

Ask Matt: Educating the Children, Educating the Parents

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Abstract

I have joined a couple of family-related questions into one column in a continuing effort to catch up with my backlog. As always, reader thoughts and suggestions are much appreciated. Here you go: A reader writes: “My granddaughter was born five days ago. She is, of course, gorgeous. She is also blessed with three granddads [...]

Article

I have joined a couple of family-related questions into one column in a continuing effort to catch up with my backlog. As always, reader thoughts and suggestions are much appreciated. Here you go:

A reader writes:

“My granddaughter was born five days ago. She is, of course, gorgeous. She is also blessed with three granddads (one of whom she will hardly ever meet) and one grandma. The family set-up is one set of straight grandparents, one single grandmother who is now a grandfather, and the rather distant other grandfather.

“What do you, or your correspondents, think about telling her about her slightly unusual family set-up? And when? In easy stages, no doubt.”

Since she’s only five days old (or was at the time you wrote), it will be a while before this will even be an issue. And honestly, it’s not going to be much of one.

We still tend to think that a “standard, normal household” consists of a set of heterosexual parents with an extended family of two sets of heterosexual grandparents. That’s what I grew up with, but that family structure is really just a blip on the Western-culture history line of family configurations.

Throughout time, and across every culture, there have been a variety of family structures, and it was only recently in Western history [pullquote align=”right”] Kids are very concrete, and they will generally accept what you tell them.[/pullquote]that this two-heterosexual-parents-with-kids single-family unit emerged. My Ward-and-June-Cleaver family might have been considered the “norm” in the white, Midwestern United States when I was growing up, but that was only because the culture thought it needed that structure after World War II in order to promote population and job growth, encourage spending, and support the expansion of the suburbs.

In order to do that, the culture put that type of family out there as the “norm.” But there were plenty

of other family structures during that time, and now, even that mainstream cultural “norm” is changing.

The good thing about kids is that they tend to accept whatever family they grow up in as “normal” and “average.” It will be quite a while before this child ever starts to wonder where her “other” grandmother is, or why her distant grandfather doesn’t come around (I’m assuming this is a former husband/partner of the transitioned grandfather).

I personally don’t see much reason to address it at all for quite a while, unless she starts asking questions. And I would never say to her that her grandfather used to be her grandmother, because he didn’t. She wasn’t born when he transitioned, so he has always been her grandfather.

It’s probably best addressed by her mother or father (whichever one has the parent who transitioned). And there will no doubt come a time when she starts to realize how family relationships work and says to that parent, “Who is your mother and who is your father?” Then that parent can say something like, “Well, Grandpa Joe is one of my parents, and Grandpa Sam, who lives far away, is the other.”

If she persists, that parent can say, “Grandpa Joe is the one who gave birth to me, so I guess you could say that he was my mother, but he had a medical situation and couldn’t stay the way he was, so now he is Grandpa Joe.”

That could bring a flurry of other questions, or she could just shrug her shoulders and walk away. Kids are very concrete, and they will generally accept what you tell them. Sometimes we think that they want to know more than they really do. We want to give big explanations when all they want is really simple answer.

So I would suggest taking your cues from your granddaughter and giving her just the information she asks for at the time. The world is changing rapidly, and by the time she even starts to ask, the idea of transition and trans people might already be on her radar. It just might be a big deal at all.

What suggestions do readers have?

A reader writes:

“I have a question about helping someone’s parents to find resources on being a parent of a transgender (trans male in this case) person. They know about my situation, they have gone from being non-supportive to somewhat tolerant (my mother) and somewhat accepting (my father), but they are still quite ignorant on the subject.

“I think that maybe they would benefit from having some kind of space where they could talk or some kind of resources to consult. The thing is, how do I bring it up to them? Should I just ask them if they need/want something like that? Should I just give them the resources and let them choose to consult them or not later? Actually, should I even bring it up to them at all, or if they didn’t look for it that just means they aren’t interested in it?

“Also, how can I tell if a support group (in this case it would be online, if I even manage to find one in Italian in the first place) is well-moderated or not? I would feel disrespectful if I asked to be allowed in since it’s a private space for parents to discuss their own issues, so how else do I find out if it’s a good place or if it would only confuse them even more than they already are?”

I think that you should bring it up to them. They might not have asked because they might not know that there are resources out there. In your longer letter (that I cut for space), you say they speak limited English, are older, live in a small town, and have not had a lot of exposure to this. It could be that they just don't know where to look, what to look for, or that there would be anything available.

If they have problems using the Internet, you could help them with this. You could go in and find some sites and bookmark those so that they could get to them later. No pressure. Just say, "I've bookmarked these sites for you. Here's how you can find them if you want to look at them." Then show them how to pull the sites up. Also, if you have any books that you want them to read, just bring those books over and leave them - "Here are some books if you ever want to take a look." And let them know that you would be happy to translate as necessary.

Once you have done this, you can back off and let them do what they will. My guess is that they will start looking at some things - perhaps gradually, but they will still look. And you can check in with them from time to time, asking if they have any questions.

Don't pressure them. Just check in. The rest will be up to them, and they can take their time to look at and digest the info. If they choose not to for a while, don't be hurt. They might be a little scared or hesitant at what they might find out. As with our own transitions, they are going through a transition, too, and it's a process. So let them handle that process in their own way.

With regard to determining if a group is well-moderated or not, that's a tough one if you are not able to join first because the group is for parents. I don't know how many of my readers speak Italian or are familiar with support groups for parents who speak Italian, but if any readers out there know of some, please let us know. Also, there is a contact for a PFLAG in Milan on this International PFLAG page. They might be aware of something as well. Good luck!

Cross-posted from Tranifesto

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