Is it a Phase?

RAISING COMPLEX KIDS CANADA
A companion to the video
"Is It Just a Phase? We Asked That Too. Our Kid Was Five."

Is it going to last? Imagine two futures. **In the first one,** your child grows up as they are today. **In the second,** they try on something new and eventually find a different path. Now — what should you actually do **today**, in each one?

If it lasts

Your child grows up as they are today.

- [ ] Love them.
- [ ] Use the name they ask for.
- [ ] Let them wear what they want.
- [ ] Keep the door open.
- [ ] Don't rush medical steps — *nothing medical happens before puberty, and after that it's done slowly, with professionals.*
- [ ] Support their mental health.
- [ ] Help them find a community.

If it doesn't

They try on something new and find a different path.

- [ ] Love them.
- [ ] Use the name they ask for.
- [ ] Let them wear what they want.
- [ ] Keep the door open.
- [ ] Don't rush medical steps.
- [ ] Support their mental health.
- [ ] Help them find a community.

Whether it lasts or changes, your job right now is identical. Everything on the list is reversible, loving, and the kind of support that goes with better mental health, whichever reality turns out to be true.

? "What makes *you* think it's a phase?" — *what I ask back, from a place of curiosity*

When a parent asks me "is it just a phase?", I respond from a place of curiosity. I ask a question back. And I listen. Because the answer is never really about the child. It's a fear. The internet. A friend. A relative. A sibling's things. A gap in education and understanding. Whatever they say, that's where the work is. Then I start where every doctor starts. **First, do no harm.**

If it is a phase, your child will come out the other side knowing you supported them and had their back, no matter what. And if it isn't a phase — the same thing will happen. Either way, you will have strengthened the relationship you have with your child, by believing them, respecting them, and supporting them through this part of their life. **That's the outcome in both scenarios. It's believing your child that steers this ship.**

THE FEAR BEHIND THE QUESTION — WRITTEN DOWN, SOMEWHERE PRIVATE

The research, in plain language — for the relative who keeps quoting the eighty-percent number. Sources on the back.

1. The "sixty, seventy, eighty percent grow out of it" number comes from clinic studies of the 1980s to 2000s that counted many children referred for not behaving the way their gender was expected to — many of whom never said they were a different gender — and some counted children they couldn't find at follow-up as having "grown out of it".
2. The best newer study followed a few hundred North American children who had socially transitioned, usually around age six or seven: five years later about ninety-four percent still identified as trans, a few percent as nonbinary, and about two and a half percent had gone back to the sex they were assigned at birth.
3. When the researchers interviewed most of the families who changed course, the change was mostly met with a shrug — neutral, or kind — and nobody they spoke to said they wished they had never been supported in the first place.
4. For teenagers the research is younger and messier, and nobody has a reliable percentage yet; what the Canadian Paediatric Society tells doctors to do is the same in both futures — support the child in front of you, rush nothing medical, watch their wellbeing.

This week's advice. Stop searching at eleven p.m. Ask your child one question, when it's calm: *"What would help right now?"* And do that thing. It'll be smaller than you feared. A name at home. A different outfit. A haircut.

Turn over for the sources — and how to read the numbers honestly.

For information only — not a substitute for care from your own physician. You already knew that.

The sources

I read the studies. Not the headlines about the studies. **Here is what each one is, and what it actually shows** — including the parts that don't fit anyone's slogan.

THE STUDIES BEHIND THE FRONT PAGE

Olson KR, Durwood L, Horton R, Gallagher NM, Devor A. Gender identity 5 years after social transition. *Pediatrics.* 2022;150(2).
317 children in the United States and Canada who socially transitioned, on average around age six and a half. About five years on: 94% still identified as trans, 3.5% as nonbinary, 2.5% as the sex assigned at birth.

Temple Newhook J, Pyne J, Winters K, et al. A critical commentary on follow-up studies and "desistance" theories about transgender and gender-nonconforming children. *International Journal of Transgenderism.* 2018;19(2).
The plain-language critique of the older "desistance" studies: under the earlier diagnostic criteria a child could be counted without ever saying they were a different gender, and some studies counted children lost to follow-up as having desisted.

Durwood L, Kuvalanka KA, Kahn-Samuelson S, et al. Retransitioning: the experiences of youth who socially transition genders more than once. *International Journal of Transgender Health.* 2022;23(4).
Interviews with parents and young people from 15 of the 23 families whose child changed course after a social transition. Responses to the change were often neutral or positive; no one spontaneously said they regretted their first transition.

Vandermorris A, Metzger DL; Canadian Paediatric Society. An affirming approach to caring for transgender and gender-diverse youth. *Paediatrics & Child Health.* 2023;28(7).
The Canadian standard of care: support the child in front of you, individualised and staged decisions, nothing medical in a hurry, watch their wellbeing.

HOW TO READ THE NUMBERS HONESTLY — THE WAY I'D READ THEM TO A COLLEAGUE

The five-year study is a study of children who had already transitioned, with families supportive enough to join a study. It isn't every child who ever wondered. It doesn't tell you the odds for a fifteen-year-old who mentioned it once.

What is clear, though, is that for children who say in words that they're a different gender, and live that way, this is not a passing thing for the overwhelming majority. And the small number who changed course? They changed their name back. Their families adjusted.

For teenagers, it's a bit different. Adolescence is when identity gets explored. Some teenagers try on a label and set it down. Some find that a label they tried at fourteen fits for life. The research on adolescents is younger and messier, and nobody has a reliable percentage yet.

! "Phase" is the wrong word even when things shift

Think about the last "phase" your child went through. Dinosaurs. Football. The guitar in the corner. Were those fake? No. They were real while they lasted. So even in the rare case where a child's sense of their gender shifts, the earlier experience was real. It was who they were then. And what you did about it — the name, the haircut, the clothes — was the right response to who was in front of you. **Nobody looks back at a six-year-old's dinosaur phase and says, "I should never have bought the dinosaur toys."**

You're not being asked to predict your child's future. You're being asked to be kind to them in the present. Those are different jobs, and only one of them is yours.