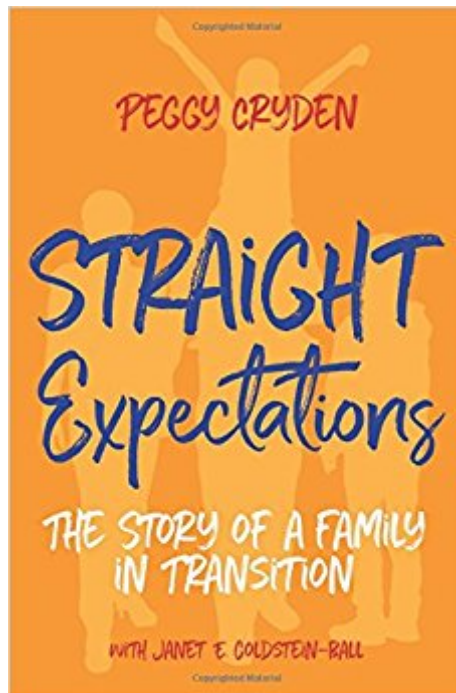




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Straight Expectations: The Story Of A Family In Transition



Synopsis

Ever since they were young, Peggy Cryden noticed her children's gender expression did not correspond with society's expectations of their biological gender. In this moving and honest memoir, Peggy details the experiences and challenges of raising both a gay son and a gay, transgender son and shares her family's journey of adversity and growth, which has helped inform her work as a psychotherapist. Beginning with her own unconventional upbringing and personal relationships, the second half of the book follows her children from birth to adulthood and through their numerous experiences including coming out, depression, hate crime, relationships, school and various aspects to do with transitioning (legal, physical, medical, social) as well as their appearances in the media as a family. This book is insightful, charming and thought-provoking, and through levity and humour, offers a positive approach to parenting outside of convention.

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Customer Reviews

Cryden writes with the emotional clarity of a seasoned therapist and also as one who's done her own soul searching. -- Ami B. Kaplan, LCSW New York City Psychotherapist and Gender Specialist.

Cryden writes with the emotional clarity of a seasoned therapist and also as one who's done her own soul searching. (Ami B. Kaplan, LCSW New York City Psychotherapist and Gender Specialist.)

"Straight Expectations" presents the moving story of a mother and how she dealt with what she had never expected, the emergence of her children as non-gender conforming. She beautifully

discusses her children's coming out as transgender and gay, and how she had to deal with her own childhood scars in order to help them along their journey. Since the book was written by a mental health professional, there may be some "expectation" that it would be focused on the topic from a psychological point of view. Instead, the book is a biographical account of a parent who happens to be a mental health professional. As such the book includes information that is very useful to parents and therapists. Coming to terms with having a transgender child created enormous difficulty in the family and her marriage. This situation is discussed and explored, and the lessons Cryden learned are poignant and should be useful to families facing a similar situation. The news of having a child who is not what was "expected" creates challenges for parents, siblings, family and even friends. Cryden presents a brave and brutally honest account of how she dealt with this, and how she did her very best to help her children. In the process she had to look inward at herself and her history as an adopted child. Early loss and absentee parenting made it difficult for her to know how to help her children and to deal with crises in her own family. She thoughtfully described how she faced her childhood and used this to help develop her own parenting style and philosophy. She honestly discusses her parent's limitations, and how she made great efforts to try to avoid the same mistakes. She courageously discusses her missteps as a parent, as well as her deep love for her children, and how she was able to ultimately provide them with the love and help they needed to thrive. The messy everyday reality and fears parents face are discussed with candor in great detail. The bravery of Peggy's two sons is apparent on every page, and her pride as a mother is palpable. While thankfully more and more transgender individuals are coming out, this is often very difficult for parents and siblings who (willingly or not) must transition along with their loved one. I feel for Cryden's husband who was clearly deeply upset and in tremendous pain when his first child came out as transgender. His reaction was not pretty, but the deep discomfort he apparently felt is not unusual given the history of prejudice in our society against non-binary gender and sexuality. It would have been interesting to hear more about how his experience, and how he came to eventual acceptance and transition. This could be helpful to others who for various reasons are not initially accepting. He struggled and fought the truth for sometime, but his love for his children was the winner in the fight. Finally, Jake and Jay's stories are incredible. I think it would be wonderful if they each wrote a book about their experience! "Straight Expectations" is a welcome addition to the literature on transgender experience for families and friends dealing with this in their own lives. The author's honesty and experience will help parents who are struggling to face their own issues, and to perhaps avoid some of the missteps Peggy described. The message I take from this book is that there is light at the end of the tunnel for families who face this challenge. Loved it!

Peggy Cryden is a family therapist who specializes in a number of areas, including gender identity and sexual orientation. Peggy's expertise stems, in part, from her own experience raising a transgender son and a gay son. In this memoir Peggy tells her story. Peggy's determination to unconditionally support her children may have been fueled by her own difficult upbringing. Both Peggy and her brother were adopted as infants by a middle-class, Jewish couple: Joan and Joe. Joan was a painter and taught English as a second language and Joe was a physicist, immersed in his job as an aerospace engineer. Though Joan functioned well in some areas she was mentally ill and incapable of being a nurturing mother. Peggy didn't know what was wrong with Joan at the time but now believes her mother suffered from borderline personality disorder, bulimia, depressive disorder, and anxiety. Joan's prescription medicines made it almost impossible for her to rouse herself in the morning to prepare the kids for school, and in the afternoons she was often laid out with headaches and backaches. Joan made little effort to prepare meals: a packed lunch might be a sandwich of peanut butter, mustard, and lettuce.....and her dinners were often burned. Joan also did odd things like eating entire packages of cookies and ice cream bars while pushing her cart through the supermarket and sitting down on the front lawn in her dress and heels. According to Peggy, Joan lacked self-esteem, was insecure about interacting with friends, had panic attacks, and was paranoid - thinking people didn't like her. For his part Joe was a distant father who had little interaction with his children. Joe's engineering job and his position as a reserve captain in the Navy required a lot of travel, and in his spare time Joe joined 'every club imaginable' and wrote newsletters for all the neighborhood organizations. Thus, Joe didn't spend much time with his children - and when he 'babysat them' expected the kids to be quiet and entertain themselves. As a result Peggy and her brother had to learn to be self-sufficient, and grew up with few physical or verbal expressions of love from their parents. Living in a home where she felt neglected, Peggy told herself "If I ever have kids, I want my family to be different".....meaning she would bond with her children and be involved in their lives. And in time, this came to pass. Peggy met her future husband Izzy when she was in her late twenties - after difficult and damaging years as a rebellious teen and 'fast' young adult. By this time Peggy had earned an Associate Degree and was applying to universities, and Izzy was a television advertising executive. Peggy and Izzy got married and had two children: a daughter named Julia (who would later transition to Jake) and a son named Jay. From the time she was a young child, daughter Julia rejected 'girly' things like dresses and dolls - and preferred to play male characters when she acted out her favorite movies. Conversely, son Jay enjoyed playing with his sister's Barbie dolls and avoided rambunctious boys' games and

sports. In time, both children were diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Jay had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) as well. As Peggy had promised herself, she was a hands-on mother - and she organized therapists and treatment teams for the children. A few years later, more serious problems arose. At first Julia thought she was a lesbian, but then admitted to her mother that she was transgender.....really a male. In addition, Julia was being severely harassed at high school because she dressed like a boy, and Peggy felt compelled to arrange an independent study program to keep Julia safe. When Julia was fifteen she changed her name to Jake and began hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to align her physical appearance with her true gender. (At this point in the book Peggy starts using male pronouns to refer to Jake.) Jake's gender affirmation was a long and complex process. When a person transitions from female to male, testosterone supplements can add body hair, lower the voice, and increase musculature. However, gender-affirming surgery is necessary to remove the breasts and - if one chooses - restructure the genitals (though Peggy suggests this is rare for transgender men). Peggy was concerned about her son's transition but ultimately accepted his gender dysphoria.....and this probably helped Jake through difficult times. After Jake's transition he realized he was attracted to men - so Jake is a gay transgender male. Meanwhile - because the family had been focused on Jake - Jay's difficulties were being overlooked. In his early teens Jay developed an eating disorder and started showing signs of anxiety and depression. By the time Jay was sixteen he was often dizzy, irritable and fatigued. A trip to the doctor revealed that Jay's weight had dropped from 153 to 103 pounds. He also had low blood pressure and decreased heart rate, which caused him to pass out, get migraines, and have heart palpitations. Jay was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa - and once again Peggy put together a treatment team. Shortly afterwards, Jay was 'caught' dating a boy, and confessed that he was gay. Jay admitted to his parents: "I didn't want to tell you because.....I know how much you went through with Jake. I wanted you to think at least one of your kids was 'normal'." Peggy assured her son that she loved him 'no matter what' and Jay was honest about his boyfriends from then on. All these changes in the family required a lot of adjustment. Peggy admits "We went from being the parents of a caring older sister and adoring younger brother to being the parents of two gay sons, and this was a whole different dynamic that affected everyone in the family." Peggy's husband Izzy took a while to come to terms with Jake's transition. In addition, Jay's perception that his brother was getting all the attention created a distance between the boys, who were once best friends. These and other issues required time and effort to be resolved, but the entire family is very close now. Both boys have graduated college, live on their own, and are doing well - so this is a success story all around. In an effort to help other people like Jake and Jay, Peggy allowed the

family's story to be publicized. Jake participated in an MSNBC documentary entitled "Born in the Wrong Body", and Peggy and both boys made appearances on the 'Oprah Winfrey Show.' Afterwards Peggy and Jake became advocates for transgender individuals, held workshops, and started a foundation called Trans United with Family and Friends (T.U.F.F.), which raises money to help transgender people. Towards the end of the book Peggy discusses therapeutic methods she uses with LGBTQ individuals. She also provides suggestions for further reading and includes a list of resources for the LGBTQ community. I found the book engaging and came to admire Peggy's strength and understanding in the face of family turmoil. To some extent, though, I feel the book's title is misleading. I expected the story to be almost entirely about Jake and Jay, but at least half the book is about Peggy herself: her childhood; her turbulent teen years; her 'substitute' mothers; her relationship with Izzy; her adjustment to Izzy's 'buttinsky' family; her education; her career; her pregnancies; her deliveries; her early years as a mother; and so on. Though all this is interesting, I would have liked to learn more about the boys and how they feel about their experiences. But maybe that's a different book. Peggy is very hard on her parents in this book, especially her mom, whose poor mothering is mentioned again and again - to the point where it's repetitious. As a therapist, Peggy might be expected to understand her mother's psychological problems.....but maybe Peggy's childhood hurts are too deep to let go. I'd recommend this memoir to people interested in LGBTQ concerns, especially readers who want to know more about being transgender. The book also provides a compelling story of an admirable and devoted mother and - on that score - would probably appeal to a general readership. Thanks to Netgalley, the authors (Peggy Cryden with Janet E. Goldstein-Ball), and the publisher (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) for a copy of the book.

This is a quick, not-very-detailed read about a family with a trans gay son and a gay son. Unfortunately, the tale didn't really focus enough on the kids and their journeys, as it seemed to me that mum wanted her story to be told. TBH, I got fed up with her longish part of the tale and skim-read. I did appreciate her unconditional support of both her kids, even when her husband couldn't deal and their marriage came under pressure, and I am happy that the family is still close today, with both boys happily dating. Unfortunately, it didn't deliver what the blurb made it out to be. I'd have been very disappointed had I paid for this.

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