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Concerned about your Child's Gender Behaviour?

Information to Support Parents of Gender Diverse Children

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Defining Gender Variance

By the age of three years, most children express an interest in or preference toward activities and behaviours typically associated to their specific gender. We call these behaviours 'gender typical' because the members of one of the sexes favour them. For example, boys enjoy rough-and-tumble play and identify with male heroes, while girls enjoy such activities as playing with dolls and pretending to be a mother. By age five to six years, children have a strong sense of the gender appropriate behaviour that is typical for their social group.

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However, some children develop in a different way. Some children have interests more typical of the other sex and sometimes want to look and act like

the other sex. For example, a seven-year-old boy plays with Barbie dolls and pretends to have long hair and be a princess. A six-year-old girl is only interested in playing outside with the boys, refuses to wear anything except jeans and t-shirts, and talks about being a boy. We call these gender variant behaviours and interests.

Gender variance and gender non-conformity refer to interests and behaviours that are outside typical cultural norms for each of the genders. Children with gender variant traits have strong and persistent behaviours that are typically associated with the other sex. Sometimes they reject the physical appearance (clothing and hairstyle) typical of the child's own sex. Gender variance does not apply to children who have a passing interest in trying out the behaviours and typical interests of the other sex for a few days or weeks.

Commonly Seen Behaviours

Patterns of gender variant behaviour are usually first noticed between the ages of two and four years. Children with a gender variant pattern display many of the following characteristics:

Boys may show an interest in women's clothes, shoes, hair and make-up. They play-act and identify with female characters. They wish to have or may pretend to have long hair, prefer girls as playmates, and avoid rough-and-tumble play and team sports.

Others may describe them as gentle, sensitive, artistic, sweet, cute, and very affectionate. When young, they may express the desire to be a girl or claim that they really are girls.

Girls may insist on wearing boys' clothing and short haircuts and refuse to wear skirts, dresses and female bathing suits. They tend to reject play activities that are associated with being a girl. Instead, they prefer games and toys that are typically considered more appropriate for boys. These girls may identify with male characters and refuse to assume female characters in play-acting. For example, they may want to be the father when playing house. They prefer boys as playmates and are interested in rough-and-tumble play and contact or team sports. These girls may also express the desire to be a boy, announce that they really are boys, and enjoy being mistaken for a boy.

Behaviours that are observed frequently before the child starts school may become less frequent once the child has more contact with peers. A decrease in observed behaviours may indicate that as the child matures and experiences peer criticism, he/she voluntarily hides or avoids some behaviours in order to blend in.

Why Gender Variance Occurs

Gender variance is not new. It has been described throughout history and in many different cultures. Child development specialists used to believe that gender typical and gender variant behaviours were the result of the ways in which children were raised. Today, experts believe that the presence or absence of these behaviours is partly the result of the biological or genetic diversity among individuals. In other words, the genetic propensity for these behaviours is hard-wired in the brain before or soon after birth. Of course, the specific content of male and female roles has to be learned by all children, even though some children seem to be biologically

predisposed toward manifesting some of the gender role characteristics of the other sex. Some experts used to believe that gender variance represented abnormal development, but today many have come to believe that children with gender variant behaviours are normal children with unique qualities just as children who develop left-handedness are normal.

Although science has yet to pinpoint the causes, we know that gender variant traits are not typically caused by parenting style or by childhood events, such as divorce, sexual abuse, or other traumatic experiences. Children do not choose to have gender variant interests any more than other children choose gender typical interests. Both types of interests represent what comes naturally to each child. Gender variance is not caused by an emotional disorder. However, because of societal prejudice, children with gender variant traits may experience ongoing rejection, criticism and bullying causing adjustment difficulties.

What to Expect in the Future

As an adolescent and adult, your child may be emotionally and physically attracted to persons of the opposite sex, the same sex or both sexes. Although these three outcomes are possible, research on boys with gender variant histories suggests that most of them have a same-sex orientation (i.e., they are gay). These boys may grow up to be masculine and conventional in their appearance. Gender variant girls are most likely to be conventionally heterosexual or perhaps bisexual in their sexual orientation.

On rare occasions, children continue to develop a strong cross-gender identification as they enter adolescence and adulthood. Such a person may be transgendered and experience persistent discomfort with his or her social sex role. Some may eventually seek sex reassignment, so they can more fully and effectively live as the other sex. Some transgender persons do not completely identify with either gender.

Child's View of Themselves

Good self-esteem is vital to a child's ability to deal with life's trials effectively. However, generalised social stigma and the hostile behaviours that stem from it can cause emotional distress in children with gender variant behaviours, making their self-esteem development more challenging than necessary. Without support from parents, the child may believe that this stigma is deserved. Affirming parenting is essential in protecting a child from these harmful effects.

Generally speaking, girls with interests or behaviours that traditionally are viewed as masculine oriented usually have a stronger self-esteem than boys who have traditionally feminine oriented interests or behaviours. This may be due to greater social acceptance of girls who show masculine interests than of boys who show feminine interests.

Can it be Changed?

At the age of five or six years, children begin to be influenced by social pressure to conform and may adjust their behaviour in public to blend in. This does not necessarily mean that the child's core traits have changed. What drives gender typical or gender variant traits cannot be changed through the influence of parents, teachers, coaches or therapists. Although a child may alter his or her behaviour in response to parental pressure or social pressure, such changes may be skin deep and may not reflect how the child truly feels. Furthermore, pressuring/shaming is likely to undermine the child's self-confidence and esteem. As we explain further below, we strongly oppose parenting approaches or therapies that focus on pressuring children to change and accommodate to a stereotype of how a girl or a boy is 'supposed to be'.

How to Help

Love your child for who he or she is. Like all children, your child needs love, acceptance, understanding, and support. Children that have gender variant traits sometimes need these in a special way. The more that society and their peers may be critical of them, the more important it is for them to have the support and acceptance of their families.

Question traditional assumptions. Do not automatically accept traditional assumptions about social gender roles and sexual orientation. Learn to separate society's judgments from the love you have for your child. Do not let other people's critical opinions of what is right and wrong come between you and your child.

Create a safe space for your child. Children are far more resilient and able to cope when they feel that their parent is on their side. Let your child know that you love him/her, no matter what. Let others know that you love your child unconditionally, and let your child know that you are there to support him/her. Many children with gender variant traits experience social isolation or bullying. You and your home may be the child's only place of safety. If this is the case, assure your child that you will always allow and encourage him/her to be who they are in their own home. Create an atmosphere of acceptance, providing a safe place for your child to express his or her interests.

Seek out socially acceptable activities. Encourage your child to find activities that respect his or her interests, yet help her or him to fit in socially. These might include gymnastics, swimming, computers or theatre for boys and athletic teams, leadership programs or outdoor adventures for girls. Remember to encourage activities that appeal to the child.

Validate your child. Talk with your child about the fact that there is more than one way of being a girl or boy. Encourage individuality, and avoid using statements such as, "only girls play with dolls", and "boys love ball play but girls do not." Instead, explain that although a majority of boys are not interested in dolls, there are some boys that love them and that's okay too! The same goes for girls: not all girls like to play mommy, some girls like to pretend to be daddy or pretend to be soldiers.

Speak openly and calmly about gender variance. Acknowledge to your child that he/she is different in positive terms. Talk with your child about what it feels like to be different. Adults who look back on their own childhood of gender non-conformity often recall feeling different, which made them feel ashamed. Help your child realise that although not everyone understands or affirms them, liking

different things is nothing to be ashamed of and can lead to special talents and success in adulthood. Most importantly, listen to your child without criticising. Your child needs to feel that he/she is understood by you in order to be open with you.

Seek out supportive resources. Share books and videos with your child that present the full range of human variation in gender roles and sexual orientation. Have these at your home, and ask that they be made available in the school library.

If your child is isolated from peers, acknowledge that this is hurtful but not his or her fault. Assure your child that he/she will make friends with others who have similar interests in the future. Seek connections with families who accept and celebrate differences among individuals.

Talk to other significant people. Include siblings in as many discussions about gender variance as possible. They may find it difficult to accept a brother or sister with gender variant behaviours or interests; they may feel embarrassed or become abusive. This is a challenge for them as well, so they may need your help in understanding their feelings. This can also be a challenge for other family members. Talk to members of your extended family, baby sitters and family friends. Let them know about your child's needs and what you expect.

Prepare your child to deal with bullying. Explain to your child that he/she will probably encounter criticism and even bullying, and ask him or her how this feels. Ask what will make him or her feel safe, and tell your child to come to you or other adults in authority for help. Let your child know that he/she does not deserve to be hurt.

From time to time, encourage your child to tell you if he/she is criticised or bullied. Children who are verbally or physically abused by peers are often afraid or embarrassed to talk about it. It is better if your child talks to you about being bullied; however, do not expect your child to always tell you. Be alert to possible warning signs that indicate your child may be in trouble. These signs can include refusing to go to school or outside, complaining of pains and aches, or crying excessively.

Be your child's advocate. You may want to anticipate problems and talk to the school, before you hear about them. Talk to your child's teacher or the school administration or guidance counsellor, and solicit their help in creating an atmosphere where your child will be safe from negative judgments. Insist on a zero-tolerance policy at school with regard to teasing and criticism. Do not assume that the school has an understanding of this issue; you may need to educate school staff. Sometimes the school environment may be such that an alternative school may need to be considered.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Avoid finding fault. Do not blame your child, yourself or your spouse. Your child's gender variance came from within and cannot be turned off at will. It was not caused by anyone else and cannot be changed by anyone else. In fact, if you focus on blame or change, you may miss wonderful things about your child and spoil the rewards of being a parent. Your child needs to express himself/herself as much as other children. If your child is interested in an activity more typical of the opposite sex, it is not an act of defiance. She/he is simply following his/her own instincts.

Do not pressure your child to change. Avoid all actions designed to pressure your child to change. Some children may hide their interests and feelings from disapproving parents because they want to be loved and accepted by them, but this does not mean that the child's deep-seated interests have changed. In fact, it teaches the child that he/she has to live a lie in order to be accepted. Do not negatively compare your child to a sibling or another child; this will only hurt both children.

Do not blame the victim. Do not try to sweep being bullied under the rug or tell your child it is something he/she must learn to accept because he or she is different. Do not make your child responsible for other people's intolerance. Being outside the norm does not give someone else the right to criticise or torment. Bullying is an unacceptable and cowardly act for which only the bully is responsible. Talk about what happened, and help the child understand why it is wrong.

Dealing with Your Feelings

Examine your feelings and learn to accept your child. You and other family members may feel uncomfortable and ashamed of your child's interests and behaviours. This is common early on. Take time to figure out where your feelings are coming from.

You may have to adjust your dreams of how you expected parenting and your family to be. If these changes must occur, you may experience some of the emotions associated with loss, such as shock, denial, anger, and despair. These feelings are all part of the process towards acceptance. You must reach acceptance in order to affirm your child's uniqueness.

Look for support. Learning how to parent in a new way can be challenging. Asking for support is a wise decision for you, your child, and the rest of your family. If you are experiencing too much stress from signs of excessive worrying, loss of sleep, anxiety or irritability, do not hesitate to seek professional support. Sometimes, two parents may disagree on how to raise a child, especially a child with gender variant traits. If you and the other parent have extremely different views, seek counselling to help mediate your discussions. Counselling will make your communication more productive by providing a safe and neutral space in which to share your feelings and differences.

Unfortunately, many times it is not easy to find support. Keep in mind that you are not alone and neither is your child. However, do not feel discouraged if it is difficult to find other families in similar circumstances in your community. You may consider joining or forming a parent support group in your community or joining an online discussion group. In spite of initial apprehension, many parents like you have found support groups to be very helpful.

Seeking Professional Help

Seek professional help if your child becomes anxious, depressed, angry or hyperactive in spite of your efforts to be supportive. If your child shows signs of self-destructive or suicidal behaviour, seek professional help immediately. It may be useful to seek out structured approaches that teach children strategies to reduce the impact of bullying and skills to respond more effectively to bullying. Children who are very shy or have difficulty making friends may benefit from training to improve social skills.

Therapists who are competent with other childhood issues do not necessarily have the competence to deal with gender variance, so become an informed consumer and select a professional wisely. A red flag should be raised when the therapist seems to focus on the child's behaviours as the problem rather than on helping the child cope with intolerance and social prejudice. In the past, professionals assigned the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder to children. This approach is flawed because it implies that these children suffer from a mental disorder. Along the same lines, therapists used to recommend techniques to change gender variant behaviours. Professionals that still make these types of recommendations should be avoided.

Ask prospective therapists how they approach gender variance. Ask about their previous experience treating children with these issues. Discuss with prospective therapists what you have learned from this paper. If you seek therapy for your child, make sure that guidance and support for the parents is a major component of the sessions. Be concerned if the sessions only involve the child, do not address your parenting questions, or do not provide you with ideas to help your child and your family.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.