Parents keep child's gender secret

thestar.com/life/parent/2011/05/21/parents_keep_childs_gender_secret.html

5/20/2011

“So it’s a boy, right?” a neighbour calls out as Kathy Witterick walks by, her four month old baby, Storm, strapped to her chest in a carrier.

Each week the woman asks the same question about the baby with the squishy cheeks and feathery blond hair.

Witterick smiles, opens her arms wide, comments on the sunny spring day, and keeps walking.

She’s used to it. The neighbours know Witterick and her husband, David Stocker, are raising a genderless baby. But they don’t pretend to understand it.

While there’s nothing ambiguous about Storm’s genitalia, they aren’t telling anyone whether their third child is a boy or a girl.

The only people who know are Storm’s brothers, Jazz, 5, and Kio, 2, a close family friend and the two midwives who helped deliver the baby in a birthing pool at their Toronto home on New Year’s Day.

“When the baby comes out, even the people who love you the most and know you so intimately, the first question they ask is, ‘Is it a girl or a boy?’” says Witterick, bouncing Storm, dressed in a red-fleece jumper, on her lap at the kitchen table.

“If you really want to get to know someone, you don’t ask what’s between their legs,” says Stocker.

When Storm was born, the couple sent an email to friends and family: “We've decided not to share Storm's sex for now — a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation, a stand up to what the world could become in Storm's lifetime (a more progressive place? ...).”

Their announcement was met with stony silence. Then the deluge of criticisms began. Not just about Storm, but about how they were parenting their other two children.

The grandparents were supportive, but resented explaining the gender-free baby to friends and co-workers. They worried the children would be ridiculed. Friends said they were imposing their political and ideological values on a newborn. Most of all, people said they were setting their kids up for a life of bullying in a world that can be cruel to outsiders.

Witterick and Stocker believe they are giving their children the freedom to choose who they want to be, unconstrained by social norms about males and females. Some say their choice is alienating.

In an age where helicopter parents hover nervously over their kids micromanaging their lives, and tiger moms ferociously push their progeny to get into Harvard, Stocker, 39, and Witterick, 38, believe kids can make meaningful decisions for themselves from a very early age.

“What we noticed is that parents make so many choices for their children. It’s obnoxious,” says Stocker.

Jazz and Kio have picked out their own clothes in the boys and girls sections of stores since they were 18 months old. Just this week, Jazz unearthed a pink dress at Value Village, which he loves because it “really poofs out at the bottom. It feels so nice.” The boys decide whether to cut their hair or let it grow.

Like all mothers and fathers, Witterick and Stocker struggle with parenting decisions. The boys are encouraged to challenge how they’re expected to look and act based on their sex.

“We thought that if we delayed sharing that information, in this case hopefully, we might knock off a couple million of those messages by the time that Storm decides Storm would like to share,” says Witterick.

They don’t want to isolate their kids from the world, but, when it’s meaningful, talk about gender.

This past winter, the family took a vacation to Cuba with Witterick’s parents. Since they weren’t fluent in Spanish, they flipped a coin at the airport to decide what to tell people. It landed on heads, so for the next week, everyone who asked was told Storm was a boy. The language changed immediately. “What a big, strong boy,” people said.

The moment a child’s sex is announced, so begins the parade of pink and barrage of blue. Tutus and toy trucks aren’t far behind. The couple says it only intensifies with age.

“In fact, in not telling the gender of my precious baby, I am saying to the world, ‘Please can you just let Storm discover for him/herself what s (he) wants to be?!.” Witterick writes in an email.

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Stocker teaches at City View Alternative, a tiny school west of Dufferin Grove Park, with four teachers and about 60 Grade 7 and 8 students whose lessons are framed by social-justice issues around class, race and gender.

When Kio was a baby, the family travelled through the mountains of Mexico, speaking with the Zapatistas, a revolutionary group who shun mainstream politics as corrupt and demand greater indigenous rights. In 1994, about 150 people died in violent clashes with the Mexican military, but the leftist movement has been largely peaceful since.

Last year, they spent two weeks in Cuba, living with local families and learning about the revolution. Witterick has worked in violence prevention, giving workshops to teachers. These days, she volunteers, offering breastfeeding support. At the moment, she is a full-time mom.

Both come from liberal families. Stocker grew up listening to *Free to Be ... You and Me*, a 1972 record with a central message of gender neutrality. Witterick remembers her brother mucking around with gender as a teen in the ’80s, wearing lipstick and carrying handbags like David Bowie and Mick Jagger.

The family lives in a cream-coloured two-storey brick home in the city’s Junction Triangle neighbourhood. Their front porch is crammed with bicycles, including Kio’s pink and purple tricycle. Inside, it’s organized clutter. The children's arts and crafts projects are stacked in the bookcases, maps hang on the walls and furniture is well-used and of a certain vintage.

Upstairs they co-sleep curled up on two mattresses pushed together on the floor of the master bedroom, under a heap of mismatched pillows and blankets. During the day, the kids build forts with the pillows and pretend to walk a tightrope between the mattresses.

On a recent Tuesday, the boys finish making paper animal puppets and a handmade sign to celebrate their dad’s birthday. “I love to do laundry with dad,” reads one message. They nuzzle Storm, splayed out on the floor. The baby squeals with delight.

Witterick practices unschooling, an offshoot of home-schooling centred on the belief that learning should be driven by a child’s curiosity. There are no report cards, no textbooks and no tests. For unschoolers, learning is about exploring and asking questions, “not something that happens by rote from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays in a building with a group of same-age people, planned, implemented and assessed by someone else,” says Witterick. The fringe movement is growing. An unschooling conference in Toronto drew dozens of families last fall.

The kids have a lot of say in how their day unfolds. They decide if they want to squish through the mud, chase garter

snakes in the park or bake cupcakes.

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Jazz — soft-spoken, with a slight frame and curious brown eyes — keeps his hair long, preferring to wear it in three braids, two in the front and one in the back, even though both his parents have close-cropped hair. His favourite colour is pink, although his parents don't own a piece of pink clothing between them. He loves to paint his fingernails and wears a sparkly pink stud in one ear, despite the fact his parents wear no nail polish or jewelry.

Kio keeps his curly blond hair just below his chin. The 2-year-old loves purple, although he's happiest in any kind of pyjama pants.

"As a result, Jazz and now Kio are almost exclusively assumed to be girls," says Stocker, adding he and Witterick don't out them. It's the boys' choice whether they want to offer a correction.

On a recent trip to High Park, Jazz, wearing pink shorts, patterned pink socks and brightly coloured elastics on his braids, runs and skips across the street.

"That's a princess!" says a smiling crossing guard, ushering the little boy along. "And that's a princess, too," she says again, pointing at Kio with her big red sign.

Jazz doesn't mind. One of his favourite books is *10,000 Dresses*, the story of a boy who loves to dress up. But he doesn't like being called a girl. Recently, he asked his mom to write a note on his application to the High Park Nature Centre because he likes the group leaders and wants them to know he's a boy.

Jazz was old enough for school last September, but chose to stay home. "When we would go and visit programs, people — children and adults — would immediately react with Jazz over his gender," says Witterick, adding the conversation would gravitate to his choice of pink or his hairstyle.

That's mostly why he doesn't want to go to school. When asked if it upsets him, he nods, but doesn't say more.

Instead he grabs a handmade portfolio filled with his drawings and poems. In its pages is a booklet written under his pseudonym, the "Gender Explorer." In purple and pink lettering, adorned with butterflies, it reads: "Help girls do boy things. Help boys do girl things. Let your kid be whoever they are!"

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Storm was named after whipped winds and dark rain clouds, because they are beautiful and transformative.

"When I was pregnant, it was really this intense time around Jazz having experiences with gender and I was feeling like I needed some good parenting skills to support him through that," says Witterick.

It began as a offhand remark. "Hey, what if we just didn't tell?" And then Stocker found a book in his school library called *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* by Lois Gould. The book, published in 1978, is about raising not a boy or a girl, but X. There's a happy ending here. Little X — who loved to play football and weave baskets — faces the taunting head on, proving that X is the most well-adjusted child ever examined by "an impartial team of Xperts."

"It became so compelling it was almost like, How could we not?" says Witterick.

There are days when their decisions are tiring, shackling even. "We spend more time than we should providing explanations for why we do things this way," says Witterick. "I regret that (Jazz) has to discuss his gender before people ask him meaningful questions about what he does and sees in this world, but I don't think I am responsible for that — the culture that narrowly defines what he should do, wear and look like is."

Longtime friend Ayal Dinner, 35, a father two young boys, was surprised to hear the couple's announcement when

Storm was born, but is supportive.

“I think it’s amazing that they’re willing to take on challenging people in this way,” says Dinner. “While they are political and ideological about these things, they’re also really thinking about what it means and struggling with it as they go along.”

Dinner understands why people may find it extreme. “Although I can see the criticism of ‘This is going to be hard on my kid,’ it’s great to say, ‘I love my kid for whoever they are.’”

On a recent trip to Hamilton, Jazz was out of earshot when family friend Denise Hansen overheard two little girls at the park say they didn’t want to play with a “girl-boy.” Then, there was the time a saleswoman at a second-hand shop refused to sell him a pink feather boa. “Surely you won't buy it for him — he's a boy!” said the woman. Shocked, and not wanting to upset Jazz, Witterick left the store.

Parents talk about the moment they realize they would throw themselves in front of a speeding truck to save their child from harm, yet battle the instinct to overprotect. They want to encourage independence. They hope people won’t be mean. They pray they aren’t bullied. No parent would ever wish that for their child.

On a night after she watched her husband of 11 years and the boys play with sparklers after dark, Witterick, in a reflective mood, writes to say we are all mocked at some point for the way we look, the way we dress and the way we think.

“When faced with inevitable judgment by others, which child stands tall (and sticks up for others) — the one facing teasing despite desperately trying to fit in, or the one with a strong sense of self and at least two 'go-to' adults who love them unconditionally? Well, I guess you know which one we choose.”

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Diane Ehrensaft is a California-based psychologist and mother of Jesse, a “girlyboy” who turned his trucks into cradles and preferred porcelain dolls over soldiers when he was a child. Her newly published book, *Gender Born, Gender Made*, is a guide for parents of nonconforming kids.

She believes parents should support gender-creative children, which includes the transgendered, who feel born in the wrong bodies, and gender hybrids, who feel they are part girl and part boy. Then there are gender “smoothies,” who have a blended sense of gender that is purely “them.”

Ehrensaft believes there is something innate about gender, and points to the ’70s, when parents experimented by giving dolls to boys and trucks to girls.

“It only worked up to a certain extent. Some girls never played with the trucks, some boys weren’t interested in ballet ... It was a humbling experiment for us because we learned we don’t have the control that we thought we did.”

But she worries by not divulging Storm’s sex, the parents are denying the child a way to position himself or herself in a world where you are either male, female or in between. In effect they have created another category: Other than other. And that could marginalize the child.

“I believe that it puts restrictions on this particular baby so that in this culture this baby will be a singular person who is not being given an opportunity to find their true gender self, based on also what’s inside them.”

Ehrensaft gets the “What the heck?!” reaction people may have when they hear about Storm. “I think it probably makes people feel played with to have that information withheld from them.”

While she accepts and supports Jazz’s freedom “to be who he is,” she’s concerned about asking two small boys to keep a secret about the baby of the family. “For very young children, just in their brains, they’re not ready to do the

kind of sophisticated discernment we do about when a secret is necessary."

Jazz says it's not difficult. He usually just calls the baby Storm.

Dr. Ken Zucker, considered a world expert on gender identity and head of the gender identity service for children at Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, calls this a "social experiment of nurture." The broader question, he says, is how much influence parents have on their kids. If Ehrensaft leans toward nature, Zucker puts more emphasis on nurture. Even when parents don't make a choice, that's still a choice, and one that can impact the children.

When asked what psychological harm, if any, could come from keeping the sex of a child secret, Zucker said: "One will find out."

The couple plan to keep Storm's sex a secret as long as Storm, Kio and Jazz are comfortable with it. In the meantime, philosophy and reality continue to collide.

Out with the kids all day, Witterick doesn't have the time or the will to hide in a closet every time she changes Storm's diaper. "If (people) want to peek, that's their journey," she says.

There are questions about which bathroom Storm will use, but that is a couple of years off. Then there is the "tyranny of pronouns," as they call it. They considered referring to Storm as "Z". Witterick now calls the baby she, imagining the "s" in brackets.

For the moment, it feels right.

"Everyone keeps asking us, 'When will this end?'" says Witterick. "And we always turn the question back. Yeah, when will this end? When will we live in a world where people can make choices to be whoever they are?"