

## **Transgressing Heteronormative Parenting Ideals to Support Contemporary Youth and Culture**

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### **Abstract**

*The ultimate aim of this proposal is to present information on nontraditional families and the challenges currently working against their mainstream manifestation. The human rights debates surrounding genital autonomy, as well as parenting gender nonconforming and trans youth, are also outlined. A shift in the paradigm of family and gender would promote support and respect for individuals who blur or reject societally instituted norms for these categories. Another aspect of human rights under scrutiny are parental rights vis-à-vis children's rights, and where the gaps within these categories lie. The children considered in this article not only include gender variant and trans youth, but also intersex children and children with an ambiguous or traumatized sex.*

The focus of this paper is to explore parenting styles that reinforce strict gender roles, sometimes at the expense of a child's creativity or identity. To begin, consider some of the less common words associated with gender research: "Genital autonomy" is a concept that suggests that alterations made to a person's genitals should only be made with that person's consent. "Gender" in this paper is not defined in terms of biology, but rather the internal perception one has of themselves, regardless of their sexual organs. The term "queer" is used as an umbrella term for any youth that does not identify within a heterosexual or heteronormative context. "Gender variant" is a term that applies to any

children or youths who function outside of binary gender norms – girl or boy. The term “transgender” (or “trans”) describes people whose gender identity or presentation does not “match”, in the societally accepted way, with the sex they were assigned at birth. Lastly, the language in this paper distinguishes between sex as biological construction and gender as an intrinsic characteristic; they are not synonymous. This conversation includes the complexity of parental rights in regard to the genital autonomy of children under the age of consent for sex assignment surgery, such as in the case of a traumatized or ambiguous sex. An emphasis and enforcement of strict gender roles, as exemplified with the popularity of the child pageantry reality TV show *Toddlers and Tiaras*. The highly gendered world of parenting begins before birth and silences the voices of many children. The scope of this problem not only includes queer youth, but the larger population of intersex and circumcised youth, as well.

The set of human rights norms applicable to these situations can be found within the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Human rights are the basic freedoms believed to be inherent to any person simply by being a human. Articles 1, 2, and 19 guarantee the right to equality, freedom from discrimination, and freedom of opinion and information. Unfortunately human rights often come with ageist restrictions that limit the rights of children. This is further complicated in the United States because the government has not signed on to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), crippling the possibility of any developmental strides. Children are separate entities from their parents, but they are inextricably tied to adults because they need assistance to reach crucial developmental milestones. Although a child is a rights-holder, the rights of parents can trump a child’s because of the perceived authoritative and stable authority adults hold over minors (Ferguson, 2013). Children may receive some additional rights and protections under law because of their vulnerability, and these, plus the fundamental rights they already receive align completely with the inherent human rights of any and every individual. The CRC “reaffirms that children

are entitled to the fundamental rights articulated in international human rights law” (DeLaet, 2012, p. 558). Arguably, the freedoms that children should be able to exercise in regard to their gender identity coincides with the fundamental right to equality. More broadly, these issues also relate to rights to self-determination, meaning that a person should determine their own path in life, which would include self-identity and gender.

### **Gender Autonomy and Identity**

Genital autonomy intersects with children’s rights and parental rights, highlighting the paradoxes and limitations within the systems of human rights and active consent. Unnecessary genital alterations (cutting of male and female sexes), forced and coerced circumcision of adults, and surgical alterations on the genitals of intersex children before the age of consent should all be taken into account. The importance of genital autonomy lies within the right of an individual to have precedence over their body in the case of non-therapeutic surgeries or procedures. “The CRC subsumes children’s rights to parental authority in ways that limit effectiveness of the CRC as a mechanism for advancing child rights within the family” (DeLaet, 2012, p. 559). That is, the interests of the child have no gravity because of the significance placed on more mature persons. Human rights such as freedom of self-expression and privacy are threatened, and in some cases the right to life is as well because of high-risk medical procedures.

There are also ideological, social, and cultural differences in how genital autonomy may be viewed or understood. Comparing thoughts from collectivist and individualist societies would circulate discussion because autonomy is not a common practice among some collectivist societies. The cultural and religious rights of genital alterations may be for a rite of passage in society, and failure to follow through with these acts may result in tension and/or ostracization. Parents may stress rights related to

the faith tradition of the family, as well as their integral morals and presumptions on the influence of sex on the gender of a child. Many parents may argue that having a sex synonymous with a child's gender socialization is what seems the most logical; however, one does not directly impact the other. Looming above these concerns are the beliefs of healthcare providers, whose "solid, unbiased facts" on this issue often clash with calls for genital autonomy. Presenting facts on female and male circumcision and the health implications of those acts may shift thinkers to a more liberal perspective, but demonizing supporters of these actions will not create dialogue or acceptance. DeLaet (2012) realizes that gender-based discrimination is more well-established than children's rights; while arguments may delegitimize the practice of male circumcision, more than likely they would legitimize female circumcision (also referred to as female genital mutilation).

Milton Diamond (1997) presents important scenarios in which children rejected the gender assigned to them when they were born with an ambiguous sex. These children rejected the socialization that their parents had established and reinforced throughout their lives. In one case study, Joan confided to her endocrinologist that she had suspicions that she was a boy since she was in the second grade. Joan was born a "normal" male, but suffered from penis ablation, meaning it was burned beyond repair, and as a result her parents had her undergo vaginoplasty in order to create a vagina and raised her as a girl. Her initial surgery was at 17 months old, but before then she had been re-socialized into the family as a girl since the age of eight months. This form of gender rejection is sometimes accompanied by feelings of suicide or other methods of self-harm, and this was evident in Joan's case. She rejected "girl" activities and items from a young age, and when she reached 14 she rebelled from life as a girl and seriously considered committing suicide. It was through talking with her endocrinologist and learning her history that Joan was able to eventually identify as John and experience psychological

relief. This case – and many others – highlights how sexual identity is not fixed by the gender in which a child is raised, but rather is informed by other factors as well (Diamond, 1997).

Creating excessively rigid gender identities for children before they can consent harms may them emotionally, as well as physically. In the scenario of “pageant moms” as shown in the television show *Toddlers and Tiaras*, for instance, extreme cases can create toxic relationships and body images for children. In recent studies, mothers of girls in beauty pageants stressed their daughters’ elevation in confidence and beauty while the mothers of girls who play soccer stressed the importance of skill in their daughter’s ability (Levey, 2009). Some pageant moms argue that the competitions give their daughters a competitive edge, but by what means? Many “full-glitzy” pageants require girls to undergo tanning, plucking, tucking, use of artificial teeth, excessive make-up use, dressing in a sexualized manner, and the list goes on. These children are seemingly innocent, but are being placed in an over-sexualized environment that makes them the target of adult projections and fantasies (Giroux, 2001). This manipulation and heightened sexualization of girls creates unwanted conformity to conservative beauty ideals, creates a “false gender self”, threatening childhood as a whole. The “false gender self” is a term introduced by Ehrensaft (2007) to communicate the facade a child creates in order to follow expected gender behaviors without drawing attention to their queerness. The commodification of these children’s bodies centers them in the male gaze, perpetuating deception, heterosexualism, and misogyny. The consequence of these highly rigid gender presentations relate to the disillusionment of heterosexuality and sexual commodification as a means of status and power. Wolfe (2012) acknowledges that these little girls believe that it hurts to be beautiful, not only physically, but emotionally and socially as well.

Daniel et al. (2005) give important insight into the gendered character of contemporary parenting through their research. They explain that the common dichotomy of two parents is important

for understanding the gendered differences that traditional views of parenthood perpetuate. Also noting that the gendered names of parents (“mother” and “father”) allow boys and girls to recognize their vulnerabilities among each other. Daniel et al. contend that generalizing the term “parent” as a neutral reference to a caretaker is an alternative approach. Gender discrimination, especially gender identity discrimination, is valid in this context. They also advocate the importance of fathers in the rearing of a child. Specifically for their help in debunking gender institutions, providing knowledge about male privilege, and criticizing the “innate” differences among the sexes. Unfortunately, many fathers continue to instill, rather than dislodge, these ideas of patriarchy and sexism.

The attitudes between masculine girls (tomboys) and feminine boys (sissies) stand in stark contrast to each other in the context of gender and societal acceptance. These opposing genders have bouts of excluding some presentations while praising others. For example, masculine presentation excludes any aspect of femininity while feminine presentations are still functional and accepted when fused with masculinity. There is a constant and unrelenting stress placed on men to perform their gender without any feminine influence in order to be a “man’s man”. This “doing” of gender is an idea introduced by West and Zimmerman (1987). The social acceptance of dominant females is more widespread than that of submissive men. This is most likely in relation to homophobia and the demasculinization of gay men. Conflating gender identity or expression with sexual orientation is a common stereotype that agitates current debates on the intersection and independence of these ideas. The language currently in use for these populations already insinuates that one is not performing their gender correctly; girls who are “tomboys” are given this name to justify their masculine identities, and it is an identity that girls are expected to shed once they reach beyond puberty. As for boys, the fact that they are sissies and not even referred to as “tomgirls” is a problem in itself. Not performing gender in socially accepted ways somehow invalidates the slim identities and expressions of girls and boys. Gender

nonconformity may be relatable to proto-gay development among children, meaning the child has an identity crisis when conflicted with same-sex attraction. This is more noted in boys than girls; however, nonconformity does not define the sexuality or identity of any person.

Caretakers who normalize heterosexuality usually do so by the exclusion of any queer people from the child's life. This omits the possibility of introducing the child to a non-heteronormative experience or influence. An argument has been that homosexuality is learned, but the same is also true of heterosexuality. Most modern parental rearing excludes the possibility of a queer child through a lens of heteronormativity. Martin (2009) explains heteronormativity as the persistent and mundane ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken as normal and natural. Heteronormative institutions, practices, and norms support a particular form of monogamous, reproductive heterosexuality. It is then that homosexuality has a context to define itself, and it is most commonly referred to as the "other", an opposition to heterosexuality. Heterosexual parents definitely have a subjective way of parenting, raising their children to interact and cope with the facets of life that they themselves did. A shortcoming of parenting only from this lens is that it does not work for all children, queer children in particular. Parents have the ability to make life experiences that they do not agree with virtually invisible to their children. Society already echoes this, capitalizing on heavily heterosexualized products and media.

Nontraditional families and queer people – and youth in particular – are virtually nonexistent in terms of basic educational tactics and community visibility. This is problematic because queer children, as well as the children of queer parents, have no relatable visibility. For instance, this is the case within G-rated and other "family-friendly" movies. The non-representation of nontraditional families is harmful to the psyche of some children. A child growing up with a single parent is not presented as a traditional, nuclear family, but it is still a common family nonetheless. A girl with two fathers, for instance, may have feelings of isolation from her peers and society because she does not know any others like her. She

cannot access media to identify with others like her in television shows or movies. Many G-rated family movies have plots following a hetero-romantic plotline and showcase one form of intimacy and family. Having a family movie where the plot line is homo-romantic or shows a nontraditional family seems like a revolutionary act, but the truth is that it is a reality that is still not acknowledged. The invisibility of these families invalidates them in society, and can lead to self-destructive behavior among children who are affected by these happenings (Martin & Kazyak, 2009).

Ehrensaft (2007) encourages conversation of gender neutral parenting in an attempt to transgress heteronormative ideologies of all children and future adults. She applies this concept of gender variance to nonconforming boys, which she refers to as “girlyboys”. One boy noted to her that he should be simply referred to as a “tomgirl”, as that would not need to be explained; much like how *tomboy* is a known and accepted gender expression and/or deviation for girls. Gender neutral parenting is best explained as a facilitative method of parenting rather than an obstructive one. The fluid expressions of children can also be an identifier in their proto-gay development, meaning that some children will identify with another gender because they do not understand that same-gender relationships are possible yet. The experience of gender neutral parents is one of learning and at times alarm, most markedly in boys who have feminine presentations or preoccupations. Many of these parents have reached out to support groups in order to network through their feelings of loss, stress, anxiety, and/or fear. The lack of research and access to resources for these parents can be hard to come by, so these networking sites can be more than a life saver—a family-saver (Ehrensaft, 2007).

To complement Ehrensaft’s radical paradigm shift, Beemyn (2013) argues that “the children should lead us” in regard to their best rearing as individuals. Parental support in these situations is a necessity, as outlined above. Support for gender nonconforming youth should not be viewed quite so differently. Many parents often reach out to support groups for parents of children with disabilities,



allergies, and as part of other minority communities. Roadblocks within queer literature and queer parenting puts gender affirming parents at a disadvantage, but there are organizations aimed at creating and sustaining conversations to support, empower, and respect these youth. Curing a child of their gender identity or expression is not supporting them or their mental health. Shifts in the treatment of gender nonconforming children, both in and outside of mental health settings, should be to their advantage. Advancing the limited information that schools and communities shelve to their populations is not conducive to a respectable climate for gender variance. These children do not need to be pathologized for their expression, nor should heteronormativity be exceptionalized within society.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

My ultimate recommendation would be for this paradigm shift in parenting “gender-free” children not to be medicalized or demonized. Gender-free is not free from gender, but rather a freedom to craft one’s gender identity/expression. Community spaces should open to support queer youth as this is a vulnerable population. The most visible challenge would be the cultural and moral standpoint of the guardian, and challenging traditional views that put gender restrictions on their children. Lessening the fear of a queer child may have a direct effect on the acceptance or rejection of their gender play within a family context – conservative, liberal, or otherwise. Societal dependency on gender norms, socialization, and maintenance of heteronormativity is rooted in the preservation of conformity via capitalism. Whether conformity be to beauty, gender, sexuality, ability, or another subject, what is not reinforced is usually not accepted.

There are not many established organizations exclusively geared toward supporting gender-variant youth or their families, with a few notable exceptions. TransYouth Family Allies is an organization that empowers young people and their families through support, education, and outreach about gender

identity and expression. The significance of this group is their stress on partnering with educators, parents, healthcare practitioners, and the community in order to help create and preserve supportive and respectful environments for trans kids everywhere. Gender Spectrum is another organization that focuses on education, training, and support to promote a gender sensitive and inclusive environment for children of any age. GLBT Advocacy and Youth Services Inc. is an organization that incorporates support groups and community events in order to impact and involve the immediate society that children live within on a day-to-day basis.

Additional research on this topic is much needed, and good starting points exist within Ehrensaft's (2007) work. She has made great strides in current research and rhetoric on these unfamiliar populations, and is doing so in an approachable, digestible fashion. A possible topic to conduct additional research on is about the custodial rights of mothers with trans or gender nonconforming youth. At a recent human rights conference at Webster University, Katherine Kuvalanka explained that there are currently many mothers who have adopted this method of facilitative parenting, but that many fathers are combating their decision to do this, citing the child's mental well-being would be at risk. Research could also be conducted into Canadian policies currently in place supporting varying gender identities, including the full impacts on human rights protection in areas where human rights complaints can be lodged based on gender identity. Viewing families within this different cultural context may give way to other insights, problems, and solutions.

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