

Written evidence submitted by Mermaids (MISS0051)

The Charity

Mermaids has been supporting trans and gender-diverse children, young people, and their families since 1995. Mermaids has evolved into one of the UK's leading LGBTQ+ charities. Mermaids is a charity that supports transgender and gender diverse young people up to the age of 19 years old (inclusive) and their families. We will be responding to this inquiry within this context.

Our online support group for parents has over 2000 members, and almost 800 young people in our youth group. We always aim to give a voice to transgender and gender variant children and young people nationwide with an aim of helping create a future society that is void of transphobia so young trans and gender variant people can be themselves without fear of discrimination and prejudice.

Our overarching aim is to create a world where gender-diverse children and young people can be themselves and thrive, and an important part of this is to work to relieve the mental and emotional stress experienced by the young people we support.

Our Response

In line with our charitable objective, we welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry.

We start with offering you submissions we have received directly from our service users. We have kept these anonymous for confidentiality and safeguarding reasons. We hope these submissions will provide you with an idea of the experiences of the young people we support in relation to their body image.

Case study 1

“My son, who was assigned female at birth has a lot of body image issues. Mainly that his body is not how he wants it to look. He is currently on testosterone which is helping him to achieve a more masculine look. His insecurities about his body have led him to having an eating disorder, if he puts on too much weight he will look more curvy or womanly. He cannot wait until he is old enough to have surgery (top surgery). He also worries and gets very anxious about going out in public, in case he does not pass as a male. He especially worries about using public toilets. If he uses the women's he may get called for being male, but is terrified of going in men's toilets in case he is called out for being female. This has all lead to depression and anxiety. He constantly compares himself to the perfect male stereotype, six pack good looks, and feels he will never achieve that look and ever pass as male. It would be good if there was more positive representation of young trans people like my son, instead of mostly

negative press. The Starbucks advert 'What's my Name' was so touching and meant so much to him and me as a parent as you felt it was being acknowledged that people like him existed. It would be so good if there was a more diverse representation on TV and in the media. So often, its perfect, beautiful, people, presented to you constantly. It makes most of us feel inadequate, too fat, too ugly, too old. But If you have the added pressure of feeling you don't fit, the straight beautiful, archetype, it can make you feel desperate, anxious and depressed."

Case study 2

"It has saddened me tremendously that my daughter grew up with a body she hates. She is a bit happier with herself now that she is on hormone treatment but she hasn't had the surgery yet and has so much self-loathing, she finds it impossible to be in a personal relationship."

Case study 3

"Before starting the anti-depressants, body image had a much more significant impact - there were nights where I would cry myself to sleep because of my chest and I was more paranoid if I passed out in public. That's still the case - my chest is the biggest trigger of dysphoria and if I'm out running I'm still paranoid and will look in the reflection of windows to check if I at least somewhat pass for male. Recently I've even been trying to contact private hospitals to see if top surgery is an option since I'm applying to university this year. I've also been working out to try and gain muscle to look more masculine but I think that's becoming more prevalent with boys and men, in general, having unrealistic expectations of themselves to express masculinity. In general, though, I think body image does have an impact towards mental health but I'm not sure if it's more to do with gender dysphoria, general depression or societal standards of masculinity."

Case study 4

"My son's body image did not seem to be an issue until he reached puberty. Before this he dressed in typical male clothes. During the changes that take place during puberty he started wearing more clothes even in extreme heat. For example, t-shirt plus shirt, jumper, jacket. I realise it was because he was trying to cover up his developing chest. This had an effect on his mental health in that he started not wanting to socialise as much and he lost his original confidence. He also stopped going swimming which he loved. With the increasing bodily started, he started self-harming. He had not done this before which was very distressing for us. We sought professional help via GP, CAMHS, Tavistock and received it and his self-harming ceased but his issues with his developing body

continued and was diagnosed as Dysphoria. This continued to cause him anxiety and not wanting to go to school - although he did go because he was determined to take A Levels in order to go to University. At 18 years of age and before going to University he elected to have top surgery. This changed everything. He rediscovered his confidence, got good grades, went to University, has made lots of new friends and is thriving.”

Hopes and Recommendations

We hope to create a world where every trans and gender diverse young person feels confident and comfortable in their own bodies.

We have identified a few ways in which we, as a society, can embrace more of our young people, especially trans and gender-diverse young people, to ensure they feel empowered in their own bodies.

Our recommendations are as follows:

- 1. Positive representation in mainstream media** – It has been heart-warming to see the ways in which the recent rise of trans and gender-diverse role models, public figures, and actors has bolstered trans young people’s own body image. For the first time, this group of young people are seeing bodies they relate to being shown in an affirmative and empowering light. We believe further positive representation of trans and gender-diverse people and bodies will continue to shape and improve their own body image.
- 2. Access to Medical Pathway** – Not every trans and gender-diverse young person suffers from gender dysphoria (a diagnosis for those who experience immense physical and/or psychological distress as a result of their gender identity feeling incongruent with their body and/or the social gender role that was assigned to them at birth), however it is important to recognise that for those who do, gender-affirmative medical and psychological support can be extremely transformative in improving their confidence around their body image. Therefore, we recommend ensuring properly resourced healthcare services so that the children and young people who need them can access timely expert guidance and support. We would welcome the opportunity to talk about the current healthcare pathway for trans children to help you work to ensure it is as effective as possible, acknowledging how vital it is that all can access healthcare support they need without discrimination. Timely and appropriate access to

gender-affirmative care, can significantly contribute to allowing trans and gender-diverse young people gaining confidence about their body image.

- 3. Charities/Community Groups** – Charities and community groups can be a major source of empowerment. Ensuring that they are resourced properly will help allow spaces for trans and gender-diverse young people to explore their body image without judgement, helping them embrace and feel empowered in their bodies.

As one service user who reached out to us said: “[Diversity] should be embraced and be shown as part of the beauty of humankind”.

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