



# An Ally's View: The Importance of Gay-Straight Alliances for Trans\* Students

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Gay-Straight Alliances

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My name is Catherine Brady and I am a board member of the Trans Equality Society of Alberta–TESA. Before I begin it is important that I let you know that I am not trans\*. I am cisgender, so I cannot and should not speak to you about the trans\* experience; it is not an experience I have lived. I will be speaking to you from the position of an ally and a parent.

I have been a board member of TESA for the past five years and a parent for the past 16. I became involved with the trans\* community about five years ago, as a result of having a close friend with a trans\* child, a child I have known since birth.

Although I had at that point in my life spent a lot of time advocating for issues related to children and schooling—I can honestly say I had no idea what I was getting into. I was truly and undeniably ignorant about the journey I was about to take—in the interests of a child. I was undeniably ignorant of what little support was out there for trans\* adults, far less for trans\* children and youth. In fact at that time the only support system that I could find was our local trans\* peer support group, TTIQ.

I remember my first meeting, held in the back of the old Pride Centre of Edmonton. There were a handful of adults discussing the challenges they were encountering finding jobs and housing, the challenges they were facing with family. I can remember the distinct, almost tangible feeling of hopelessness and desperation: I kind of wondered why people were even coming.

Yet I now know that TESA's president, Jan Buterman, turned to this group when he was fired because of his trans\* identity. Despite the fact that he is well-educated—with professional credentials—losing his job caused such overwhelming stress, anxiety and fear that having access to the support of other trans\* people, his peers, was invaluable in allowing him to cope emotionally with this terrible event.

The strides that I have seen trans\* Albertans make in just a few short years is nothing short of phenomenal. Legal cases like *C.F v. Alberta (Vital Statistics) (2014)*, in which a trans\* adult fought for and won the ability to have birth certificates amended without first undergoing Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS), have fuelled this change. As a result of this decision—Wren Kauffman, a trans\* youth—was able to change his birth certificate. Prior to the *C.F v. Alberta (Vital Statistics) (2014)* legal decision Wren would have had to wait until he was 18 to be considered for surgery.

Victories like these have resulted in a marked transformation in the discussions that occur within peer support communities. The hopelessness and resignation has been replaced with constructive problem solving. The community looks for solutions rather than accepting defeat.

The community still faces chronic discrimination issues related to jobs, housing and family. However, the simple ability to gather together to talk about problems that others in different circumstances do not face—or have faced and overcome—opens opportunities for people to find appropriate solutions, or at the very least to find some positive coping mechanisms.

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are peer support groups and they are vital for our children and youth. They are no less relevant or important than the adult support groups. For some they may be a place to relax with friends. For others they may be a place to find resources and support and for others they may be the only safe space they have in the day.

I am sure you will hear from other presenters the statistics of homelessness, depression and death by suicide that afflict our LGBT children and youth. The numbers are distressing. Sometimes school is the only safe space for these children. But even schools with the most inclusive environments, those that have active policies in place for LGBT children and youth, can fail when it comes to gender identity.

Trans\* children in particular face unique challenges that their gay, lesbian and bisexual colleagues do not. Consider, for instance, how easily it is for a trans\* or gender non-conforming child to be outed. School databases and the resulting record keeping systems, like attendance sheets, are set up in such a way that they record the child by sex and name: a sex they may not claim or a name they may not use. Whether it is an accidental faux pas or a teacher or administrator acting out of ignorance or hostility, the trans\* child can easily be outed without consent by what could be an accidental slip of the tongue.

When this happens to trans\* adults—and it does all the time—they not only turn to their peer support group, but they may also choose to complain to the authorities, file a human rights complaint, launch a lawsuit, or undertake any number of means to rectify the problem. Where does the trans\* child turn for support? Consider also the issue of washroom accessibility for the trans\* child. This is usually not an issue faced by their cisgender peers, whether gay or straight.

The child I know personally has encountered issues with washroom access. This child has a supportive school, supportive family and friends. And yet, I would still find myself standing in

the hallway, explaining time and time again to other adults or visitors that “yes, they could be in *that* washroom.”

Currently there are powerful interest groups who want to instill legislation preventing trans\* children and youth from using gender-appropriate washrooms at schools. This is reprehensible. Canada does not criminalise the use of washrooms regardless of signage, and schools boards and schools should not take it upon themselves to begin doing so. Again—where does the trans\* child turn for support? Children and youth are in NO such position to advocate for themselves, and this can be made even worse if their families are not supportive of their chosen identity.

TESA believes that the fundamental dignity of the person is not met by arbitrarily demanding a child take on an identity in opposition to their own. Respecting the agency of the human person—whether child or adult—takes little effort and does not require one to change one's own beliefs. It requires only that the ‘other side’ be allowed to have a voice. Yet in the instance of GSAs in schools, our government seems unable to extend even this negligible amount of effort. They seem determined that the voices of children and youth have no meaning whatsoever. TESA as an organisation—and I as a parent—cannot say anything other than that this is fundamentally wrong.

Participation in GSAs is not mandatory nor is it limited only to those who identify as LGBT. They are open to all who are willing to discuss, learn, share and support one another. They are a space that allows for true compassion to be practiced. Compassion comes from the Latin word *compati*, *com* meaning ‘together or with’ and *pati* meaning ‘to suffer’, being compassionate can be thought of as ‘walking together in suffering’. As an ally, it is an experience I am very familiar with.

To deny children and youth opportunities for support and compassion—the same support and compassion that is required by adults—is needlessly cruel, particularly when you consider how little agency children and youth really have in our adult world. This type of support does not need any special budget or extra resources, (no more so than any other school group). This type of support needs a room. It needs safe and caring adults. Its needs are minimal and its results are profound. A child that is safe and supported flourishes and grows. I presume that is what we all want for our children and youth.

‘Children and youth’ has been a phrase I have struggled with throughout this presentation, and as you probably noticed I have used a mixture of both. My struggle over language choice is directly related to another crucial difference between sexual identity and gender identity.

Sexual identity is generally determined as one reaches sexual maturity. Although this varies with individuals we usually think of it developing in the ‘teenage’ years—grades 6 to 7. Gender identity is determined much earlier. In the case of the child that I know, they knew before they started school that they were not the gender they were given at birth. This is a common experience for those who are trans\* identified.

To the best of my knowledge most of the GSAs are aimed for grade 7 and up; I am not aware of any support groups for those in elementary school, particularly in grades 1–4. As a parent, it causes me great discomfort to imagine a young child knowing something is different, not knowing what that is and having nowhere to turn.

Sitting with that discomfort reminded me of a document that is posted in one of my children’s schools: the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. It had been a while since I read them so I pulled them up on the Internet to review. I discovered a version I had not read before, one written in child friendly language—something that I think we can all benefit from. Simple, plain language. Here are a few of the rights that stood out for me:

- “You have the right to choose your own friends and join or set up groups, as long as it isn’t harmful to others.”
- “You have the right to get information that is important to your well-being, ... Adults should make sure the information you are getting is not harmful, and help you find and understand the information you need.”
- “You have the right to be alive.”

GSAs save lives.

Bill 10 with its amendment requires our children (and youth)—if their GSA is denied—to appeal to the Minister of Education. I invite you to pause for a moment and remember when you were in grade school. Even if you were legally able to, would you have the ability to appeal to a Minister of Education? Would you have even known one existed? Could you have done this without the support of a caring adult?

As a TESA member, I am well aware of how many adults, who have legal agency, struggle with the ability to launch a legal appeal. The bureaucratic process can be so overwhelming, they simply give up. Asking our children and youth to take such actions is ludicrous. Asking them to accept what appears to be segregation on the Minister's behalf is disgraceful.

We as adults, whether trans\*-identified or allies, parents, teachers or legislators are obligated to act in the best interest of our children and youth: ALL of our children and youth. We are obligated to uphold their right to life, a safe and supported life. I ask you to consider and reflect upon how you will uphold this obligation?

## References

C.F. v. Alberta (Vital Statistics), 2014 ABQB 237. Retrieved from [http://www.albertacourts.ab.ca/jdb\\_new/public/qb/2003-NewTemplate/qb/Civil/2014/2014abqb0237cor1.pdf](http://www.albertacourts.ab.ca/jdb_new/public/qb/2003-NewTemplate/qb/Civil/2014/2014abqb0237cor1.pdf)

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child Friendly Language. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf>

## Resources

**TTIQ** – TTIQ is a support and information group for all those who fall under the trans umbrella and their family or supporters. It is hosted at the Pride Centre of Edmonton. <http://www.pridecentreofedmonton.org/>