



The Unspeakable Pain of Parents with Transgender Children

Preface 1

In the last three years, the working team of Post Gay Alliance (PGA) has been providing support services to transgender and their parents. PGA has also set up the first parent's peer support group in the Asia-Pacific region and has so far served more than 30 parents with transgender children.

In the course of serving these parents, we deeply feel the complex emotions they have been going through – loneliness, helplessness, confusion, agony, guilt, and worry. The reactions of Mr. and Mrs. Chan, one of the couples, are typical. Mrs. Chan recalled, “During that period, I collapsed totally, I cried and cried, I didn’t want to see anyone, and had all sorts of weird thoughts, I felt so guilt-ridden that I wanted to die.” Mr. Chan also said frankly, “It came as a bolt of lightning, it didn’t make sense at all, what had gone wrong? I was shocked, just couldn’t take it and felt really bad. Thinking that he (my son) would be marginalized and his life ahead would be tough, I just couldn’t sleep at night ...”. Unfortunately, no books or booklets have been published, either in Hong Kong or elsewhere, about the trauma of these parents of transgender children and their needs.

We are truly grateful to some of the parents who courageously agreed to be interviewed by us and shared their unique and untold stories. It is our hope that the five stories in this booklet can help encourage parents in similar situations to learn how to set free from pain and dismay, and to strike a balance between taking care of themselves and protecting their gender dysphoric children. The stories of a 4-year-old boy and an 8-year-old boy told here testify to the fact that it is still possible for a child with gender incongruence to change his or her gender identity. The key to changing transgender children lies in improving parent-child relationship. In the case of a boy, when the father and son manage to re-establish an intimate and satisfying relationship, the son’s cross-gender behavior will diminish or even disappear altogether. So far, no comprehensive and systematic study has been conducted which can clearly classify the characteristics or behaviors of children suffering from gender dysphoria, or accurately project whether a child’s gender nonconformity will persist or disappear as he or she grows older. In view of the absence of research data support, parents are advised not to rush into taking actions to change the gender identity of their children with gender dysphoria.

We sincerely hope that this booklet can help you understand more about the distress of parents of transgender children and learn how to walk with them with love and care.

Dr Hong Kwai-wah
PGA founder and consultant

Preface 2

To the majority of us, the intense pain suffered by the five couples who shared their stories in this booklet is beyond our knowledge and understanding. No matter how well-educated you are or what respectable profession you are in, you may still know nothing about parenting because there is no school teaching this subject. Every child is unique and as he or she grows up there are so many variables along the way. A lot of things that happen are out of the expectations of parents. Compared with poor exam results and bad habits, the impact of psychosexual inversion of children on their parents is perhaps much greater, as it means rejection and discrimination from all walks of life.

Reading this booklet reminded me of an incident years ago when a good friend confided in me that she was shocked to discover that her young brother was gay. This fact toppled the once harmonious family like overturning a chessboard, and their parents never recovered from the blow since. Even now, I can still see in my mind's eye the pain and helplessness in her as she told the story.

I believe this is exactly the purpose of the publication of this booklet. The parents in the five stories were shocked and shattered when they learned that their child was transgender, and were utterly hopeless as if they had just been handed a death sentence. They could not tell anyone about the piercing pain in their heart, and sometimes when people asked about their child it was like rubbing salt in the wound. The fact that they were unable to help their child had already thrown them into the abyss of depression ... and the thought alone was unbearably heavy ... Fortunately, they received help from psychiatrists who offered professional counselling and they were also given the chance to join a parents' peer support group: "All the secrets and anguish buried deep in my heart were finally set free"; "Listening to other people's stories ... sometimes what I couldn't express myself, other people can say it out loud for me"; "We came to realize that there are so many families in the same boat, each with its own troubles. Other people's experience can help us face our own problems"; "These parents made me feel that I was being understood. Their experiences and sharing brought hope to someone down in the dumps like me."

Life is full of difficulties and no one is spared. It is only when we share our burden with fellow travelers on the same road that we will not stumble. I sincerely hope the parents facing the same difficulties can, through this booklet, open up their hearts and come out of the tunnel soon.

Ma Chun-mui
Senior Publisher and Editor

The Unspeakable Pain

“During that period, I collapsed totally, I cried and cried, I didn’t want to see anyone, and had all sorts of weird thoughts. I was heart-broken and hurt, and I felt so guilt-ridden that I wanted to die. Was it that I didn’t care enough about him? What did I overlook? Was there anything that I didn’t do good enough? Or was I being too harsh? All along my son and I had been very close, how come I didn’t notice anything?” Tears rolled down Mrs. Chan’s face. Mr. Chan handed her some tissue paper and said, “It came as a bolt of lightning, it didn’t make sense at all, what had gone wrong?”

Untraceable desire for sex change

It all started one night three years ago when Mr. and Mrs. Chan’s son suddenly came out of the closet, “I hate my Adam’s apple, I want to be a girl.” Ever since that self-disclosure, Mrs. Chan cried and cried almost every day. The couple wrecked their brains but still could not understand: their son loved football and car racing when he was young; they never caught him wearing girl’s costumes; he was never bullied at school; and his social life was healthy and normal. How come that after studying abroad, he now said he wanted sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to become a girl?

Mrs. Chan recalled, “I remember before he went abroad to study he was about to attend the school graduation ball and he even said he would invite girlfriends to dance. We had a suit tailor-made for him and when he tried it on he looked so pleased with himself. Even now I can still see in my mind the gratifying smile on his face!” Mrs. Chan claimed that she was an observant person and yet she didn’t detect any trace of her son’s dissatisfaction with being a male.

Mr. Chan was also shocked. “I just couldn’t take it and felt really bad. Thinking that he would be marginalized and his life ahead would be tough, I just couldn’t sleep at night ...” As parents, they obviously did not want their son to undergo surgery. So Mr. Chan tried every means to get help – checking online, reading books, and seeing medical specialists and psychologists. He was hoping that as long as their son was willing to talk to different doctors, the problem could be solved. But unfortunately, it didn’t work, their son was determined.

Desperate and helpless

As nothing could change the mind of their son at the time and knowing that his way ahead would be difficult, all Mr. and Mrs. Chan could do was try to understand him better. In order to do that, Mr. Chan made efforts to take time out of his busy work schedule to go on pleasure trips with his son whenever there were long school holidays. “I would take him on cycling trips abroad, hoping to spend more time with him. Seeing that he often wept secretly, sometimes I would pretend that I didn’t know, but other times I would give him a pat on the shoulder or hug him. I guessed he was struggling hard and was depressed.”

At first, the father tried to talk the son out of it, but the son was not willing to listen and after a while whenever the topic of SRS was raised, he would turn silent. In the same year, the son began to take hormones and wear female clothes. He even changed the gender on his passport before receiving SRS. All these broke the mother's heart.

Whenever people asked about their son, Mrs. Chan would feel a stabbing pain. "I dreaded seeing other people. What could I say when they asked if I had any children or how was my son? Could I say, 'I had a son but he is dead'? I couldn't bring myself to saying that. Or, could I simply say, 'I used to have a son, but now he has turned into a daughter'?" Mr. Chan was in the same situation. "I didn't talk to anyone about this. During the day I could work or do exercise to get it out of my mind, but at night I just couldn't sleep."

Mrs. Chan admitted that she was totally lost and confused. "Sometimes I would sit there and couldn't help but cry and cry. Other times I would repress my feelings for a few days and then they would erupt and I just broke down ... There was a time when I didn't even dare to dress up or wear a skirt for fear that my female costumes would affect my son's moods."

Sorrow and nothing but sorrow

As the son became more and more of a stranger to them, Mr. and Mrs. Chan were filled with sorrow. "We, as husband and wife, just couldn't talk about it because it hurt so badly. My husband was very distressful already, so it was hard for him to share my burden," said Mrs. Chan helplessly. Mr. Chan nodded before adding, "At first I didn't feel that distressful. But she influenced me, and the more I thought about it the more distressful I felt. Sometimes we would talk about how to deal with our son, but we didn't have a clue and his response was often not what we expected. So we just had to deal with it step by step."

Although the piercing pain was unspeakable and their hands were tied, Mr. and Mrs. Chan did not lay the blame on each other. "Neither of us knew why it turned out this way and we never blamed each other. I didn't complain about my wife and we had no idea how to support each other." Yet, Mrs. Chan responded, "Well, I did ... He often said, 'Not doing anything is the best thing to do!' But as a wife, I always hoped that my husband would do something without being told. Also, I thought parents should do something to remedy the situation, or do something to change the situation. Frankly speaking, I didn't really blame him but rather blamed myself, wondering whether I had neglected our son or scolded him so much that it forced him onto this path."

As they calmed down, Mr. and Mrs. Chan came to realize that the cause of gender identity disorder was very complex. Instead of trying hard to figure out what had gone wrong, it would be better for them to find the way to moving forward.

Peer support

Faced with a tumbling sky, it was the help from the parents' peer support group that carried Mr. and Mrs. Chan through the hardship. To Mr. Chan, joining the group gave him an important

channel to vent his frustration. “We are a group of parents sharing our experiences. The situation of each couple’s transgender child is different. Listening to other people’s stories and sharing our own can help us understand one another. Sometimes what I couldn’t express myself, other people can say it out loud for me.”

Mrs. Chan nodded in consent. Honest sharing between parents made her understand that she was not the only one feeling angry and frustrated. “My son and I used to be very close, I would hold him and kiss him all the time when he was young. But now there is a big barrier between us. Even though I still love him a lot, sometimes when I see the way he looks, talks or behaves, I can’t help but feel disgusted deep down.”

Mrs. Chan hated herself for not accepting her son, but then she found out in the peer support group that this was the road many parents had travelled. The sharing of experiences by other members prompted Mrs. Chan to face her true self. “I had a lot of anxiety and fears inside, yet I didn’t pray for myself. It was through such sharing that I realized I had to return to God before I could have the strength to stand firm and take care of my son.”

By faith, Mrs. Chan rediscovered her role as a parent. “God reminded me that parents are merely stewards, we have to rely on His mighty power to take care of our children. How will God not look after His children? Just as it was said in John 14:18: ‘I will not leave you as orphans’” When she said that, her eyes were filled with tears again.

Be good to yourself

Mrs. Chan admitted honestly that she had once thought of killing herself, only that she couldn’t bear leaving behind her aged mother, husband and son unattended. She thought to herself, “If I was not going to die and end it all, I’d better move on bravely.” So, she started to open herself up to a number of trusted friends. By so doing, she not only found understanding, but also rediscovered her lost self. “My friends advised me to go out and interact with people. They told me there were a lot of friends out there who cared. What they said made me ask myself if I really wanted to live the rest of my life like the way I had been.” Mrs. Chan is a sociable person and she believes she is a good listener in her friends’ eyes. Once a friend sought help from her and the experience changed her outlook. “What happened was a friend had some relational problems and she came to talk to me. Through comforting her, I learned to look beyond myself. I suddenly realized that for a long time I had not been taking good care of myself and had not really looked at myself in the mirror because I was thinking about my son every hour and every minute.”

After trying hard for two years, Mrs. Chan eventually learned to let go bit by bit. Now her eyes no longer focus on her son alone but also on the way forward where there will be no more sighs and despair. “Even though I still can’t see clearly what lies ahead, I believe there is a way out and there is light at the end of the tunnel.” Mr. Chan added, “We have hope, but we dare not expect too much. Now we only set our eyes on the next step. Apart from wishing our son would change his mind, we also hope he can fit in with society and live his life independently.”

Husband and Wife to Keep in Step

“When Heng Chai was in kindergarten, he made a lovely dress with my trousers. It was really impressive!” Mr. Lee was amazed by his son’s creativity.

Mrs. Lee, who was looking after Heng Chai full-time, had also noticed his special talent. “Starting from the age of 3 or 4, Heng Chai’s drawings were all about princesses. He was totally committed and never got tired of drawing them. From simple lines to rich details, these drawings fully unveiled his aesthetic sense. He could even use blankets and bed sheets to make dresses of different styles and designs!”

As parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lee obviously wanted their child to give full play to his talent. So they bought him animation videos and books about princesses such as *Frozen* and *Cinderella* which he loved and asked for. Mrs. Lee thought it was not a bad thing for Heng Chai to learn to be kind and loving from these female characters.

Conflicting views

“Seeing that he had a sharp sense for female costumes, I took him out to buy colorful fabrics so that he could develop his interest and creativity in fashion design.” Mrs. Lee meant to help Heng Chai grow his talent but surprisingly Mr. Lee was not happy about it. Mr. Lee explained, “Heng Chai’s behavior at home was feminine. I already sensed something wrong when he used bed sheets to make dresses, and the word ‘gay’ actually crossed my mind. But I was worried that the more we suppressed him the more he would fight back, that was why I didn’t do anything to stop him at the time. Yet I was thinking all the while how to guide him onto the right path.”

Mr. Lee didn’t expect that his wife would encourage Heng Chai to make dresses by buying him fabrics, he reacted by putting away all the fabrics. Although Mrs. Lee was not pleased with what her husband did, deep down she couldn’t help but wonder why their son hung around girls all the time. She was also worried that Heng Chai might become more and more feminine. In order to find out more, she attended talks on this topic. “It was at a Sexual Ethics Summit I attended a few months ago that I realized the seriousness of the matter. I found out that boys who like to play with girlie things may very well develop into homosexuals [see note]. Heng Chai was like that from age three to seven and a half. Does that mean it was deep-rooted? I was really upset and couldn’t sleep at night.” Yet, when Mrs. Lee suggested seeking professional help, Mr. Lee had reservations although he was the one who had suspected something wrong much earlier than his wife.

“Frankly speaking, I have attended this kind of talks before. I thought as long as we care more about our son, he would change gradually. Why seek help from a doctor?” Still, in order to make his wife feel better, Mr. Lee agreed to go and see a psychiatrist with her. “It is inevitable that husband and wife have different views. As a husband, if I refused before even trying, then I was not paying my wife due respect. For the good of the family and Heng Chai, there was no harm trying.”

Expanding the child's horizon

At first, Mr. Lee agreed to see the doctor purely for the sake of his wife. But it turned out that it opened his eyes to the problem. "I dare say I spent more time with my son than many other fathers. I used to think I could wait a few more years before taking any action. Little did I know that this stage is the most crucial. Also, husband and wife must work together and persist before improvement can be made." According to expert advice, parents must try to expand their child's horizon and identify a variety of common conversation topics of interest to the child. "Before, he would only watch princess movies. Now we would take him to movies with a strong storyline, such as *Spiderman* and *Cars*. Since Heng Chai is more mature than other boys of the same age, we can share with him the content of the films as well as his thoughts and feelings."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Lee made efforts to involve Heng Chai in group activities. "When he was young, Heng Chai always liked to play with his female cousin who is about the same age as he. As I didn't want him to play only with girls at school, I asked his teacher to assign a boy to sit next to him. I made arrangements for him to play spinning tops and go skating with other boys and I also enrolled him in team sports such as ball games."

In less than four months, as the surrounding environment changed, Heng Chai no longer indulged in princesses alone but would play LEGO and spinning tops at times. "Now when his aunt takes him and his female cousin out to shop for toys, he would choose a gun. And when he plays with his female cousin, he doesn't thread beads any more but would choose spinning tops instead."

Father takes leading role

Changes in the environment outside have to be complemented by changes in parent-child relationship inside. Mrs. Lee, who is now working part-time, said, "I would arrange to work on the days when my husband is on leave so as to give father and son a chance to go out together and build their relationship. On school days my husband would take Heng Chai to school and the two of them can chit chat on the way, while bedtime provides precious moments for father and son to do heart-to-heart talk." Mrs. Lee is willing to take the back seat and make way for her husband to spend time with Heng Chai alone. Mr. Lee appreciated this deeply, saying, "It takes two to tango. Now he likes to be with me and even insists that I should be the one to take him to school. I am so happy. What I treasure most is the bedtime heart-to-heart talk when he would open up to me."

[Note: Outcome studies of childhood Gender Dysphoria showed that the majority of cases became homosexuals or bisexuals as they entered puberty; for Gender Dysphoric boys, up to 75% became homosexuals or bisexuals. Green, R., Roberts, C.W., Williams, K., Goodman, M., & Mixon, A. (1987). Specific cross-gender behavior in boyhood and later homosexual orientation. *Br. J. Psychiatry*, 151, 84-88)]

Seeing the big improvement in father-son relationship, Mrs. Lee said frankly, “My husband can understand our son’s thoughts and feelings better as he is good at using the luring tactic. As for me, my upbringing taught me that parents should say and do what they think and have to reason with their children, but this way would sometimes annoy my son. In light of this, I thought if my husband could do a bit more in disciplining, it would be even better.” So Mrs. Lee suggested that her husband should change jobs. “The coming few years are the most critical. But he often has to work on Saturdays and Sundays and can’t spare the time to be with Heng Chai. I hope he can give us five years so that Heng Chai can go through puberty smoothly.”

Seeking consensus

However, the couple has different views about the course of action to take. Mr. Lee enjoys his current job and has no intention of finding a new one. He responded, “Actually, I have asked Heng Chai during our bedtime talk what he thinks. I asked him, ‘Should dad resign and spend more time with you?’ He replied at once, ‘No! If you resign, where shall I put my bag when I go to your office?’” What a funny reply! Mr. Lee added, “Not to mention gender identity and sexual orientation, I hope as he grows up he will understand that parents can’t make all the decisions for him. I would also teach him to develop a sense of responsibility, such as he should take care of mom more and should not make her angry all the time.” On hearing this, Mrs. Lee was deeply moved by the great efforts her husband made to take care of Heng Chai and felt that she should respect and support his final decision.

Today, Heng Chai would still draw princesses occasionally but his cross-gender identity characteristics have subsided. However, it is not easy to discern what he really thinks deep inside and there are so many unforeseeable circumstances in the course of his growing up. Mr. Lee admitted, “Our moods inevitably change along with our son’s condition, going up and down.” As Christians, all Mr. and Mrs. Lee can do is to learn to lift the matter up to God. Mrs. Lee said, “I believe ‘you do your best, let God do the rest’. I only know I should do the best I can. A child’s sexual orientation or gender is beyond the control of man. All we can do is ask God for His mercy.” Faith is the power source that drives them on to walk with their child. With husband and wife reaching a consensus, Mr. Lee said, “If one day he really becomes a homosexual or even seeks sex reassignment surgery, we as parents just have to accept it. This is what the love of Christ is.”

Gender stereotyping: right or wrong?

Mrs. Lee has often heard negative comments about gender stereotyping in recent years and she did not have any objection at first. But now after witnessing with her own eyes the impact parents can have on the gender identity of their child, she said firmly, “If any parents find their child have characteristics of cross-gender identity, like my son’s love for princess stories and dolls, I think they have to interfere and should not overlook the importance of his psychosexual development. You should encourage him to play boy’s toys as soon as possible or should at least give him different options.” Mr. Lee added, “Do not take the seriousness of the problem lightly. In the case of a boy, it’s the father’s duty to spend more time to play and talk with him and help

him affirm his male character or gender identity. I don't think scolding or beating helps, rather, one has to find the most suitable teaching method."

To sum up his experience, Mr. Lee reckoned that it is most important for the child to feel that he or she is being loved and accepted, and to know that their parents are on their side. Even though parent and child may have different values or stances, they should never be at odds with one another.

Where There's a Fall There's a Way

“The material things you two give me are more than enough, I knew that all along. But when I come across difficulties, where are you? And where is God?” These were the tough questions Yung Chai put to his parents.

Mr and Mrs Leung thought they had given the best to their son, but little did they realise that they had neglected his emotional needs.

Overlooking feelings

Mrs. Leung said, “My husband and I thought hard about this. Perhaps we had put too much emphasis on analyzing and solving problems instead of caring about his feelings or giving him emotional support. This made him feel that he was not loved but was given orders and pressures all the time!”

Yung Chai was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome and ADHD when he was in junior high school. He had problem communicating with people, his attention span was short, and he was stubborn. His parents were busy looking after his special learning needs and teaching him how to behave properly but overlooked his emotional upsets caused by bullying at school.

“When he was in Primary 1 he had complained about being bullied. When in junior high he also mentioned that he was rejected by the boys and that he mostly played with girls.” Mr. Leung added, “After he entered senior high, he often fought with us. And it was only then that he began to tell us he was being bullied in church and at school, and said it was better to be a girl than a boy because girls did not have to bear too many responsibilities and were protected from bullying.”

Mrs Leung recalled that her son’s desire to be a girl was in fact traceable. “When he was in primary school, his favourite toys were models and swords. But after he entered junior high, I once found some girls’ uniforms and stockings in his bedroom. At first, I thought it was the curiosity boys normally had about girls during puberty. But later, I discovered that he collected female underwear and had his legs shaved. When in senior high, he started doing cosplay at animation-comic-game fairs dressing up as a girl.”

Already exhausted dealing with Yung Chai’s school work and behavioral problem, Mr. and Mrs. Leung were completely devastated now that the issue of transgender identity popped up.

The hurt of a father

Mr. Leung had not a clue why his son did not want to be a boy. Seeing that Yung Chai would hold his mother’s hand when going out although he often fought with her, Mr. Leung tried to put his arm around Yung Chai’s shoulder to show his affection, hoping to understand his thoughts and feelings better. “That year he was in Middle 5, once I tried to put my arm around his shoulder but he pushed me away. At that

moment I felt really hurt. I suddenly realized in shock that I, as the father, hardly held a place in his heart. Perhaps it was because I had never taught him how to behave like a boy that he wanted to be a girl and be protected.”

When Yung Chai was in primary school, Mr. Leung worked in the mainland and he normally only communicated with his son by talking on the phone. Even when he was back in Hong Kong during the weekends, he was always too tired to play with Yung Chai. So the relationship between father and son was merely at a superficial level.

“That time when he pushed me away, it came as a wake-up call. It struck me that I had to stop criticizing and fighting with my son and should spend more time with him.”

Making up for lost time

Mrs. Leung nodded in agreement. Since Yung Chai’s experience as a boy was full of hurts, repeated reasoning and teaching by parents would only fall on deaf ears. Therefore, it would be better to help him learn how to re-establish his identity as a boy by spending more time with him. “So I asked dad to squeeze more time out from his busy work schedule to be with our son alone, because there were things which I, as a mother, could not teach. Even though I could tell Yung Chai about his dad’s merits, having the father around as a role model is important.”

Mr. Leung took his wife’s advice and began to spend time playing and studying with Yung Chai according to his likes and dislikes. “In the last five years, I started off by playing electronic games with him, then watched movies and talked about life, took courses on badminton, and went on trips together. I tried to listen to and understand his thoughts.”

Knowing that he had a late start, Mr. Leung took great pains to make up for the time lost with his son. “I seldom dwelt on self-blame and regret. But rather, I looked ahead. Our boy was already like being shut in a dark room, if I did nothing but regret, it would only make it even more difficult to bring him out of the dark.” While it was not known whether helping Yung Chai to re-establish his male identity would work or not, at least the relationship between father and son improved a lot. Mr. and Mrs. Leung had no idea what was the best way to handle their son’s complicated condition, they just walked on step by step.

Finding the right way

Mrs. Leung said with a sigh, “Asperger’s syndrome alone already drained me. When I got up every morning I never knew what trouble would come my way, it was really tough ... To a mother, she and the child are one because in the ten months of child-bearing she can actually feel the embryo’s heartbeat inside of her. But it’s not the same with a father. I was very worried that if Yung Chai became a girl one day, how could he put up with the gossips of friends and relatives? At that time, I cried every day to release my anger before I could go on!” Sometimes, all Mr. and Mrs. Leung could do was sigh and mock themselves before stumbling on.

Today, Yung Chai is already working. Mrs. Leung said frankly, “My husband and I have different views where teaching an Asperger child is concerned. For instance, when our son plays electronic games all night, I would insist on teaching him what is right and what is wrong, but my husband thinks that it is better for him to learn from making mistakes. Yet, I am grateful that we are still of one heart and have never thought of ignoring the problem.”

Mr. Leung stressed that neither of them would force the other to follow his or her way of dealing with the situation. “I don’t insist on changing our son, I would only try hard to act as an intermediary. Sometimes when Yung Chai knows that he has made his mother angry, he would ask for my advice after he has calmed down. I would keep an open mind and try to analyze the matter from different angles together with him, learning to be patient and appreciative. You see, ‘a small step to me means a big leap for him’. So, even when I fail all the time, I still keep on trying to find the way out.”

Despite all that, Mrs. Leung admitted, “Very often I really can’t stand our son’s temper and behavior. All I can do is go forward in faith, choose to forgive and forget. Otherwise, I would go crazy!”

From complaint to trust

Both Mr. and Mrs. Leung are Christians. Yung Chai, who has been attending church since young, is now having doubts about faith due to his transgender identity. Mrs. Leung confessed that she had blamed God for this. “I had negative thoughts from time to time, I despaired, I lost control of myself, I was filled with anger. Why me? Doesn’t God love me? Look at the people around, their sons are independent and have girlfriends, yet my son has Asperger’s syndrome and transgender identification problem.” Since Yung Chai looks quite normal on the outside, Mrs. Leung has not said anything about him to other people in order to protect him. “Apart from one or two close friends, a lot of people at church think I am over-anxious about my son. But in fact, no one knows the pains I suffer. At the bottom of my heart, I really wish to be understood and if someone just said ‘I know you are going through a lot’, it is already a great comfort to me.”

Mr. and Mrs. Leung used to think that God was merely standing by doing nothing all these years. Yet unknowingly, God was in fact teaching them the lesson of parenting. “We came to realize that we had to first change ourselves. All along, we had been going after efficiency and results and always wanted to solve problems once and for all. For example, we thought if our son bought a sword then it would mean that he was a boy and all problems would be gone. As a teacher, I was once granted the best teacher award, yet I had no idea how to deal with my own son. It was only then that I saw my insufficiency and that I had to learn not to rely on my experience and ability alone.”

The couple learned to lift their son up to God in prayers. “We trust in the Lord’s work and time and have become less impatient like before. This has in turn helped relieve Yung Chai of the thought that both God and his parents are pressing him for change. Now we would take advantage of every possible opportunity to guide him to ponder over the faith he himself once

firmly believed in and let him make his own decision. This process is like pounding on a rock day after day and I believe one day it will crumble.”

Support from peer parents

With no support from the church community, Mr. and Mrs. Leung are grateful that they joined the parents’ peer support group where they befriended a group of parents with transgender children.

“First and foremost, we got to know more. When the church doesn’t seem to understand and we feel isolated and heavily burdened, we can find comfort and support here. The sharing of some of the parents who are more cool-headed has inspired me to fine-tune the way I interact with my son.” When Mr. Leung looked back on how he had gone through those hard times, he reckoned that the first thing was faith and second was the one heart and mind of husband and wife. “Sharing in the group is also very important. We came to realize that there are so many families in the same boat, each with its own troubles. Other people’s experience can help us face our own problems. Walking on this long and winding road, we have to open our hearts and eyes and pray for one another. This is something the analysis of experts cannot give.”

Members of the parents’ peer support group task force took the initiative to approach Yung Chai, which made him feel that he was being loved. This has indirectly eased the tension between him and his parents. Mrs. Leung is truly grateful, “In the past, not too many people cared about Yung Chai. He said more than once, ‘If I had known these people (the volunteers) earlier, perhaps I would not have become this way.’ I hope one day he will feel fully loved.”

On their expectations for Yung Chai and the future, Mrs. Leung remarked, “As it was shared among mothers in the group, our son was given to us by God to look after as stewards, He loves him more than we do. So we must not take credit for his merits or blame ourselves for his shortcomings. We should learn to let go and be kind to ourselves.” Mr. Leung added, “Give thanks and cross the bridge when we come to it.”

Out of the Abyss of Desperation

Suicide attempt at age 8

It was one of those rare nights when my husband came home early from work and we watched TV with our elder son Ho Chai after I had finally put the baby to sleep. At first it was quite a pleasure listening to Ho Chai singing happily along with the TV drama theme song. But then his voice grew louder and louder. My husband told Ho Chai repeatedly not to wake up his baby brother but he wouldn't listen and kept on singing loudly. My husband then got angry and grabbed a bamboo stick to beat him. He even blamed it on me, saying, "See, it's you who spoiled him, he just wouldn't listen." I was annoyed and went into the bedroom. It never occurred to me that something terrible was going to happen ten minutes later. Suddenly, I heard Ho Chai yell, "Help! If you beat me again, I will kill myself!" I ran out of the bedroom and saw Ho Chai standing there with a knife on his neck. I rushed up at once, hugged him and pacified him, calming him down eventually.

Hospitalization and turning quiet

While this incident seemed to be over, it left a scar on the three of us. My husband and I entered a cold war, Ho Chai refused to talk to his father and started bullying his baby brother all the time. There were also complaints against him at school about behavioral problems. At first, I thought he was only being naughty and rebellious and didn't take much note until something happened when he was in Primary 6. He flared up once and attacked the domestic helper with cutlery over something as trivial as whether he should eat rice or eat noodles. I was scared and called the police. Subsequently, Ho Chai was admitted to the hospital psychiatric ward for the night. It was only then that I realized the seriousness of the matter. So I quit my job to look after Ho Chai full time. Unfortunately, I had already missed the golden period. After he was discharged from the hospital, Ho Chai turned very quiet. Feeling betrayed, he stopped talking to us. He shut himself up in his room all day long and would only eat his meal alone in his room.

Long hair problem

Initially I thought Ho Chai was merely unstable emotionally. However, after entering secondary school, he started to grow his hair long. At first, he would have his hair cut once a year. But when he went to Middle 3, he refused bluntly to have his hair cut at all. It was only from the school social worker and educational psychologist that I learned in shock that my son wanted to be a girl! Oh, my goodness, his emotional problems already drained my energy, now added with this gender identity disorder, I was totally devastated. At the time I was hoping that the school would handle special students like him with discretion and provide support. But to my surprise, the school principal was adamant, "If no haircut, then no school!" It was only after intervention by the Education Bureau that Ho Chai was allowed by the school to study by himself in the library. This meant that every day when he went to school he was "alienated", so after a few days he refused to go any more and threatened to commit suicide. Although later he changed schools and studied Middle 4 somewhere else for a year, he dropped out eventually also due to

the long hair problem. After that, he shut himself up at home for as long as four years.

Desperately helpless

My husband kept such a distance from Ho Chai that he did not even want to hear or talk about him. I had to face the whole problem all on my own, running around seeking help. I thought getting an outreach social worker to come to our place could help Ho Chai return to normal life, but that was only my wishful thinking. After following up with Ho Chai for over a year, the social worker said to me, "There is nothing else I can do to help him." I remember when he said that to me, it was like passing me a death sentence. I was in total despair at that moment! The only advice the social worker gave me was to cut off all financial support to Ho Chai. I tried to deal with Ho Chai both the hard and the soft ways and finally he agreed to take a course at Youth College. Yet, a few months after the course started, Ho Chai collapsed emotionally and sought to kill himself again. He was later admitted to a psychiatric hospital where he stayed for almost three months. After that, Ho Chai shut himself up again and wouldn't communicate with anyone. He also wore female clothes from time to time. He just turned 20 that year, there was still a long way to go, how was he to move on?

Will death end it all?

For more than 10 years, I was totally exhausted mentally and physically looking after Ho Chai. My emotions became unstable, I had nightmares every night, and I lived like a zombie. As a Christian for over 40 years, I asked God, "Why me? I really can't take it anymore, I am tired ... Please take my life!"

The idea of committing suicide crossed my mind several times. I had also thought of kicking Ho Chai out or dying with him. Thanks to the strength from my faith, I didn't do anything like that. God reminded me of the time I accepted Jesus as my savior and pledged that I would let Him steer my life. God asked me if I was still willing to let Him take control and I said, "Yes!" It was then that I dropped the idea of taking my own life. God also showed me all these pictures of my son in my mind: being left alone with no one to turn to, sleeping in the park, bullied by people ... Would I want to see that? Not at all! Instead, I should walk alongside my son. The moment I prayed for the strength to let go and let God take charge of my son, I was relieved completely as I believed everything was now in His hands. To be honest, I really wanted my son to return to God, but it had to be his choice. Looking at the problem from a different angle, I began to understand and accept him, even when he was dressed like a girl.

Father and son heart to heart

The turning point came two years ago when I joined the parents' peer support group and came to know a number of parents with transgender children. All the secrets and anguish buried deep in my heart were finally set free. Unlike counsellors or psychiatrists who gave professional advice, these parents made me feel that I was being understood. Their experiences and sharing brought hope to someone down in the dumps like me. The group members helped me

understand that this uphill battle could not be fought alone, but by husband and wife hand in hand.

To be frank, I was once disappointed with my reticent and busy husband. But after joining the group, I would try to express my dissatisfaction subtly. Gradually we ended our cold war and started talking again. It was only then that I found out my husband was upset because Ho Chai wouldn't talk to him. In order to create opportunities for father and son to communicate, sometimes when Ho Chai made certain requests I would pretend that I could not satisfy him and ask him to talk to dad.

Other times when I saw my husband serve Ho Chai fruit or heard him say "Actually our son is lovely in some ways", I could sense that his heart was softening. As for Ho Chai, he also changed from refusing to communicate with his father to writing short notes to him. Even though father and son still did not talk to each other, the gap between them was beginning to narrow. I was truly grateful for that.

Light at the end of the tunnel

As a matter of fact, Ho Chai's self-isolation and emotional problem is far more serious than his gender identity disorder. The volunteers in the parents' peer support group offered to contact Ho Chai and make friends with him. It opened a window for him and he began to smile again. This gave our whole family great moral support.

This year, seeing Ho Chai step out from his cocoon, start work, and live like a normal person, I am greatly relieved. Even so, since I chose to walk with him, I have to put up with his roller coaster mood swings. In order to stay calm and handle these difficulties, praying is my source of strength. I can only overcome difficulties and walk on by pouring my heart out to God and letting Him take my burden. I realize that sometimes people are kept in their own prison because they are not willing to let go. Reading the bible, praying and drawing near to God give me inner peace and joy. Besides, asking trusted friends to pray for me and learning to look at my son and at pain and suffering from a different angle also bring hope.

I don't know what the future holds, but I truly believe that God loves me and that He will have the best plans for me. I trust myself and my son completely in His hands. "Don't be afraid, just believe!" It is my sincere hope that this experience sharing of mine can encourage fellow travelers on the same road to move on.

Father's Role: Son's Playmate

This weekend, Mr. Chan went hiking again with his youngest son Tak Chai. Watching the father and son walking further and further away, Mrs. Chan recalled that a few years ago when Tak Chai was four years old he would blankly refuse to be with his father alone. But now he is on closer terms with dad than with mom, which means her efforts in the past few years have finally paid off. As the mother, she is not jealous at all but feels gratified.

Transgender identification at age 2

It all began in the year when Tak Chai was two.

Mrs. Chan, who had devoted all her time and energy to taking care of their youngest son Tak Chai, noticed that his preferences were gradually changing. "He liked playing with toy cars at first, but then suddenly he switched to cooking kit. And in choosing the color of clothes and toys, he would shift from his once favorite blue and green to pink, and pink alone." Mrs. Chan began to feel uncomfortable. When she mentioned this to her friends during casual chats, they said she was over-sensitive as gender neutral was the social trend these days. Meanwhile, relatives and friends would buy the boy pink pyjamas and toys to please him.

"After some time, Tak Chai began to identify himself as a girl. He became interested in make-up and red lipsticks and insisted on wearing long hair. So every time we had to wait until he fell asleep before we could cut his hair." Mrs. Chan felt something was wrong with Tak Chai and talked to her husband about what should be done. Although Mr. Chan also found their son a bit odd, he did not want to pass judgement too soon. "Young children's preferences will change as they grow older, let's observe him a bit longer first."

From escaping to seeking help

During this observation period, Mrs. Chan tried to play some neutral toys such as LEGO with Tak Chai. But he insisted on choosing dolls and identified himself with them. When Mrs. Chan attempted to correct him, he would react strongly. For fear that the more they argued the more he would persist, Mrs. Chan adopted the escape strategy and avoided talking about gender identify with Tak Chai. This went on for over a year until one day when Mr. and Mrs. Chan incidentally attended a talk on Christianity and law which touched on the characteristics of gender dysphoria in children. Finding these characteristics match their son's, they bought the book *Raising Gender-Confident Kids: A Practical Guide* by Melvin W. Wong recommended by the speaker. After Mrs. Chan had read the book, she realized that something was really wrong.

"The book contains a lot of information on the characteristics of cross-gender identification which are similar to our son's. In particular, it mentions that 'father absence' may make a son identify with his mother's gender." It dawned on Mrs. Chan that in the last couple of years her husband had been so busy at work that he seldom came home for dinner. Even when he did come home early occasionally he was exhausted and had hardly any time to play with Tak Chai.

Mr. Chan loved his son but father-son relationship was not close at all. Worried that their son's psychosexual development could be a problem, the couple sought professional help by seeing a psychiatrist with a Christian background.

"The analysis made by the doctor helped me and my wife understand our son's condition more clearly and also removed a lot of worries." With the practicable advice and suggestions given by the doctor, Mr. Chan got down to action. "First of all, I arranged to take leave as soon as possible. Despite a really busy work schedule, I did my best to make time to keep Tak Chai company." As the wife, Mrs. Chan had always wanted her husband to spend more time with their son. Now that Mr. Chan was taking the initiative, she was more than happy to cooperate with him. "I had to remind myself to let go and intentionally kept a certain distance from Tak Chai, allowing my husband to take care of the boy and play with him."

No more father absence

It happened to be summer holiday at that time, so Mr. Chan rearranged his working hours and came home earlier to take his son to the beach to swim. "At first, Tak Chai would not go out alone with his dad and we had to use some little tricks to lure him. Also, dad had to play his favorite cooking game and jigsaw puzzle with him at home." Mr. and Mrs. Chan tried hard to play both boys' and girls' games and toys with Tak Chai so as to avoid gender stereotyping. Mr. Chan remarked, "I started with the games he liked in order to identify with him first before slowly introducing him to other activities such as football." He reckoned that strengthening father-son relationship was of prime importance. "The most effective way is taking a shower together, during which dad can chat with son and give him lessons on sex education such as talking about the differences between male and female."

Nevertheless, gaining the total trust of Tak Chai did not happen overnight. Mrs. Chan said frankly, "In the early days, even though he had a good time playing with dad during the day, he would only let mom put him to sleep at night. After a while, dad would be asked to tell bedtime stories, but no matter how interesting the story telling was, as soon as it was over dad had to go. It took about eight months before Tak Chai finally allowed dad to put him to sleep." Indeed, a child's response is the most direct. Mr. Chan admitted, "During this process, I was perturbed as well as a bit hurt. But the doctor did say it would take a long time, and that as long as we were determined and persistent, we would see changes."

Change in gender identification after one year

Changes did take place bit by bit despite ups and downs. "From the time he identified himself as a girl to the time he said he was half boy half girl, and in between claiming to be a boy sometimes and a girl at other times, we had to keep a close eye on him every minute. It was exhausting. We were also under heavy psychological pressure and time just seemed to go so slowly." Fortunately, after a year of concerted effort, Mr. and Mrs. Chan finally saw that their son's condition had stabilized. "Now he is very sure that he is a boy. He would play with other boys, use neutral color lip balm, and is willing to have his hair cut. He even said he would get

himself a wife when he grows up. If someone says he is a girl, he would be upset.”

Since Mr. Chan has to work, after completing his prime task he became somewhat relaxed. So Mrs. Chan has to remind him all the time and tries her best to build a positive image of the father as a knowledgeable person. “I would pretend that I don’t know a lot of things in order to create opportunities for Tak Chai to ask his father. I would also choose some story books on admirable fathers to read to him.” The couple devised a long-term division of labor plan, with mom continuing to take care of the son’s daily needs while dad is fully in charge of outdoor activities. “Every weekend, father and son would go out together hiking, swimming or playing remote-controlled helicopters. Now his relationship with his dad is much closer than with me.”

Long road ahead

As the Chinese saying goes, “A parent living 100 years spends 99 years worrying about his/her child”. Although Mr. and Mrs. Chan are relieved for the moment, they are not without worries. Mr. Chan remarked, “The doctor said the child is currently going through the period of establishment of gender identity (age 4-9), and close attention has to be paid to how he deals with those of the same sex and those of the opposite sex, as well as whether there is bullying at school. Then the child will enter the stage of formation of sexual orientation (age 10-14). As the child goes to secondary school, he will enter puberty when it will be difficult for parents to interfere. So there could still be hiccups.” In order to protect their son, Mr. and Mrs. Chan have not mentioned anything about Tak Chai’s condition to other people. They hope their son does not have to put up with gossips and can grow up as a healthy and happy person. Mrs. Chan said with a sigh that social norms and the comments and attitudes of relatives and friends are the most difficult to deal with. “If a relative buy him a girlie garment or a neighbor says he is pretty, it could undermine his gender identification. In the past I would only laugh it off, but now I will say firmly that he is a boy!”

Lastly, Mrs. Chan said sincerely, “When a child identifies himself or herself with the opposite gender in terms of appearance, it may very well be some kind of Freudian slip. Parents must take time to find out what is going on and do their best to collect information on various possibilities. Don’t go along blindly with the so-called macro trends of the world, otherwise you would miss a lot of opportunities of making changes.”

