

05/05/2024

Parents of Adolescents with Gender Distress - Victoria (PAGD) is a growing collective of Victorian parents, all with adolescent and young adult children experiencing distress around their gender identity. All our children have expressed gender distress only after reaching puberty. The majority are diagnosed with neurodiversity or display neurodiverse traits. Most have experienced trauma or suffer from mental illness. As their parents, we love and support our children and advocate on their behalf. All of them have our full support to express whichever sexuality they wish to.

All our children have self-diagnosed with the encouragement of peers, school personnel and on-line resources such as TikTok. It is notable that gender distress peaked for most of our children during or shortly after the Covid pandemic when their mental health was noticeably more fragile.

None of us believe our children have been 'born in the wrong body'. None of us believe that the orthodox 'affirmative only' model of care currently championed by our state government offers best practice treatment for our children or upholds our human rights. The recent Cass Review conducted in the UK has challenged the robustness of the scientific basis for the 'affirmative' model of care for gender distress, and many countries who have undertaken similar systematic reviews now support diversity of opinion and approaches. We believe that in Victoria, our children and families are being discriminated against and being enforced to follow a model of treatment that is neither scientifically robust nor proven to be of benefit. In the process, several of our human rights have been ignored and continue to be under threat.

In the last two years, several of the children of parents in our group have changed their minds on the nature of their identity, which challenges the common assertion of the 'affirmation' model that gender identity is innate. However, their progression to reconciliation with their physical body and at times, their sexual orientation, is not simple, with most requiring compassionate on-going psychological support that is increasingly hard to find.

There is no state support for views that challenge the 'affirmation' approach to gender distress, or recognition that a diversity of views is valid. The result of this is that many of us feel unwelcome and alienated by our own government and isolated from support that is extended to other citizens. Parents adhering to the 'affirmation' model are celebrated and supported, while parents who wish to follow a more cautious and neutral approach, or who question the validity of the 'affirmation' model are shunned. While the concepts of diversity and inclusion are endorsed, they are not upheld.

As the 'affirmation' model is increasingly challenged globally, it raises the question of whether the state sanctioned approach is itself a threat to the well being of gender diverse Victorians.

Human rights in Victoria are upheld through the **Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006**. Our lived experience is that the following rights have been negatively impacted by the State government adherence to the 'affirmation' model of care for gender distress to the exclusion of other points of view.

Freedom of expression

Many of our parents have experienced discrimination at work and in society for questioning the affirmation model and orthodox views on how to support gender diversity. This is particularly distressing for parents who are struggling to find mental health support for their children. They are traumatised and triggered by constant visible support in the workplace, government agencies and healthcare settings for an ideology and model of care that they do not believe is of benefit to their child. Parents who have made their views known in the workplace have been subject to disciplinary procedures for expressing their view or had work contracts cancelled. This has occurred outside of any discussion of work competence and clearly breaches their right to freedom of expression.

Protection of families and children

The Charter states that families are the fundamental group unit of society and are entitled to be protected by society and the State. Further, every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in the child's best interests and is needed by the child by reason of being a child.

Many of our families have lived experience of systematic disregard for this right, particularly in schools. In numerous cases, and contrary to the principles of both the **Education and Training Reform Act 2006** and the **Child Youth and Families Act 2005**, school personnel have intentionally excluded and alienated parents from discussions regarding their child's gender distress and mental wellbeing.

We are particularly distressed by the well-intentioned but ill-informed willingness of schools to implement 'social transition' without consulting parents. For children who are struggling with mental health and identity formation, this intervention has compounded distress and increased mental instability. Intentionally alienating parents in the process is a clear breach of human rights and has also isolated children from their most important support structure at a time when they needed it most. It is a significant psychosocial intervention that school employees are woefully uninformed about and unqualified to make.

Since the inception of the **Change or Suppression Practices Prohibition Act 2021** in Victoria, all of our families have experienced extreme difficulty in finding suitable psychological support for our gender distressed and gender diverse children. We believe the legislation has been counter-productive, reducing the willingness of practitioners to work with our children. All of us have struggled to find the cautious and neutral psychological help recommended by our peak psychiatry bodies for what we believe is a psychological problem.

The impact of the legislation discriminates against families who wish to follow the more neutral 'watchful waiting' approach to gender distress, an approach that is increasingly being recommended globally.

By enforcing adherence to a single model of thought and healthcare through legislation and policy, freedom of expression, diversity of opinion and access to adequate healthcare is being denied. Our gender diverse children are not a homogenous group and to demand they are treated as such, disrespects and threatens their human dignity, psychological complexity, and diversity.

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