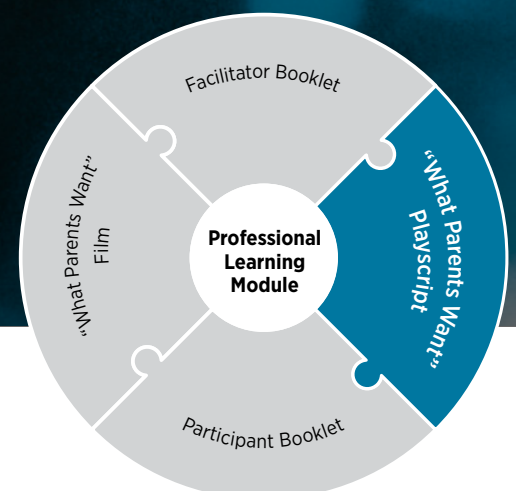


# WHAT PARENTS WANT:

## Talking About Gender and Sexuality Diversity in Schools

PLAYSCRIPT



Tania Ferfolja • Jacqueline Ullman • Tara Goldstein

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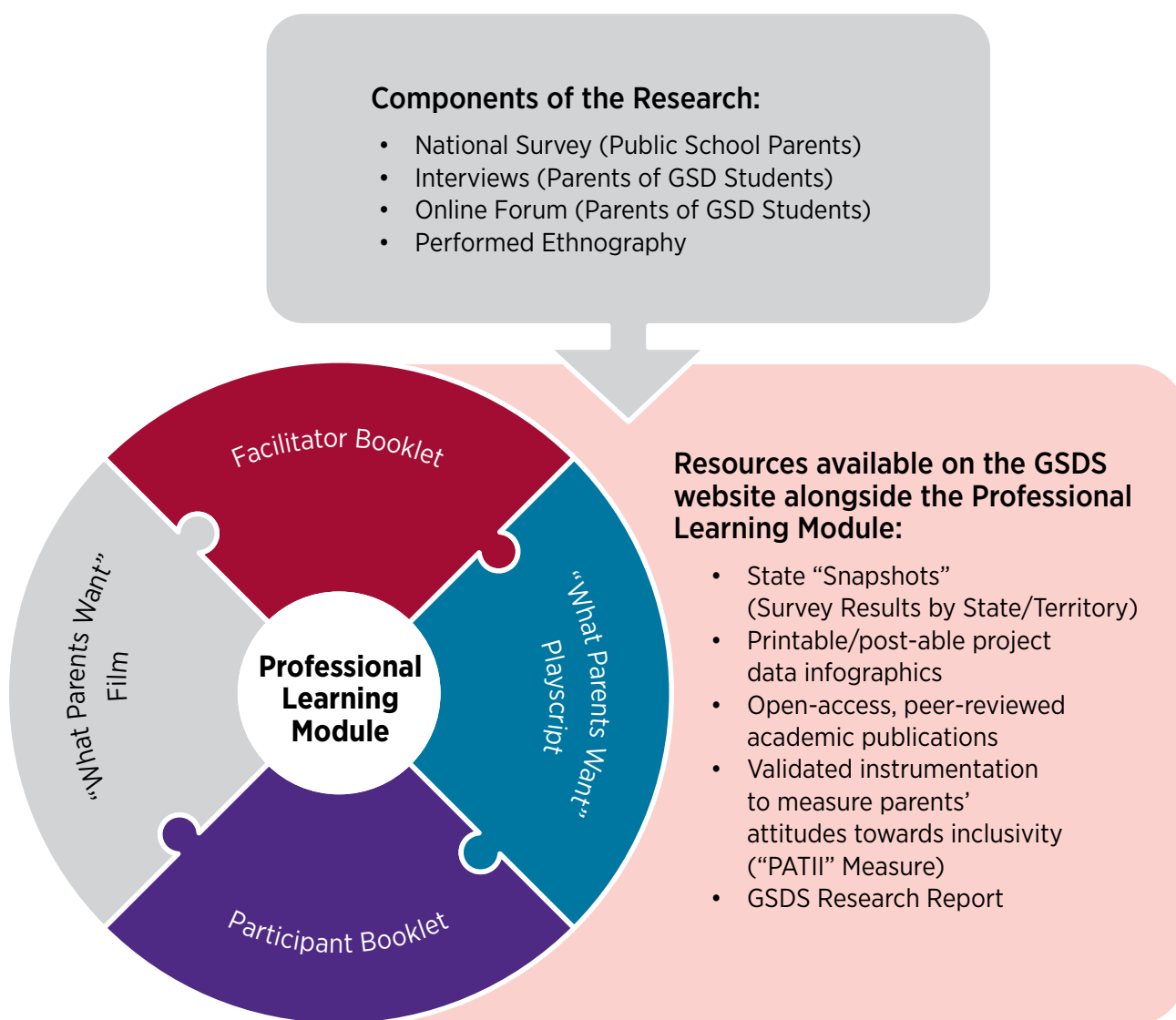
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This play, like much of our work, is dedicated to all the gender and sexuality diverse young people who are trapped within systems that marginalise them, including schools, and to those we have lost in the struggle.

This Playscript is one component of a professional learning module for educators and is part of a broader package of resources developed as a result of the findings of an Australian Research Council-funded project titled, 'Gender and Sexuality Diversity in Schools. Parental Experiences and Schooling Responses' (DP 180101676). The diagram below details the various components of the research on which this professional development model is based and on the structure of the professional development module itself. For more information about the research, professional development module, or to contact the researchers, visit: <https://westernsydney.edu.au/gsdgs>.



# WHAT PARENTS WANT: TALKING ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUALITY DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS

## Characters

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Narrator

Mother of Asha (bisexual son)

Mother of River (gender fluid child)

Mother of Emma (transgender daughter)

Mother of Meg (transgender daughter)

Mother of Bridget (transgender daughter)

Mother of Jordie (sexuality diverse daughter)

## Introduction to the play

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### NARRATOR

Welcome to *What Parents Want: Talking About Gender and Sexuality Diversity in Schools*. This is a verbatim play that draws on the findings from a research project that was conducted across Australia. The research investigated the experiences of parents of gender and sexuality diverse young people attending a public school across kindergarten through to year 12. As a verbatim play, it draws on excerpts from actual interviews and online forum data to form the play's script. The actors are using the words of some of the parents who participated, and as they were relayed to the researchers during data collection.<sup>1</sup>

The research highlighted that gender and sexuality diverse kids come from a diverse range of families, including families living in cities, regional and remote areas of Australia; families where parents were born in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas and speak a variety of different languages at home; families where parents identify as Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim and as not religious.

All names used in this playscript are pseudonyms.

<sup>1</sup> In Parts 1 and 2, the playscript is verbatim from the data of six parent participants. Part 3, however, is an amalgamation of the data from a range of participants which has been included into the voices of the six central characters to form composite characters. These adaptations were made so that the many ideas for improving school inclusion as expressed by parents in the research more broadly could be incorporated into the play.

*What Parents Want: Talking About Gender and Sexuality Diversity in Schools* is divided into three parts. Part 1, 'This is us. Introducing our children' introduces the audiences to six parent participants, all mothers, who talk about their child's experiences of coming out and identifying as gender and/or sexuality diverse. You'll notice the parents in this section all identify as mothers; most of the people who participated in the research were mothers. Part 1 will help viewers understand a little about these young people and their histories before hearing about their stories of schooling as described by their parent.

Part 2, 'School Encounters. Parents' talk about their child's school experiences', shares parents' experiences of the school system in relation to their gender and sexuality diverse child. In Part 2, we hear again from the same six parents who talk about their child's interactions with their peers and educators. We learn about what schools are doing well and what schools aren't doing well in supporting gender and sexuality diverse students.

In Part 3, 'Ways Forward. Parents talk about what schools can do', the parents talk about their ideas of what schools can do to support their child into the future.

We hope the play helps us all to better understand the schooling experiences of gender and sexuality diverse students and their parents, and to engage with the suggestions made by parents to ensure equity for all.

The words used in this playscript are those used by parents verbatim as they shared their journey with their gender and sexuality diverse child at a particular point in time. A core value of this project was to validate and centre their voices.

It is critical to acknowledge that language used in this space, particularly around identity, is rapidly evolving. Thus, some of the language used by parents to describe their child's experience at the point of project participation has also evolved.

As language can have a big impact on the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse people, viewers are encouraged to consult with local organisations who support gender and sexuality diversity to ensure that they are using the most appropriate terminology when working with young people and their families.

Some of the parents' narratives talk about children's self-harm and suicide ideation. If this play causes you distress, support is available through Lifeline Australia 13 11 14, or QLife LGBTIQ+ on 1800 184 527, or another counselling service in your area.

## **Part 1**

### **This is Us. Introducing our Children.**

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#### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

Emma, who we're talking about today, is my transgender child. She was born male. Emma is nine. It was getting clearer that Emma couldn't keep pretending to be a boy and that's how she felt. She said that she thought it was a lie. She had all her girly things in her bedroom that if she had friends over, you'd have to put them all away. She didn't want to go out of the house because she'd have to get changed into boy clothes. So, it got to a point, at school, she really couldn't concentrate because she was so focused on presenting more like a girl. She had feminine mannerisms and was obsessed about what things were girl things and what things were boy things. She didn't want to go to the boys' toilets anymore and I was getting phone calls to say come and pick her up from school.

#### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

My child is River. They prefer the 'they' pronoun, which we're all struggling with a little bit because it's plural. River decided, or announced, they were gender fluid probably 18 months ago. They would have been 11 and a half at the time. River feels very clear that they're not in the wrong body, but feels that they don't feel feminine and don't like feminine things, and don't feel like a girl. So, River had this big, thick, beautiful, curly shoulder-length hair that was kind of like the thing that everyone knew them by. River decided that they wanted to shave it all off. So we shave it every six weeks. So, it's really short. It suits them. They look amazing. River's got a very androgynous body. Like they're tall, very lean. So they easily pass as a boy, or they pass as somewhere in the middle. Like they wear boy's clothes and is mistaken for male. With old people they will say, "Oh your son's so lovely!" Then you see them kind of going, wait, hold on, and just looking a bit confused and embarrassed. River just goes "Thank you" and moves on.

#### **MOTHER OF ASHA**

My son, Asha, is 15, nearly 16. Asha is slightly gender non-conforming, he's in no way gender-queer but he doesn't necessarily follow "the rules" in the way he presents, so he likes to wear women's jewellery sometimes and that kind of stuff. So, at some point he decided that he was bi. Heterosexuality hasn't been assumed as much in his entire schooling life as it certainly was for any of our generation. Every now and then, stuff that he says surprises me in terms of how different the attitudes are amongst him and his peers than they were for me and actually are for me now. Asha's always felt that he was a part of his school community, even if things weren't going terribly well.

### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

Jordie's just turned 14. So, she's about to head into Year 9 of high school. In Year 5 of primary school, I started to see some changes in her. She was showing interest in her body and in other kids. She hit puberty very early, at 10 years old, and so she went through rapid physical growth and emotional turmoil, really, because she was so young. She began to know a bit more about herself and so, at 11, she came out. She realised at that point that she was interested in girls. She was a bit afraid to tell her parents, my ex and myself, in case we were – probably just not going to take it seriously, I guess, because she was so young. We just said, you know, it's great that you're starting to understand this about yourself. Anyway, that vision of herself has never really changed and from that point she started to independently research sexualities and genders and became very, very aware. So, for example, at 12 she announced one night at dinner that there was a sexuality and gender type for each day of the month. So, there were 32 recognised ones at that point. She was doing all this independent research on her own.

### **MOTHER OF MEG**

From my point of view, pre-transition there's Rory and post-transition there's Meg. By two and a half years old my son had rejected all boys' toys, rejected playing with boys, told us that he didn't like his body, wouldn't listen to his name or respond even to it. At two and a half he watched a movie called Frozen and the lights just went on. From that moment, it was just all girl stuff – dresses. The preschool at the time was very open but were very concerned if your child comes dressed as a girl every day, that other parents might be concerned about that. We were having tantrums – hour-and-a-half long tantrums if you put the shorts on.

### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

I have twins. They are 14. They were both born male and then last year in October, one of my twins said to me that, I think that my brother is having gender identity issues. I asked my then-son, and he said, yes, I am. It was apparent that this had been bothering him for some time. He had been depressed and anxious and we didn't understand why for years. He then transitioned and became she. In December we chose her name, Bridget, with her, and she's now 14 and lives as a girl. Goes to school as a girl and yeah, is doing really, relatively well. She's on oestrogen now and so she's socially and medically transitioning. At 18 she'll have gender confirmation surgery.

### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

Emma was adamant she was changing socially to a girl. She'd picked a name. She had been seeing a counsellor who'd given us some of the tools to cope with the change. The school was very accommodating because I think they could see that it got to a point for Emma that she couldn't continue. On the last day of school, she took off that school uniform and put on girl clothes and that was it. There was no stopping her. I'm guided a little bit by Emma, who is very happy in where she is right now. She feels that she's completely a girl. She goes to her friend's birthday parties and has sleepovers and in a way, I feel like at this point she doesn't want to be viewed by others as "different". Like, she does ballet out of school and she won't let me tell the other ballet girls that she's transgender. I do worry sometimes that it's not great, that going "under the radar" is how she's learned to cope. We do need to have something out there so that Emma can accept that being transgender is okay. Because right now, being transgender is okay only if no one knows you're transgender.

### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

River felt quite confident that their friends would be okay about them coming out as gender fluid. They're all pretty bright, engaged kids, interested about the world, wanting to be doing the right thing kind of kids. So, we role played what River could say. River told the friends at school and they all jumped up and hugged River and said, "We love you" and "we're so proud of you" and "thank you for telling us". Just the cutest, most beautiful response ever, amazing and they're all like 12- and 13-year olds! Like it just makes me cry. I could not have wanted more. I'm so glad it went so beautifully for them. River's friends asked all these great questions like, "So, what pronoun should we use?" And "What about teachers? Do you want us to correct teachers if they use the wrong pronoun?" "What about other kids asking questions?"

### **MOTHER OF MEG**

If we had just moved schools and she'd started as Meg that would have been a completely different story. But because she actually socially transitioned in kindergarten where all those kids know, it's now become a major problem for her. So, she has this secret that she has boy parts. Internally I think she's dealing with, "I have a secret. I'm not allowed to tell anyone. But everything in my school tells me to tell the truth. Then where do I live in that world?" Because at school in kindergarten it's all about telling the truth, being honest and sharing about yourself. So, she has a lot of anxiety about, "What if someone finds out and they tell the whole school? What will that look like for me?" Her first question all the time is, "Does this teacher know about me, Mummy?" She's constantly hyper vigilant about protecting herself at school. ...She's mimicking the girls to make sure she looks like them. So, dress-up days, mufti days, bookweek days, any day that you can imagine where they get to choose their own outfit is problematic, very problematic. Because, "If I look too girly what will that mean?" It's hyper vigilant, constant.

## Part 2

### School Encounters. Parents Talk about their Child's School Experiences.

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#### MOTHER OF JORDIE

Jordie went into Year 7 maybe a little naively. So, in Year 7, she was quite open about sexuality. She had trust in her peers and so she was just engaging in that kind of talk in the way that all the kids are engaging in that talk. What I think shocked her was how people – her peer group – responded. So, in that first instance, she got called names by – particularly by the boys in Year 7, because she went into that whole year trusting, I mean she was just a kid so she didn't really think, oh, I need to protect myself or be careful about how I speak about myself. I think she wandered into that space expecting it to be all okay and it wasn't. So, that set up this low-level bullying, I suppose, and excluding, because she was this different kid. That escalated over time and so it's the subtle stuff of not being invited to parties, not being asked to do group assignments, not engaging with her at lunchtimes and things like that.

#### MOTHER OF MEG

It was very problematic for the school. They were not ready. So, we saw a paediatrician and the paediatrician had said to Meg, "You just be whoever you want to be". I had to actually do my own background work to be able to protect her in her transition. So, I went through the education legal bulletins and worked out what I was able to protect her with and what I could educate the principal on because she'd never heard of gender dysphoria which my child was diagnosed with. The first two terms the teacher had no idea about gender dysphoria. So, the kindergarten teacher, I was updating her constantly and I felt like I was doing the work – all of the work actually – to protect my child. So, educating the teacher, telling her – because they just had no idea what to do. There were no policies. They had no idea how to educate the rest of the school, the teachers, the kids in the classroom.

At Meg's older brother's school there is a big mural. They're very gay and very proud. In the secondary school it's very proactive. In primary, absolutely nothing. It's too scary. There's no books. I think the teachers in kindergarten tried to put in a book about a panda who didn't know who he was and there were parents complaining about that. There's nothing visual at all. There's nothing – there's no support groups. It's not talked about. It's almost like, well Meg's teacher said to me at a meeting, "I avoid talking about transgender stuff. I avoid gender dysphoria. I avoid anything to do with gender or the LGBTQ community because that is not my role. It is not my role to teach that. It is not my role in the school to teach other children about that. It's got nothing to do with me." I think that's probably indicative of a lot of teachers. It's just – it's not their role to teach gender stuff. That's the parents and doctors. It's got nothing to do with them. So, avoiding the topic at all costs is paramount.

### **MOTHER OF ASHA**

Asha was bullied a lot in Year 7. The school did a whole gender thing in Year 7 actually, and they had masculine traits and feminine traits in columns and somebody else in the classroom said, “Asha, you’re right there in the middle”. He was sort of read as slightly gender non-conforming, for want of a better description, but only very slightly. As a result, he was a target for one kid in particular – it went on for six months and in the end, I went in to see the deputy and said “I have tried everything. I don’t know what else to do.” He said, “Yeah, that kid comes from an incredibly conservative background”; Asha clearly comes from a very progressive background. You couldn’t get two more opposed kids. He said, “If he’s not doing well socially, we’ll just change his class” and moved him out of that class on the spot. The fact that the school considers social wellbeing to be absolutely intertwined with education is critical. If you are not happy socially, if you’re not confident in your belonging, your sense of belonging, then you can’t learn. If you’re constantly on the defensive, how do you engage academically? Asha’s had issues, he’s had times when – socially – things weren’t working terribly well and that kind of stuff, but there’s never been a sense that he didn’t belong at that school.

### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

Emma did eventually get to stand up and talk about how she identified and they’d read the “I Am Jazz” book which was one from our personal library and she’d taken it to school. They read it in Emma’s class and the two other classes that were from her year group. They also read it to Marnie’s – her older sibling’s class – because Marnie said the kids in her class also knew Emma as a boy and she was quite worried that they wouldn’t understand or accept what was going on. She didn’t want to be teased or have to explain it to every single person. The school was reluctant to put transgender education out to all the students, so it was really just Emma’s year group, which was Year 3 at the time, and Marnie’s year group – which was Year 5 at the time. I guess people talk, so it just evolved and I did not have a single parent have a go. It was universally accepted, wonderful comments from everyone. Great, really great.

### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

Jordie sought out at high school a peer group who was akin to her, if you like. Her group is young people who are exploring their sexuality. A couple of her friends are trans, identify as trans. A couple of them identify as homosexual or lesbian. So, the whole group is – they’ve kind of found each other. It’s a group of kids who are identifying quite diversely. The school itself does have a support club and that’s on a Friday. It’s very popular. However, Jordie is suffering with a lot of anxiety through feelings of exclusion, wider feelings of exclusion, so we’re going through a whole process of psychiatry at the moment and anti-depressant medication. This is because, even though there is the group, the wider impacts of the school – which is very heteronormative and cisgender – it’s actually had quite a negative impact on her. Rather than the school doing any kind of adjusting or addressing, it’s been, “Oh, let’s see if we can counsel Jordie rather than the school doing something different.” The outcome of that has been for her to go to the school counsellor, and then adjust her student timetable. So, last year she ended up with only half her grades. So, she’s a bright kid but she’s being – well, it’s like this thing of reducing rather than addressing the issues.

### **MOTHER OF ASHA**

Asha has actually had a really good experience at school. When he started high school, his year advisor was also the rainbow advisor for the school and when we met him on enrolment day he complimented Asha’s blue hair, apologised for the fact that his was black at the moment and said “Don’t worry, it will be purple again soon!” [Laughs]. And like, Wear It Purple Day was the biggest event for the year; it was huge, it was a really big deal. They had awards for the best dressed and they made videos of it and kids doing cartwheels and dancing. They just made it incredibly celebratory – and, yeah, not serious. I think that that’s been the takeaway to me that I wouldn’t have thought about before, was just making it fun.

### **MOTHER OF MEG**

I don’t think a lot of the teachers are aware of the impact of the little tiny daily things that the school does. For example, even the enrolment form – I know even last year Meg still had trouble when she logged onto the computer system because they set that up in kindergarten when they enrol. They set the login with her birth name. Every time she has a casual or a different teacher, her name pops up as “Rory”. So last time that happened she walked out of the classroom and went. She just went to her safe space. It was too much and too overwhelming for her to see her name up on the computer in front of everyone as Rory. Again, I think it’s just a systematic – there’s nothing in place for schools to understand what’s going on for these kids. Also, the peer social thing is really important – so when she feels like she’s being laughed at or identified, the emotional impact on her is overwhelming. She doesn’t know what to do with it. So, the last term of school she started self-harming at school in front of the kids. She’s eight. She’s in Year 3.

### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

There was a child who transitioned in Year 6 at River's school. It was just handled so beautifully by the school. Like it was just the most perfect thing. They took the kids in her year and had a separate talk with them and just talked about what was going to happen. The child was going to come to school and she was going to have a different name and we're all going to try and use her new name. Sometimes we might make mistakes and that's okay because we'll just apologise and move on – like everything was handled so beautifully. I know with that there were lots of discussions about gender. That was when River was in Year 5, in a composite class of 5/6. So they got all the 5/6 kids together, that's right, and explained what would be happening with the child coming to school with a different name and in the girl's uniform and that kind of thing.

### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

In January we wrote an email to the Anglican School that our child Bridget was going to and we said, this is the story. Our child is transgender and she wants to come back to school as a girl. The first thing they said was, they've never had a transgender kid at the school, which obviously cannot be true, given that one point three or one point five per cent of all young people these days identify as transgender<sup>2</sup>. But that was their view. "We don't have the resources and facilities, particularly bathrooms and change rooms to accommodate her", which is also a false and ridiculous idea. She just wanted to use the girls' ones. Then they said, "And, in addition, we think it will be necessary for us to write a letter to the entire school, telling the parents that we've got a transgender child in the school. And as a consequence, there's a good chance that your daughter and your son will be bullied at school." I got off the phone and I talked to my husband. We were very, very upset. Because in a way, for us it was a kind of predictor about some of the discrimination that she might face in the world. The informal, implicit kind of discrimination involved. It wasn't like, well your daughter's going to be expelled, we're not having her. It was just they were doing everything they could to convince us that we should take her out because the unspoken fact was she's going to be – they'd make her – unwelcome in the school. We didn't know what to do. We were really struggling. She'd only been out a few months. She was of course struggling. So, we just sent an email to the school saying fine. We'll just take the child out of the school. That was January, in the first week of January and she didn't have a school to go to. It was massive for us.

<sup>2</sup> About 1.2 per cent of Australian school children are thought to identify as transgender (The Royal Children's hospital Melbourne, 2022). See: [https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact\\_sheets/Gender\\_dysphoria/](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Gender_dysphoria/).

### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

As my daughter Jordie built her identity of herself, she also learned how to trust or not trust the space. You know, how trustworthy it was or how dangerous it was for her. That was where the shutting down, I think, started to occur. So, whenever I've gone up to see the school – and I have done that from Year 7 and Year 8 – I've always said to Jordie, do you want me to talk about your sexuality? She's like, yeah, that's fine. I'm like, because I think we probably do need to talk to the teachers about this because I think it's actually part of the factor of the peer harassment. We have had the conversation and I said to the teachers, I need you to watch out for that not being a reason for bullying or exclusion or these micro-aggressions. I've been very clear with the teachers that they need to know who Jordie is as a student and what my expectations are that she should still have a safe and full education. There would be acknowledgement, certainly, on the part of the teachers, but the reality was nothing – and so the answer was, well, we have this LGBTIQ club on a Friday. They don't do things like Wear it Purple Day. They don't do that. They do allow students to wear small rainbows for Pride Month, but that's about it. So, it's really peripheral. When I have asked for stuff, they've kind of voiced an indication of support but it's just not embedded in the school.

### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

River decided that we would go and speak to the year advisor, who's really lovely and I was confident – I had talked to him earlier in the year. He was amazing and had thought of every conceivable question and had answers to everything. Like what toilets do you want to use? You can use the disabled toilets. What about after PE when you have to get changed? You can use those toilets there, you don't have to use the change room. What uniform do you want to wear? Do you want me to talk to other teachers about it? Are any of the teachers dividing the class into boys and girls for lesson things? Just an amazing list of questions. He then made sure that their report card was gender neutral. He talked to all the staff members at the school. He said it was easier to just tell all the teachers in the school rather than just the teachers that had River because they're going to have them at some point, so it's just easier to just start off, tell everyone. A few teachers actually came and apologised to River because they had done class activities that involved splitting the class into boys and girls, and they realise now that that's not okay and they are not going to do that anymore and were really just so kind to acknowledge that they'd done that. A few teachers have made some – like misgendered them and have just apologised and moved on and it's not been a big deal.

### **MOTHER OF MEG**

Teachers at Meg's school are doing what they can. So next year Meg's teacher is going to have a theme of rainbow through her class to try and – they are just doing the best they can with what limited information they have. The school does try to help Meg – they did a whole school dance musical with a rainbow theme. Meg was on stage for the first time in a ballerina outfit. She was so happy. So, I think schools are doing what they can. They're trying really hard to – I know Meg's teachers, they are aware that every decision they make will impact on Meg's mental health even if it's in 10, 15, 20 years. That's a big call. That's a really big call for a teacher to make.

### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

There were a couple of incidents where the boys had been climbing over the cubicle because Emma wouldn't pee at the urinal standing up in front of everybody. She didn't want to go in there anymore because these kids were climbing over and saying what have you got, you got a big willy going on in there or something? So, she'd come home and do a giant wee and then she'd be fine. That was happening on a fairly regular basis so she was missing quite a bit of school because she couldn't pass urine and was getting stomach-aches and things from holding on. So, the school, I guess, were becoming more and more aware that this was a problem, because I'd talked to them about this toilet issue and other things like getting changed in the classrooms as they did for swimming lessons, she wouldn't do that. So, I said to them, can we get her into the toilets and get her changed there? Emma had said that she wanted to go to the girls' toilet and the school were a little reluctant initially, but I said that that was a law, that if somebody identified as that gender, then they were to go to that toilet, and I pointed out that it was more inappropriate for her to be going to a urinal with boys when she's a girl. That in a girls' toilet, all the cubicles have doors. There's toilet etiquette and you go into the toilet, you close the door, you come out, you wash your hands and you leave. So, when we discussed that, they became okay with it. Yeah, they told the boys about the toilet etiquette and they also let the parents know that there had been this incident. So, they individually spoke to each parent. Then the boys apologised to Emma and she accepted that that was okay. But from then on, she went to the unisex toilet, which is what they renamed the disabled toilet as. They actually took the sign off and put up unisex.

## MOTHER OF BRIDGET

So, we went around networking as much as we could and asked people about a particular school. We sold our house and we moved because you have to be in the catchment area to go to that school. We rented a house and we got Bridget into school a week after school started in January. At first it went okay. The school has diversity as one of their slogans and they committed to trying to make it work. But very soon, she started being bullied. Like really, really seriously. So, for example, there were some kids that lived near us where we were renting. Year 9 boys. They were following her around at school, flicking up her skirt. Then when she was walking home from school, they'd come past on their bikes and push her over. When they were running at athletics, they would form a circle around her and just jostle and push her. In the corridor, they would shout across the corridor. I was reporting this to the school. But they weren't able to do anything. So, Bridget was actually becoming terrified and wouldn't go to school. I was trying to work, but I was having to drop her at the time the bell rang. Fetch her when the bell rang. And when I spoke to the school, they just said, "Look, you know, if your daughter will come and point to the pictures of all the relevant kids, we will deal with it." But she wouldn't because she was too afraid to do that because the kids live near us, like 50 metres away. They used to walk past our house every day to and from school. So eventually I just gave up and said, okay. We're going to look elsewhere.

Anyway, now, in this most recent school Bridget goes to karaoke club and the Deputy Principal goes along. And he sings with her and karaoke and so on. When I spoke to him about it, and I said, "Oh, thanks for doing that, it's really cool". He said, "No, I know, I need to show the other kids this is a good kid, and we're with her, and we support her". So, they very consciously show the extra support to a trans kid so that other kids know that the teachers know this child is trans, they are on her side. They're with her, they're looking out for her. And it's been a very significant thing for her, that he likes her, and he does this with her. She's not aware obviously of why, but you know, they make a special effort to align themselves with vulnerable kids. I think that's necessary in schools you know?

## **Part 3**

### **Ways Forward. Parents Talk about what Schools can do.**

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#### **NARRATOR**

In Part 3, we include the voices of numerous other parents who participated in the research and amalgamate them with the six mothers that you've already met in Parts 1 and 2. We asked parents what they wanted to see happening in schools.

#### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

My state put together some resources that were supposed to be guidelines –

#### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

I think they need to have a list of resources in school available to all the teachers.

#### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

They weren't guidelines; the way that they were framing it was like support for gender diverse children. The first thing that it talked about was that at the core of all of our policy decisions is the wellbeing of students. But then there was nothing that said how do you actually ensure the wellbeing of a trans child?

#### **MOTHER OF MEG**

My recommendation is we need policies in place. We need really strong, strict protective policies in place that protect teachers and the kids. I think that's the way forward.

#### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

Also teaching classes in university before the student teachers graduate!

#### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

Yeah – and what gets me is advising kids that calling another an anti-gay slur is against school guidelines is totally insufficient. “Why is it against school guidelines?” “How can it make another person feel?” and “What impact can it have on another person?” That sort of thing needs to be taught to teachers so that they in turn can communicate this to kids and lead by example – authentic example – not just an example of blindly following school guidelines to comply.

#### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

Schools could do more as a curriculum, not as like you've got a transgender kid, let's address this one person. They do stuff for culture, like I know they talk about Diwali and Ramadan, but I don't think that they identify that gender is also a broad thing and people have different genders and sometimes identify in different ways.

#### **MOTHER OF MEG**

When is the LGBTQ committee coming to schools? Where do they get a voice? Is there a committee at school? There should be one. Why don't we have an LGBTQ committee at the school? We have programs for ESL students. We have programs for – we have programs for everything else, but we don't even have a voice for parents of LGBTQ students – to come forward.

#### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

River got their period for the first time and that was really distressing. It was really hard to find information about kids who identify as gender neutral getting their period. Like there was stuff around transgender young people, but I kind of felt like there was a little bit of a gap there.

#### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

I've been thinking about how that's going to work out for Emma, because she's going to be given the pack with the tampons and the pads and she's never going to have any use for that. She's going to want to know how girls develop, but she's going to feel in this strange place.

#### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

That's probably been the biggest hurdle: the body changes. I don't feel like they've done much about it at school. I don't think they have talked about the difference between gender and sexuality or sexual preferences.

#### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

I think it should be compulsory in all schools that they have to have an LGBTIQ-focused term, where that's all they focus on in health and physical education. They get decent content and material. And the teacher who's running it must be trained in it, you know?

### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

I think there needs to be a trained counsellor employed in every school who understands the issues and has regular contact with the parents, not ad hoc.

### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

I like the idea of schools having access to a 'gender counsellor' that they can call on for support if they need it.

### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

Simply saying that you don't support anti-LGBTQI activity is insufficient; educators need to understand and appreciate the complexity of what our kids are going through. The trauma that is involved to even be able to get to the point of coming out and then being expected to just get on with it amidst an environment of very little compassion is ludicrous. Our children are in a mental health crisis. Trans kids are 10 times more likely to kill themselves and gay kids are 6 times more likely<sup>3</sup> – this is totally unacceptable. The changing of policy and guidelines is great but it's not enough. There needs to be training on the emotional toll on our children and ways to foster inclusivity.

### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

What schools need to have across the board is annual, mandatory education – which they do currently for mental health – but they need to do this across this topic as well. I think anybody who's in the teaching space has an obligation to know how to support these kids.

### **MOTHER OF MEG**

I think the way forward is to not only educate the school staff and students but the broader community on the gender diversity that exists. Even if the school and educators are equipped and extensively trained in understanding and supporting gender diverse students, without bringing this understanding to the broader community and parents, bullying, discrimination and isolation will continue. Viewing gender diversity as an impairment only exacerbates the negative stereotypes and deficit viewpoint towards this group of children. Unless this view is changed from the top – through policy – to the bottom – within pedagogy and practice – our children will always be viewed as "outside of the norm" and treated that way.

3 "LGBTQA+ young people aged 16 to 17 were almost three times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past 12 months. LGBTQA+ young people aged 16 to 17 were almost five times more likely to have attempted suicide in their lifetime. LGBTI young people aged 16 to 27 are five times more likely. Transgender people aged 14-25 are fifteen times more likely" (LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, 2021). See: [https://assets.nationbuilder.com/lgbtihealth/pages/549/attachments/original/1648014801/24.10.21\\_Snapshot\\_of\\_MHSP\\_Statistics\\_for\\_LGBTIQ\\_People\\_-\\_Revised.pdf?1648014801](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/lgbtihealth/pages/549/attachments/original/1648014801/24.10.21_Snapshot_of_MHSP_Statistics_for_LGBTIQ_People_-_Revised.pdf?1648014801).

#### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

From my experience a lot of support is left up to the teachers that are either LGBTQI openly themselves or those that are very supportive of the community. The support group in my child's school was set up by two gay teachers. I feel this is done from a level of support generated from personal experience – which is wonderful, however, I see no training in place for the other teachers.

#### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

I asked my child if they felt there was anything they would change at school and they said that they wished that teachers didn't separate things by gender for activities as they were always separated from their friends which made them upset and anxious. They really hate sport and Physical Education for this reason.

#### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

I wish they didn't separate kids by gender ever! Every school should have a neutral uniform option. No more gendered buckets for lunch boxes in kindy!

#### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

We need gender neutral toilets at every school; and not what I saw at my daughter's school recently – a big sign up near the loos near the front office saying "transgender toilets". I'm sure someone very well meaning put that up – but really?! It means anyone using the toilet is declaring to the whole school, "Hey everyone! I'm transgender!"

#### **MOTHER OF MEG**

I guess, it would have been nice for my child's teachers to know what to do, but in their defence, if they haven't had a transgender child before, it's hard for them to know. But it would be good for them to have the answers, not for me to have to go out and work out what my child's rights at school were. Of course, I did that, but not every child is going to have someone that will do that for them.

### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

I'd probably like some standard resources for the schools so that all schools got some books about that sort of thing that became part of that curriculum. We need cross-curricular inclusion of gender and sexuality diverse stories at all stages – this is not a scary or difficult thing! It just means that teachers need to be mindful of not just defaulting to stories with a white mummy and daddy and a girl wearing a dress and a boy kicking a football. There are so many different stories to choose from and to share with every kid in their care. Just give kids some choices and honour their choices without making a big deal of it.

### **MOTHER OF ASHA**

At my son's school they've got posters all over the school. There was a rainbow notice board for stuff going on that's relevant. I would say that making it cool is probably the biggest thing. Straight up pride in having these students at the school, in celebrating the fact that they are here and that we're proud to call them our own, that this is part of who we are.

### **MOTHER OF EMMA**

I gave my daughter's teacher some books that I thought could help; if the teacher just read the books to the class, they could help kids understand my daughter's experience. And they were age-appropriate books about just gender, they weren't even about trans kids necessarily, just describing identity and gender and stuff like that. She read one of them on the very last day of term. It was the most ambiguous book there was. So that didn't really help, but my daughter was happy, so that was really all that mattered.

### **MOTHER OF BRIDGET**

Leaders and policy makers need to stand up to prejudice and hate speech. When the former Prime Minister says things about 'gender whisperers' and "letting kids be kids", it lets our gender diverse kids know that the PM – the most powerful person in the country – thinks that they are abnormal – or even that they don't really exist.

### **MOTHER OF RIVER**

I think politics in Australia, unfortunately, uses the schools as fodder for their agendas. I think that's exactly what happened during the marriage equality vote. Like that would have been a great opportunity for the schools to change their tune and do some positive lessons about just general acceptance and wellbeing and all of that sort of stuff. It's all missed opportunities. You have teachers having to be the customer service agents of public opinion. That's not really what they're there for, so I feel like the government should stick up for teachers' ability to keep kids safe while they're in their care.

#### **MOTHER OF MEG**

It starts with the leaders in our educational fields better grasping the realities and equitable needs of our gender diverse children to ensure they have as many opportunities to succeed in life and employment as any other child.

#### **MOTHER OF JORDIE**

Don't confuse sexuality with gender expression, don't perpetuate misinformation about child sex changes, don't encourage stories about girls not being safe in school toilets – and stand up to people who do spread – and perpetuate – all of these misunderstandings. Be an ally and be assertive about it!

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### **Final Word**

#### **NARRATOR**

The researchers appreciate the time that you've taken to engage with the stories of these research participants and the experiences of their gender and sexuality diverse children. Thank you to all who have made a contribution to this research. We are optimistic that, together, we can make a positive difference to the lives of gender and sexuality diverse young people at school.

For an electronic copy of this playscript, and its associated professional learning module for educators, or for more information about the research on which this play is based, please visit the researchers' website.

<https://westernsydney.edu.au/gsds/home>



