

Gender Diversity in the Early Childhood Classroom

How do we meet the transgender and non-conforming children in our classrooms today? With love, acceptance and an open mind.

Four years ago, at a local Waldorf school, an application arrived. This application was eventually routed to my desk, with a sticky note: please call parent. Little did I realize that we were about to embark on an entirely new journey. I called the parent and we set an appointment for later that week.

When the mother arrived for her appointment that day, she carried with her two applications: one for a child called Sean, one for a child called Bella¹. We spoke for over an hour about her daughter, who was born a biological male, and wished to live her life as a female. The child was enrolled in her current school as a boy, but wanted to “socially transition” to life as a girl, and the family wished to start over in a new school setting. The parent suggested that I contact Joel Baum at Gender Spectrum. I said we’d be in touch, and I began my re-education.

At the same time, there was a child enrolled in the kindergarten whose given name was Taylor, a name that is often chosen for either a male or a female child. Her parents referred to their child as “she.” The child, however, insisted she was a boy. She dressed in boy’s clothing and wore her hair shoulder-length. Occasional arguments among her classmates were easily settled: Is Taylor a boy or a girl? Taylor is Taylor, the teacher firmly stated, and all were satisfied with that answer.

In the high school, meanwhile, a rising ninth grade student, who had been known as Nora to her lower school classmates, was posting on social media sites that she wished to be known as Niko. She cut her hair short, began shopping in the young men’s department, and asked to be called only Niko from this point on.

The young child often appears androgynous. Depending on the way the child is dressed (in “girls’ ” or “boys’ ” clothing), the length of the hair, the toys clutched in the child’s hand, or the color of the child’s accessories, we make assumptions about gender. We see a child dressed in pink and say, “What a beautiful little girl!” If the child is in blue, we acknowledge what a strong and handsome fellow he is. Many parents have consciously chosen to use less traditional colors to dress their babies, and do not limit toys to dolls and trucks. Even chain discount stores are moving away from labeling aisles as “Girls’ Building Sets” and “Boys’ Building Sets.”

“Boy or girl?” is often the first question asked of new parents. The baby is heaped with color-coded gifts. What happens when the female child grows old enough to speak, and begins stating firmly, “I am a BOY!” or the male child exclaims, “I am a GIRL!”? Gender identity emerges in the child as early as age two, and is often clearly—and firmly—expressed by age four. Gender identity is one’s self-conception of one’s own gender. It is unique to each one of us. It reflects how we feel inside and may be congruent to one’s assigned or biological gender (cis-gendered) or incongruent (transgendered). The more appropriate question, then, is: “What is the anatomical sex of the baby?” The answer as to gender will have to wait until the child is a bit older.

Gender expression is more about how the individual expresses masculinity and femininity. Tomboys, “girlie girls,” and now, “BoyGirl” and “PrincessBoy” are all ways of showing oneself in the world. Clothing, backpacks, and toys can reflect the child’s view of himself or herself in the world. Certain gender expressions are still strong in the culture (pink is for girls, only boys play with trucks) although thankfully we are moving away from such narrow confines.

Every child and every family is different, as is every teacher, school, and community. After working with several families, we can offer a few guidelines,

¹ I have used pseudonyms for the children in this article to protect their privacy.

culled from our work with Joel Baum at Gender Spectrum and the Ackerman Institute's Gender and Family Project, as well as many of our own experiences. We offer these with all gratitude to the courageous children and families who are leading the way.

General Guidelines

"Insistence, Persistence, Consistency" over time is the rule of thumb. Is the child consistent in her gender expression? A week or two of dressing in a specific way or asking to be called by another name is not indicative that the child is transgender; the young child may perhaps be "going through a phase." It is over the course of time that one pays greater attention to the gender expression of the child.

"Acceptance is Protection." The Ackerman Institute uses this phrase for their work with families and schools. The child who feels accepted for who he or she is will thrive. Teachers and parents must stay alert to signs of teasing, bullying, or exclusion, and put a stop to it. The children are on the frontlines of normalizing gender diversity and need the support of all the adults in their lives.

"We make assumptions all the time about what is in one another's underwear," states Joel Baum, very succinctly. He makes a clear point that may guide anyone through the very complicated maze of gender identity. At the heart of the matter, every individual has the absolute right to privacy.

"Options for all, requirements for none." No child is forced to use a private bathroom. Biological males identifying as female are not required to use the boys' bathroom. This child may use either the private bathroom OR the girls' bathroom, and the same goes for the biological female identifying as a male.

"My right to dress and identify as I choose trumps your discomfort with my choice." Although this is not so much an issue with younger children, often parents or older students may bring up that there is discomfort around using the locker room with a gender-expansive or transgender classmate. See the above guideline about options: the individual who is uncomfortable is free to use the private bathroom.

Gender diversity is not contagious! A gender non-conforming child in your class may pique some interest among the other children (is Taylor a boy or a girl?) and even some "trying out" of behaviors or ways of dressing. Ultimately, each child finds the gender expression which feels right to him- or herself.

Find ways of grouping children other than by boy or girl. Be mindful of your own language.

Discuss a "Plan B" with the child's parents. In spite of the best efforts and attention to privacy, at some point the child will be "outed." Now what? In the case of a student who is new to the school, to find that he is "really" a girl may come as quite a surprise. For a child that has been enrolled in the school, where everyone knows the "tomboy," the surprise may not be as great, but the same questions arise: is my child safe? Do I want my own daughter/son in a locker room with a boy/girl? What if my son "likes" her, but she's actually a biological male? Where will this child sleep on the class trip? And of course, how do I explain this to my child? What language do I use? The parents of the transgender child have grappled with these questions for themselves and perhaps with extended family or close friends.

Gender is different than sexuality. Identifying as a male, female, or gender non-conforming individual has nothing to do with one's sexuality. They are entirely separate issues, and outside the scope of this article.

In the early childhood classrooms, children are allowed to be whomever they wish to be and to express their inner experiences of male and female however they wish. Children come to school to learn, to have new experiences, and to grow into free, upright individuals. Teachers and parents are in the unique position of being able to support our youngest members of the school community in this manner of finding their way. It is an honor to be able to work with children and families who are simply trying to live authentic lives, true to themselves. It takes a lot of communication and willingness to stay open. Most of all, it takes welcoming a new way of being in the world. ♦