to the gender in which that individual identifies with may also develop. Just as a student born female would feel uncomfortable using the boys' restroom or locker room at school; so does a cross gender female student (born male but identifies as female) and vice versa, as illustrated in a recent case at Gloucester High School in Gloucester, Virginia where 10th grade transgender boy, Gavin Grimm, photographed in figure 1, (born female but identifying self as being male), was granted permission by the school principle to utilize the boys' bathroom and locker room only to have the school board deny access to these facilities just a few months later (Kellaway). Title IX of the Education Amendments prohibits sexual discrimination or exclusion from participation in education programs or activities that receive Federal funding. The Office for Civil Rights in Education enforces schools' compliance of Title IX and ensures equal and fair treatment of students regardless of sex, including cross gender identifying individuals.



Fig. 1 Hilton, Joel. "Transgender Restroom Controversy." 2000-2015. *10 on Your Side Wavy.com*. LIN Television Corporation. Web. 6 April, 2015

It is common knowledge that during the adolescent years into young adulthood boys and girls are seeking acceptance from their peers as well as a sense of belonging within their community. This feeling of connection and belonging plays a vital role in an adolescent's mental and social development, undoubtedly more so for the cross gender student who also struggles with the challenges and obstacles of their emerging and developing gender identity. A transgender student will have a stronger sense of belonging to their school community when allowed the opportunity to openly express their gender identity, freely discuss transgender issues at school with peers or staff, and partake completely and without restriction in school facilities and activities (Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz 12). Before Title IX officially clarified in 2014 its inclusion of sexual discrimination against cross gender identifying individuals the state of California led the way in 2013 adopting specific bylaws protecting the rights and promoting fair treatment and respect for cross gender identifying individuals (Yan). Research shows that students enrolled at schools with gay, lesbian and transgender support groups showed fewer suicide attempts at their school than those schools without such a support system in place (Toomey et al).

Fear of the unknown unfortunately always plays a dark role in human society. Many argue that allowing cross gender individuals to use school facilities designated to the gender in which they identify with will violate the rights and privacy of the other (non-transgender) students (Kellaway) or opening the door to victimization and bullying in the confines and secrecy of the bathroom (Kennedy). A popular solution to the debate on which facilities a transgender individual should be allowed access to has been the development or availability of unisex bathrooms such as the nurses office, as was offered in the case involving sophomore Gavin Grimm in Gloucester, Virginia (Kellaway). Though this may sound like a logical and fair solution by some it unfortunately violates the civil rights of cross gender identifying individuals according to Title IX, "forcing transgender students to use segregated facilities not only violates federal law, but is also intensely stigmatizing" (Marks). Due to lack of support, acceptance, and fear or actual experiences of isolation the majority

of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students undergo their development in a back and forth manner rather than a steady progression (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds).

Many cross gender identifying students report experiencing their first account of discrimination and harassment at school and those experiencing high levels of harassment with no mediation or support within their school system demonstrated low attendance and grades as a result (Greytak). Family members of transgender teens can vouch for a marked increase in self-esteem when their son or daughter feels accepted by and part of their school community as expressed by Gloucester High sophomore Gavin Grimm's mother, Deirdre Grimm "Gavin has been so much happier and healthier since he has been able to be himself at school. It will be a major step backward for him to have to use a girls' bathroom or a bathroom that is separate from the ones all the other students use" (Marks).

In the Survey of New Mexico School Health Professionals Regarding Preparedness to Support Sexual Minority Students, conducted by Inas Mahdi and associates, school professionals were surveyed about their knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students, the obstacles and challenges LGBTQ students face, and the preparedness each school professional felt in caring for the needs of LGBTQ students. "Although expressing confidence in their abilities, the majority of school health professionals surveyed reported limited or no experience discussing behavioral health concerns with LGBTQ students or intervening to address harassment" (Mahdi, et al 21). According to a survey conducted and discussed in the publication titled Harsh Realities published by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, ninety percent of transgender youth experienced derogatory name calling in school as well as negative gender expression remarks, whether they acted too masculine or too feminine. "Transgender students also reported little intervention on the part of school personnel when such language was used. Less than a fifth of transgender students said that school staff intervened most of the time or always when hearing homophobic remarks (16%) or negative remarks about someone's gender expression (11%)"

(Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz 10). Education and information should be provided to student peers, parents, teachers, and staff on the challenges LGBTQ youth experience in an effort to strengthen school unity, enhance anti-bullying programs, and promote fair treatment, understanding, and equal rights to all students regardless of their biological gender, gender identification, or sexual orientation. The lack of support, understanding, and acceptance in the high school for cross gender adolescents promotes victimization and isolation of those students coping with cross gender identification.

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