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Raising Girlyboys: A Parent's Perspective

Diane Ehrensaft, Ph.D.

An increasing number of children are expressing themselves in gender-expansive or gender-variant ways. A subgroup of those children are girlyboys: boys who accept themselves as boys but cross culturally defined gender lines in their attitudes, behaviors, and desires. Using clinical material, written accounts, and personal observations, this paper investigates the experience of parents raising these boys. Facilitative parenting is differentiated from obstructive parenting within the rubric that gender-fluid outcome is healthy and parents can have influence in this arena. The experience of parents with their girlyboys is also offered as a window through which to view a young boy's protogay development. Analysis is made of the ways in which the psychoanalytic lens has traditionally blurred or distorted our thinking about parents' roles in gender-variant children's development. An alternative view of parenting, informed by the work of post-modern psychoanalytic gender theorists, is proffered, with an end to reinforcing healthy gender-fluid development.

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FOREWORD

This article was originally written as a paper for the American Psychological Association Division of Psychoanalysis 2001 Spring meetings and then revised again for a presentation in 2002. In that form it was circulated widely but never submitted for publication. I asked myself why, and realized it was the very nature of the subjective matter that left it germinating so long. “Raising Girlyboys” is a story about the vulnerabilities for mothers and fathers raising children who go against the gender grain. In that sense, it is also a story about myself, who was one of those parents several years ago. I’ve come to realize that I had to wait until my son was fully out of childhood, which in this day and age is tagged at about age thirty, until I felt comfortable enough to share our story in print. With that said, I shall proceed, with special appreciation to my boy, who is now a man.

INTRODUCTION

A half-century ago, children who strayed from the socially prescribed norms of masculinity and femininity might have found themselves sitting in a therapist’s office with strenuous efforts on the part of both clinical staff and family to “fix” the children. To fix was to bend their twig back to normative and acceptable behavior for their gender. Fifty years later, we have children and youth forming national advocacy and support networks as they proudly announce themselves to be transgender. In the first decade of the 21st century, parents with children who defy the social norms of gender behavior can now contact a new organization, the Outreach Program for Children with Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families in Washington, D.C. The program offers support to gender-variant children and their families with the stated mission of validating “that there are different kinds of boys and girls in the world and not just one kind, like many people think” (Menvielle, 2004, p. 4). These differences can run the gamut from the desire to play with “opposite-sex” toys to declaring one’s gender as opposite from the one assigned at birth.

Rather than replacing, gender-variant support services stand alongside traditional conservative programs that continue to

pathologize and treat children to cure them of their gender “deviance.” In dialectical fashion, psychoanalysis has been responsible for both the aspersion cast on these young children’s characters and the more recent antidotal insistence that gender be perceived as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy and that all human beings, not just the gender variant child or adult, carry within them the socially constructed attributes of both the feminine and the masculine along with characteristics that defy any such binary categorization (Goldner, 1991, 2003; Harris, 2000, 2005; Dimen, 2003, 2005). It is in the spirit of this insistence that I offer the following discourse, focusing on the socialization of one specific subgroup of gender-variant children: boys who identify as boys but like to do girl things.

WHO ARE GIRLYBOYS?

“Mommy, you know how some girls are tomboys. Well, I’m a tomgirl.”

(Max, a 6-year-old boy, to his mother¹)

This little boy is alerting his mother to his own experience of gender, an experience in which he is intent on crossing gender lines, becoming a “gender nonconformist.” It is notable that he did not extend his thinking even further with an absolute gender-parallel term—like sallygirl—to complement tomboy. That is because Max may be telling us something very profound about himself: He cannot categorize himself as either boy or girl; he feels both, a tom and a girl. Max’s self-definition as “tomgirl” both highlights and offers yet another way to think about the concept of a “girlyboy,” a word coined by Ken Corbett (1996) to define a group of boys who “do not feel themselves to be girls, exactly ... do not feel themselves to be boys, exactly ...do not wish to grow up to be women nor to deny their male bodies” (p.446). A girlyboy extends beyond the boy who incorporates a bit of the feminine within him. He plays at the edge of reality, refusing to accept the socially defined borders of male/female. Ludovic, the 7-year-old main character in the movie *Ma Vie en Rose*, defines it most succinctly: “...you have to understand, I’m a girlboy.”

¹As reported by Barbara Waterman, Ph.D., on May 24, 1999.

ATTUNING TO GIRLYBOYS AND THEIR PARENTS

Alex had long brown hair and intense, doe-like eyes. He was 8 years old and had been coming to see me for therapy because he was a boy with a secret: He wished he was a girl. Walking down the street, many people thought he was. He had an uncanny physical likeness to the boy who played Ludovic in *Ma Vie en Rose*. In one particular session, he leaned back in my chair, hands folded across his chest, and pronounced: "I think you need to write a new book. You should title it, *The End of Discrimination*. The book would be about no one teasing each other about gender things and understanding that everyone has their own way of being about gender that is unique to them. It should be a book for parents to tell them how to do it."

As he spoke, Alex could not consciously know that I was in the midst of preparing the first draft of this paper. Yet in his own experiential wisdom he gave me the gift of an eloquent outline for the major themes on this subject: a little boy's gender desires, the pain of social scrutiny in the face of those desires, and the wish for a parent's help. I was also aware that Alex might never have produced this material had he not had supportive parents who were doing their best to facilitate Alex's own unique gender development as a girlyboy and had he not had a therapist intent on helping him blossom rather than bending his twig.

Let me digress for a moment to a memory from my own past. I am in Greenwich Village with my son, who is 22 at the time and living in New York. We stroll into a store that sells outlandish beads, baubles, and feathers. Jesse admires a purple boa just like the one his older sister had. I buy it for him. We leave the store smiling. Jesse is my gay son. I did not know he was gay when he was a child. Nor did he, as many gay men first report an early conscious awareness of their *gender* difference well before they are aware of their sexual orientation (Corbett, 1993). Indeed, what our whole family *did* know was that from the time he could walk and talk Jesse was the living embodiment of Ken Corbett's "girlyboy" or Max's "tomgirl"—transforming his dump truck into a cradle, preferring porcelain dolls over toy soldiers, liking drama and art over soccer and skateboards, drawn to girls over boys as his playmates. At age 7 he wrote a poem at school, "If I were a girl ...I would be the same." Like Alex, Jesse felt free to ex-

press himself so openly and clearly because he, too, I would like to think, had parents and teachers who were doing their best to facilitate rather than obstruct his development as a girlyboy.

I am starting from the premise that gender variance is healthy and that parents have influence over their child's gender development. With that said, I believe that among the parents of girlyboys we have a small cohort of now two generations of sensitized mothers and fathers who can help us answer a significant question about the development of gender as an emergent phenomenon with a creative interplay of constitution and environment: How does a parent facilitate the healthy development of a gender-variant child? To answer that question, I will rely primarily on my own observations, both clinical and personal, along with published reports from others, concerning parents who have attempted to do exactly that, or have not.

This query about socialization is a crucial question, for at this moment we know much about the ways in which parents have obstructed, but little systematically about the ways they have facilitated their children's fluid gender identifications and development. In the context of relational theory advocating gender spectrum rather than gender dichotomy as a signpost of healthy development, I am defining the obstructive parent as one who condemns the child's gender nonconformity and does his or her best to "break" it. I am defining the facilitative parent as one who strives to allow a child to express himself in his own unique gender way while helping him to adapt to a world that will not necessarily embrace that way of being. Differentiating facilitation from obstruction is an important issue not just for parents but also for any clinician, health professional, or educator working with a child who presents with gender nonconformity.

Over a decade ago, Corbett (1993) called on psychology to develop a new theory of gender development that respects variation in human development more than the desire to create a falsely symmetrical metaphysics of gender: "it is incumbent upon us to distinguish the normative from the natural and to begin to present the vicissitudes of gender" (p. 356). This, along with the writings of Goldner (1991), Harris (1991), and Dimen (1995), marked a paradigm shift from gender breaking to gender bending, from perversions to preferences, and from sexuality to sexualities. In this challenge to conservative theories of gender development, parents and professionals

alike have been held accountable for their lack of understanding, bias, and negative behaviors regarding children who go against the grain of culturally defined normative heterosexual gender development. In the paradigm shift from the falsely symmetrical to the expansively fluid, it is often implicitly assumed that gender-variant children must fight for their subjectivity and authenticity within a hostile social environment that will defy the children's attempts to liberate themselves from stringent gender restraints. As stated by Dr. Susanna Moore in her doctoral dissertation, "Diagnosis for a Straight Planet: A Critique of Gender Identity Disorder for Children and Adolescents in the DSM IV" (2002), "Like the protagonist in the French film 'Ma Vie en Rose' ..., a boy may in fact feel most comfortable and least distressed when wearing a dress and making clothes for his Barbie doll; yet, when he is his happiest his parents are most distressed and his peer group least tolerant" (p. 129).

Ironically, at the same time that gender-expansive developmental theory assumed a restrictive and restraining stance on the part of parents, there surfaced another, seemingly unrelated challenge to psychoanalysis and allied clinical and developmental theories and practices. Specifically, these fields have been accused of parent-bashing—blaming the parent as the nexus of all children's ills. We have erroneously created the icebox mother, the schizophrenogenic parent, and a host of other pathological categorizations of parents as the causal agent of their child's autism, schizophrenia, or other psychiatric ailments. Such parent bashing can be no more exquisitely exposed than in the 20th-century psychoanalytic narrative of the ineffectual father and overbearing, seductive mother as the root cause of a perverted development toward homosexuality or transsexuality in their son (see Richard Green, *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality*, 1987, as a case in point). In the case of sexual development, it appears that the clinical field had deftly managed to kill two birds with one stone. Both parent and child were simultaneously maligned, the former for perverted parenting, the latter for perverted development.

Many of us were trained within this very approach to parental effects on child development. Therefore, it behooves us to be mindful of the potential indelible etching of such biased thinking. Deeply influenced by years of training within a "point-the-finger-at-the-parent" paradigm and even more years of living in a culture that persistently

holds parents accountable for child outcomes, we may have unwittingly or unconsciously carried this same propensity toward parent blaming into our more enlightened investigations of children who challenge traditional gender categories. As I said earlier, my focus here is on a particular type of gender-variant child—the girlyboy. A girlyboy is a boy who challenges the cultural binary concepts of gender—he crosses over, in his play, in his dress, in his fantasies. It has been assumed that his developmental road will be a hard one, both in the world and within the family. A decade ago, in his groundbreaking article on gender variance, Corbett (1996) alerted us that:

Girlyboys face a special crisis in separating from their mothers. They do not wish to disidentify with their mothers. Rather, they strive to retain feminine identifications. Their wishes are greeted with denial as they attempt to move forward. There is no cultural support, no place of cultural malleability, for such a developmental wish [pp. 453-454].

Who might it be who greets the boys' wishes to retain their identificatory maternal ties with denial? Among others, one can presume the boy's own mother and father may be at fault because, from a child's point of view, the innermost circle of culture is typically located within the family. Yet I think to myself, what about all the mothers and fathers who have been committed to helping their children become who they want to be, who have not turned away from their girlyboys when they discover them but do their best to facilitate their forward, positive development as gender-variant children?

The inquiry into parental facilitation of girlyboys' development draws us to a larger issue concerning a certain blind spot in our recent, more progressive psychoanalytic thinking about gender fluidity and sexualities. From the 1960s to the present, we have witnessed a feminist infusion into the theory and practice both of psychoanalysis and gender development. Some of those very feminist theorists and practitioners have themselves become or have helped other people become the sensitized parents of a generation, now two generations of children brought up with expanded gender possibilities. In this same historical era we have also witnessed a rapidly growing cohort of another, overlapping group of gender-sensitive parents: gay, lesbian, and transgender mothers and fathers acutely aware of devel-

opmental gender issues as a result of their own childhood and adult experiences “going against the grain.” Yet it is only with great difficulty that we have begun to free ourselves from the vision that parents are always obstructers, and children the liberators when it comes to gender nonconformity. Despite the now two generations of children raised by parents to the tune of “free to be you and me,” we have been somewhat nearsighted, perhaps even blind, to the significant liberating transformations in family life and parental practices that have occurred in the domain of gender development over the past four decades.

While reformulating our thinking about sex and gender beyond conservative binary concepts of “boys will be boys and girls will be girls,” we have tended to ignore the parents who neither cannibalize nor obliterate their child’s authentic gender self (cf. Harris, 2000). Some parents derive genuine pleasure from facilitating gender fluidity in their child and discover that, like themselves, their child has not made a linear claim on gender. The mother can find the girl in the boy and the boy in the girl just as she has found them in herself, and so, too, can the father. Although only a fictional character and a grandmother rather than a mother, I would refer you to a poignant scene from *Ma Vie en Rose* in which Ludovic’s grandmother, happening upon Ludovic dancing by himself in imitation of his much idealized Barbie-like cartoon princess, looks momentarily bemused and then joins Ludovic, with a twinkle and a smile, in his imitative “fairy” (in every sense of the word) dance. Grandmother and grandson come together in their gender reverie, and Ludovic appears utterly blissful in the glow of his grandmother’s silent, playful acceptance of his girlboy self. Facilitating the forward development of *any* child with a fluid rather than binary gendered self necessitates rethinking the rigid paradigm of parent as obstructer, child as liberator, replacing it instead with a model that recognizes the complex matrix between parent and child in which parent can obstruct but also facilitate a child’s journey in discovering her or his own unique gender self.

GIRLYBOYS, PARENTS, AND PROTOGAY DEVELOPMENT

Challenges to traditional psychoanalytic theories of gender have intersected and overlapped with challenges to archaic and constricting

concepts of sexuality both within and beyond the field of psychoanalysis. Regarding sexual development, there has been a call for social and psychological support for protogay children and an acknowledgment of a healthy developmental progression toward a homosexual identity (Isay, 1986; Corbett, 1993). If we move from retrospective analysis to lived childhood experience as it unfolds, parents are faced with a thorny problem: With all good intentions of doing right by our children, we do not necessarily know we have a gay son while we are raising him. So how do we know how to raise a healthy one? Perhaps the answer to the riddle lies in the experience of girlyboys and their parents.

Any boy who refuses or fails to accept the socially defined borders of male/female qualifies as a girlyboy, whatever his destined sexual orientation. At the same time, being a girlyboy may indeed be a marker of normative childhood gay development. Many gay men report an early history of girlyboy experience and, although there is some controversy about the accuracy of the findings, Richard Green's (1987) longitudinal study of homosexual development reported a strong link between childhood gender nonconformity and later homosexuality. Further, if you ask parents to be Monday-morning quarterbacks about their adult gay sons' childhood experiences, a good number will report that the first thing they knew about their son was the he did not conform to the "whole boy thing" well before they had any awareness of their son's homosexuality. So the paradox of proactively helping children with healthy gay development is that we do not know they are gay until later. Nor do they. Recently, a gay man and former Boy Scout asked in a letter written to the editor in response to the Boy Scouts of America's position that gay boys should find an organization of their own: "Was I really supposed to have it all figured it out before I joined the Cub Scouts at age 8?" (Wilson, 1999, p. 6). In a child's early and middle childhood, at least up until age 8, the only information parents may have is that their son is a girlyboy; the jury is out as to whether he will evolve into a gay man or not.

If we accept that there is such a thing as healthy normative gay development, the experience of parents with their girlyboys may be our best and perhaps our only window into directly observing the interpersonal matrix of homosexual development as it unfolds in the family in early to middle childhood. Simultaneously, the ex-

perience will provide us with information to guide the healthy development of *any* gender-nonconforming child toward his or her authentic and flexible gender position, whether that child comes to define him or herself as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, queer, transgender, transsexual, intersex, or defies gender or sexual categorization altogether. Such guidance directs us to the broader and increasingly imperative task incumbent on our field to undertake if we are to undo the damage of archaic gender theories: challenging gender rigidity and identifying growth-producing paths that allow for gender fluidity.

Almost three decades ago Stephen Mitchell (1978) pointed out that a psychodynamic theory of homosexuality does not inherently equate with a search for pathology but can stand as a neutral scientific inquiry. Yet still it has been a struggle for psychoanalytic thinkers, even the most progressive, to refrain from the model of pathology, particularly when it comes to analyzing a parent's contribution to a child's homosexuality. Therefore, shedding light on the experience of parents with their girlyboys may not only provide our best window for understanding protogay development. It may also give us leverage to deconstruct the archaic model of parental pathology and replace it with a positive socialization model that supports boys who are on their way to becoming gay.

PARENTS DISCOVER THEIR GIRLYBOYS

Annie sat in my office crying. She is the mother of Alex, the muse for the book *The End of Discrimination*. It was the late 1990s. Alex, then 6 years old, had insisted on wearing only pink for the past 2 years. At the time he was in a rage. He was being forced to wear black pants and a white shirt for his school choral performance. The girls got to wear skirts. Why couldn't he wear a skirt, too, instead of the dumb pants? It was totally, absolutely, and grossly unfair, he cried. Annie spoke through her tears: "If he grows up gay, that's okay. I just want him to be happy with who he is. But how can I help him now? What do I tell him when he wants to wear barrettes to school? He goes to public school and I have to prepare him for the world he lives in. What am I supposed to do?"

Annie only wanted what was best for her son. Like myself with my own son, she could not yet know if her son was gay. It was too early to

tell. Up until age 8, most girlyboys do not consciously know or have not yet declared their sexual orientation. They do know, however, well before their eighth birthday, that they do not fit into the mold of prescribed male behavior in our culture. They accept that they are boys, but boys who have a fancy for girl things.

That is often the most that parents can know as well—that they have a girlyboy. They might also know, as mentioned earlier, that although having a girlyboy does not necessarily mean their son will be homosexual, many males who do become homosexual recall a history of being a girlyboy.² Francine, the mother of Kevin, who was then a 16-year-old gay adolescent, reported that as early as age 2, her son's play, body movements, and general disposition led her and her husband to ask each other, "Maybe Kevin's 's gay. How can we help him?" They could not know, they could only guess, but it was obviously a good guess, forecasting their son's coming out at age 16.

As with Kevin, being a girlyboy starts as early as the second year of life when a little boy discards trucks for dolls and bucolically strokes his silk bunny impervious to his other little male toddler friends wreaking physical havoc in the sandbox. Although we have spent decades generating theories identifying the early family dynamics that would lead to this phenomenon, the subjective reality reported by so many parents of girlyboys is that such behavior simply presents itself. In the present controversy regarding the genetic underpinnings of both homosexual development and gender nonconformity (see Byne, 1994; LeVay & Hammer, 1994), it behooves us to listen very carefully to the reports of parents of girlyboys that all have the same refrain—"He just started being that way when he was two or three":

"When he was two, he was always in my jewelry, my purses, always in the closet for my shoes, wanting to dress like me ... I don't think anyone encouraged it" [Report from a mother in Green, 1987, p. 116].

"Even before her son turned two, Sherry Lipscomb noticed that he wasn't like other boys. When she took him shopping, he

²See Richard Green, *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality* (1987) in which he reports that two-thirds of the subjects who presented as "feminized" males in childhood went on to become homosexuals in adulthood.

would go gaga at sparkly dresses. He would toss his baby blanket around his head like a wig and prance on the balls of his feet” [as reported by John Cloud in “His Name is Aurora,” *Time*, September 25, 2000, p. 90].

A mother reports that her son wouldn’t play with trucks, he wouldn’t go outside and play, always preferred dolls, just preferred the “softer, cleaner, peaceful type of playing.” She reported that the behaviors “started at three, when his brother was born. That’s when I first noticed he was different. And his artistic ability started shining at three. I mean, he did glossings that were just flabbergasting” [Green, 1987, p. 121].

In Coates, Friedman, and Wolfe’s (1991) report on gender identity disorder (GID), little Colin, who was diagnosed with the disorder, showed up, at age two and a half, with markedly “feminized” cross-gender behavior, including preference for female attire and activities. The authors assume the behavior was stimulated by a traumatic rupture in the mother–son relationship, yet Colin’s parents’ report sounds no different from the reports of other parents who “discover” their son’s gender nonconforming behavior somewhere between 2 and 3 years, which is the age when all children typically move from core gender identity to gender role identity, adopting behaviors and attitudes culturally rendered as either male or female.

Rather than *shaping* girlyboy behavior, parents’ experience is typically that they are *presented* with it. Their child comes to them. He is acting girly. Obviously, parents may be unaware of the unconscious dynamics that have led to that moment. But it may also be that we professionals have been insensitive to the parents’ experience and the possibility that the child is shaping the parent much more than the parent shaping the child. According to Dr. Edgardo Menvielle (2004), co-founder of the Outreach Program for Children with Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families, “Parents have little or no influence on the child’s core feelings that define him or her as gender typical or gender variant. Such core feelings appear immutable” (p. 3). In essence, the role of the parent is not to shape but to respond.

Attachment theory has identified the reciprocal loop in the infant-parent intimate bond. The parent’s unconscious and conscious

expressions have tremendous impact on the child, but the infant's expressions also have powerful influence over the parent. I would like to transfer that paradigm to our understanding of gender. Psychoanalytic theory has consistently looked at the parental responsibility for the child's gender development but rarely at the child's influence on the parent and the parent's response to what they discover in their child. In considering parents raising girlyboys, we have the opportunity to enter the reciprocal loop between parent and child, observing the effect of the girlyboy on the parent's responses and behaviors, which in reciprocal fashion affect the emergent growth of the girlyboy. On the one hand, I am in total agreement with Adrienne Harris (2000), when she states, "The assemblage of gendered experience in sexual life is contingent and emergent, not preprogrammed" (p. 233). On the other hand, it is my impression that our strong efforts to counteract more conservative essentialist stances on gender may preclude us from considering the elements of gender that may *not* be socially constructed but are instead constitutional predispositions. Such predilections, similar to temperament, may contribute to the child shaping the parent, who in turn shapes the child.

This reciprocal-loop approach differs from Coates et al.'s (1991) analysis of gender dysphoria in children as the outcome of trauma or attachment disruptions in the first years of life. For example, a little boy who lost his mother in a car accident, and was with her in the car at the time, soon after adopted the accoutrements of a female and switched his self-identification from male to female. This gender crossing was understood as holding onto his dead mother by becoming her. I would propose that Coates et al.'s (1991) analysis of the roots of gender dysphoria may be correct but accounts for only a small subset of gender-variant children, either those who show a sudden change of gender behavior after a trauma or those who appear to have an entanglement of anxiety-ridden gender dysphoric behaviors in the context of attachment disruptions. I would further argue that those gender-dysphoric children exist among a larger pool of gender-variant children in which the vast majority have no trauma or attachment disruptions but just come into the world that way.

With that said, in the context of the situation of the majority of gender-variant children, I would like to focus on the parents' experi-

ence that the girlyboy *presents* himself to the family, rather than being created by them. The parents, once they meet up with their girlyboy, are faced with difficult internal negotiations and child rearing challenges. Like Annie, every parent of a girlyboy in the social context of contemporary gender norms is confronted with a dilemma in trying to negotiate inside and outside experience. The inside experience involves attuning to a little boy who is hell-bent on doing girly things. The outside experience involves accommodating to the present culture, which, albeit with some emergent gender flexibility, still persists in being binary in its understanding of gender, continuing to prescribe and proscribe appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for males and females.

All parents, not just parents of girlyboys, are challenged with the task of helping their children find their individuality while simultaneously preparing them for the culture in which they will live and grow. Sarah Ruddick (1989) articulated this duality of parenthood in identifying preservation, growth, and social acceptability as the three key components of the work of motherhood, work I believe we can extend to fathers as well. If the social group's demands for acceptable behavior, in the parents' eyes, contradict the child's needs for protection and nurturance, Ruddick describes the parents as "be[ing] caught in painful and self-fragmenting conflict" (p. 22). Nowhere could this painful conflict between their child's self-growth and the culture's mandates be more evident than in the psyches of the parents of the girlyboy. Typically, they find themselves confronted with the glaring contradiction between the desires, predilections, and core self of their gender-nonconforming child and the aspersion and anxiety of a culture that demands conformity to gender expectations and in which individuals have been found to torment, punish, or even murder those who do not abide (cf. St. John & Lee, 2002; Zamora, 2002).

The ability of a parent to negotiate this conflict between the outer dictates of society and the inner needs of the child differentiates a facilitating from an obstructive parent within the perspective of healthy gender-fluid or protogay development. Any particular parent of a girlyboy, caught on the horns of the dilemma, may be neither consistently facilitative nor consistently obstructive. That parent may instead find himself or herself vacillating between obstructing and facilitating, driven by the painful self-fragmenting

conflicts and the seemingly irresolvable tension between protection, nurturance, and social demands in regards to healthy versus acceptable gender development in their child. So perhaps we would do better to focus not on the facilitative or obstructive parent per se but on those parental practices that would qualify as facilitative and those that would qualify as obstructive, whether across individuals or within the same individual.

OBSTRUCTING VERSUS FACILITATING AS SEEN THROUGH THE PSYCHOANALYTIC LENS

Typically, parents in psychoanalytic accounts are maligned for causing havoc in their children's gendered lives either through conscious intent or unconsciously driven interchange. Parents have been pathologized for manipulating their sons into acting like girls, reinforcing them when they do, and failing to provide proper guidance for how a boy should be a boy. Coates and her associates' (1991) account of little Colin is a case in point. The researchers identified Colin as a child suffering from GID. Their criteria were that he expressed the wish to be a girl, expressed the feeling that he hated being a boy, had a persistent interest in cross-gender activities, including preferring girls to boys as playmates and having an aversion to rough-and-tumble play. Even though they reported that Colin had an age-appropriate interest, curiosity, and pleasure in his penis and showed no aversion to it, they still determined he qualified for a GID diagnosis. With the caveat that I am critiquing from a distance, never having had the opportunity to sit with Colin and his parents in a consultation room as the clinical researchers did, my reading of the written report leads me to the conclusion that Colin could fit the profile of any child who presents as a girlyboy, including the desire to be a girl and the repudiation of one's boyhood. Although he may have had deep psychological problems, GID may not have been one of them.

Little Ludovic (*Ma Vie en Rose*) announces to his male friend, "We're going to get married when I'm not a boy." Richard Green's (1987) data on boys who became homosexual suggest a developmental stage in which, like Ludovic, boys wish to be girls because they know no other way to fulfill their desire to do girly things and see no

alternative pathway to a world in which one could marry a man. As one homosexual young man explained regarding his early desire to be female:

Maybe it was because I had always been homosexual, and I thought in order to have a sexual relationship with men, back then, I'd have to be a woman. I couldn't be a man and have a sexual relationship with a man. Maybe then, you know, I never thought about men making love to men. I always thought I had to be a woman to have a relationship with a man" [p. 367].

Would it be possible that little Colin was situated in just such a developmental conundrum, dreaming of life as a girl as the only avenue to fulfill the wish to slide to the feminine side of the culturally defined masculine/feminine spectrum and maybe even as an early expression of his desire to marry a man and his unconscious theory that the only way to achieve that goal was to become the female bride?

We can wonder why little boys can imagine no other arrangement except heterosexuality when it comes to love, marriage, and Eros. Is it because of the social construction of sex/gender systems equating with heterosexuality to which Gayle Rubin (1975) alerted us many years ago in her essay, "The Traffic in Women"? Alternatively, could Melanie Klein (1949) have been correct in her assertion of a phylogenetic innate knowledge of the primal scene, which includes sex and reproduction between a man and a woman? I would argue for the former—a hegemonic sex/gender system in which little children's consciousness is shaped within a fairytale world filled with princes and princesses yet devoid of same-sex love stories with happy endings.³

Regardless of the reason, as they grew older and more cognitively sophisticated and flexible, these boys who earlier expressed a wish to be a girl discovered that one could be a *boy* doing girl things and

³Only in a few progressive schools around the country do we find the rare story books such as *King and King* (de Haan and Nijland, 2002), that address same-sex attractions with happy endings. In de Haan and Nijland's picture book for young children, the prince falls in love with the prince and they live happily ever after as king and king.

that one could be a boy loving boys. Discovering this option, the desire to be a girl fell by the wayside. By young adulthood the boys were firmly entrenched in their identification as males and could often hardly remember the time in which they wished to be a girl as it went the way of childhood repression. It appears that Coates and her associates (1991), as they observed young Colin, did not take into account the potential later discovery on the part of the child that boys can be boys even if they like girl things and even if they like other boys. Instead, they drew the conclusion that Colin was suffering from GID.

There is also another developmental possibility they did not consider. Irene Fast (1984, 1999), in her differentiation model of gender identity, outlines a developmental progression from a very early stage in which children believe they are all inclusive—they can be boy, they can be girl—to a more sobering moment in their preschool years when they come to the realization that they cannot be both boy and girl and must mourn the loss of the one they are not as they progress to a consolidated understanding of the one they are. Could it be that some children never accept that restrictive categorization of singular gender identity, based on assigned sex at birth and male or female genitalia? Instead, could it be that these children remain playing at the borders, defying the normative standards predicated on body definitions of the gendered self and casting the recognition of sex differences based on genitalia to the winds, continuing instead to imagine and play out all or any of the possibilities on the gender spectrum? As they challenge the boundaries of bodies they may ask, “Just because I have a penis, why can’t I be a girl when I feel like it? Who determines what is girl, what is boy?” In essence, they are simultaneously fixating on and transforming Fast’s all inclusive stage, moving it to a metaphorical rather than a somatic, concrete level. Rather than fixation at early stages of inclusive gender development that prevent them from moving forward to a “healthy” singular consolidation of self as girl or boy, we could say that these gender-variant children stay forever creative, holding on to their early experience of gender freedom that suits not their body but rather their mental self. If this were possibly the case for Colin, we would want to rid him of his diagnosis of gender identity disorder and replace it with the attribution of gender identity creativity (GIC).

Such, however, was not the case for Colin, and once diagnosed with GID, the authors turned to an analysis of the parents' interactions with Colin, as well as the dynamic features from the parents' own past that might contribute to Colin's gender dysphoria. Mr. S, Colin's father, was faulted for being unconcerned about Colin's overtly feminine behavior once it began and "inadvertently reinforce[ing] Colin's cross-gender behavior by not directing it or setting any limits on it" (Coates et al., 1991, p. 505). Further, Mr. S was held accountable for Colin's gender identity disorder because he did not engage in rough-and-tumble play with his son, a form of play in which Colin showed no interest whatsoever. Curiously enough, nor had Mr. S. in his own childhood, a piece of information that should at least give us pause in terms of potential genetic loading for lack of interest in socially defined masculine pursuits.

The researchers assessed Mrs. S, Colin's mother, as contributing to Colin's gender problems because she derived pleasure from discovering that he was soft, gentle, and sensitive. Her cathexis to Colin as a boy who was always tuned into her feelings, who showed sensory sensitivity, and who displayed an artistic nature was also interpreted, negatively, as reinforcing the "feminine" aspects of Colin. Further, in reacting angrily to his aggressive outbursts, Mrs. S was perceived as inhibiting Colin's masculine expression and preventing him from becoming a boy's boy.

Mother and father together were held accountable for Colin's gender dysphoria because they idealized his aesthetic side; fostered his interest in drawing, his fascination with colors and textures, and his playacting; and admired his sensory sensitivities, seeing them as part of his artistic temperament. They were also faulted for being highly invested in Colin's physical appearance and wanting others to recognize Colin as special, gifted, and talented.

In sum, Colin's parents were seen as obstructing his normal gender development. Yet, if our intent is to support rather than suppress gender fluidity in a child, every one of Mr. and Mrs. S's faulted parental behaviors can be readily re-categorized as facilitative rather than obstructive actions. Let us consider the possibility that instead of trying to bend the twig, Mr. and Mrs. S recognized that Colin was part of that large majority of gender-variant children who simply show themselves to their parents: He was presenting himself as a

girlyboy and they were striving to both accept and respond to him for who he was. If this child had been Colleen instead of Colin, few parents would be faulted for admiring her artistic ability, appreciating her soft cuddliness, and even developing an investment in her physical beauty. But because Mr. and Mrs. S were acting that way toward a *son* rather than a daughter, their parenting practices were deemed pathological.

Herein lies the psychoanalytic lens in which we have been known to view parents' interactions with their gender-variant children. In this specific case, the lens' prescription causes us to inadvertently malign parents' facilitative actions toward their girlyboys, which involve (1) recognizing and accepting who their son is, (2) following his lead regarding his gender-related desires and behaviors, and (3) not allowing binary gender norms to interfere with their attunement to their son. Rather than receiving acknowledgment and support, such a parent stands a good chance of being pathologized and sent off to treatment. In Colin's case, the intent of the treatment was to make the parents aware of their child's suffering and help them recognize the contribution of their own psychodynamics to Colin's gender identity disorder. Perhaps the only intervention Mr. and Mrs. S needed in the arena of gender development was help in carving a path that would facilitate the healthy development of their girlyboy son. In addition to reinforcing their nurturance of Colin, such help would necessarily include attention to Ruddick's third task of parenthood, social acceptability, so that Mr. and Mrs. S could establish a balance between inside (Colin's psyche) and outside (the social world in which he resides) by attuning to Colin's gender predilections while also helping him cope with an environment potentially hostile to his gender-crossing.

Coates et al. (1991) report no evidence that Mr. and Mrs. S were following any feminist ideals, ideological convictions, or gender-revolution strategies in supporting their son Colin in his girlyboy behavior. It appeared that they were just trying to live their lives. I would now like to invite us to turn to another set of parents, those likely influenced by feminist ideals, ideological convictions, or gender-revolution strategies. I am referring to the cohort of mothers and fathers who self-consciously desire to be facilitative parents in helping their young sons discover their own gender uniqueness.

THE INGREDIENTS OF FACILITATION

I am recalling my son's lament at age four. Sitting in his bed whimpering, I overheard him cry to himself, "How am I ever going to be a daddy and a zookeeper at the same time?" That was actually the least of the problems confronting him in his last year of preschool. How was he going to figure out that he could love his own boy body while desperately wishing he was a girl so he could get a porcelain doll for a holiday present, like all the girls got, instead of the stupid wooden airplane he was given, like all the other boys in his preschool program? As he faced his problems, I confronted my own. How was I, his mother, going to handle the situation when the directors of that program asked my husband and me to attend a meeting to discuss their concerns that Jesse was suffering and disturbed and to ask if we were as concerned as they were that Jesse so openly expressed his desire to be a girl? Not without a great deal of inner trepidation, I handled the situation by responding to their question with a question, an old psychoanalytic ploy: "Yes, I know he talks about wanting to be a girl, but has he ever also told you that he doesn't want to be a boy?" The answer: "No." I knew my own son's psychology intimately enough to decipher his internal logic: If he were a girl, he would be able to get that porcelain doll. As a boy he could not—except, of course, that my husband and I immediately went out to buy him one, to right the gendered wrong.

Yet with all my confidence as a feminist psychoanalytic mother who embraced gender fluidity and believed that binary gender was merely a social construction, I left the meeting troubled. I realized the hard road our family had ahead of us and scrutinized my own defenses against the message the directors, whom I deeply respected, were delivering about my son. Already in my four years' experience as Jesse's mother, I was acutely aware of the psychological processes that parents go through as they help bend the gender without bending the twig. A child may be a twig who cannot be bent, but a parent may be a bough that can crack. What resources must parents have at their disposal to be able to face the onslaught of pathologizing that will come the way of both their girlyboy and themselves so that it does not interfere with the task of imbuing their child with a sense of confidence and competence in his gender choices?

To answer that question we have to consider the developmental tasks for the child and the socialization tasks of the parents. For a child to reach a healthy consolidation of gender, the child must (1) become aware of one's own genitalia and learn a *body* identity (male, female, intersex); (2) know one's desires; (3) integrate psyche and soma into a cohesive gender and sexual identity, one that can involve multiplicities and fluidity but also a sense of coherence and unity; and (4) integrate one's gendered self into society. To facilitate this process, parents must (1) provide a child with a consistent gender label (be it male, female, male-female, in the case of an intersexed child, or a more recently coined term, "ze," which is inclusive of both she and he, just as Ms. was once introduced to include both Mrs. and Miss);⁴ (2) acknowledge the child's desires; (3) allow identifications to unfold; (4) model actions; (5) respond to actions; (6) stay attuned to who the child is becoming or has become; (7) represent one's own values and beliefs about gender to one's child; (8) provide intermediate creative space where parent and child together or child alone can fantasize and play with different possibilities of gender (a family gender reverie of sorts); (9) teach a child about "gendered" society: what to expect from it and how to meet up with it; and (10) accept the child's evolving gender identity.

As can be seen, parents have more than twice as many tasks as the child, and the challenge for parents of girlyboys, raising their sons against the grain of society's present gender standards, can be daunting. The demands of the gender socialization tasks typically leave the parents of girlyboys with a sense of dis-ease, conflict, or dilemma. Catherine Tuerk, co-founder of the Outreach Program for Children with Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families, reported to a journalist her experience 30 years ago with her girlyboy son (who grew up to be gay): "She felt afraid that he might become gay or transsexual and that she might have done something to cause his 'problem'. Mental health professionals told her that her son could be 'fixed', so she and her husband put him through years of

⁴We might entertain a time in the future where "gender boxing" (i.e., checking off one box or another for a person's gender) will be eliminated as a category of identification, but until such time, parents will continue to hold the task of communicating to their child a gender label, whatever traditional or innovate nomenclature they might choose in that endeavor.

psychotherapy to make him more ‘masculine’.” After he came out at age 20, Tuerk “‘realized that everything I had been told by professionals was wrong or harmful to him and our family’” (Crawford, 2003, p. 40). Feminism and more socially visible and acceptable queer experience (e.g., *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *The L-Word*, shows available and watched by the general public) have generated movement toward more flexible gender norms, which in turn has made enough of an inroad so that parents of girlyboys today have more options to envision a healthy life for their girlyboy son that Tuerk had 30 years ago. Yet angst still lurks either in the back- or the foreground. George Hagen, a 21st-century father of a school-age girlyboy, waxes positive about all the ways he and his wife have supported their young son in his gender-variant ways, knowing that they do not want him to feel ashamed but rather proud of who he is. Yet there is still a darker side to their parental experience remains in place:

...looking into his eyes, I know he’s on his own. I can’t be at his side on every playdate. I can’t change his friends’ attitudes, those of future teachers, or those of strangers who stare at him on the street. Already he knows he’s different. He’s not a girl, and yet he doesn’t act like a boy. ...We [he and his wife] wait anxiously for the stereotypes to catch up [Hagen, 2002, p. 174].

Parents of girlyboys are faced with an almost irresolvable conflict between individuality and adaptability. As parents, we protect our children. Contextually, we live in a culture where there is greater latitude to be a tomboy than a girlyboy. As George Hagen (2002) describes it for his son, “At 8, he has learned that most boys find dolls weird. He has been humiliated by friends who’ve made fun of his precious possessions—he’s left playdates in tears because of it. Even strangers who’ve seen him carrying a doll around our neighborhood have stared” (Hagen, pp. 173-174). A tomboy can be seen as transcendent, a girlyboy only as deviant. With the phallus as the more valued vehicle to power and success (Mitchell, 1974), it makes social and emotional sense that a girl would want to borrow it. In contrast, it sends people into turmoil when they see a boy repudiating it, which is what is assumed of the girlyboy. Such turmoil can generate not only teasing or harassment but also escalation into violence,

even murder, as in the tragic cases of Matthew Shepard and Eddie (Gwen) Ajuaro, one murdered for being gay and the other for being transgender. Riki Wilchins, executive director of the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, reminds us: "Kids are dying out there because they don't meet narrow gender norms—the boy who throws 'like a girl' or the girl who is perceived as being too masculine" (Heredia, 2002, p. A3). Parents' work is not only to protect their child; it is built into the parental experience to grow to love one's child in a lasting bond and therefore fear losing that child. The actual threat of death to one's beloved child because of who he or she is or is identified as being is an angst hard to escape and an outcome that any loving parent could only dread.

As a result of such external threats, it is extremely difficult to simply celebrate one's son's cross-gender choices, even if a parent has done the internal work to embrace rather than repudiate the child's gender-variant self. Not just the threat of death, but also the specter of removal, having their child taken away from them, may impinge on their parenting experience. Five-year-old Aurora, whose parents allowed their son Zachary to change his name, declare himself a girl, and live accordingly, was suddenly without his family when the local children's service agency swooped in to place him in emergency foster care (Cloud, 2000). Although this was the case of a transgender child, rather than a girlyboy, the knowledge that a gender-variant child was actually taken away from his parents can worry its way into the psyche of any parent who supports his or her gender-variant child's individuality in a manner that might meet with social aspersions. Anxiety about the outside world's responses may mix itself up with internal doubts of one's own, generated by one's own gender conundrums or internalized messages from the past, creating quite a strong and potentially noxious emotional potion. Unless parents are absolutely insulated from the culture around them and the internalized experiences within them, it will be difficult to escape the psychological conflicts generated by raising a son against the gender grain.

As indicated in the reported accounts so far in this discussion, the girlyboy is usually discussed in terms of the negative reactions and repudiation he feels in the face of his environment both inside and outside his family, including his confrontations with the mental health community. The experience of girlyboys is often framed in

the context of deficit. Recently a colleague expressed her position that the feminization of the boy could be attributed to the lack of a third, particularly a masculine third. This represents the deficit model, that boys cross gender lines because they are *missing* something. Richard Green (1987) devoted decades of clinical research to finding a cure—to transform the girlyboy into a boy's boy, both through direct psychotherapy and through counsel to the parents. The child had a shortcoming that had to be overcome. The assumption of deficit is a soft underpinning of the hostile cultural milieu regarding gender “deviant” individuals that the parent has to help the gender-variant child negotiate. To accomplish this navigation, the parents who support the healthy unfolding of their gender-variant child must become both an anchor and oasis for the child and yet simultaneously a coach who trains and prepares the child for the real world out there that might be quite discordant with the inner sanctum of the home.

I would like to pause for a moment to ask if this parental experience is any different than the experience of a parent raising a child of color in a racist society. I would say yes and no. Parents worried about the racism and parents worried about homophobic rage that may confront their children all share the anxiety that each time their child leaves their home he or she may come back physically or psychically harmed, or maybe not come back at all. Both sets of parents worry about the stigmatic labels that will be attached to their child, either in the educational, mental health, or social world. Finally, both sets of parents may find themselves negotiating strategies to instill in their children a sense of pride in who they are while simultaneously preparing them for others who may see it otherwise. At the same time, there is a distinctive difference in the two sets of parents' experience. Parents of children of color recognize that their children are not the color they are by choice, but by birth. Even a parent who helps their child “pass” as another race knows that at its roots their child's actual race is immutable. This is not the case for parents of girlyboys, even in the face of recent evidence that gender identity may be etched in the brain rather than sketched by the environment. The culture around the parents still overwhelmingly holds to the belief that “gender crossing” is a remediable situation, not a fact of birth, and, as mentioned earlier, the culture will hold parents accountable for causing the crossing, reinforcing the crossing, and tak-

ing no action to stop the crossing. There are professionals in abundance trained to step in to “cure” the gender “abnormality.” Pediatricians regularly refer to those trained professionals, as do educators. In that sense, this cultural sensibility creates a psychological burden for the parent of a gender-variant child neither more nor less, but different from the burden for the parent of a child of color. Few people try to change the fact of a child's race; many will try to change the fact of a child's gender variance.

Just as racism affects all of us, so, too, do gender stereotyping and gender biases. None of us has grown up in a genderless culture, and despite our conscious beliefs and theories, “gender ghosts from the nursery” (cf. Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro, 1975) may surface in any one of us. For example, throughout this paper you may have found yourself feeling a twinge of discomfort in response to the term “girlyboy.” A colleague admits to me that she found herself wincing when the mother of a gender-variant child reported how she let her son parade on Halloween in flowing chiffon and indicated with pleasure how much he loved the experience. The thought floated through my colleague's mind, “You can't do that. It's too fem.” Given her commitment to gender fluidity, she caught herself and chided herself for such archaic thinking, but her self-abrogation alone will not suffice to will such thoughts away. To borrow the words from social analyses of racism, we are all susceptible to internalized homophobia and aspersion toward gender variance, given the culture in which we live.

At a more subtle level than my colleague, I, the mother of a girlyboy, unconsciously revealed my own “gender ghosts” displaced into my professional writing. My book *Parenting Together: Men and Women Sharing the Care of Their Children* was written in the 1980s while my son was still a child. In the book I talk about expanded gender possibilities for children when they are raised by both men and women as their primary parents. One manifestation of the children's gender fluidity appeared to be cross-dressing among the little boys. In making sense of this finding, I wrote:

Observers and parents alike begin to grow squeamish when they see boys dress up. It is not just what the neighbors think, but also stirrings within themselves about possible perversions. ...Homophobic worries surface, such as when one grandfather

warned his daughter to forbid her son from ever wearing a dress again or he would be in danger of becoming a homosexual. ... In fact, boys donning women's clothes in their fantasy play is not at all related to later sexual identity. ... Cross-dressing in boys' play is merely a manifestation of their cross-sex identifications and the ease with which they express the developing feminine aspect within them in their early years [Ehrensaft, 1987, pp. 232-233].

It is not that this passage was either misinformed or wrong. But re-reading it many years later, when my own cross-dressing son indeed had grown up to be gay, I had to ask myself why I was so adamant in discounting the possibility that cross-dressing in a little boy may indeed mean that he is on his way to being gay. Why could I not prepare a parent that growing up to be gay was not an inevitability but a potentiality for cross-dressing little boys that a parent might want to contemplate, as I would do now? Why was it not even on my inner radar screen that cross-dressing could also be an early sign of transgender development? Quite possibly I was defending against an "unthought blown,"⁵ a subliminal understanding that not just any little boy who pranced in frills, but my own son was on his way to becoming gay and I was not ready to face that reality. Twenty years later I am now equipped with the knowledge that my son *is* gay. With my motherhood work of balancing protection, nurturance, and social acceptability for my son drawn to completion, I am also more able to think about what was already there to take in 20 years ago in Green's work about the linkages between boys who exhibit cross-gender behavior and later homosexuality. I no longer have to defend against a possibility that is now a reality, and, to the best of my conscious knowledge, I am pleased that my son has found his true self, which I believe is his gay self.

⁵I am borrowing from Christopher Bollas's term, the "unthought known," defined as "the dispositional knowledge of the true self" (Bollas, 1989, p. 10), a form of knowledge that has not been thought but is a preverbal sensibility. In contrast, the "unthought blown" is an intuitive understanding that we care not to have but find surfacing despite ourselves. It is quite common in parenting experiences, as when a parent simply has a feeling that a child has transgressed with no concrete evidence.

CASE STUDIES: FACILITATORS AND OBSTRUCTERS

I have learned that to be facilitative of a child's unique gender development is not to purge ourselves of the unconscious stirrings and unthoughts blown but rather to bring them to consciousness and negotiate them so they do not interfere with the child's well-being. I would now like to present you with two sets of parents who demonstrated the opposite ends of that spectrum, one being able to reflect on their inner conflicts so as to nurture and support their son, the other being driven by those conflicts into hysteria and denial in relationship to their son.

The first set were Annie and Charles, the parents of Alex, the boy who is looking forward to the end of discrimination. In my office they have both been able to explore the possibility that their son will be gay or perhaps will be transgender. At first they reflected that they could accept homosexuality but not a transsexual outcome for Alex. To them transsexuality felt like a repudiation of Alex's own body and self, and simply, "just too weird." A year later they had worked through their squeamishness and felt they were now prepared to accept that Alex might become a transsexual, if that was truly where Alex was headed and if that is what would make him feel whole and happy. In a session during that period, Annie reported the following experience: Alex was now eight. She was shopping for him in a secondhand store and found a pair of jeans with embroidery at the waist, 1970s style. She debated buying them for him. She knew he would love them, but she scrutinized her own motives and did not want to be in the position of reinforcing problematic cross-gender behavior; problematic, that is, in his social world outside the house. She decided to buy them. She gave them to Alex, whose first response was, "Mom, I can't wear those to school!" Before she could answer, his face lit up and he added, "But I could wear them on the weekends!" From that moment on, the jeans became his favorite pair of pants, carefully laid out on his bed for weekend wearing. Annie still was not sure whether she had done the right thing, but the look of delight on her son's face convinced her that she had created a deeply happy moment for him, not just because of the acquisition of the girlyboy jeans but because of the recognition that his mother was attuned to his gender uniqueness.

Alex's parents had attended to the task of training him about gender social acceptability, but not without pain and sadness. They themselves did not advocate the gender-constricted norms of their community and felt somewhat duplicitous hoisting those norms on their son against their own beliefs. Yet given the alternative choice of their son suffering hassling, teasing, and even physical violence at the hands of some of his schoolmates, they decided to protect him from such harm by educating him about the culture and setting limits on his public actions. They explained to him that there was a time and a place to push against the "not fair" parts of the culture, but school was not yet the time or place when it came to dress code. When he grew to be a teenager, he would be old enough to make his own gender choices about such things, but until then, as his parents, they would be making the decisions for him. I would note that I am aware, from my work with other families of gender-variant children, that some parents would take issue with Annie and Charles's restrictions, feeling that it is more important to challenge the norms and demand that the school also do so accordingly, rather than asking their gender-variant child to accommodate or succumb to the non-accepting or pejorative stance of the social milieu. These differences highlight for me the reality that there is no one right or wrong way to proceed. Instead, each set of parents must negotiate and come up with either their own strategies or alternatively, their own "compromise formations."

Returning to Alex, he knew full well, given the coaching and limit-setting from his parents, that his embroidered jeans could never touch the seat of his school desk, and he momentarily wondered reproachfully why his mother would tease him with such a gift, until he came to his own solution of home-based embroidered jeans. If Annie and Charles were to forbid cross-gender dressing completely, such clothing items might have a greater chance of going "underground" and becoming highly charged, fetishized objects for Alex, given his strong desire to have them. Instead, both parent and child were engaged in a specific form of compromise formation, negotiating the dilemma of balancing individuality with social acceptability by creating a category of weekend jeans. Neither Annie nor Alex felt fully resolved about this solution. Annie worried about sending mixed messages to her son. Alex still longed to wear his jeans 24/7. Yet overall Annie had facilitated Alex's positive sense of

himself as a boy who liked girl things in a world that leaves little room for such desire or behavior.

Many of you hearing this story of weekend jeans may come up with alternative interventions or may question some of Annie's inner motives for her purchase, given the strength of her ambivalence. I invite you to ponder what you yourself might have done in this same situation, if you were Alex's parent. My intent here is neither to laud nor critique Annie's actions but to illustrate the process of reflecting rather than fleeing from "gender ghosts" and then using those reflections to balance external exigencies with internal psychic experiences to inform one's actions in response to a girlyboy situation.

The second set of parents, Margie and Ted, came to me when their son, Jacob, was nine years old. They worried that he played dress-up with his friends, and that dress-up entailed putting on discarded clothes of his mother's that he kept in a special box in his closet. His friends happily joined him in this play, but Margie and Ted worried there was something wrong with Jacob because he engaged in such "girly" play. What if he turned out gay? As they shared their concerns, I was aware that my mind kept drifting to my own question about Ted: "Are you sure *you* might not be gay?" I did not share that thought but tucked it away in my own consciousness and proceeded to acknowledge their worry. Much later I returned to their question and invited them to enter a process with me to think about the possibility, "What if he *did* turn out gay?" They declined.

Two years later they came to consult with me again. Jacob had entered middle school and was socially isolated and unhappy. He was unwilling to sign up for sports activities and had retreated to his room and to his computer. He no longer played dress-up; he hardly did much of anything. Jacob sounded as if he had hit the doldrums of early adolescence, but the isolation seemed more extreme than usually exhibited by the average young teen.

A year later they called me again, this time in a state of crisis. Ted had discovered that Jacob had stolen Ted's password to the Internet and was visiting sadomasochistic gay porn sites filled with violence and torture. What should they do? They came in for yet another consultation. We identified three major parenting tasks before them: (1) to communicate to Jacob that sneaking behind his parents' back and stealing Internet passwords was not acceptable; (2) to be clear that

neither parent advocated sex fused with violence, and that healthy sexuality was about the expression of love, not hate; and (3) to finally address the elephant in the middle of the room and open their eyes to the evidence before them, that Jacob might be exploring his own homosexual feelings and that they needed to find a way to help him establish his authentic sexual identity in a positive way while exploring their own conflicted feelings about it. Based on my past experiences with Ted and Margie, I estimated that the first two tasks would come easily to both parents but that the last would be fraught with difficulties. Both parents readily agreed to task one and task two, but neither wanted to return to work on the more complicated third task addressing Jacob's emerging sexual identity, not because that work was done but because it was work that they were still neither ready nor willing to do. There was good reason to believe that Ted and Margie were already obstructing rather than facilitating Jacob's authentic gender and sexual development, driving him to more underground fantasies and actions, with no parental oasis or anchor to help him explore and establish his own unique gender self. Whereas they might be quasi-successful in suppressing Jacob's *expression* of his gender uniqueness, they may never be able to squash his internal desires. Regrettably, if this speculation is accurate, Jacob may well be left in constant turmoil between inner desire and outer behavior, perhaps turning to the darker side of underground sexuality as his own authentic sexual self is blocked from the light of day, all of this contributed to by his parents' failure to grapple with their own "gender ghosts."

In addition to gender ghosts, I would like to add that "gender angels" may also contribute to the influence of the parents' gendered past on their present capacity to be facilitative rather than obstructive of their child's gender explorations and experiences. I would define "gender angels" as those positive or transformative experiences we ourselves may have had as children or as adults in confronting and negotiating conflicts about our own gendered position in the culture, experiences that get internalized and woven into our adult gendered selves. Reflecting on my own negotiations as a parent of a gender-variant child, I believe my relative success in holding and responding to my son's gender nonconformity goes beyond my active participation in the feminist movement from the late 1960s on. Prior to that, as a child, I was always a combination of fem and tomboy—

baking cakes and embroidering napkins under my mother's tutelage, batting balls and competing in the blackboard jungle of straight As and academic awards under my father's. When out with my mother I would dress to the nines in 1950s frills; when with my older brother I would occasionally tuck my long ponytail under my sailor hat in the hopes that someone would mistake me for a boy. Although it took me until adulthood to harmoniously integrate those multiple aspects of my self, I will always remember the childhood experiences of going against the grain. We could say that these very experiences were intergenerationally transmitted to my son, influencing or even determining his emergence as a girlyboy; but we could also formulate those experiences as my internal integration of a gender fluidity that helped me meet the son who was presented to me and hold him in a way that facilitated his own gender development "outside the box."

From my sense of Annie and Charles or Margie and Ted as parents, suffice it to say that I think Annie and Charles possess such facilitative "gender angels," while Margie and Ted instead struggle with old demons not yet laid to rest. We all have gender ghosts, but perhaps the addition of gender angels becomes a critical variable in differentiating facilitative from obstructive parenting.

Whether possessed with angels or ghosts, all parents of girlyboys, along with their sons, have a common task: the management of anxiety. In the context of a homophobic culture with clearly defined gender pre- and proscriptions, both the parents and their girlyboy sons are faced with the tension-filled task of balancing their inner feelings and desires with the exigencies of the culture around them. In essence, the parent must figure out how to raise a child who is a stranger in a strange land, and the child must negotiate being that stranger. How they negotiate the tension may very well differentiate the emergence of the girlyboy as an adult with a consolidated sense of self from the adult with a conflicted gender identity.

CONCLUSION

I have invited us to think about the development of the girlyboy from the viewpoint of the child who presents himself to the parent rather than the parent who molds the child. From the standpoint of healthy gender expansiveness and normative gay development, I have asked

us to think about facilitative versus obstructive parenting and be mindful that parents have been found to be helpful, and should not be consistently cast as harmful. I have alerted us to the anxiety that all parents of girlyboys face in integrating the intrapsychic phenomenon of their child's unfolding unique gender self with the relatively unyielding social demands of the world around them.

Yet our work is not yet finished. As parents and girlyboys manage their anxiety, those of us who are clinical theorists, researchers, or practitioners would benefit from exploring our own anxiety as well. We have our own gender ghosts and angels, and a good majority of us have been trained in a tradition that equates health with heterosexuality, posits gender as a fixed rather than fluid category, and perceives sexual development as a family affair in which parents obstruct and children conform, break free, or collapse under the load. I would invite us to break away from such thinking about parenting and gender development and be open to the possibility that the twig may shake the tree and that not all trees are intent on bending their twigs.

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