

What's so bad about
a boy wearing a
dress



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The phone rings and it is your friend letting you know she has had her baby and the baby's name is Alex; immediately you congratulate her on the birth of her son. It never crosses your mind that the baby could be a girl. While grocery shopping you run into a co-worker and her children.

One child is noticeably a little boy because of his short haircut, spider man shirt, athletic shorts, sports team hat and his shoes are covered mud from his morning dirt adventure, he is introduced as Matthew; the other child has long hair and is wearing a pink and yellow dress, purple necklace, green bracelets, black athletic shoes and is carrying a doll, this child is introduced to you as Jamie. In response you tell Matthew you love his spider man shirt and Jamie you think her doll is pretty; quickly your co-worker corrects you and says " Jamie is my son also.

How do you respond? The article I choose is about similar situations; parents and children struggling to find the middle ground between male and female identities and children not knowing which gender they identify best with. Our society is socially constructed to identify boy names versus girl names and gender and identities based on the genitalia of the child; although for some it is not a simple choice to follow the social norms of gender.

Recently, the New York Times published an article titled " What's So Bad About a Boy Who Wants to Wear a Dress? written by Ruth Padawer. In this article Padawer discusses the stresses provided to parents and children when it comes to identifying with a specific gender. The article details interviews with parents and children who have chosen to identify themselves in a way that bends the gender norms. Padawer connects to the sensitivity of

the situation for parents and the complexity of the situation for children.

Most parents according to Padawer are lost and do not know who to turn to when confronted with a gender confused child.

In desperation they go to the internet to search for forums, and websites to get information on the proper way to support their gender- nonconforming youth. Padawer (2012) introduced, “ Edgardo Menvielle, head of one of the world’s few programs for gender-nonconforming youth, at Children’s National Medical Center in Washington” (p. 4). Menvielle states “ more parents decided that making their child conform to a gender will damage his self-esteem, and I’d agree. I would argue it’s not even ethical to say to a child, ‘ This is the gender you must be’ ” (p.).

The article continues introducing several families and telling their stories of how they support their children who decided to go against the cultural norms defined by gender. Parents “ Susan and Rob allowed their son to go to preschool in a dress...” (Padawer, 2012, p. 1), they refer to their son Alex as “ gender-fluid” meaning he was “ equally passionate about and identified with soccer players, princesses, superheros and ballerinas (not to mention lava and unicorns, dinosaurs and glitter rainbows)” (p. 1).

Their decision to allow Alex to bend the gender rules and go against what society has constructed as a male and female based wardrobe was difficult, but “ after consulting with their pediatrician, a psychologist and parents of other gender-nonconforming children, they concluded that “ the important thing was to teach him not to be ashamed of who he feels he is” (p. 1).

Alex’s parents continue to tell Padawer that Alex’s “ movements ricochet

between parodies of gender: on days he puts on a dress, he is graceful, almost dancerlike, and his sentences rise in pitches at the end.

On days he opts for only “ boy” wear, he heads off with a little swagger” (p. 1). The only right choice a person can make when it comes to their identity is being themselves and not allowing society to define who they are. In the article author Padawer attempts to set aside the classification of what is right and wrong when it comes to the expectations of gender. According to Sonja K. Foss, Mary E. Domenico and Karen A. Foss (2013) in their book *Gender Stories, Negotiating Identity in a Binary World*, “ You have the option of selecting a different interpretation of what you are experiencing or observing. This process is called reframing.

Reframing means shifting perspectives so that you view a situation from a different vantage point” (p. 21). The children discussed in the article with the help of their parents use various ways to reframe themselves. In the situation of Alex, his parents let him wear a dress to school and when he came home crying they made the decision together that he would only wear the dress on certain days. When he started kindergarten they were too worried about him being bullied so they forbid wearing a dress to school but allowed him to reframe in other ways such as painting his finger nails, wearing pink socks, r even wearing beaded necklaces (Padawer, 2012, p. 11).

Foss, Domenico and Foss explain “ reframing is especially useful when you are feeling stuck in a situation that seems impossible to change” (p. 21). In class discussion on September 11, 2012 we discussed the Public versus

Private as discursive articulations; related to the article specifically I am interested in how the children and even their parents construct their private and public spheres (Harter, 2012).

Their private sphere would be more relaxed and open as the child would feel more comfortable being his / her self rather than needing to cover up their gender confusions to avoid criticism from the public eye. In our culture the prevailing ideology of little boys is that of spider man shirts, tonka trucks and being athletic not fingernail painting, dress wearing, ballet loving boys. The article " What's So Bad About a Boy Who Wants to Wear a Dress? " (Padawer, 2012) separates this ideology and explains that children make up their own ideology and it is based on what they feel comfortable being.

During an interview with an 8-year-old boy, who loves wearing pink ribbons with sparkly butterflies in his hair mixed with his Pokemon t-shirt and black and pink stretch pants, named P. J. , Padawer talks to him about wanting to be a boy or a girl. He tells her he does not want to be a girl but " he just wants to wear girl stuff" (p. 11). When asked why he wanted to be a boy and not a girl he replied, " Because I want to be who I am! " (p. 11). Padawer explains " by way of explanation, he told me about a boy in his third-grade class who is a soccer fanatic. He comes to school every day in a soccer jersey and sweat pants,' P. J. said, ' but that doesn't make him a professional soccer player' "(p. 11) P. J. is a smart boy who is not allowing the cultural norm to shape his master narrative; he is who he wants to be and will not allow pressures of an ideological society to mold him differently.

Pawader relates P. J's story to Alex's story and writes, " He's right: no one looks twice at the soccer-star wannabe, whereas boys like P. J. or Alex are viewed with distress, especially the older they get" (p. 1) Foss, Domenico and Foss (2013) explain the binary influences in your life through " stages of life, communication in relationships, artifacts, social systems, and institutions...", all of these stages " construct and reinforce a social reality of you as a gendered person" (p 61). Starting before a child's birth the binary system is starting to work. This is the difference between a pink or blue nursery or it could be the difference between being named Suzanne or Nicholas; both of these binary decisions assist in determining you to value one gender over the other.

I found this article to be powerful and well written; especially since I have dealt with similar situations within my own family. At the age of twelve my female cousin decided that she wanted to be a male and would go by Jes instead of Jessica. She expressed herself in various ways and my Aunt and Uncle were supportive of her throughout the process. They say that if they had not been supportive then she would have backed away from them and not have had anyone that loved and cared about her to run to when she needed it the most.

This was almost twenty-years ago and today, Jes identifies as being a female lesbian; for a short time she was genderless, or as Alex's parents described it as " gender-fluid" (Padawer, 2012, p. 1). While reading the article I could not help but look back to my thoughts and feelings during this time in our family. Padawer does a great job introducing storylines as well as providing reliable research in a way to make the situation more easily understood by the basic

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heterosexual population who do not know how to relate to gender-fluid/gender less/gender non-conforming people.

The article is most likely to spark conversations among parents, children, and even amongst children and teachers in the classroom. The article could give encouragement to parents who have a child that is gender-fluid and they did not know where to turn. As well, a child who might read the article could find encouragement to confront their parents or to reach out to a friend to discuss their feelings. At the end of the article Pawader described a time in Alex's kindergarten classroom when kids were making fun of his pink socks.

His teacher used it as a teaching opportunity, she told the kids that she had male friends who wore nail polish, and explained to them that there were times not so long ago that all women had to wear dresses, no pants were allowed. After the lesson Pawader (2012) states, " the comments in the classroom about Alex's appearance pretty much stopped" (p. 12). Our society is constantly reinventing acceptable norms; years ago it was not acceptable for same sex couples to marry and slowly states are starting to pass laws allowing this to happen.

Conclusion Children are always going to be curious and will ask questions about what they think is not normal; it is our jobs as their parents, educators, friends and society in general to teach them to have an open mind and to be accepting of everyone. The world would be a very boring place if everyone looked, acted, and loved the same way. Social construction of gender is not

going to change over-night; society is slowly adapting and broadening the definition of gender norms.