



Moments to treasure:

Narrative family therapy with trans children and cisgender parents

An interview with David Nylund by David Denborough



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Abstract

David Nylund's primary work is at the Gender Health Center in Sacramento, California, with family members, caregivers, and parents of young trans and gender diverse folks. David works primarily with parents to invite them to come to a place of supporting and affirming their child's gender identity. This interview explores the ways in which he engages in narrative family therapy in this context.

Key words: trans, gender diverse, young people, family therapy, narrative therapy, parents

When you first meet with families, how are the conversations likely to start?

Most of the time, when families come to see me, the parents have positioned me as an expert and they're wanting me to offer some sort of assessment as to whether their kid is 'truly trans', are they really a transgender person. I'm positioned as some sort of diagnoser or an assessor, and so that's where our conversations often start. They are seeking reassurance and clarity in what is often a really challenging and confusing experience for them.

What is interesting to me at the start is that they've chosen to come to the Gender Health Center and to consult with me – knowing that I have a lot of experience in working with trans youth and I'm very much an advocate and an ally. The fact that they have sought me out, rather than another therapist who might be sceptical of trans experience, always seems significant to me.

One of the ideas I've found useful is to remember that as much as I wish to be an advocate to the young person, I need to start where the parents are at. For many parents, they're completely shocked, surprised and unsettled when they first come to see me. They're often coming from a place of, 'Maybe this is just a phase'. This is often our starting point, 'Is this just a phase? How do I know if my kid is trans?'

I've found that I need to slow down and respect what the parents are contending with and recognise that, for the most part, they're coming from a place of love and concern. Often there are multiple concerns, including the real fear about how their child is going to be treated in a transphobic culture.

Honouring concerns and fears sounds like a significant place to start. Can you say more about how you seek to do so?

I often just want to slow the conversation down and hear their concerns and where these concerns are coming from. I also seek to honour the values and intentions implicit within their concerns that often speak to their love of their child. Early on, I might also ask questions about what they value about themselves as parents. There is one particular question I find helpful in this:

'If I was to ask your child what they appreciate about you as parents, what might they say?'

If we're meeting together – young person and parent(s) – then I might ask the young person questions like,

'Tell me about your parents and what you love and value about them?'

This leads to me hearing stories that are testimonies of the parents' love. If I start from here, this can create a space where parents and child are more open to a collaborative conversation.

Are there other principles and practices that act as a guide in these initial moments?

I'm interested in deconstructing the binary of parents being either 'supportive' or 'not supportive'. I don't find that binary at all helpful. There are degrees of support and degrees of affirmation. Early on I will be looking for opportunities to invite the parents to support their kids' gender expression, but this doesn't necessarily mean they have to be an advocate or support their kid if they want to start medical transition. Maybe they can start to support their young person's social transition and their wish to express their gender in particular ways, including the way they dress. And then maybe they could honour their kid's pronouns. These might be initial steps. In this way, there are degrees of support and in our early conversations I'm not asking parents to wave the trans flag. I just want to start with one thing that the parents could practise that is somewhat affirmative and that, importantly, their child will experience as acknowledging. Because this will also be significant for their relationships.

Does it make a difference that you are a parent and that you are cisgender?

Yes it can. Because I'm a cisgender white male, in the eyes of many cisgender parents, I carry unearned legitimacy. While parents might think my trans or non-binary colleagues have an agenda – that they are trying to recruit the young person into being trans – with me, because I present in a fairly normative, masculine way, I am granted a certain kind of unearned respect. I think it's important to acknowledge this privilege and to try to use it well. My cisgender masculinity can sometimes be particularly helpful in making connections with fathers. We can connect around some traditional masculine discourses, sports and so forth.

Making some sort of connection based on mutual respect is a starting point. One of the other things I often do early on in meetings with parents is to ask them if they have any questions for me. When I do this, I often ask the young person to leave the room. I've learned

that the parents might need to catch me up with what's been happening in the family and they also might want to ask questions that might be somewhat harmful for the young person to hear.

While the young person often knows what the parents' concerns are, I still find it helpful to invite the parents just to have a conversation with me where they can ask initial questions. I'll also ask if they want some information and, if so, I can refer them to literature for parents. Fortunately, there's an increasing amount of literature written by parents of trans youth for other parents, and also literature from trans folks themselves as well as resources from professionals who are working in diverse gender communities.

If a parent is interested in doing some reading, then this sometimes indicates a level of support. If a parent instead says 'No I don't need to read anything, I know my kid's not trans', or if there are very different responses and tension between the parents, then this might alert me to different care that I need to take.

If you meet with parents alone, do you also meet with the young person alone?

Yes, if I meet with parents alone, then I will also spend some time just with the young person alone and that's where I might say,

'My pronouns are he/his/him, what pronouns should I use with you? How should I refer to you when your parents are in the room? How can I best support you? Is there anything that's important for me to know? Anything that you want to keep private between you and me?'

In response, often the young person will say,

'I prefer that you use he/his/him pronouns but with my parents, I'm okay if they're using she/her/hers'.

If this is the case, then I will begin to use the pronouns that the young person identifies with in the presence of their parents, and this is sometimes significant for parents. They begin to hear their child referred to by their pronouns, and they hear these being used by another adult – one who has some experience in these realms.

Can you say more about how you respond when between them the two parents may have very different attitudes towards their child's gender expression?

This is quite a common situation. Let's say there is tension between heterosexual parents, typically the mother is more supportive and the father, given their induction into traditional patriarchal masculinity, is less open. Quite often there can be a tension between the parents and the mother may feel in the middle.

If so, I'll talk with the couple alone and I'll ask them not what they think their kid needs from them individually, but instead:

'What do you think your kid needs from your relationship?'

I'll talk to them as the relationship, not as the individual father or individual mother. This is something I have learnt from Stephen Madigan's approach (Madigan, 2017) and I've found it very helpful. Further questions might include,

'What does the relationship need from you to be supportive?'

Also relevant is the influence of mother-blame. At the beginning of our first conversation, the mother might ask me questions about what she's done wrong. Hopefully by the end of the conversation, this can move to what they've done right. Maybe they've parented in such a way that the young person feels safe to let them know who they are. I might ask questions such as,

'What does that say about you as a parent, as a mum, that you've helped support and raise a kid who is able to get in touch with who they are, at great risk?'

Down the track, I may also explore Karl Tomm's internalised other questioning (Tomm, Hoyt & Madigan, 1998), where I'll interview the parent as the young person. I never do this in the first meeting, but when the parent is moving to some degree of affirmation, I sometimes interview them as their kid and say something like,

'What is it like when your dad doesn't acknowledge your pronouns?' or 'What do you need from your dad?'

So I'm interviewing the dad as their kid, and I'll often do this with the kid in the room. This means the kid's voice is being acknowledged without the young person having to speak for themselves (which could put them on the spot and there might also be a risk of some retribution after the conversation when they get back home). I've found many of these internalised other conversations in the presence of the child very moving.

I can really imagine this. What about situations where either parent is quite determined not to affirm their child's preferred gender identity. Perhaps they think this would actually make things worse for the young person?

In those sorts of situations, sometimes I use some of the mainstream traditional research on trans youth, including the standards of care by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. While these standards are increasingly privileging the voices of trans folks and are less pathologising than they were, they remain highly medicalised. In my experience, however, some parents find it comforting to understand that their kid has 'gender dysphoria' and I find this is a concept that can then be externalised.

We can speak about how gender dysphoria tends to increase as children move into puberty and I'll refer parents to the standards of care that describe how refusing timely medical interventions for adolescents who experience gender dysphoria can put them at great risk for stigmatisation and depression. At times, I cite additional research that shows that family support is a key factor in reducing depression and suicidal thoughts and actions. Sometimes this research leads parents to understand differently the crucial importance, sometimes life-saving importance, of family support.

What about considerations of religion and faith? Do these themes sometimes emerge in your conversations?

They certainly do! Sometimes I'm working with families from conservative faith traditions and if this is posing a challenge I'll try to refer them to somebody within their faith community who has some progressive views on trans experience. There's an organisation here in California, called The Gender Spectrum, for parents of trans youth, and they have a youtube channel where parents talk about tensions between honouring their religious faiths and supporting their kid and what that's like. This can be challenging work, but I am always able to find folks within the relevant faith community who are trans affirmative.

I'll also try to learn more about aspects of their particular faith tradition that might prove helpful in speaking about love and family. For instance, I might ask questions about what their faith tells them about values in terms of parenting. I might also explore some of their core foundational, spiritual values around love and caring, and we then talk about whether these could be used as a starting point for support for their child, and what

this could look like. What's crucial is to open pathways so that parents can stay within their faith and also be supportive of their child.

To assist with this, the Gender Health Center has families and parents and leaders within different religions who we can call upon to help. In talking about this, it's really important not to assume that parents from conservative faith traditions are not supportive, and families that have more progressive and liberal views are supportive. I've worked with some really conservative Catholic families who have been completely supportive of their trans child, and I've worked with progressive, liberal feminist families who are not supportive. They might be supportive of their kids' sexual identity, but not at all supportive of their kids' gender transition via medical means. Where parents land in terms of being supportive doesn't seem to be dependent on political or religious views.

I'm interested in how you have built links with leaders of faith in different religions. Can you call them up and invite them in as outsider witnesses?

That's a great idea. We haven't been able to organise that as yet, but I will look for opportunities. We certainly involve parents from other families as outsider witnesses, but I haven't yet been able to bring in any clergy or spiritual leaders. That's something I'll think more about. Fortunately there are folks who volunteer here at the Gender Health Center from many diverse backgrounds including religious backgrounds, so we're able to call upon them and they are able to use their faith, their church, their mosque, their synagogue, and so forth, to help families who are struggling with how to make sense of their kids' gender identity in ways that are congruent with their faith traditions.

I don't mean to imply that this is not hard work, Sometimes it's really hard. Parents might move towards some degree of affirmation and support and then the next step where it gets really challenging is if the young person wants to start medical transition via hormones or surgery. That's when parents can believe their child is too young to make that decision, that it's irreversible, and that they'll have to wait until they're 18.

How do you approach such situations?

If parents want to close off any conversation about hormones, then I'll want to start with their concerns about hormones. We will talk honestly about immediate

side effects and long-term effects. And then, slowly, I'll hope to talk about the medical reality: that if their kid waits until they're older, until after puberty has started, then the hormones are not going to be able to slow down the development of secondary sex characteristics. Hormones and hormone blockers can slow that process down but if they wait until they're older it's less likely that their kid is going to feel at home in their body.

Looking at this from a purely medical perspective can sometimes help and I will work with doctors who can explain this to parents much better than me. I can also call upon other parents whose kids started hormones when they were 14, 15, or got top surgery at 16, and I'll ask them to be available to families who are now grappling with these dilemmas.

But, of course, sometimes the parent might refuse to support their child starting hormones. Because parental consent is required, I will then go back to work with the young person as to how they're going to manage living in a body that doesn't suit, doesn't fit their idea of themselves. We might talk about how they can best hold onto hope for the future. It can be really tough work.

We've covered a lot of territory already and I've just got a couple of complex realms I'd like to ask you about. Complex for me at least, they might be simple to you! The first of these relate to how you were talking earlier about the words 'advocate' and 'ally', and that sometimes you see yourself as an advocate and an ally, and other times you step into a different place when you're meeting with a family. You mentioned that sometimes parents think you or your colleagues have an agenda – and I guess advocates and allies do have agendas? I'm not exactly sure what my question is, but this is a complex realm isn't it? The Gender Health Center is an advocacy centre – and a wonderful one – I guess I'm wondering about any reflections you have about those differing positions that you're grappling with when you're meeting with families and have that profound responsibility of meeting with a family that is not your own and with people who have had relationships with each other since the child's birth ... Is there a question in there?

Yes it sure is complex. Let me see if I can respond! Firstly, the parents and families who come to the Gender Health Center know that it is an advocacy organisation and a trans-led organisation. They're seeking us out rather than a therapist who does some version of

aversion therapy. So this, I think, means that my role as therapist and ally/advocate can be aligned in a transparent way.

Secondly, I think that part of our role is community work – introducing parents to other parents who have been through related experiences.

Thirdly, coming from a narrative and post-structuralist theoretical framework means that we understand that parents stand in multiple locations and contradictory discourses. Parents' lack of support, or hostility to trans experience, has not been invented by them, it's situated within broader cultural, gendered traditions. Therefore, perhaps my role as therapist/ally/advocate involves trying to create space for parents to get some distance from these dominant cultural discourses.

And fourthly, I'm also a parent and I think that does help me to relate to what it might be like for a parent to be really confused and concerned about their child. Even if they have moved to a level of support, then what's it going to be like for their kid around dating? What's it going to be like in terms of the violence they may experience? How am I going to tell my relatives, my friends, my co-workers? I can relate to these questions.

Fortunately, I have now witnessed so many families move through these questions. I just had a meeting the other day where the mum, who was not supportive when they first started seeing me a year ago, said,

'I have waited until this session with you David, because I have a holiday gift (for their child). I've done the paperwork for you to change your legal name and gender identity'.

The kid was just amazed and crying. It is so moving to be in these kinds of conversations. In this case, the mum took this step at considerable risk. She did so knowing that her husband might not be supportive and it might even put their marital relationship at risk, yet she felt it was super important.

This can be powerfully moving work. As well as acknowledging every step taken along the way, the other thing that seems really important is to validate parents' experience of loss.

Can you say more about this?

When somebody is expecting a child, often the first question asked is, 'Is it a boy or a girl?' There are so many gendered expectations even before birth, so if a young person starts to depart from heteronormative

and cisnormative expectations, this can involve loss and a grieving process for parents which I need to really honour and acknowledge.

While there may well be a lot to be gained from any transition, there is also loss. When I have asked, 'Does this feel like loss and grief?' parents have appreciated this 100% of the time. They have appreciated me honouring their grief and loss. I don't want to do this in a traditional, normative, staged grief model, but because gender is such a main force in our culture, a primary discourse, then a change of gender of one's child is a huge loss. Significantly, in the process of acknowledging loss, it also becomes possible, through re-remembering practices, to name and acknowledge the many qualities of the child that are not gendered qualities and that will continue. In this way, the young person will continue to be the same person, they'll just be more of that person.

Parents are holders of histories, aren't they? Parents have known the young person through histories/herstories/theirstories/non-binary stories – throughout their entire lives. I'm really interested in how this role of parents as holders of history can be relevant in this work. Remembering particular treasured characteristics and values of their child, and tracing these through time in ways that generate a continuity of identity, sounds really significant ...

Yes. I can interview the parents about memories of their kid when they were younger and I'll often do this with the young person in the room. At certain points I might then turn to the kid and say,

'Were you aware that these are important qualities that your mum and dad are really proud of? And do you see these qualities continuing on as you move forward as the gender you identify with?'

I think this can be really reassuring for parents, who may have supported and cultivated these qualities in their child over many years, to have the chance to honour these qualities and come to see that they will not only continue but might actually even strengthen as their child is able to be more at home with themselves.

That's a beautiful metaphor ... being at home with oneself ...

Yes, I like that metaphor. Not being able to be the gender that you are is almost like being unhoused. Young people often really identify with this.

The other thing that I find really helpful is to invite parents to look back at their own gender history. This tends to be mainly with mums, but sometimes I can invite dads into it also. The idea is to invite the mum, for instance, to consider the ways they were socialised as to what it means to be a female; what were the real effects of this; and how did they respond to this. Quite often, we then get to hear the story of the mum's resistance to dominant gender prescriptions re femininity. They might have even been involved in some feminist movements; or there might have been incongruencies between their parents' expectations and their own hopes for their life; or maybe they identified as a tomboy. Through these explorations we might discover/generate some threads of connection between themselves and their child around resistance to traditional gender norms. This, in turn, might lead to a conversation of how they are both, to some degree, not a 'gender outlaw' but perhaps 'gender resistant'. And then, hopefully, with the father too, there might be some conversations about how they've seen the real effects of toxic or hegemonic masculinity; and perhaps how they've tried to create a way of being a man that is congruent with what they give value to.

I remember one poignant situation in which two parents who were divorced and really couldn't stand each other would come to the sessions together to support their kid who identifies as a trans male. I remember asking the father,

'In what ways do you think your son is teaching you how to be a better man?'

This father articulated some very moving things which were so powerful for their son to hear. It was moving for me too!

That's a beautiful story. As was the earlier story about the mother who bought the holiday gift for her child. What a tragic indictment on our society, however, that she might have to choose between her relationship with her son and her relationship with her partner/husband.

Yes. When that is the case it's totally tragic. And I try to do all I can to prevent this.

There's another complex realm I wanted to mention. I am really interested in people being able to determine their gender identities outside of medical discourse, and outside of professional jurisdiction. I know that there are some developments in

California that enable someone to make a change to one's legal gender and name without medical or mental health professional involvement. And I know there is so much vibrant cultural work happening in North America that is transforming understandings of gender. For instance the fabulous Alok Vaid-Menon, whose activism and cultural work is creating room for some people to be at home with their diverse bodies and live non-binary gender identities without medical interventions. Do you have any reflections on these realms?

What seems really significant at the Gender Health Center is that there are people in the community, and people who work as volunteers, as peer advocates, and so on, who embody so many different trans and non-binary identities. There is diversity of cultures and ages, young folks who are non-binary, folks who are trans, folks for whom medical interventions have been life-saving, and others for whom they are not relevant. This means that the Center in some way seeks to continually expand options of gender belonging.

That sounds really significant. On another note, I'm linked with a youth service in Adelaide that offers accommodation for young people who are unhoused. As you know, the percentage of young queer, trans and non-binary folk who are homeless is really significant. I'd be really interested in whether you are involved with young people whose biological family relations have broken down and if you explore ways of supporting relationships with one of more members of their biological family?

Certainly there are situations in our work where the parents don't move to a level of support and ostracise the young person, kick them out, and there are some who become unhoused, homeless. One of our priorities in this circumstance is to create community and queer family. We have some structures in place for that. We have what's referred to as a respite program, where a community of folks who have been ostracised by their own families of origin are now creating new families and support. I had a client recently talk about the alternative ritual they created at the time of Thanksgiving. Because they weren't allowed to go home for Thanksgiving, they and other trans folks in respite, created a Transgiving instead! What was really cool about this is that what people did for this Transgiving holiday deliberately subverted the regular gender expectations of Thanksgiving – which is a holiday in the US that has all sorts of routine gender roles. Finding ways to create queer family and queer holidays seems significant.

It certainly does. What about situations where there's been a break with biological family but there might be one sibling or a grandparent who is somewhat more accepting. Is there scope in trying to work, if not with the parents, then with maintaining some connection with one family member ... so that histories can be held onto even as people are struggling with profound rejection or ostracism? Or so that connections are maintained so that if sometime down the track the parents shift their position then there is an opportunity for regrading relationships?

Yeah, there's one family I'm working with where the parents aren't supportive but the grandma is, so I work with the grandma. We work on ways that they can covertly support each other in the hope that one day the parents will be able to join them. As you said, where the parents are now is not necessarily where they're going to land down the road. I've noticed that even the most conservative fathers often begin to move to some level of acceptance/ acknowledgement over time. If there is a way of maintaining connection with other family members this seems really important.

Sometimes these family situations get quite complex. For example, where a child might be in foster care and the foster family is supportive in relation to the young person's gender identity but the biological parents are not and they're trying to reunify.

That sure is complex! Okay, only got one other question which goes back to one of the first things you said ...

Okay.

You mentioned that one of the first things many parents say is 'This is just a phase'.

Yes.

I realise this phrase, for young people, is like an emblem for feeling the opposite of accepted and the opposite of acknowledgement. It's like a touchstone isn't it? So I know it could be a breaking point between parents and young people. And yet, at the same time, sometimes gender identities do change ... they are not necessarily fixed in stone ... so I'd be interested in how you respond when parents say 'Couldn't this just be a phase?'

That's a great question. And yes, almost all parents ask some version of that question or mention the word 'phase'. I'll just share an experience where a young trans man and his parents who had immigrated from Sri Lanka came to see me. The parents are both medical doctors and the ways they were initially understanding their cultural traditions and social locations were not open to supporting their kid's transition. Yet, they came to see me. At the beginning of the conversation they spoke about their child going through a phase. But by the end of the session the dad said,

'You know what, I've come to realise that we're going through a phase, my kid is not.'

I actually wish I had taped that session because I can't remember what had happened in between!

In response to your question, when parents talk about whether their child is going through a phase, I'll share a story like that one. I'll bring in the voices of other

parents. I'll acknowledge that it's not just the kid who may be going through a phase, but they're going through a particular phase too, and we'll try to understand phases not in a pathologising way, or in a way that in any way diminishes their significance, but in a way that honours what both young people and parents are experiencing.

That's a really beautiful story, particularly from a family who has migrated. Those parents know a lot about migration, a lot about phases and changes.

There are many very moving experience in this work. When parents like this father, or the mum who started the process of the legal name and gender change, take these steps to acknowledge their children, these moments when I can turn and just watch the kid's face, their reaction ... those are the moments I treasure.

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