

Family experiences with puberty blockers in Aotearoa

In this information sheet, parents and caregivers of transgender¹ young people in Aotearoa tell us what taking puberty blockers has meant for their children.

The quotes in this information sheet were collected from members of the support group **New Zealand Parents and Guardians of Transgender and Gender Diverse Children**, which supports over 1,200 parents and guardians in Aotearoa who are raising transgender children and young people www.transgenderchildren.nz

Parents say puberty blockers have given their children time and space to make decisions, stopped unwanted physical changes, improved their wellbeing, reduced distress, and in some cases saved their lives.

Note: Some of the experiences discussed include self-harm and suicidal behaviour. We encourage you to take care of yourself when reading. If you need to talk about anything discussed here, we list support sources at the end.



- **Giving time and space**

‘Access to puberty blockers gives **breathing space** to rangatahi and their whānau to work through what the appropriate next steps are without the distress and negative mental health effects of irreversible pubertal changes.’

‘Puberty blockers have meant that we can **slow down**, and not rush into major changes. It’s given my child time to get psychological assistance and work through his dysphoria and reduce his distress. It’s provided him with mental stability, and there’s nothing more important than that.’



‘Puberty blockers were an essential part of my child’s gender exploration, allowing them to stop worrying about developing a female body shape and focus on figuring out their identity. A couple of years later they realised that they were actually non-binary and came off puberty blockers, having had the **time and space** the blockers allowed them to come to the realisation that their non-binary identity did not have to come with a particular physical body. They have since gone through natal puberty with no ill effects.’

‘My child was on blockers for several years and then stopped and went through puberty and changed their name but did not want any

¹ For brevity, we use the term transgender to refer to anyone whose gender is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. This is intended to include takatāpui, non-binary, and gender fluid people, alongside anyone who seeks gender-affirming care to express their gender, however they might choose to identify.

further gender affirming medical care. When I asked if they could tell me why they needed blockers and what difference it made to them, they said: It was a **helpful pause** to gather my thoughts. I was not comfortable in my body, and it gave me time to think and do things to be comfortable.'

- **Stopping physical changes**

'Puberty blockers for my child was not about biding time, but **ensuring irreversible puberty changes did not occur**. Having gender dysphoria from preschool age it was essentially life-saving that she had access to the medicine she needed to prevent the dysphoria getting worse. She said "if I didn't have access to blockers, I wouldn't have made it'

'My child was desperate to start blockers before she started to look masculine. She was severely depressed and suicidal. Starting blockers allowed her growth to slow, and she **avoided all the things that she was petrified of.**'

'Blockers have been hugely important to my child, even though they were mostly through puberty at the time of starting. Blocking of female hormones and any further puberty effects has been **life-saving** for my child.'

'Facial hair is the biggest source of dysphoria as my child was already quite far through puberty before starting medication. But they are now able to start **laser hair removal** as they are on blockers so no more new hair will come through. This might sound minor to others but will be a huge benefit for their mental health.'

'My child has had to have **2 major surgeries that could have been avoided** (along with the public health cost involved) had he had access to blockers when he was at the right age. He was suicidal for a number of years along with self harm behaviours as a coping mechanism due to puberty progressing.'

'My daughter didn't understand her feelings until she was 17. By that time, puberty was well advanced and all the manifestations of being male had appeared. At 23 she wishes she was shorter, her voice wasn't as deep, and she didn't have to deal with facial hair. If she had known about being transgender then **we would have a much happier adult now**. As it is she hates to speak, she finds it difficult to find clothes and shoes that fit, and she hates going out in public.'

- **Improving wellbeing**

'Our child started blockers when puberty was medically confirmed as having started. She cried with relief. Puberty blockers allowed her to **grow into the confident young woman** we now have. They were crucial to her wellbeing.'

'Our son's teacher commented that he is happier since starting blockers, is **more sure of himself** in the classroom, and is claiming his identity with pride. She was also his teacher last year, and she remarked what a difference it has made for him to have blockers.'



‘Since going on blockers my non-binary teen has been able to explore their gender expression and become **more confident in their identity**’

‘Puberty blockers changed everything - for the better. We have not looked back. There was hope where body dysphoria was taking over everything. **There was a future for her.**’

‘Our child started on puberty blockers and now **celebrates their body** most of the time rather than hiding it all the time. He is super grateful for them and so are we.’

‘The difference to my son’s mood and functionality was night and day. He was able to finish school and in his final year become **one of the country’s top scholars.**’

‘Access to blockers early on in puberty allowed my son to focus on areas other than gender dysphoria in his life - things like getting an education, job, being a positive human being. He is a **young adult who thrives** and is succeeding in studying to be a social worker. He will make a strong contribution to New Zealand in future.’

‘My daughter is **loving life** and is who she is meant to be.’

- **Reducing distress**

‘After the first injection of the blocker, my daughter’s **anxiety and depression significantly reduced**. There have been no further incidents of self harm.’

‘Our son came out to us as transgender when he was young. He was diagnosed with anxiety and depression in the lead up to being able to go on puberty blockers. We witnessed an extreme deterioration in his mental health as his puberty began. He started blockers about a year ago. Since then, while his gender dysphoria is still extreme, I believe he would be in a much worse mental health position if he were not on blockers. They have allowed him to be a little more comfortable and **prevented further deterioration in his mental health.**’



‘My child didn’t get a chance to go on puberty blockers prior to going through puberty. It was too late by the time we knew this was something available to young people. My child had to experience crippling anxiety, body dysphoria, and was suicidal. It impacted everyday life for them at home, school, sports, friendships. Their whole world closed in and nowhere felt safe for them, not even walking by a mirror in their own room. Starting puberty blockers and hormones had an **immediate effect on their wellbeing and view of themselves**. The social anxiety eased, they were hopeful and could finally see a future where they belonged. They went on to become head student, graduating early, now in university, working and volunteering for a number of community organizations.’

- **Saving lives**

‘Puberty blockers **saved my son's life**. Leading up to his coming out he was in so much emotional and mental turmoil he was self-harming, drafting suicide notes and planning out how to kill himself. I

strongly believe that without being supported to access puberty blockers we would have lost him. Puberty blockers have genuinely saved our whānau.’

‘I can tell you hand on heart, if I had to tell my daughter that blockers were no longer available, there’s a good chance she would take her own life. I am not being dramatic, it’s simply a fact. I would move countries if I had to, in order to access them for her. **The alternative is not worth considering.**’

‘If we as a country want to have a **positive impact on youth suicide**, access to puberty blockers is one useful thing we can do.’

‘Puberty blockers for children should be their **right to have hope.**’

Where can I get further information?

This is one of a series of three information sheets about puberty blockers, compiled in Aotearoa New Zealand in August 2023 by a clinician providing gender-affirming healthcare to transgender young people and a researcher in transgender health, with input from community experts in transgender health and wellbeing. These information sheets can be downloaded at www.projectvillageaotearoa.com/pubertyblockers

Do you need to talk to someone?

If you need support after reading this, here are some free, nationwide, confidential services you can contact.

OutLine: A support line for the rainbow community and their friends and whānau every evening from 6-9pm. 0800 OUTLINE (0800 688 5463)

Suicide Crisis Helpline: A service available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. 0800 TAUTOKO (0800 828 865)

1737: Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.

Lifeline: Support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Whatever the issue, we’re here to listen. 0800 LIFELINE (0800 543 354) or free text HELP (4357).

Text: Julia de Bres and Rachel Johnson

Graphic design: Ia Morrison-Young

Illustrations: Julia de Bres