

Suggestions for parents of gender nonconforming children

by Suzanne J. Kessler & Wendy McKenna

www.webehave.com/hottopic.htm

- Don't make your child feel bad about his/her style and interests. Accept that these might be different from yours. Don't make your child feel ashamed of his/her choices. Ask yourself: Whom is the child's behavior harming? Why am I so bothered or embarrassed by my child?
- Be cautious about turning your child's style into a sickness. Families who live in major urban areas, in particular, may encounter pediatricians who want to refer the gender nonconformist child to a gender clinic. If your child is unhappy (depressed or anxious) take your child to see a child psychologist who specializes in childhood depression or anxiety.
- Don't blame anyone. Chances are, your child's nonconforming preferences are unrelated to any specific things you have done.
- If there's a mismatch between a parent and child's style, acknowledge it to yourself and to the child. Try and reach a compromise in terms of shared activities. A boy who isn't interested in playing football might be interested in being taken to a football game by his father. There might be features of the event --- game strategy, half-time performance, etc. that could appeal to him. A girl who doesn't like shopping for dresses might enjoy shopping with her mother for clothing that she does like.
- If your child is being teased at school, speak to his or her teachers and let them know that you do not see the child's gender nonconformity as wrong or a problem. Enlist the teachers' support in teaching the other children to understand diversity of interests. This might not be easy, but it is your responsibility as a parent to help others respect your child.
- Discuss with your child the fact that unusual behavior may be unfairly criticized and provide strategies for him or her to resist teasing.
- Model desirable behavior. By accepting your child as who he or she is, you will be modeling respect for personal choices.
- Relax and love your child. Children thrive when they have strong and nurturant relationships with their parents. Remember you want your child to become a caring, productive, healthy and happy human being.

Gender Roles and Stereotypes by Dana Williams

<http://www.tolerance.org/parents/kidsarticle.jsp?p=0&ar=8>

Messages in the homes, schools, the media and virtually every other arena of life continue to tell our children what they can and cannot do because of their gender. But as I've learned, everyday activities as routine as watching television can lead to valuable teaching moments about how to avoid and shatter gender stereotypes. As parents and caregivers, we must make sure we create our own ways to make such lessons a part of everyday life. Here are some tips on how to do that in your home:

Expand Activities for Girls and Boys

- Encourage children to play with both genders.
- Be sure to provide girls with opportunities to climb and explore and boys with activities to play make-believe games and enjoy art projects.
- Respect children as individuals. Don't try to talk your daughter into buying a Barbie if she really wants a big Tonka truck. And don't prod your son to take up baseball if his real interest lies in gymnastics.

Help Counter Stereotypes

- Read books and tell stories that highlight characters demonstrating gender equality.
- Point out real people who demonstrate non-traditional gender roles — women as doctors, scientists and construction workers and men as stay at home dads, nurses or schoolteachers.

Question Generalizations

- If a boy at school makes your daughter mad, don't allow her to say, "Boys are stupid!" Since one person's behavior is never representative of a group, encourage her to express her feelings about the individual rather than the entire gender.
- Question teachers about worksheets and other assignments that reinforce gender stereotypes.
- Point out gender stereotypes in books and stories.

Shatter Media Messages

- Talk about differences in video games designed for girls and boys. Who are the aggressors and the victims? Why do girl specific games promote stereotypical interests like make-up and fashion?
- Talk about the portrayal of sexism and violence in music lyrics and videos. Where does the balance of power lie in these mediums and why?
- Point out gender roles and stereotypes in cartoons, as well as those like Power Puff Girls and Kim Possible that break the mold of gender stereotypes.
- Examine commercials and advertisements for toys. What might a girl who likes to play with racecars think about commercials that only show boys playing with them? What message does a commercial that only features girls playing with arts and crafts send to a boy who enjoys those activities?

Check Your Own Gender Bias

- Be a good role model by setting equal examples with housework and parenting chores. Show your kids that women can mow the lawn and men can run the vacuum.
- Treat girls and boys fairly and equally. Don't be tough on your son for crying over a bump or bruise and coddle your daughter for the same thing. Teach boys to be nurturing and compassionate and praise courage and strength in girls.
- Show equal enthusiasm for women's and men's sports.

While it is true that *nature* creates certain innate differences between boys and girls, *nurture* also can play a huge role in dispelling some of the stereotypes that surround those differences.

As my child's primary nurturer, it is my job to make sure he knows that girls and boys can both rule. And wow, have I got work to do!

"Gender advice" for parents by Marilyn Heins, M.D., F.A.A.P.

www.parentkidsright.com/pt-gender.html

- ACCEPT your child. Know, understand, and fully accept your child's temperament, desires, interests, and dreams.
- BEWARE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES. All gender stereotypes -- yours and those of our culture -- affect both boys and girls.
- ENCOURAGE EVERY CHILD TO FOLLOW HIS OR HER DREAM. Your daughter likes tools? Buy her a toy tool set and let her go to engineering school. Your son likes dress-up, and art? Be fearless in encouraging him to meet his own goals.
- LET EVERY CHILD PLAY WITH WHATEVER HE OR SHE WANTS TO PLAY WITH. My only concerns about toys: ban toy weapons and avoid toy overload so the kiddies can appreciate what they have.

Then you can be an enABLER of your child's birthright to be himself or herself -- a precious gift.