

“Isn’t there something wrong when a boy paints his toenails?” My last article on children’s sexuality generated this question which has prompted me to write once more on this matter. Our society struggles so much with the issue of sexuality and this is certainly one of the highly sensitive areas. Many a parent who can smilingly condone a little girl playing with the boys and climbing trees will start to panic at the sight of their son trying on a dress or high heeled shoes, using mum’s makeup, even playing with dolls. We need to look at both the source of the panic and the potential meaning of the behaviours for children.

Most children will grow up identifying with their same sex parent if s/he is involved in their life. If not, it’s important to arrange plenty of opportunities to have positive contact with at least one same sex adult. As children learn from play they also need opportunities to try out lots of different roles. Ideally they will have access to a range of toys (they don’t need to be expensive bought ones) and a range of dressing up costumes.

Children of both sexes can benefit from playing with such traditionally gender-related playthings as construction toys and dolls giving them a chance to mimic the behaviours of the adults they see around them or on television. They will also enjoy trying on a range of clothing including that which is traditionally seen as belonging to the opposite sex. Often female role costumes look and feel far more attractive than male role costumes. They’re more likely to be made of a range of bright colours and interesting textures that will attract a sensual child of either gender.

Creative parents and early childhood educators ensure they provide desirable wizard cloaks as an alternative to the ballet tutus and fairy costumes. Even so it is entirely appropriate that pre-schoolers of either sex may enjoy trying out all of those roles, just as they might relish the chance to wear make-up, nail polish and jewellery. The kinds of play a child enjoys will be influenced by their unique personality in combination with the opportunities they are offered and what they see as approved of by adults important to them.

The primary adult concern is usually a fear this behaviour indicates their boy is going to grow up homosexual. That is one of the possible reasons for persistent cross dressing in a school age child. Despite many efforts to inform society that homosexuality is a normal sexual preference for around 10% of the population, there are still people who do not accept this. Outrage over the Civil Union Bill is just one indication of this lack of acceptance, which means of course that it is all the harder for homosexual teens to develop a good self concept.

There are many other reasons for persistent cross dressing past the age of five. It may well indicate that the child is unhappy with the sex they are because they dislike the behaviour they see in their same sex parent and don’t want to identify with it- for example a boy who sees his father’s violence. Similar effects can occur if parents are separated and the child repeatedly hears their same sex parent derided. With the birth of a different sex baby or circumstances where the opposite sex gets treated better- for example in families where the boys get beaten but the girls don’t, it makes sense for a

boy to hope to become a girl. All of these circumstances require parents to make changes to help a child to feel good about their gender.

It's also occasionally possible that persistent cross dressing in school aged children is an indication that this child has, from their own perspective, been born in 'the wrong body'. Just as some parents struggle with the thought their child may grow up to choose same sex relationships it's an even more huge challenge to accept transgender realities. Our society tends to follow a dualistic model of sexuality, seeing people as either male or female, homosexual or heterosexual. In reality sexuality is far more fluid. This is a big topic that needs to be dealt with in a future article of its own.

What's important to remember is that self esteem is very much connected to sexual identity. It's clear from the above examples that without appropriate adult responses and guidance, children in any of these circumstances will not grow up to feel good about themselves. Children need parents who understand that there are many different ways to express one's personality and gender identity. They need direct support to accept and value themselves as they are. Pam Linke's book Pants Aren't Rude will help parents deal with this task. Anyone still struggling should seek professional help without delay.