

# Where You Are

## S5 Episode 3 — Supporting Your Child as They Discover Their Gender

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**Carrie:** Your relationship with your child is their most valued relationship. They trust you more than anyone. They love you more than anyone in this world. And the fact that they waited to tell you is because that's the most important relationship to them.

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**Bryn Askwith:** This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith.

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**Char Black:** And I'm Char Black. Gender is an important part of your child's development and overall identity. So, today's episode looks at supporting your child as they discover their gender. Together, we'll offer a starting place for parents and caregivers to learn about concepts and terms related to gender, discuss how to talk about gender identity with your child, their siblings and extended family, and share gender-affirming approaches that you can use to support your child from a young age as they explore their gender identity. We'll also highlight resources and services that can offer support for you or your child.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Let's get into that conversation. At the Kelty Centre, we receive a number of questions from parents and caregivers about how to support your child as they explore their gender and express it in ways that feels right to them. So, we're really grateful to have three guests on the podcast today who are here to share their experiences with us and talk with us more about this.

Our first guest is Kendall, a registered social worker at BC Children's Hospital Gender Clinic, and she also works with autistic youth and young adults through the Canucks Autism Network. She loves getting to work with folks as they learn to let their true selves shine through in the world.

Welcome to the podcast, Kendall.

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**Kendall:** Thank you so much. I'm very glad to be here.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Kendall, when it comes to gender, the parents who connect in with the Kelty Centre will say there's a lot of terms and concepts that feel new to them. I'm wondering if you can start us off by sharing some information around a few of them. Just a few common terms to start us off.

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**Kendall:** Totally. The big ones are gender identity and gender expression. We'll start with the gender identity, and that's that felt sense of knowing about what your gender is in your head and in your heart. Only the person can tell people what their gender identity is. Nobody else can really say what somebody's gender identity is. And then the other concept is gender expression. So, all the ways that you communicate that gender identity out into the world. So that might be your clothes, your pronouns, your way that you speak, the name that you use, fingernail polish, all the ways that you tell the world what your felt sense of knowing inside your gender is.

And then of course also, there's the sex assigned at birth. For lots of folks, that sex assigned at birth and their gender identity, their felt sense of knowing align, and then they feel comfortable expressing their gender in alignment with those two concepts. Those folks would be cisgender. For some folks, that felt sense of knowing of their gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth, and those folks would be considered in an umbrella term, trans. Some folks within the umbrella of trans might identify with lots of different terms. There's an endless list.

It's really, really wonderful, right? Because we're living in a time where people get to actually check in with themselves and say, " That term doesn't quite fit me. What does?"

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**Bryn Askwith:** That's a great starting place.

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**Char Black:** So I wanted to bring into the conversation, Carrie and Wayne. Welcome, Carrie and Wayne.

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**Carrie:** Hello.

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**Wayne:** Hello.

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**Char Black:** They are parents of two wonderful kids and the founders of TransParent, a nonprofit that provides peer support, education, and advocacy for parents and caregivers of two- spirit, transgender, and gender- creative kids in the Okanagan. So, thanks so much for being with us today.

Can you tell us a little bit about your family and how gender identity has been a part of your story?

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**Wayne:** We do have two gender-creative kids who are transgender. The youngest one actually came out to us first, and was not a surprise. He had always been interested more in boys clothes, boys games, pretending to be a boy when he was playing when he was younger. And it turns out he wasn't pretending but we didn't know that at the time. And then one day actually while Carrie was traveling and I was at work, he just texted us and said that he thinks he's trans. And as I said, it wasn't a surprise, but it was still not news that we were expecting in that moment, so it took a little bit of time for us to process all of that.

And the reason actually that Carrie and I founded this organization, TransParent, is because there wasn't anything like that anywhere that we were. And we realized that we couldn't be the only people who had discovered that their kids were trans and looked for support and resources. Our oldest didn't come out to us until much later, and was more of a surprise. So, we've had sort of different perspectives on that and we could appreciate some of the experiences that parents have, that sometimes their kids are coming out to them as trans at much younger ages and sometimes when they're older.

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**Char Black:** Yeah, thanks for sharing that it can really happen in the younger years or later years, and Wayne mentioned some of these clues. What tips would you offer parents in having a similar journey? I'm thinking specifically when you receive these clues, what did you actually do with those clues? Would you have done anything differently in those moments?

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**Carrie:** I think every parent thinks back and says, " Oh, here's all the things I would've done differently. How much time do we have for the podcast?" But with other parents, sometimes I'll call them breadcrumbs. It's like the little trail that leads you but you don't always know what it is. It could just be breadcrumbs, right? And for lots of kids, I get contacted by someone who has, let's say a four- year- old son, and he's decided he wants to wear princess dresses. And people are like, "Okay. Apparently, my kid's trans. What do I do?"

And I say, "Oh, whoa. Hold on. That doesn't necessarily mean that." But sometimes, the collection of clues, the collection of breadcrumbs leads you down a certain path. And so, I don't know that we would've done anything especially different. Maybe, we would've caught on a little bit sooner? I'm not sure. Our oldest, there were no clues. But our youngest, he wrote a letter to Santa, as kids do, and he had written that... He wondered if Santa was able to make him into a boy. And then, he erased it. Because it was in pencil, but we could still see what it said. And I helped him mail the letter and then read it. He'd play make- believe and he'd be mister, and the big brother or the uncle.

And I guess now if you put them all together, it seems obvious. But at the time, these were just little random breadcrumbs in our family, right?

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**Wayne:** At the time I was interpreting it, and I think maybe Carrie as well, more that he was seeing a lot of male role models in the shows that he would watch or the books that we would read. Just because of the kind of society that we live in, they're often the stronger characters, and so we thought that was what he was wanting to model after. And so, we were trying to encourage strong female characters and saying, "Look, he could be really strong female." It turns out we were wrong about that. So...

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**Carrie:** Yeah, we did. At one point, all the books we had had strong female characters, the movies. I'd be like, "Oh, look at this one. This is God." And he just couldn't relate.

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**Char Black:** I love all these examples and the way that you've said they're breadcrumbs and a collection of breadcrumbs, so thanks for sharing those.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Kendall, was there anything else you want to jump in on?

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**Kendall:** Yeah. I think when people are parents, they feel all this pressure to have everything figured out for their kids so that they can protect their kids, so that they can guide their kid. Your kid is an individual person outside yourself, so your job isn't to analyze all of the clues and know before they do. Your job is to create that safe place so that they can come to you and they can share who they are, and you can celebrate it. Right? So if you're like, "Holy, how did I miss all of this" You missed it because your kid wasn't ready to share that part with you because they were still exploring, and that's okay.

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**Carrie:** Absolutely. I just want to add... I love that you said that, Kendall. One of the coolest things about being a parent, I think, is that they are their own fully- formed individuals. And I feel like if you're doing it right, you're laying this foundation for them to figure out fully who they are.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I wanted to connect in with you, Kendall, as well, just hearing Carrie and Wayne's family story. I'm wondering are there other themes that come up for parents that you work with in the gender clinic that you want to talk about as well?

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**Kendall:** I really encourage all parents to think about how their gender fits in for their life, and what pieces of their gender fit really well for them and what don't, and start exploring those openly in front of their kids. If you've always wanted to wear nail polish, maybe give it a go. If you've always been frustrated that you have to remove all your body hair, maybe don't for a little while. Kind of blur those lines of gender, really set examples of how to feel at home and your body, and your kid will notice. Your kid will feel more comfortable exploring their gender and

figuring out where they fit, making it a journey together to just figure out who everybody is and what makes them happy. It takes the pressure off and it's a really wonderful way to signal that you're safe for these types of things without having a big conversation where everybody feels overwhelmed.

We definitely do hear from parents, "How did I not know?" And so, we tell parents all the time, "Your kid's probably been thinking about this for a long time in little bits and pieces. And so it makes sense that you are shocked because they're that much further along in this very journey and you just found out yesterday, so it's going to take you a little bit of time to catch up. And that's okay." We definitely tell parents too, that if you're grieving a little bit in this process, that that's totally normal and that's part of what sometimes people experience. And I think, really, to normalize that to any parent. The process of parenting kids is the process of letting go of the vision that you thought before you even had kids.

We all have an idea of who those kids will be in our future, and the process of parenting is gradually letting go of who you thought you had, to get to know the kid that you have in front of you. And whether that's gender diversity or the fact that they hate volleyball or the fact that they will never get a PhD, whatever it was that you expected your kid to be because you created that from your own hopes and dreams. As you can get to know the kid you have instead and celebrate that, you'll always just strengthen your relationship.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Char, I'll shift it over to you.

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**Char Black:** Awesome. Carrie and Wayne, as kids explore things in their world, it often gives us, as parents and caregivers, a moments for our own pause and reflection. As your kids were discovering their gender, what thoughts and feelings were going on for you specifically and how did you address those?

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**Carrie:** Gosh, so many thoughts. I think our overriding concern was just worry for them, for their safety. For their emotional, psychological, physical safety. And I wish I could say that that's completely eliminated now. It's not. But I would say that was our concern for the world that is sometimes filled with discrimination and there's a lot of stigma surrounding gender identity. And so, we weren't worried about our love for them or we weren't changing how we were parenting them necessarily. Just hoping that the same opportunities would be available to them, that would be available to them as cis people. And I love what Kendall said about maybe they don't want to play volleyball. Our youngest, I had this idea in my head that she was going to play baseball and got all the equipment and things like that, and then she was the kid in the outfield literally lying down and picking daisies.

That was the first parenting experience I had where I was like, "Oh, okay. Apparently, your expectations don't always come true."

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**Char Black:** Wayne, do you have any reflections around what kind of thoughts and feelings came up for you?

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**Wayne:** Yeah. So there is, of course, a lot of uncertainty as a parent as to, "What is this going to look like? What does this mean? There's so much to learn." And we hear this from the parents in our group as well. They also, as Carrie had said, are concerned about the safety and well-being of their child. And that comes from both external factors because of the world we live in, and also internally. How are they doing themselves with their own mental health? How are they processing all of this for themselves? And it's a hard journey. So, there's that concern.

And I want to also come back to what Kendall said about grieving as parents. That's a theme we commonly hear from a lot of parents in our group, and they're sometimes afraid to admit it because they think maybe they shouldn't be. But as you said, Kendall, yeah, that's a totally normal part of the process. But that's another important part of us having this group is that the parents have a safe place to express that grief with other parents rather than doing that in front of their child, because the child doesn't want to necessarily know that the parent's grieving who they aren't because the parents thought that they were somebody else.

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**Carrie:** Can I just jump in and say that there's an important distinction between grieving because you have a trans child and grieving what your expectations were, and that they're different? And I think if I can give a gift to other parents with trans kids, it's that they often feel so much guilt about lots of things, but grieving is one of them. And when I say to them that there is a distinction, you saying you're grieving does not mean you love your child less. It doesn't mean that you are sad or upset that they're transgender. It just means you're grieving the expectation of what you had. You're grieving... Sometimes if the child comes out much later, sometimes they're grieving or very confused about, why they didn't know? Why they didn't see? They say, "Why didn't they tell me? They told the school first. They told their teacher. They told their friend or whichever. Does that mean they don't trust me or love me or whatever?"

And I say, "No, the opposite." Your relationship with your child is their most valued relationship. They trust you more than anyone. They love you more than anyone in this world. And the fact that they waited to tell you is because that's the most important relationship to them, and they just have to be sure.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I think that's really important for parents to hear from other parents, just a reminder about how important that relationship is. And even though, kids as they get older, they might not be communicating that, but that relationship still is prominent and important in their world. So, that's really nice to hear from another parent.

You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. Looking to learn more about supporting your child as they explore their gender identity? Head to [keltymentalhealth.ca](http://keltymentalhealth.ca). You'll find a number of gender-affirming resources and support services for parents and caregivers.

I just wanted to take a minute just to loop back with you, Kendall, just on a couple of themes that also get brought up in the Kelty Centre, and that's just support for siblings or extended family members. Do you chat with parents about that sometimes at the gender clinic? And if so, what information do you share with them?

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**Kendall:** Certainly, yeah. I think when somebody comes out as trans, all the focus goes to that trans kid or the gender-creative kid or the non-binary kid, and we forget sometimes that the whole family is coming out at the same time, right? And so siblings, parents, grandparents, they're all having these conversations. They don't know how to have now about their family member who's come out, and they're not really sure. They're not sure what they can share, how they're allowed to share it. They're not sure how to have the conversations. And that is hard work, and sometimes we don't acknowledge that hard work because we're all focused on that one individual. There are some resources to help with scripting if you have siblings that are young and they might be getting questions on the playground. So, a family discussion about what the trans kid is comfortable sharing and what it isn't. And then a little bit of scripting, both for that trans kid so that they feel comfortable with what to say to people, and also for the siblings.

So whatever words feel true to the family, having that in the back of your mind can really help with those tricky situations and those tricky conversations. I definitely hear some grandparents are surprisingly really good at this stuff. They may have had a lot of expectations of their children, but by the time they get to grandparents, they're like, "Oh, my grandchild's actions don't really reflect on me in the same way. And I've lived a whole life and I've learned I just need to be happy and may need to be happy, too." So sometimes, your older relatives can surprise you. Not always. And sometimes, this stuff is going to be really hard for them.

One thing that we do tell folks is that a lot of gender-diverse folks, if they hear their wrong name and wrong set of nouns, their brain gets stuck on it and they don't even hear the rest of the sentence. So, if you're trying to get your kid to load the dishwasher and you use the wrong name and set of pronouns, you're a lot less likely to get the dishwashers loaded. So even if it feels kind of awkward and it's a lot of work for you, it can really improve the communication to just lean into it as much as possible.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I heard you mention some ways or strategies or gender-affirming parenting practices. So I'm just wondering, Carrie, what are some examples that you and Wayne did in your home with your kids? Again, from those early ages to support the gender exploration and creativity. What were some of those practical things?

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**Carrie:** So for example, when we'd go into a clothing store buying bags, school clothes or whatever, and our son was drawn to the boy section of clothes with the dump truck on the front or whatever of the shirt, to just not make that hard to just say, " Yep, absolutely. Is that the one you want?" Sometimes later, there'd be questions about, " So, what is it about that that you really like?" But just going with that, not providing more obstacles for that. He wanted to learn hockey and he played football, and we didn't say that those were things that were gendered. We said, " Yes, of course, you can do those things."

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**Wayne:** I also wanted to comment on the importance of school because kids spend a lot of their time at school. And the fact that we have the resources at schools now, especially in this province of gender identity and that sort of thing that kids can explore is so important. So in the case of our youngest, he found a book. He saw in this book, there was a transgender boy. And it was the first time he'd encountered this and it resonated with him in a way he suddenly discovered that this was maybe what he was. And not only was this some exposure for him to see this as a possibility, but the fact that it was in a book at school, the fact that it was normal enough to be in a book at school really helped a lot as well. So, I think it's important to have those resources available at schools as well as having the openness at home to be supportive of whatever sort of gender exploration it might be.

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**Carrie:** Yeah, and being careful and being mindful. Kids are always listening. Even teenagers, when we think they're not, they are always listening. And especially, trans kids are looking for clues that you accept them or that you will accept them. Even if they are just wondering if maybe they could be trans, they're looking for clues in their environment. They're looking for things that their teachers say. They're looking for the characters in books, they're looking to us as parents. And if they overhear us laughing at a transphobic joke or making comments about something we've seen in the media or something, they hear all of this. They file it in their memories as, " That's not a safe thing," or, " That is a safe thing."

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**Char Black:** Thanks for sharing all of that, Wayne and Carrie. For me as a parent, it feels doable, what you're just explaining. Notice these breadcrumbs, create an open supportive environment. Then, they're looking for their own clues around safety as well, so it's really nice to know. I just wanted to touch on one thing Kendall previously was talking about, the importance of talking to your other children and their siblings and the language they're using. Do you have any comments on guiding parents or caregivers through conversations with their other children when a sibling is exploring their gender identity? How can families adapt to using new language?

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**Carrie:** We've had families that we've supported where siblings were extremely concerned about their appearance to other people. And I don't just mean physical appearance but their presentation generally, and their popularity, and their status within their friend groups and



schools. That has been extremely challenging. But by and large, siblings are supportive. Sometimes, they know before parents do. Sometimes they're encouraging the parents, because we have found younger people, they get it so much quicker. Parents come to us and they say, "I don't know. Their brother just right away switched pronouns and names like it was nothing." It was no big deal because they already had a friend at school or they knew somebody or saw someone they follow on TikTok is trans. So they're like, "Oh, like this person I follow on TikTok." And then they just shift immediately and parents are like, "I don't know if I can do this."

I say to them, "One of the easiest things you can do, the simplest thing..." They'll sometimes just say, "What do I do today?"

I go, "You can do this the minute we get off the phone or you leave this meeting, you can use the pronoun and the name that they would like to use. And even if it sounds and feels like a lie in your mouth, and it will a little bit because you're calling them by something that you're not used to, one day it won't. And I think the minute you see the change it makes in your child, it's like they blossom. It's like a flower that's getting watered. You will see the joy, you will see the sunshine on their faces, and then you'll want to keep doing that. You're just using their correct name and pronoun, and it's a game changer for your relationship, too. It's going to make everything easier. So, that's something you can do. It's easy, it's accessible. You can do it right now."

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**Kendall:** And building off of that, I like to ask people or encourage people to imagine standing in front of their own parents and being able to say, "This is exactly who I am. This is what I like. These are my goals. This is what I want for my life." And having their parents look them in the eye and say, "I love you and I'm so excited to live this life with you exactly as you are." And I think when you have a gender-diverse child, that is a child who's brave enough to stand in front of you and tell you exactly who they are, and you have the chance to give them that gift of acceptance. So maybe, you're not ready to do it right now, maybe you don't have those words. But the fact that they're standing there showing you who you are, just means that when you're ready, you're going to be able to give them this incredible gift.

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**Carrie:** Wow, that gave me goosebumps, Kendall. I'm a little teared up. That's beautiful.

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**Wayne:** I also wanted to point out in our parent group that we have a lot of families, and I just want to emphasize what Carrie was saying with siblings who immediately switch over, immediately are accepting of their siblings who are gender-diverse. But sometimes, that's not the case. And sometimes, there are siblings who are not on board. And unfortunately, sometimes also parents. Very often, there's one parent who comes to the group, and the other parent is maybe not supportive. And that, I think, just emphasizes why it's so important that if you can be supportive as much as possible because they may not have all the other people in their lives being supportive. So, they need someone who is.

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**Carrie:** Yeah. TransParent is really born out of the idea that if trans youth have even one supportive adult in their life, it's a huge protective factor for them. The rates of self-harm and other things, that go way, way, way down. So once Wayne and I heard that, we said, " We have to do this. We have to help. We have to help other parents and caregivers to be that person so that these beautiful kids can grow into beautiful adults."

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**Bryn Askwith:** Agreed. The other thing I wanted to do was just segue a little bit because you mentioned TransParent, to resources. So I'll just check in with Kendall, wondering about what resources do you often connect families to that you would want to share out, again, for families with maybe younger kids who are just starting on this journey? And then Wayne and Carrie, if you have other ones to add in, that'd be great, too.

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**Kendall:** Yeah. There's a great book, the Transgender Child, that is a really great resource for parents of younger kids. And there's tons of resources on the Trans Care BC website, and they have health navigators too, that can help navigate you around. They have a page that can populate all of the support groups in your area so that you could reach out and find a support group. And then the BC Children's Hospital website also has a lot of great resources as well as the Kelty Mental Health Center website. So, I think that those are some great places to start. Gender Spectrum still has resources to help navigate conversations with schools, and so that's really great as well.

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**Carrie:** Yeah, I want to echo the Transgender Child. We have a set of learning resources that we provide for families to borrow. So we have these resources that we loan out, and Transgender Child is one of them. And there's your Transgender Teen and there might be another one besides that, I'm forgetting, but they're really, really good. Then Trans Care BC, as Kendall said, we love them. They're the first point of contact that we had, really, outside of probably the lovely people where Kendall's at, who we adore. They also, on the Trans Care site, have learning modules. And while many of them are aimed at healthcare workers, there's quite a few that are not. They're free and accessible to anyone can go and take these little Trans 101 things. And they specifically have a section on their page for parents and caregivers and family, and they have books categorized according to age. Ones that are just picture books that are just very simple. There's one called Red, it's about a crayon, and it's one that I know kids in our group have really enjoyed reading. There's so many resources there. Or call us. Come to our group. It's free and it helps a lot to know other parents to talk with them. It normalizes everything. It can make you feel less alone. It will make you feel less alone.

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**Char Black:** Amazing. Thank you. And just to wrap up, we always want to ask our guests to give their words of wisdom. Do you have any key takeaways that you'd want to share?

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**Carrie:** Yeah. I think the biggest thing is love your child. Just keep loving them. They need you to show them little signs of acceptance, whether they're trans or cis. They are looking for these clues. My husband, Wayne, puts a little sticker always on his phone. And when it fades, he gets a new one that says Proud Dad, with a rainbow flag or something like that. We stand up when we hear about stigma, discrimination, and hateful conduct.

Mostly, love them. Just love them. And know that if you continue this relationship, they're going to feel comfortable talking to you about everything, not just their gender. And I feel like we have a closeness with our kids that wouldn't have happened if they didn't come out. And let your kids drive the bus.

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**Char Black:** Wonderful. Wayne?

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**Wayne:** I just wanted to add or really reinforce some of that, the importance of supporting your child. The statistics show that a child who has supportive parents is so much safer and less likely to self-harm or go down a dangerous path. So, it's super important to be supporting your kids. And especially when they're younger, I think this has also been said. That you're not assuming that they are trans, you're not assuming that they're not. Carrie likes to use the phrase gender- creative. They're just being gender- creative, perhaps. Let them be, and just support them in that and see where that journey goes.

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**Kendall:** I heard it said like this recently that when your child is a baby, you are the boss or the manager of them. And then as they grow, they fire you as their boss and they hire you as a consultant. And if you do a really good job as a consultant, then in their adulthood, they'll fire you as a consultant and they'll hire you on as a friend. But if you don't do a good job of moving from that boss role to that consultant role when they need it, you might not get hired back on as a friend. And so, I think it's a really lovely way to put it, and I think Carrie and Wayne are so far in their journey and they're so supportive and so wonderful. And you might not be there yet, but I think always remembering that in any given moment, you have the choice to choose love. So, just continue. If you didn't do it in the moment before, renew that. How can I choose love in the next moment? Because little by little, you'll definitely get there.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I think those are amazing takeaways for all of our listeners. Thank you so much, Carrie, Wayne, and Kendall for joining us on this episode, and I hope it's not the last episode that we get a chance to chat with you about this. So, thanks again for making the time today.

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**Carrie:** Thank you so much for having us.

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**Wayne:** Thank you.

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**Char Black:** Bryn, it's been so great co-hosting this episode with you. Thanks to our Where You Are listeners as well. Glad you tuned in with us today.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Thanks, Char. Co-hosting with you, I say is always a highlight in my day. If you enjoyed this Where You Are episode, please leave us a rating where you might be listening now.

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