

Child

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What is a transgender child? These days, it depends on whom you ask.

A relatively new social form, we see no references to transgender children prior to the mid-1990s. Previously confined to medical and psychiatric discourses and labeled “effeminate boys” and “masculine girls,” children who transgress gender norms in their surrounding social contexts were understood primarily as invertes and more recently as protohomosexuals (Bryant 2006; Sedgwick 1991). In the early twenty-first century, however, multiple constituencies are vying to define the terms of the transgender child and to secure explanations of the etiology, prevalence, and characteristics of this emergent identity group.

The first generation of parents actively supporting and facilitating gender nonconformity in their children wasted no time forging local, national, and international communities. From the advocacy organizations they form to the blogs, websites, and listservs they populate, they are devising their own collective answers to that question. Some parents use the term *transgender* only in reference to children who have made social and/or medical transitions from one gender category to the other (Brill and Pepper 2008); others ascribe to the more conventional notion of the transgender umbrella and seek to loop in kids across the spectrum of gender fluidity. These labeling processes are not merely symbolic. They mirror a series of difficult decisions families face: Will they facilitate social transitions for their very young children? Will they seek out and endure the stress and expense of providing gender-confirming medical care for adolescents? How will they explain their child to relatives, to other parents, to social service agencies and schools? Is it possible, and what would it mean, to make the “wrong” decisions?

The psychiatrists and physicians who treat these youths and families also seek more secure and reliable mechanisms for determining which children are truly transgender, which will become gay or lesbian, and which may exhibit no gender nonconformity at all later on. Over the last two decades, professionals have developed specialized clinics for treating gender-nonconforming children, and parents and children often submit to a vast battery of tests as a condition of their treatment. An international consortium of gender experts collaborated on producing standardized measures for gender, along with a robust research agenda

that includes theorizing the causes, incidence, and developmental trajectories of atypical childhood gender behaviors and identities. It appears that while puberty-blocking hormone therapies offer relief to many children, these and other, newer medical technologies simultaneously exert their own normalizing pressures to order, taxonomize, and measure gender transgressions.

Older transgender adults initially resisted the efforts of the parent activists and advocates who first began agitating for support from schools and doctors in the late 1990s and early 2000s, fearing political repercussions from the public endorsement of social transition for young children. While many have since come out in support of gender-nonconforming children and their families, trans adults must cope with the deeply different trajectories and life chances of the smallest gender outlaws. Some of these children may elect to be stealth (maintain total privacy about their gender histories) as adults; some may never identify openly as transgender; many will never go through their natal puberties or retain childhood memory books filled with pictures that do not mirror their gender identities as adults. For these reasons, this new generation may have wider latitude to dis-identify with transgender history and with those who came before them.

A central paradox animates all of these efforts to define the transgender child. While most adults understand gender development teleologically, they still struggle with whether and how to distinguish childhood self-knowledge from adult identity. They labor to determine if gender is ever fluid or stable, unfinished or finished, a property of the self or a creation of the outside world. Woven through these projects are countless other questions: Politically and personally, what does it mean to label a particular child transgender? If what an assigned male child tells you is that she *is* a girl, does the term *transgender* truly represent her personal identity? Does it represent a shift in social category, or is it merely a signifier of how other people understand her history? Is a significantly gender-nonconforming or masculine girl transgender if she still identifies as a girl? Is being transgender distinct from being a “blend” (Brill and Pepper 2008: xiv), a “gender prius,” “gender creative,” “gender independent” (Ehrensaft 2011), or any of the host of other new terms for gender fluidity in children? Do these words even demarcate a particular form of personhood, or do they simply rebrand deviance while implying that the vast majority of children are safely gender normative? Fundamentally, do we, the adults, get to decide the answers to these questions?

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References

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Childhood

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In many societies, the child is constituted as a body that is always in the process of becoming, moving from birth to maturation, from infancy to adulthood. Childhood becomes the time-space in which the human begins as an unfinished entity that undergoes a specifically developmental and so also normatively progressive trajectory of bodily and social transformation whose endpoint is completion as an adult. Gender plays a central role in this process: while the child's gender is fixed at (or before) birth and read off from the body's genitals (as well as chromosomes and hormones), the child must also *become* fully gendered as an (adult) man or woman through development. The developmental process works through a system of normalization, furthermore, such that the child's development may proceed along either normal or pathological lines. Since normal development is not guaranteed, the child becomes the site of tremendous cultural investment with regard to all developmental processes, including that of gender.

Transgender childhood bears the mark of the simultaneously fixed and molten status of the child and child-body with regard to gender development and of the child's normalization as well. For a child to claim a transgender status (or for an adult to claim transgender status for a child) is difficult because the child is always already seen as incomplete, as not yet fully formed; its gender is not fully mature, and the child is also seen as not fully capable of knowing its own gender. At the same time, precisely because of this not-yet-complete status, the child is