

# Considerations for Affirming Gender Nonconforming Boys and Their Families: New Approaches, New Challenges

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## KEYWORDS

- Gender identity • Children • Gender variance
- Pre-homosexual • Transgender • Homosexual

The media and the public's reaction have created the impression that gender variant behaviors of many children are indicative of later transsexual identities. This has suggested to some parents that the best way to manage their sons' gender variance, and perhaps gender dysphoria, is to allow them to dress as girls in increasingly more situations, to the extent that for some this becomes a transition to living full-time as a girl. This article poses some considerations in exploring these issues. Since I have had contact with relatively few parents of gender variant girls, I will not address these issues here. The issues of raising gender variant girls may be different from those if raising gender variant boys and require a separate discussion.

## BACKGROUND OF THE GENDER VARIANCE SUPPORT GROUP: "FEELING GOOD, FITTING IN"

A support group developed through the Children's National Medical Center (CNMC) for parents with young children with gender variant behaviors started in 1998. The goal was to help parents help their children to "feel good" about themselves and "fit

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*This was written in 2007 when I was codirector of the program for families of children with gender variant behaviors at the Children's National Medical Center at Washington, DC. In January 2009, I resigned from the program at the Children's National Medical Center. I continue on as a consultant, conducting intake consultations for the listserv.*

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in” with social realities. We thought that a substantial majority of these boys would grow up and identify as gay, as all research has shown (cited elsewhere in this volume). Perhaps because of my own experience with my gay son, the many gay men whom I have known, and the research with which I was familiar, I had come to believe that the origins of sexual orientation were essentially biological. I was reacting to decades of mistaken beliefs that homosexuality resulted from the psychosocial environment (ie, too much mom, not enough dad). I did not believe that allowing a boy to express his feminine interests would cause him to later *become* gay but instead believed he was *born* gay. I thought that expression of feminine interests was part of the normal childhood development of many gay men. But I was also sensitive to the social environment of homophobia and heterosexism, and the prevalent belief that allowing a boy to openly express his femininity would stigmatize him. I hoped that our program would support or facilitate normal development with minimal shame.

A parent’s guide (also developed at CNMC) reflected a positive, supportive approach to fully affirm and celebrate the child. This new approach was to avoid the necessity to correct and suppress the expression of femininity. The creation of many safe places for the full expression of gender variant behavior, primarily in the home, was encouraged. The initial group of parents in our support groups was resistant to allowing their boys to fully express their feminine interests, even at home. Parents were encouraged to develop a strategic approach for social interaction to minimize stigma. Dispelling the myth that there is or should be only one kind of boy became a central goal. Parents were encouraged to help the child understand the harsh realities of societal intolerance (ie, the macho standard of only one kind of boy). In 2003, we published the parent guide, based on the first 5 years of our experiences with the local parents’ group.

Also, in 2003, Dr Edgardo Menvielle, codirector of the program, created a website and an email listserv at CNMC. At this time public awareness of transgender issues was increasing. We were aware of the work of the PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)) Transgender Special Outreach Network (later the Transgender Network, or T-Net), and the Trans Family listserv, which were excellent resources for parents of transgender children (mainly adolescents and adults). Within our listserv, a few parents reported that their boys seemed to be excessively distressed and insisted that they were girls rather than boys. Many questions arose about how the childhoods of transsexual teens/adults may differ from the childhoods of gay teens/adults. Professionals began to question whether the diagnosis of GID (gender identity disorder) in childhood was appropriate to describe the common development of many gay boys, unnecessarily pathologizing children within the gender spectrum. It seemed there was a difference between the theatrical fun of gay boys playing dress-up and the stressful attempts of transsexual boys, who believed they were girls, presenting as their correct gender. One of my transsexual friends captured this difference when she said, “The gay boys want to be fabulous like Barbie; I just wanted to be like my mom.”

In 2006, a trend began as more parents within the listserv felt their sons were transsexual girls rather than gay boys. This trend was initiated and supported by the intense interest in stories in the media of children beginning gender transition at early ages.

In general, there are 4 ways that parents deal with the challenges posed by their boys with gender nonconforming behaviors:

1. Forced conformity to masculine gender normative behaviors (the traditional oppressive approach).

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