

*“Gender Born, Gender Made brings to our homes, schools, and clinicians’ offices a wealth of ideas and tools that will prove invaluable as we move toward a more empathetic, just, and inclusive society.”—from the foreword*

# gender born, gender made

Foreword by  
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the Gender and Sexuality  
Advocacy and Education  
Program, Children’s National  
Medical Center



RAISING HEALTHY  
GENDER-NONCONFORMING CHILDREN

Diane Ehrensaft, PhD

PRAISE FOR  
GENDER BORN, GENDER MADE

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“This is an outstanding reference—an indispensable guide for those providing care for gender nonconforming youth. Dr. Ehrensaft eloquently presents evidence to support her enlightened and impassioned plea to advocate for the ‘true gender self’ of all children.”

—**STEPHEN M. ROSENTHAL, MD**, professor of pediatrics, director, Pediatric Endocrine Clinics,  
University of California, San Francisco

“Courageous and clear, this book tells gender like it is—with real advice for those brave parents who are helping their transgender children to lead the 21st-century world toward an understanding of what it means to be fully human. *Gender Born, Gender Made* is a must-read for anyone who wants to comprehend the function and importance of gender in American culture, and learn how we can break gender’s irrational stranglehold on the human spirit.”

—**JAMISON GREEN, PhD**, educator, policy consultant, and author of *Becoming a Visible Man*

“Dr. Ehrensaft uses her own experience and the narratives of her patients to provide a glimpse into the obstacles that children with gender dysphoria and their families face. Their strengths are reflected in their stories. This provocative book will be helpful for parents, teachers, and clinicians working with children along the continuum of gender expression. These are children who, like all children, do not want to adapt to the expectations of others, but wish to be embraced for who they are.”

—**CYNTHIA J. TELINGATOR, MD**, child and adult psychiatrist; faculty member, Cambridge  
Health Alliance; and assistant professor, Harvard Medical School

“This book provides a creative approach in the evolution of our understanding of gender nonconforming children, a thoughtful way forward from oppression towards affirmation. There is important information here for all who care about the quality of life for all children and their families.”

—**CATHERINE TUERK, APRN**, cofounder and senior consultant, Gender and Sexual Advocacy  
and Education Program, Children’s National Medical Center

“Dr. Ehrensaft has written a seminal and informative book that fills what has been a gaping abyss in the literature for parents rearing gender-nonconforming children. There have been few resources available for parents with children whose gender expression is notably different from that of their peers, and they are often isolated and frightened . . . This is a book that is informed by scholarly advice, yet reads with a gentle advocacy—it will be read and earmarked. Finally, a book I can hand to parents that guides them in this unique and rewarding journey.”

“In *Gender Born, Gender Made*, Dr. Ehrensaft issues a clear and compelling call to parents and professionals in support of children living outside of society’s narrow gender expectations. Building on her vast experience working with children, families, and professionals, she beckons all of us to expand our traditional notions of gender, challenging us to create affirming spaces in which children can discover and celebrate their authentic selves. Hers is a model of gender acceptance and inclusion not only for children pushing the boundaries of gender, but for all children simply wishing to be themselves.”

—JOEL BAUM, MS, director of education and training, Gender Spectrum

“Parents need to make decisions now, about the children they have now, and the fact that the science can’t keep pace with the culture doesn’t diminish that need one iota. *Gender Born, Gender Made* speaks to this reality . . . Ehrensaft’s experience as a therapist working with gender-creative children and her own experience as a parent of a gender-nonconforming child, make this book unique. She’s a double expert, both parent and supportive professional, and while we wait for the research to trick in, for the science to come of age, it is people like her to whom we should listen when it comes to understanding this exquisite mystery of male and female, mind and body, love and identity.”

—BEDFORD HOPE, [Accepting Dad](#) blog

“Diane Ehrensaft is the patron saint of kids who don’t conform to traditional gender norms . . . Her book should be recommended reading for all parents-to-be . . . [and] for all parents and family members even remotely involved in the life of a gender creative child.”

—[Raising My Rainbow](#) blog



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# **GENDER BORN, GENDER MADE**

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Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children

**DIANE EHRENSAFT, PhD**

Foreword by  
**EDGARDO MENVIELLE, MD, MSHS**



**THE EXPERIMENT**  
NEW YORK

GENDER BORN, GENDER MADE:  
*Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children*

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*To Rebecca Hawley, Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley, and Satya Hawley —  
my teachers*

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**FOREWORD**

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by Edgardo Menvielle, MD, MSHS

The setting is our parent group in Washington, D.C., in the basement of the church where we meet monthly. The children are playing in an adjacent room while the parents sit in a circle and discuss their latest experiences, and their fears and hopes for their children. A knock on the door is followed by the triumphant entry of two little boys draped in lace, pretending to be two matching brides. Layers of cloth are wrapped around their bodies and heads, making dresses, veils, and trains that keep getting in the way of their small feet. Fancy jewelry complements the over-the-top outfits. “Let’s walk down the aisle,” one says to the other, and they proceed to march around the circle of parents, taking little steps. They are beaming with joy. The sight is reminiscent of the opening scene of *Ma Vie en Rose* when the protagonist, Ludovic, descends the stairs in a princess costume and made-up to perfection to meet unsuspecting neighbors for the first time. There is none of Ludovic’s gravitas in these boys, only joy. (Ludovic only smiles after the crowd cheers—they take him for his sister; he assumes that the cheers celebrate his glamorous beauty.) Do I see a tinge of the excitement that comes from transgression, the spark of satisfaction that comes from getting away with small, forbidden pleasures? Or is it the joy of cooperative play, in which individual fantasies mesh in perfect creative unison and flawlessly coordinated execution?

When the boys finish circling the parents, they exit the room amid appreciative applause. It is rare that children come to the parents’ room; this was a special offering, a proud show of an artist’s achievement. The discussion in the parent group resumes. The questions raised by gender nonconformity are complex. The parents grapple with their children’s safety and what might lie ahead for them. They raise questions of fairness, freedom of expression, sexuality, individuality, tradition versus creativity, continuity versus change, pleasure and renunciation, bullying, and femininity and masculinity in multiple combinations and permutations. Simple answers are elusive.

In the same group meeting, a parent tells us about a children’s book that is likely to win a statewide competition in which early elementary school students vote for their favorite book. In the book, the cat character tries to wrest control of the story’s narrative from the author. After a struggle, the author puts the cat in a pink tutu. The cat is utterly mortified and gives up. The parent remarks on the delighted response of schoolchildren who are in on the story’s joke about social emasculation. She observes that this scene is not generally used as a teachable moment to criticize the devaluation of femininity or to raise awareness of the social opprobrium experienced by males who express it. This, the parent sees, is an example of the uncontested gender indoctrination of children that makes her son vulnerable to his peers’ taunting.

Socially sanctioned parenting scripts are ubiquitous and yet often invisible. A potent one is that parents must inculcate proper gender roles in their children at all costs. That was the starting point for the parents in our group, as it is for all parents, but over time the cumulative evidence at home has shown that expectations of strict gender enforcement are neither realistic nor advisable. Knowing that children who deviate from gender mandates are susceptible to social exclusion, these parents must instead learn to support their children as they walk through social minefields, figuring out their own

steps.

A person's gender is no more and no less than a creative individual achievement, and yet it can only develop through social exchange. It is informed by biology, culture, society, and the times in which we live. But it's not clear in what proportions these elements contribute, or whether all these ingredients are really necessary. Diane Ehrensaft, PhD, does not advocate the elimination of gender but a loosening of its mandates, allowing the boundaries to be blurred. She proposes shedding the gender corset to create room to breathe, room to grow. She shows us that gender is different things for different people, and she makes a compelling case for allowing children and adults to play with gender—without the severe punishments often inflicted on those who are making up the rules of the game they play it. She helps us open our eyes, minds, and hearts so we can see and hear beyond the surface in order to help each child find his or her own truth and flourish.

Let people be and let's support who people are: the proposition is simple, but the road to that goal is fraught with obstacles. *Gender Born, Gender Made* brings to our homes, schools, and clinicians' offices a wealth of ideas and tools that will prove invaluable as we move toward a more empathic, just, and inclusive society.

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## Princesses, Priuses, and Penises

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“Can’t everyone see I’m a girl? I’m a princess with a penis.”



“I’m a boy in the front, and a girl in the back. Kind of a Prius—a hybrid.”



“They got it all wrong. I do not want to be a girl. I just like to dress up.”



Above, three young people—a boy, a girl, and a boy, respectively—describe his or her gender-creative journey through childhood in the twenty-first century. Each of them, in his or her own way, does not accept the binary concept of “Boys will be boys, girls will be girls,” prescribed by and promoted in our culture. Two of them are questioning whether the gender assigned to them at birth is really who they are. The third is questioning the culture’s gender policing of dress-up and cross-gender play. Their queries and explorations are what qualify them as “gender creative.” Their travels will not be easy, and that is why I am writing this book—to carve a path toward gender health for all the children and youth who go against the normative gender grain of our culture.

We can never know the exact moment of conception, but when I think about the birth of this book, I always go back to a particular moment in 1980. It was evening, and the fog and the chill had come in over the Berkeley Hills right through the front door of the warm and usually cozy home where my then three-and-a-half-year-old son attended the preschool that was his beloved home away from home. The directors, two wonderful sisters who couldn’t have been better at getting the finger on the pulse of all that little people need to grow, along with the then love of my son’s life—the clinical psychology graduate student doing an internship at the program—had asked that my husband and I come in for a special meeting. As much as they adored our son and his blissful spirit and creativity, they were worried. “Why?” we asked. Because Jesse repeatedly announced that he wished he were a girl. Therein began a long journey of advocating for our gender-bending little boy. Even in a setting as “free to be you and me” as Berkeley and the San Francisco Bay Area, and even in a preschool as open and progressive as the one he attended, the world was truly not ready to receive a male tutu-wearing porcelain-doll collector who only played with boys who played with girls.

For years I went on to live my life, raising a son and a daughter who both liked dolls and frills, and opening up my clinical practice to children and their families who played outside the binary gender box. I am remembering yet another moment from those times. It is 1984. The doorbell rings. It’s Cassie, one of Jesse’s close friends from down the block, coming to look for Jesse to play. She

known Jesse since they were two, as they both went to that same preschool that worried about Jesse's possible gender disorder. My mother, who is visiting, runs up to Jesse's room when she sees who's at the door. "Jesse, your friend's here. Hurry, take off the clothes." Now, she wasn't asking him to do a striptease. She was engaged in an urgent intervention—getting Jesse to take off his layers of film, pink and rose-colored nightgowns before Cassie saw him in them, nightgowns that were actually cast-offs of my mother's, meant not for him but for his older sister's dress-up box. Jesse's grandmother loved him dearly and was only trying to protect him from social humiliation, believing that his dress-up routines should remain in the privacy of his home, or maybe his room, kind of like masturbation. Jesse's mother (that would be me) had other ideas—that if Jesse wanted to dress up as an ethereal fairy, that was just fine. So back to Cassie. Hopping up the stairs to the second floor two at a time, in she sailed. Jesse had paid not a whit of attention to his grandmother's storm warning. Cassie trotted over to his bedroom, peeked in, and with neither a flinch nor a moment's hesitation, piped up "Oh, hi, Jess. Want to play?" And off they went, Jesse in his layers of chiffon, Cassie in her jeans and a boy's T-shirt. In those five minutes we had enacted a fine moment of three generations making gender: a grandmother who felt queasy about her grandson's cross-gender expressions and only wanted him to be safe and protected, a mother who was spending hours and hours sorting out how to meet her gender-creative son where he needed to be met, and her son and his little friend who gave not a second's thought and couldn't see what the big fuss was about. And not one of us could yet know that Jesse would someday grow up to be a gay man seemingly quite content in his male gender identity.

Now, so many years later, it is I who am the grandmother. I watch my granddaughter in her adamant insistence that she will *not* wear a dress. Pink is her least favorite color in the whole world. In contrast to both her uncle and her mother, she rarely has played with a doll. I try to attend all her softball games and marvel at her grace as a natural jock. And I am now old enough and wise enough, I hope, to know that her own journey in finding her unique gender self is a work in progress that will unfold over many years and with all our support, including from her great-grandmother, who is still alive and well and has definitely come around to being a firm advocate of gender-nonconforming children.

Yet it is not my personal stories that I want to showcase in this book, but rather what I as a developmental and clinical psychologist have set out to learn about the biology, about the developmental milestones, about the intricate choreography between nature and nurture, about our social constructs and our social mores that weave together to create such incredibly unique gender options for every child. The particular children I am interested in are those who transgressively and creatively define themselves as outside the traditional binary boxes of boy/girl and are desperately in need of someone to speak on their behalf. It may be four-year-old Seth who likes to wear dresses to school, but ask him anytime and he'll tell you he's a boy. It may be six-year-old SaraJane who used to be Craig until making it clear over and over again that they all got it wrong—"You may think I'm a boy, but I'm not. I don't feel like a girl. I *am* a girl." It may be seven-year-old Maggie who says, "I'm both, a boy in the front and a girl in the back." Some people like to refer to these children as *gender variant*, but *variant* has a somewhat negative connotation of "other than normal," not too far off from *deviant*. Some people like to place these children on a gender spectrum, with the understanding that

children can slide along this spectrum from one pole to the other (male/female), allowing for incredible variation along the way. But a spectrum is a very two-dimensional, linear concept, and doesn't give full weight to the myriad possibilities in establishing one's true gender identity. So I would like to refer instead to a *gender web*, in which there are intricate pathways in three dimensions—side to side, up and down. This web will have to take into account any particular child's assigned gender, that which appears on the birth certificate; the child's gender expressions—those feelings, behaviors, activities, and attitudes that communicate to both self and other one's presentation of self as either male, female, or other; and the child's core gender identity—the inner sense of self as male, female, or other.

A large number of children will find a fairly good match between their assigned gender, their core gender identity, and their gender expressions. But a fair number, and it seems a number that is steadily increasing, will not. Those are the children who find themselves in my made-up category “gender creative,” a developmental position in which the child transcends the culture's normative definitions of male/female to creatively interweave a sense of gender that comes neither totally from the inside (the body, the psyche), nor totally from the outside (the culture, others' perceptions of the child's gender), but resides somewhere in between.

In this day and age, raising a gender-creative child is still never an easy matter, despite years of hard effort on the part of feminists, gay and transgender activists, and progressive gender specialists to make room for broadened expressions of gender as a healthy rather than pathological way of being. I've never been shocked, but have nonetheless felt chagrined, as I bear witness to the hard road these families travel, watching their children insist on following the directives of their inner desires and wishes in the face of aspersion from a surrounding culture that attempts to impose prescriptions and proscriptions for “appropriate” gender behavior. Most disturbing to me was coming to realize the harm done to these children if they fell into the wrong hands—the hands of my own profession. As a clinical psychologist, I am bound by the oath that dictates the actions of all medical and mental health professionals: Do No Harm. Yet all around me, physicians, psychiatrists, and child therapists are doing just that—in clinics and private practice consultation rooms where parents are advised to take away their little boys' dolls and pink tights or make their little girls grow out their buzz cuts; mothers and fathers are directed to ignore or punish their children's “inappropriate” gender expressions and pay attention to or reward only the “gender-appropriate” ones; and families are sent home to make sure the gender-nonconforming children are redirected to same-sex friendships and to their same-sex parent as the main or only parent to identify with. In such treatment, considered by its critics to be a form of *reparative* or *conversion* (which with a scrambling of a few letters could be read as “coercion”) *therapy*, parents come to learn that until they follow through with this treatment regimen that has as its ultimate goal their child's conforming to binary gender norms and accepting his or her assigned gender, their child will be stuck with the stigma of a psychiatric malady—*gender identity disorder*, as clearly laid out in the mental health bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

Yet, I open the January 2009 issue of *Pediatrics* to learn of a large-scale study by Caitlin Ryan and her team of researchers, which found that young adults whose parents supported their gay and lesbian identities showed good mental health outcomes, whereas those youth who were not supported

had a higher incidence of poor mental outcomes, including depression; suicidal feelings thoughts, attempts; sexual acting out; and drug abuse.<sup>1</sup> Holding those findings in mind, I know, from my own experiences and others', that some gender-creative children are undergoing reparative therapies aimed at "setting them binary" (a variation on "setting them straight"), and they become listless or agitated long for their taken-away favorite toys and clothes, and even literally go hiding in closets to continue playing with the verboten toys or wearing the forbidden clothes. And I think to myself, "We have no more time to spare."

I had first thought that before embarking on this book it would be best to wait until we had more large-scale scientific outcome studies such as Caitlin Ryan's group, now targeted not at gay and lesbian young adults but at gender-nonconforming children and youth. But I felt a pressing urgency to speak out with a call for action right now. More and more children are coming forward and expressing themselves in gender-nonconforming ways at a moment when such children continue to be harmed by outmoded or misguided practices that treat their gender creativity as disease rather than health, and do everything possible to ward off budding homosexuality or transgender identity. Although harmful these practices still dominate the field and are reflected in the continuing reliance on gender identity disorder as a valid assessment of children who go against the grain of gender norms. As a licensed mental health professional, I have tried to take my oath very seriously and I see doing no harm not only as my individual but also my collective responsibility to children and their families. I feel I can no longer wait to share what I've learned from listening to my young patients and from having the opportunity to join with their families in helping their children grow healthy and strong as gender-creative children—some transgender, some gender fluid, some of whom we don't yet know where they will land. So I write this book, perhaps prematurely, understanding that I have so much more to learn—most important, from the children and their parents—and that we and my like-minded colleagues are just beginning to embark on a long project of reexamining what it means to be a gender-healthy boy, girl, or other in the twenty-first century.

Those who either practice or advocate reparative therapies will argue that we already have sufficient scientific evidence to demonstrate that it would be best for children to accept the gender assigned to them at birth, and that treatment by both professionals and parents that is designed to cure children's cross-gender identifications demonstrates good results, including allowing the children to fit into society and protecting those children from potential ostracism and rejection. This would include the clinical research of Drs. Kenneth Zucker and Susan Bradley in Toronto and Dr. Richard Green at UCLA. Others, like myself, question whether those results, in which children learn to accept who others want them to be, are read through a biased lens, do not have adequate long-term outcome studies, are based on a selected population of children, and lack a comparison study measuring the outcomes for gender-nonconforming children whose parents refused, sometimes even fled from, such treatment for their children. In other words, we challenge whether those studies tell the whole or real truth about children's gender health.

As part of that challenge, I would like to offer a new lens, one that casts gender nonconformity in a positive light, in order not to squelch but to facilitate it. It is also a lens that can see clearly the vibrant polyglot of gender-creative children. Looking through this lens, we see children who declare to us, sometimes at a very early age, that the gender they are is not the one they were assigned at birth.

We locate gender-fluid children who slide along a gender spectrum or weave their own intricate individual patterns along the gender web. In both past and present days, we have known the gender-fluid child as the “androgynous” child or the “tomboy,” or, in more pejorative terms, the “sissy boy.” We zoom in on “Gender Priuses.” I am borrowing this from a term coined by Maggie, a seven-year-old gender-nonconforming child I saw for a single consultation. You will recognize her from the opening quotes of this introduction. Maggie wore only boys’ clothes, including boys’ underpants (“Girls’ ones give me wedgies”) and walked through my office door looking like any other gender-normative boy in my practice. But then Maggie swirled around and flaunted a long, blonde, meticulously coifed braid cascading down his/her back. Then we have my own coined term, Gender Taurus. Rather than being a bull on the bottom and a man on the top, Gender Taurus are children who are aware of their genitalia and the gender assignments of those organs, but know that the rest of their torso can speak a different story. So said one assigned-male four-year-old child, Lex—again, at our very first meeting: “You see, I’m a girl on the top and a boy on the bottom.” Just as a footnote, at the following meeting, our second session, Lex announced to me, “Now I’m all girl.” I wondered with Lex whatever happened to the bottom half, the boy half. Lex looked me straight in the eye, and explained, with great aplomb, “Oh, it just walked off, so now I’m all girl. You can call me Lexi.” We may also encounter protogay children, boys and girls who are on their way to declaring their gender identity and first explore and express their nonheterosexual selves through playing at the gender margins in early and middle childhood. Many, but not all, gay men will indeed report a childhood history of going against the norms of “appropriate” gender behavior as children but ultimately growing to embrace the gender assigned to them at birth as they embraced others of that same gender as the objects of their desire. We have the queer youth of today who like to keep people guessing and wonder why we have to categorize by gender at all. And then we have, as one teenaged patient of mine described him/herself: Gender Smoothies—“Just take every part of gender and mix it up and you have me.” All of these children and youth qualify as “gender creative,” if that is defined, as I explained earlier, as living in a space that is neither dictated by the inside nor the outside but resides somewhere in between. All of these children bring together a rich and varied palette of the possibilities of gender uniqueness rather than the old-fashioned strict Dick and Jane gender dichotomy.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH BEYOND THE GENDER BINARY

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**Transgender Children:** Children who declare, sometimes at a very early age, that the gender they are is not the one they were assigned at birth, but the opposite one.

**Gender-Nonconforming Children:** Children who do not abide by the prescribed gender norms of their culture.

**Gender-Fluid Children:** Children who defy the norms of binary gender and either slide along

a gender spectrum or weave their own intricate individual patterns along the gender web.

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**Gender Hybrids:** Children who experience themselves as a combination of girl/boy:

**Type 1: Gender Prius:** A half-and-half (boy/girl) gender

**Type 2: Gender Taurus:** Girl (boy) on top, boy (girl) on the bottom

**Gender Smoothies:** Children and youth who take all aspects of gender, mix them up, and come up with a blended sense of gender that is “me.”

**Gender-Queer Youth:** Children and youth who reject binary gender categories altogether and focus on establishing their own unique gender identity, neither male nor female.

**Protogay Children:** Children who play along the margins of gender in the context of their journey toward a gay identity.

**Prototransgender Youth:** Youth who first declare themselves as gay or lesbian and then discover, often in late adolescence or early adulthood, that they are actually transgender, and had used sexual identity as a stepping-stone toward their transgender true gender self.

In the spirit of creating this new lens, I would like to devote *Gender Born, Gender Made* to helping families and professionals untangle gender and learn to identify each child’s unique gender web. They listen to the children and help them be the most authentic people they can be in their gender identity and expression. The princess with a penis is very different from the girl-boy Prius who is very different from the dress-up boy who is different from the Gender Smoothie. If we are not able to make these distinctions and if we lump all the gender-creative children together, we may simply create new ill-fitting boxes of gender-nonconforming children and unwittingly promote unhealthy if not dire outcomes for everyone who deserves to be recognized as his or her unique gender self.

The two-spirits, or third or fourth genders, of Native American culture do not live as either boys or girls, men or women, but somewhere in between, having the spirit of both the male and female within them. They have often been healers, artists, mediators, and leaders, recognized among their people for their flexibility and expanded perspectives. They signify the postmodern concept of gender fluidity, except they go back to premodern times. The two-spirits show up early in childhood—“It is natural. They were born that way. It is their nature.” In the words of Osh-Tisch, a third-gender member of the Crow tribe, “That is my road. . . . I have done it ever since I remember because I wanted to do it.”<sup>2</sup> Since it was in the child’s nature, Native American parents knew not to try to change the child. Instead, they were to allow the child to either cross genders or live as both.

This is exactly the model that informs my work with gender-nonconforming children and the



families. The difference is that, unlike Native American tribal culture, we do not live in a society that supports our two-spirited children. Instead, we want to classify them as male or female, based purely on the sex assigned to them at birth. Like the white man who decimated the Indian nations and in the process either murdered or forced the third- and fourth-gender individuals to live in accordance with binary gender norms, there are those today who would wish to see gender-nonconforming people totally eradicated. There are mental health professionals whose aim is to make gender-nonconforming children gender normative—that is, to force them to accept the gender associated with their genitalia rather than with what their mind and heart tell them.

The model of ensuring children’s healthy growth that I will present in this book does not have that aim. Instead, it follows the child’s lead and goes where the child takes us. It assumes that the child most likely comes to us with his or her gender creativity intact, rather than being shaped after birth by hapless parents who have some gender-skewed agenda or are incapable of setting appropriate limits with their children and providing proper gender guidance. My greatest hope is that this model will prove reparative of the harm heretofore and currently done to gender-nonconforming children by our dominant culture. In presenting this model to you, I also hope it will serve as a tribute to all of the parents who have turned to community and professional organizations and individuals that honor and foster their child’s unique gender self, understanding that it is located somewhere within a beautifully spun web rather than within one of two stark boxes. Such parents recognize, accept, and affirm their children, rather than trying to bend their twigs or break their spirit. Unfortunately, they, like the Native American elders who accept and embrace two-spirit or third- and fourth-gender members among their communities, are not looked at kindly by the outside world—in particular, by members of the professions that work with children and youth. My son Jesse’s preschool directors who were worried about Jesse’s “gender dysphoria” were not pleased that we were not. Drs. Ken Zucker and Susan Bradley, in their book *Gender Identity Disorder and Psychosexual Problems in Children and Adolescents*, found troubling the decision of two parents *not* to have their son, Ben, “treated” at the Child and Adolescent Gender Identity Clinic in Toronto, as it was clear to them that treatment with the set goal of helping Ben be happier with being a boy was absolutely warranted. They assured readers:

Although it is important to be aware of parental ambivalence about the assessment process, such ambivalence is not necessarily an indication that parents will reject a recommendation for treatment when it is warranted. We have had experience with a number of other parents who chose to pursue therapy, despite the intense anxiety activated by the assessment process.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of such confusion, disapproval, and outright opposition, it is a challenging, confusing, and brave journey that parents embark on when gender-creative children appear on the family scene. I often wonder what happened to Ben; but in the meantime, if his parents might possibly be reading this book, I would like to thank them for having the wisdom, at least a decade and a half ago, which so easily came to our Native American elders but is so grossly denied or misapprehended when a North American family takes their child in their arms and flees from those who would potentially harm them.

child in the name of mental health. Rather than being blamed, which is the wont of my profession when it comes to parents, Ben's father and mother should be applauded for their protective actions in the name of their son.

## OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

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This book will explore the developmental unfolding, the psychological experiences, the needs and supports, the relationship between the child and the family, and the social milieu of the gender-creative child, with recommendations of steps to be taken to ensure not just the health of this child but the health of each and every one of our children. Obviously, nonconformity can only exist in relation to conformity, so in that way the gender-nonconforming child is closely tied to the gender-conforming child. As long as gender continues to be a defining feature of identity in our culture, every single one of our sons and daughters, whether conforming or not, will need to spin his or her unique gender web.

Before I give you a short preview, I would like to take a moment to remind you that we are talking not about sexuality, but about gender. The two are certainly intertwined but are often confused for each other. Our sexuality and our sexual identity have to do with many things, but at their center is the object of desire—do we desire people who are the same or opposite gender as us, people of another gender, people of fluidly defined gender, people who are transgender, people of no declared gender? Our gender identity and expression, on the other hand, have to do with how we incorporate our own culture's definitions about being male or female with our own internal preferences, desires, and recognition of who we are as a male, a female, a third gender, a fourth gender, and so on. As we reach adulthood, we can think of it this way: Our sexual identity has to do with who we get into bed *with*; our gender identity has to do with who we get into bed *as*. A transgender individual can be gay or straight. A gay person can be gender conforming or gender nonconforming. And so forth. I hope that this differentiation between gender and sexual identity will serve as a helpful compass to hold in hand as we unfold and follow the map of the gender-creative child's journey through childhood.

The first two chapters will pick up on the hard journey ahead, looking at the culture of homophobia and transphobia and our cultural assumptions about gender and gender development that will have to be unlearned to make room for the gender-creative child and family. I will then turn to the concept of the *true gender self*, which is the core of gender identity, to be differentiated from the *false gender self*—the accommodations a child makes to either please or fit in with the surrounding culture and which can sometimes shield the true gender self. The true gender self is presented as the antidote to gender identity disorder, a concept of pathology that thwarts rather than fertilizes the growth of the true gender self. We will be exploring the answer to the question, "Where does gender nonconformity come from and where does it go?" To that end, we will put the concept of gender creativity in a developmental perspective, in order to understand that these are children who are blessed with the ability to hold on to the concept that we all had one time in our lives that we were free to be anything.

we wanted—boy, girl, maybe both. We will zero in on the complexities of raising a gender-creative child who “just comes to us” that way, and follow the trajectory of the child who shapes the parent and the parent in turn shapes the child, looking at the joys but also the conflicts and anxieties experienced by such children, their parents, and their siblings.

One particular complexity is that a child is a moving target and gender development is a lifelong process—so parents and professionals alike will have to train themselves both to listen carefully to the child and to live comfortably in a state of not knowing exactly where the child is ultimately headed, a task so challenging that it warrants a chapter in itself. We will consider the dangers when parents cannot listen and wait, and instead feel compelled to either bend a child’s gender twig or catapult the child into a clearly defined gender category that might not be his or her true one, sometimes under the auspices of a mental health professional’s advice. This will lead to a discussion of the particular challenges of puberty and adolescence for both the child and the parents of a gender-creative child, including the decision, with the help of enlightened professionals, to use puberty-delaying hormone blockers or for a youth to be administered cross-hormone therapy or even sex reassignment surgery during his or her adolescent years, circling back to the concept of the true gender self. We will get a lived profile of the protogay child, the gender-fluid child, and the transgender child, to provide a window into that vibrant polyglot of the cohort of gender-creative children. Finally, I will present the model of relational true-gender-self therapy to give us an idea of the ways in which a therapy office can provide a haven for the gender-nonconforming child to thrive and grow, in contrast to a hell in which the dollhouses are boarded up and their budding creativity squelched.

Throughout all the chapters, we will have to constantly hold in mind that to raise a gender-creative healthy child takes an entire village. It will take parents, it will take mental health and health professionals, it will take schools, it will take community educators and advocates, it will take lawmakers and judges, it will take the highest echelons of our government to make sure these children and their families can truly make a go of it. So let us begin with some realities about the village.

## Relearning Gender

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If my son, God forbid, if my son put on a pair of high heels, I would probably hit him with one of my shoes. I would throw a shoe at him. Because, you know what? Boys don't wear high heels. And in my house, they definitely don't wear high heels. . . . You got a boy saying, "I wanna wear dresses." I'm going to look at him and go, "You know what? You're a little idiot! You little dumbass! Look, you are a boy! Boys don't wear dresses."

—ARNIE STATES, KRXQ RADIO HOST, MAY 28, 2009



They are freaks. They are abnormal. Not because they're girls trapped in boys' bodies but because they have a mental disorder that needs to be somehow gotten out of them.

—ROB WILLIAMS, KRXQ RADIO HOST, MAY 28, 2009



I only wish that these were the ignorant remarks of two men whistling in the wind. Unfortunately, they were broadcast over the airwaves and memorialized in an Internet recording for any and all around the world to hear. Ironically, just as I sat down to write this chapter, I received an e-mail with a call to action, citing these two radio announcers' comments and asking people to send a letter of protest to the head of the radio station, which I immediately did. (Footnote: As a result of a collective public outcry—mine and others—the show was temporarily taken off the air.) But the fact that these vitriolic and bigoted words were not only said publicly but broadcast globally to the masses is a clear reminder of the road of thorns that is still before us as we struggle to substitute a bed of roses for our gender-creative children.

It is not just the transphobic comments of misinformed rabblers that ring in our ears. Dr. Phil, the renowned psychologist of media fame, has echoed these negative sentiments, albeit in milder, kinder tones. I am referring to a televised program on gender confusion that aired in January 2009. In no uncertain terms and with firm authority, Dr. Phil told a mother of a five-year-old, gender-fluid, Barbie-loving, dress-coveting little boy: "Direct your son in an unconfusing way. Don't buy him Barbie dolls or girls' clothes. You don't want to do things that seem to support the confusion at this stage of the game. . . . Take the girl things away, and buy him boy toys." I watched in fascination as Dr. Phil touted his wares without a grain of humility, and I questioned the extent of his training as a child gender specialist. I said to myself: "Okay, Dr. Phil. Do you have a son? Do you have a 'gender-traditional' son—a 'boy's boy'? Let's say you do. Imagine him at age five. Imagine that his favorite toy was his G.I. Joe army tank and his favorite outfit was his Incredible Hulk T-shirt, baseball jacket, and camouflage pants, finished off with Spiderman shoes. Imagine one day you go into his room and announce—'Okay, buddy, all the tanks have to go, and the trucks and the cars, too. They're just no

appropriate—they're making you too macho. From now on, Barbie dolls. And the T-shirt, we're trading it in for a pink My Little Mermaid rhinestone-studded tunic with sparkles.' You wonder why he's sobbing as you pack away all his favorite boy things, but you reassure him, 'Don't worry. You'll get over it. We know what's best for you.' Now let's go one step further. Imagine it was you who was that five-year-old G.I. Joe boy. How would you have felt?"

In such exercises of imagination I hope we can begin to grasp the oppressive culture that bears down on our gender-creative children when their parents, under the tutelage of self-declared experts, are instructed to take away their favorite toys, favorite clothes, and favorite colors, and then to hear their children grin and bear it. As long as popular media continues to run the gamut from horrible incendiary remarks to misinformed professional advice, the parents of gender-creative children will have to confront and transcend a consistent, damning message: "Your child is sick." And the stakes are high as long as we do not pull out the stops to replace that message with a new and correct one: "Your child is healthy."

## ONGOING PREJUDICE

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In the first years of the new millennium, as I began speaking publicly on the topic of gender-nonconforming children and their parents, I wrote the following as the introduction to one of my talks:

At age fourteen, Eddie Araujo of Newark, California, had come out and began living as a young woman. On October 3, 2002, Eddie, now seventeen and now also known as Gwen, was strangled and beaten to death by three young men after appearing at a party in women's clothing.<sup>4</sup> His death is being considered a hate crime. On October 19, 2002, *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported this statement from his mother, thirty-eight-year-old Sylvia Guerrero: "His tombstone will say Gwen. This kid was a great kid, and he suffered so much. He's my Gwen, and he's beautiful. I just wish I could have saved him from this."<sup>5</sup> I would like to dedicate my talk today to Eddie Araujo and his mother, Sylvia Guerrero, in memory of a boy who died for having the courage to go against the grain and in tribute to a mother who supported him in his journey. I am sharing my thoughts with you today as my small contribution to averting further tragedies such as this. For until we enlighten ourselves about both the experience of growing up against the grain of prescribed gender norms and the challenges for the parents of those children, and until we then inform our actions accordingly, there are more children who will be beaten.

With a heavy heart, I realized some years later that my words rang hollow in the halls of recent history. More children have been beaten, and killed. By 2008, the picture of a fifteen-year-old boy, Larry King, had made the front page or cover of almost every major U.S. newspaper and news magazine, not because he was a spelling bee champion or child prodigy, but because he had been murdered by a classmate. Larry was in junior high school in Oxnard, California. With the support of the group home in which he was then living, Larry came out publicly as gay. He began wearing

makeup, jewelry, and high-heeled boots to school. He expressed interest in another boy at the school. This made the other boy feel uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that he brought a gun to school and shot Larry in the head as he sat in his computer class. A few days later, Larry died. Had he lived, he might have explored further whether he was gay or transgender, or maybe he might have spun some other unique gender web. Tragically, Larry will never get that chance.

To be gender nonconforming is to risk being killed, but on a daily basis it more likely means being harassed, confused, and misunderstood in the community or maltreated by mental health professionals who traditionally have wanted to pathologize and fix, rather than explore and support the gender-creative children who come to them. There is no doubt that these children are among the ranks of minority individuals in our society who must anticipate bigotry and antipathy from those who either do not understand, are ill-informed, govern their thinking with myth rather than reality, or make from their own insecurities and internalized prejudices that can go back to their earliest childhood project hatred onto those who are so different from themselves. At the same time, gender-creative children diverge from almost all other minority children in that they have an additional mark against them: They may face aspersion from their very own family, loved ones who are supposed to be their protectors. Unlike black parents, for example, who do their best to instill racial pride in and watch the backs of their children as they attempt to negotiate a racist world, some parents of gender-bending or gay children may feel distressed or disgusted by their own offspring and wonder why they are being punished with such “perversion.” By adolescence, these youth may find themselves thrown out on the streets by their own family—poor, homeless, and socially orphaned. Or they themselves may have fled from the family, foster care, or group home where they have been harassed and bullied because of their gender presentation. Presumably, if you are reading this book, you are not among those rejecting people, but we can still assume that your child or any gender-nonconforming child you know or are working with has a caregiver, grandparent, aunt, uncle, maybe even a sibling who cannot accept his or her gender presentation. So not only the harm outside the family but the harm in the very inside of the family needs tending.

The good news in all of this is that neither culture, family, nor individuals are static, so we are not talking about immovable forces but works in progress on every front when we pose the question: What will it take to pave the road to healthy development for all gender-bending children?

The first thing it will take is to unlearn what we have been taught about gender and its development.

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL TODAY?

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I recall a moment from my graduate school career at the University of Michigan in the late 1960s. We were studying gender development. Before us was a grainy black-and-white film of children in white lace dresses flitting through the grass. The children were all little boys, presumably forced by their parents, particularly their overly enmeshed mothers, to become pathologically and perverse

feminized, the extreme of the “sissy boy.” We were taught that these boys needed help, and the mothers, a good talking to—accompanied by intensive psychoanalysis. With some room for titillation it was nonetheless impressed upon us that we were looking at a very serious childhood disorder.

Now let’s fast-forward to 2009. I am participating in a panel titled “Lesbian, Gay, Transgender Youth: Family Approaches,” at the American Psychiatric Association’s annual convention. I am seated, facing the audience, straining my neck to see the PowerPoint presentation of one of my copresenters. There I see photographs from the most recent annual weekend family get-together of the Outreach Program for Children with Gender Variant Behaviors and Their Families. The children on screen are participating in a fashion show. It is no longer the era of boys in white lace dresses. The children are decked out in high-heeled boots, glitter, boas, jewelry, wigs, makeup, and more. It is hard to tell any of the children’s assigned gender at birth. My copresenters are not talking pathology; they are teaching the audience about the joy and delight that ensued when these gender-creative children found a safe haven in which to truly express themselves. I sat there smiling, honored to be invited to share panel time with Catherine Tuerk and Edgardo Menvielle, the founders of the outreach program. These pictures spoke a thousand words. I was deeply moved by the aliveness on the faces of the children looking into the camera. Actually, as I think back, those children running across the law some half century earlier on that grainy movie screen looked no less pleased with themselves. It was we, the audience, who were instructed to be disturbed.

There is much I had to unlearn to get from my graduate program to my place on the podium at that convention, where I spoke on the importance of the gender-nonconforming child’s finding his or her authentic gender self and on the role of the parent in either supporting or impeding that journey. The depth of my reprogramming to reach an enlightened point B from that rigid point A is reflected in the words of Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper, authors of *The Transgender Child*:

Today, gender can no longer really be considered a two-option category. That form of thinking is outdated. It can be compared to trying to view the world in distinct racial categories without an understanding that an ever-growing percentage of the population is beautifully multi-ethnic. Gender is very similar. Most of us were taught, and most firmly adhere to, the concept that there are only two distinct categories of gender, male and female.<sup>6</sup>

Most developmental psychologists, mental health professionals, and medical providers of my and earlier generations were taught even more than that during our training. We learned that the two distinct categories of gender were the bellwether of normality—if you clearly placed yourself in one or the other box, based on the gender stamped on your birth certificate, you were normal. Otherwise you were an aberration. So, to fully give children today the space for gender creativity, there is much complex unlearning and relearning to do—about development, psychology, and health.

Those of us who are professionals in the field will have to unlearn our theories of gender development that taught us that, by age five or six, healthy children are totally secure in their gender identity, based on the sex assigned to them at birth, and will also be set in their (hetero) sexual orientation. Whether we were trained in psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, or developmental psychology, the overarching theme was the same. At birth, all children were assigned a sex, male or female, based on what the doctor saw between their legs. A few babies had the misfortune of being

born with ambiguous genitalia, and these children would need to be “fixed” and assigned a singular gender, male or female, as soon as possible. The urgency stemmed from the belief that after the first two years of life, it would be hard, if not impossible, to change an intersex (known then as hermaphrodite) child’s, or for that matter any child’s, “core gender identity,” which was defined as the sense of self being either male or female, based on sex assignment at birth, which in turn is based on genitalia and X and Y chromosomes. This identity—“I am boy” or “I am girl”—appeared to be firmly established and immutable by the time a child was eighteen to twenty-four months, facilitated or actually established by the treatment of the child as male or female by those caring for or relating to the child. Whereas toddlers may have little understanding of what it *means* to be male or female and no comprehension that this is a permanent status in life based on having either a male or female body, they nonetheless are now able to declare their gender—to themselves and to the world.

After children establish their core gender identity, they enter their preschool years, when they will be socialized in the ways of male and female that are normative in their culture. This is when they start their education in what it means to be male and female, known in my training years as *sex role socialization*. Learning to take on the accoutrements of boy or girl is dependent on the presence of both older males and older females who will be role models and reinforcers of “gender-appropriate” behaviors and will also serve as emotional objects of identification in which children will want to be just like their same-sex parent or caregiver. The gender notion is that likes will attract likes in terms of how to be, and that opposites will attract opposites in terms of whom to be with. So boys will become men who love women, and girls will become women who love men. Particularly in the psychoanalytic account, this is no easy accomplishment but follows a turbulent preschool period known as the Oedipal stage, in which girls fall in love with their father and imagine having a baby with him, boys worry about losing their penis and facing retaliation from their father for falling in love and attempting to steal away their father’s wife, and little girls have to give up on having a penis and settle for having a baby. In a variation on that theme, boys have to mourn that they will never be able to have babies themselves and girls will grow to feel sorry for boys who have no aperture to their insides but are all closed up and barren. But the central theme remains the same: By the time boys and girls enter grade school, it will be clear that all children are either male or female and that there are no backsies on that; they will know how to behave as that male or female; and they will accept that someday they will find a wife or husband and have a fulfilled heterosexual life with their own marriage and babies, as modeled on their mom and dad’s.

This unfolding drama is predicated on a model of men, women, and babies as the universal family type, which we know no longer to be true, and posits that all children have three developmental gender tasks: (1) establishing a core gender identity as either male or female (by two years of age); (2) learning what it means to be male or female and learning that it is a permanent fixture of who they are (known as *gender permanence* and set as an accomplishment of the preschool years); and (3) establishing their sexual orientation and object of sexual desire.

In this model, if a five- or six-year-old boy is still unclear about whether he is male or female, if a seven-year-old girl asserts that her real name is Samuel and she’s always been a boy, if a four-year-old’s love affair with a same-sex parent never fades and mutates into persistent same-sex crushes and “effeminate” behavior in the fourth grade, you’ve got trouble on your hands. Something went awry



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