

THE LABORATORY

An interview with Diane Ehrensaft, author of Gender Born, Gender Made

Posted on [January 11, 2012](#) by [The Experiment](#)

Diane Ehrensaft will be speaking in New York this evening at 7pm at [Bluestockings Bookstore](#). Visit the [event page](#) for more information.

Q. Why did you write this book?

Gender Born, Gender Made author Diane Ehrensaft

A. Because grave harm is being done to children who go against the gender grain and I thought I could share what I've learned that would stop this harm and replace it with good practices to help gender-nonconforming children grow up strong and healthy. I also wanted to offer information and support to the parents who are raising the children, as it is a complicated and sometimes confusing road to travel.

Q. Isn't it the parents who make children this way?

A. Parents, of course, play a vital role in shaping their children and teaching them what is appropriate and inappropriate, but when it comes to gender-nonconforming children, the evidence and my own clinical experience tell me that in the vast majority of cases these children just show up, sometimes as early as the first year of life, and it is the parents' work to figure out how to meet up with their gender-nonconforming child.

Q. Won't most children outgrow being gender nonconforming and grow up to be gender normative?

A. Some will, but most won't, unless those around them force them to suppress their authentic gender selves.

Q. So how do you know which are which?

A. You listen to the children. Given the space, they will tell you. You also grow to understand that establishing an authentic gender self is a journey that may unfold and change over time. You get help from a trained professional if you are confused and would like someone to think about it with you. The most important thing is to sort out how your child is expressing him or herself now and what s/he needs to feel expansive and good about his or her gender identity and gender behaviors.

Q. But shouldn't you just get children to accept the bodies they were born with?

A. Only if you think that's what dictates a child's sense of self as a boy or girl. For a majority of children, there is a match between what's on the birth certificate, and what's in their own mind, but there are a

number of children who insist that everyone has it wrong—they are the opposite gender from the one assigned to them at birth.

Q. So what should we do with those children?

A. Allow them to establish their own affirmed gender, not the one we assigned, but the one they tell us they are. To do this, it will help us remember that our gender identities are more located between our ears than between our legs. Also, it is not for us to tell them, but for them to tell us who they are.

Q. You write about a “gender web.” What is that?

A. Some people believe that we all belong in a gender box—boys in the male box, girls in the female box. Those who believe in greater gender freedom for all people talk about a gender spectrum—like the color spectrum, there are an infinite number of ways to combine notions of male and female and other to create a unique gender identity. I like to think more about a gender web, a three dimensional construction that weaves together nature, nurture, and culture to give each person a unique gender web. Like fingerprints, no two people’s will be the same.

Q. And what about this idea of a true gender self?

A. That comes right out of the gender web. The true gender self is the sense of ourselves from deep inside about the gender that feels right and that feels like it fits us best. It may be influenced but not dictated by the gender listed on our birth certificate. It is how we know ourselves, and the very first kernel of that may be there from birth. There is also the false gender self—that’s the gender face we put on to the world, usually because we feel that’s what they expect from us. In the best of all possible worlds for our children, the true gender self will prevail over the false gender self, and if doesn’t, we may have a very unhappy child.

Q. So what does the true and false gender self have to do with this idea of the gender creative child?

A. Gender creativity is the thread that weaves together the gender web. It brings together the world out there and the feelings inside to come up with a gender self. The gender creative child is the child who slips out of the gender boxes and finds new ways to affirm a gender self—be it as a transgender, gender fluid, or gender nonconforming little person.

Q. In a previous book, *Spoiling Childhood*, you wrote that parents are too lenient and let their children be kings and queens of the roost. Now in *Gender Born, Gender Made* you are saying that parents need to follow their children’s lead rather than guiding their children in their gender identities and gender expressions. Isn’t that giving little children too much power about things they couldn’t yet know? Isn’t that contradicting what you’ve said before that parents are just too lenient with their children and need to take over some authority?

A. Only if a boy telling us he is a girl is the same as a boy telling us he never has to make his bed, ever, because he doesn’t feel like it and by the way he should get to get an iPod no matter how expensive it is.

But it's not the same. The boy telling us he is a girl is telling us something very profound about himself that if we don't listen to could result in depression, anxiety, even a wish to kill himself to get out of his agony. He is not just trying to get his own way and rule the roost. He is asking us to please pay attention to him about who he is and to please consider that we may have got it wrong.

Q. But how is a parent to know if his or her child is transgender or if it's just a phase or if it's some sign that a child is confused or disturbed?

A. That's the 64,000 dollar question. Sometimes it will take a long time to figure it out, sometimes a child makes it easy by insisting, persistently, that you all have it wrong, I'm not who you think I am. Sometimes a child wants to be "fem" one day, and "buff" the next. Sometimes a child is telling you something that at heart actually has more to do with something else than gender—like when a little boy wants to become a girl after his mother dies so he can keep her come alive by becoming her. To follow a child's lead is not the same as letting him or her run loose. Listen carefully, but if you can't decipher in gender terms what a child is telling you in words and actions, that is where a gender-sensitive mental health professional can be invaluable in helping the parents sort it out and do right by their child.

Q. What about safety? The world isn't so kind to children who go against the gender brain. Gender-nonconforming and transgender kids can get teased, made fun of, physically attacked. Don't we want to keep our children protected from that?

A. Absolutely. But if keeping them protected means that they can never be who they truly are, that's a protection racket, not real protection. Every family will have to make decisions about their own community and what is safe for their child. But they should also know that children who are asked to suppress their true gender selves may suffer from angry outbursts, anxiety, depression, even thoughts of suicide. And that will never be a very safe internal world for the child. Indeed, sometimes children may need to learn about the unfair world out there and that they will have to restrict their gender creative expressions to the safety of their homes. But children learn more about safety when they see their parents going out in the world to advocate for them and make sure they are treated with respect for who they are. So true safety will come from parents joining with the community around them to create gender accepting environments that leave room for all kinds of genders. And this will surely take a village.

Q. What is the most important message you would want to give parents about raising a healthy gender nonconforming child?

A. Start from where you are, but don't stay there. Having a gender-nonconforming child who just shows up may be startling, confusing, or challenging to your personal, cultural, religious beliefs about gender. But imposing those feelings on a child who doesn't fit in those boxes may hurt them for the rest of their lives. Give room for your own feelings, but put center stage the needs of your children to be who they really are. It is not for you to tell but for them to say. For all the parents who are already on that path, it is with deepest gratitude and respect that I take my hat off to you.

2 Responses to *An interview with Diane Ehrensaft, author of Gender Born, Gender Made*

**Elke** says:

January 19, 2015 at 1:00 pm

It's difficult to find educated people for this subject, however, you sound like you know what you're talking about!

Thanks

**olof humphries** says:

April 23, 2015 at 12:41 pm

Good article! We are linking to this gret post on our website.

Keep up the good writing.

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