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# **APPLES, ORANGES, AND FRUIT SALAD: SORTING OUT TRANSGENDER, GENDER NON-CONFORMING, & NON-BINARY CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

# THE NEW GENDER WARS

- Gender comes in an infinite variety, and children should get to live in their affirmed gender at such time they know it.

vs.

- Once a boy, always a boy, once a girl, always a girl. Biology is destiny.

vs.

- We need to wait and see, how about until adolescence, and not jump to premature conclusions about a child.
- Recent evidence of gender wars:

Bathrooms

# A MESSAGE FROM THE GOOD PEOPLE OF NORTH CAROLINA



# Gender Affirmative Model

(Hidalgo, Ehrensaft, Tishelman, Clark, Garofalo, Rosenthal, Spack & Olson, 2013)

- **Major premises informing practice:**
  - Gender variations are not disorders
  - Gender presentations are diverse and varied across cultures, requiring cultural sensitivity
  - Gender involves an interweaving, over time, of
    - Biology
    - Development and socialization
    - Culture and context
  - Gender may be fluid, is not always binary
  - If present, individual psychological/psychiatric problems are often secondary to negative interpersonal and cultural reactions to a child
  - Gender pathology lies more in the culture than in the child

# Gender Health

- Youth's opportunity to live in gender that feels most real and/or comfortable
- Youth's ability to express gender with freedom from restriction, aspersions or rejection

# THE GENDER WEB



# **GENDER WEB**

**Each person's gender web weaves together**

- **Nature**
- **Nurture**
- **Culture**

# **THE THREADS IN THE GENDER WEB: NATURE, NURTURE, AND CULTURE**

- **Chromosomes**
- **Hormones**
- **Hormone receptors**
- **Gonads/Primary sex characteristics**
- **Secondary sex characteristics**
- **Brain**
- **Mind**
- **Socialization: Family, School, Community**
- **Culture: Values, Ethics, Laws, Theories and Practices**



## **CHILDREN BEYOND THE GENDER BINARY**

### **Gender-Nonconforming Children**

**Transgender Children**

**Gender Fluid Children**

**Gender Hybrids**

**Gender Priuses: Half Girl-Half Boy**

**Gender Tauruses: One on Top, Other on Bottom**

**Gender by Season: School year girl, Summer boy**

**Gender by Location: Home boy, At Grandma's girl**

**Gender Ambidextrous Children**

**Gender Smoothies**

**Gender Queer Youth**

**Non-binary**

**Agender Youth**

**Pangender Youth**

**Protogay Children**

**Prototransgender Youth**

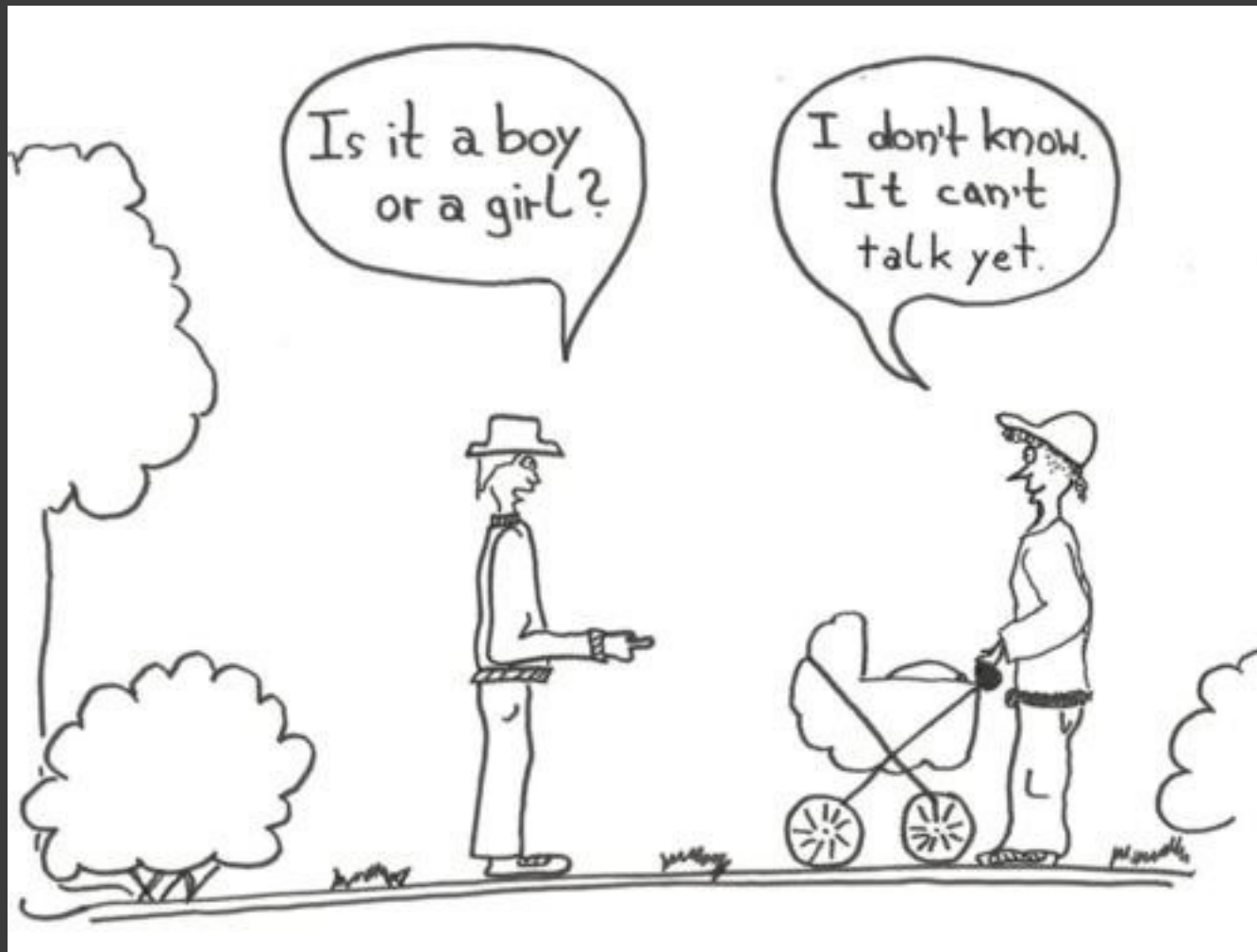
**Gender Tootsie Roll Pops**

# **GENDER AFFIRMATIVE MODEL TREATMENT GOALS**

- **Facilitating authentic gender self**
- **Alleviating gender stress or distress**
- **Building Gender Resilience**
- **Securing Social Supports**

# **ESSENTIAL THERAPEUTIC TENET**

It is not for us  
to say, but for  
the children  
to tell



# **CHALLENGE: FINDING THE CHILDREN IN TRANSLATION**

- If you listen, they will tell you who they are.
- But how do we know what they are saying?

# TRANSLATION TOOLS

- Listening
- Mirroring\*
- Play
- Interpretation
- Suspension in state of not knowing
- Monitoring personal experiences that may distort your gender vision
- Cultural sensitivity
- Collaborative work with parents, family, community

# **MYTH ABOUT THE GENDER AFFIRMATIVE MODEL**

**We rubber stamp  
whatever a child  
tells us about  
their gender.**

# RESEARCH ON GENDER-NONCONFORMING CHILDREN

- **PERSISTERS:** YOUNG CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE A GENDER DIAGNOSIS EARLY IN LIFE AND PERSIST WITH THAT DIAGNOSIS INTO ADOLESCENCE
- **DESISTERS:** YOUNG CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE A GENDER DIAGNOSIS EARLY IN LIFE AND NO LONGER HAVE THAT DIAGNOSIS BY PUBERTY
- MAJORITY OF CHILDREN IN CLINICAL STUDIES HAVE PROVEN TO BE DESISTERS (most recent finding: 63%[Steensma et al., 2013] )



# **YOU SHOULD KNOW**

**Persisters/desisters presently most popular set of studies quoted to argue that:**

- 1. Young children cannot possibly know their gender**
- 2. Until further notice, they should use bathrooms that match what's between their legs**

# **SO HERE'S THE QUESTION**

**HOW COULD WE POSSIBLY SORT OUT  
THE PERSISTERS AND DESISTERS  
EARLY IN LIFE?**

**AND**

**IF WE CAN'T, HOW COULD WE ALLOW  
YOUNG CHILDREN TO TRANSITION  
FROM ONE GENDER TO ANOTHER (an  
option for prepubertal children)?**

# **Controversy: Social Transitions**

- Do social transitions from one gender to another make sense in young children?
- Corollary: Can a young child know their gender identity?

# Inferring Childhood from Study of Transgender Adults

- On-line survey of 3,474 transgender adults (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011):
  - 82.6% aware before age 12 they felt different
- Follow-up interviews (N = 419):
  - 67% transgender men, 62% transgender women felt from young age different from gender assigned at birth
- Childhood: majority expressed gender in hiding
- Reported effect: psychological pain and suffering

# **TASK FOR GENDER SPECIALISTS**

**To identify individuals like Beemyn and Rankin's subjects early in life so that:**

- 1. authentic gender can unfold without having to hide/without restrictions and barriers**
- 2. continuity rather than bifurcation exists between childhood and adulthood gender**
- 3. childhood psychological suffering is reduced**

# DIALING BACK TO THE PERSISTER/DESISTER DATA

“Feelings of gender dysphoria persisted into adolescence in only 39 out of 246 of the children (15.8%) who were investigated in a number of prospective follow-up studies. . . . [R]esults unequivocally showed that the gender dysphoria remitted after puberty in the vast majority of children.”

(T. D. Steensma, R. Biemond, F. de Boer, P. Cohen-Kettenis. Desisting and persisting gender dysphoria after childhood: A qualitative follow-up study. *Clin Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 2011, 16: 499-516, p. 500)

## **Clinical Conclusion of Persister/Desister Data**

Since only a small number of gender dysphoric children will continue to be gender dysphoric in adolescence, this is not a reliable predictor of later transgender outcome. Therefore, give children a chance to explore their gender, but do not promote an early gender transition, as most of these children will grow out of their gender dysphoria and will not grow up to be transgender.

# **Clinical Misuse of Persister/Desister Data**

If we move in early to get children to accept their assigned gender, to “live comfortably in their own skin” (Zucker, 2012) we might be able to ward off a transgender outcome.



# **FAULT LINE IN CLINICAL PERSISTER/DESISTER STUDIES**

- **THEY CONCENTRATE ON MEASURES OF GENDER DYSPHORIA (IN THE PAST, OF GENDER IDENTITY DISORDER)**
- **THEY FAIL TO HIGHLIGHT THE MORE CRITICAL VARIABLES:**
  - 1.CHILD'S GENDER IDENTITY**
  - 2.CHILD'S GENDER EXPRESSIONS**



# **METHODOLOGICAL FLAW IN THE DUTCH PESISTER/ DESISTER STUDY**

- **Children who did not return to the clinic by puberty were counted as desisters**
- **How could they possibly know?**
- **Result of the flaw:**
  - \*Inflates the number of desisters**
  - \*Makes it look like a smaller percentage of persisters**

# **PERSISTERS/DESISTERS = APPLES AND ORANGES**

- **The 85% desisters not the same children as the 15% persisters.**
- **85% most likely never wanted to change their assigned gender. Majority of them: most likely proto-gay.**
- **15% persisters most likely Beemyn and Rankin's transgender subjects as little people.**

# SEPARATING APPLES FROM ORANGES?

- Can we differentiate the two groups in childhood, rather than having the 15% wait until they grow older to claim their affirmed gender?
- Answer: Not with a 100% accuracy, but, to quote our U.S. president in his 2008 campaign: **Yes We Can.**

# **APPLES, ORANGES, FRUIT SALAD**

- **SOME YOUTH WILL BE EXPLORING OR AFFIRMING THEIR GENDER IDENTITY (APPLES)**
- **SOME YOUTH WILL BE EXPLORING OR AFFIRMING THEIR GENDER EXPRESSIONS (ORANGES)**
- **SOME YOUTH WILL BE EXPLORING OR AFFIRMING BOTH (FRUIT SALADS)**

# **A REASON TO CARE**

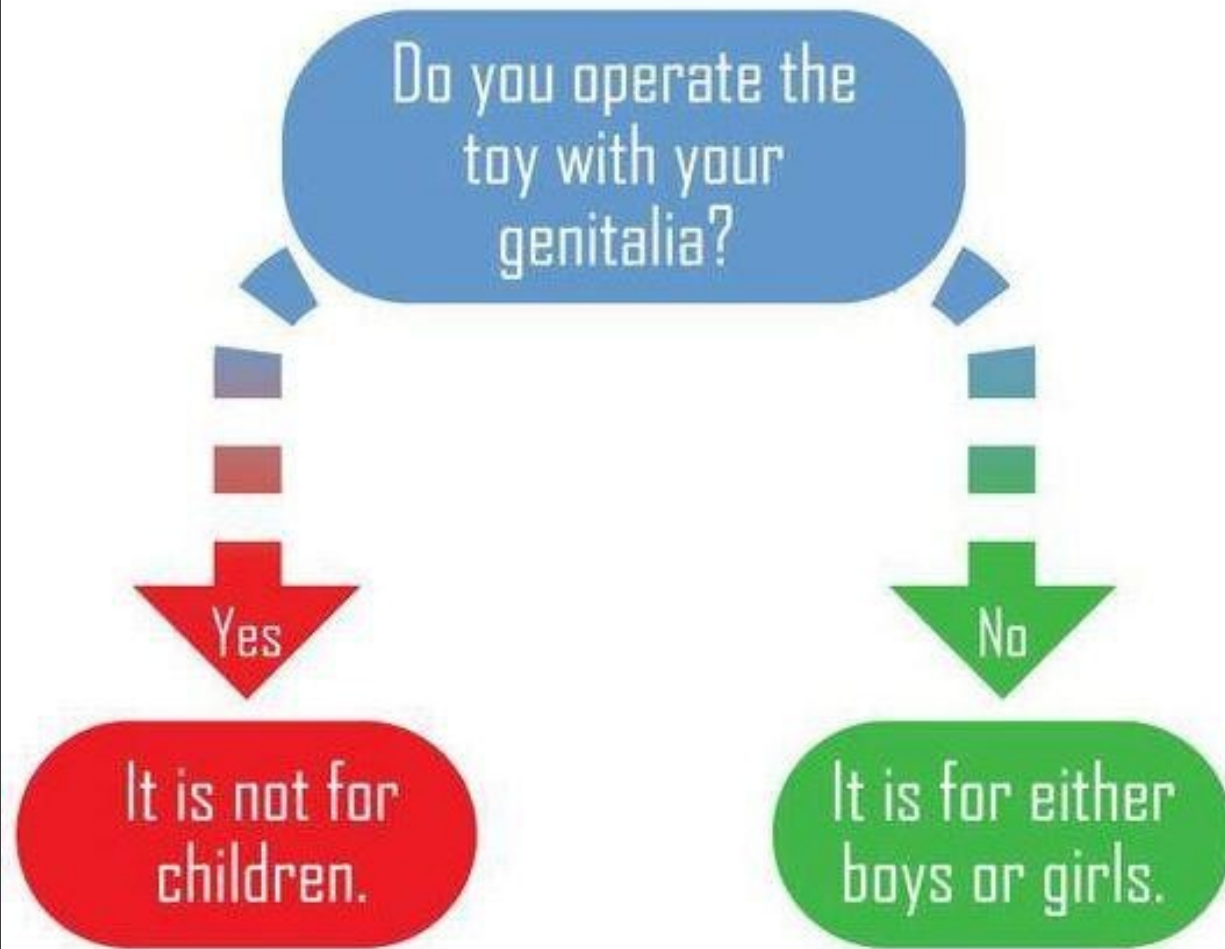
**CHILDREN HAVE BETTER  
MENTAL HEALTH  
OUTCOMES IF WE  
RECOGNIZE THEM FOR  
THE GENDER THEY ARE  
RATHER THAN THE  
GENDER WE THINK THEY  
SHOULD BE**

# Separating Apples and Oranges Requires Separating Gender Identity from Gender Expressions

- **GENDER IDENTITY:** Who I know myself to be at my core—male, female, or other
- **GENDER EXPRESSION:** How I put my gender presentation together—the toys I like to play with, the activities I like to do, the children I choose to play with, the clothes I like to wear, the way I like to move, and so forth

# Gender Affirmative Model for Gender Expressions

How to tell if a toy is for boys or girls.



original version via ([facebook.com/dumbsainthood](https://facebook.com/dumbsainthood))  
updated version ([duelinganalog.com](https://duelinganalog.com))



# SECOND STEP SEPARATING APPLES FROM ORANGES

- **Stop** measuring gender dysphoria  
(= measure of pathology or psychological distress)
- **Start** measuring gender identity  
(= measure of developmental status and cognitive/emotional awareness)

# APPLES



- Children who often show up in child gender research as the “persisters”
- Cross- gender in identifications early in life; continue on the same track into and beyond puberty (Consistent, Persistent, and Insistent)
- Typically say, “I **am** a -----” rather than “I **wish I was** a -----”
- Many express body dysphoria
- Gender explorations typically don’t present as child’s play but serious work
- Nature thread of their gender web often quite strong
- Our youngest cohort of transgender people



# ORANGES



- Children who often show up in child gender research as the “desisters”
- Gender-nonconforming but do not repudiate their assigned natal sex. May say “I **wish I was** a ...”
- Large number of these children will become gay or queer, exploring gender on way to discovering sexual identities
- Do not tend to repudiate their bodies, but can engage in fantasy play or ruminations about life in another body
- Explorations in realm of gender expressions rather than core gender identities
- Nature, nurture, and culture all strong threads





THE GENDER CREATIVE CHILD

EHRENSAFT



"Should be required reading  
for all therapists, pediatricians,  
and K-12 educators and for  
parents whose children express  
their gender differently."

—Genny Beemyn, PhD, coauthor of  
*The Lives of Transgender People*

# THE GENDER CREATIVE CHILD

Pathways for Nurturing and  
Supporting Children Who  
Live Outside Gender Boxes

DIANE EHRENSAFT, PhD

Author of *Gender Born, Gender Made* and director of mental health  
at the University of California—San Francisco Child and Adolescent Gender Center

FOREWORD BY NORMAN SPACK, MD, director, Gender Management Service,  
Boston Children's Hospital, and associate professor, Harvard Medical School

# FRUIT SALAD



- Tapestry of self which is neither male nor female but own creative understanding of gender, both in identities and expressions
- These children resist gender boxes
- Often live in gender middle grounds, where no either/or but instead all and any
- = our agender, pangender, gender fluid, gender queer children and youth
- Recently, culture thread of gender web shown to be strong: children influenced by new notion of gender infinity





# When should we think about a social transition for a child?

- When other possibilities ruled out, especially gender as a symptom of some other underlying problem
- When central issue is determined to be gender identity, not gender expressions
- When child expresses need/desire to transition
- When parents can offer positive support for their child transitioning
- ☾ Then consider a social transition, either everywhere, or in safe situations

# What About the Oranges?

- If issue is gender expression, not core gender identity, carve out space and support for child to express gender in way that suits the child, not way that suits society
- No social gender transition is called for

# What About the Fruit Salads?

- They are a mélange
- Some may request or benefit from a gender transition, but not necessarily a binary one
- Others are fine with the sex assigned on their birth certificate, but redefine what that means
- We need to stretch our thinking to consider a pangender, agender, third, fourth, and so forth gender identity

# FOR ALL GENDER CREATIVE CHILDREN

If safety and protection needed in face of a hostile environment, child helped to understand need for reining in authentic gender not because something wrong with the child, but because some people haven't yet been taught about gender in all its flavors and hues. When people don't understand, they may not be supportive or nice, but we're working on changing that.

# **WHAT IF THEY CHANGE THEIR MINDS?**

- **Then we help them spin together their gender web as they know it now**
- **There are no data to indicate that children who change their gender more than once over time, including switching back from transgender to their original gender, are at risk for any psychological disturbances—as long as we support them in their journey**

# Interventions with the Family

- **Work with family to accept and support child they have. If family begins from place of rejection or upset, we start there, work toward getting child into focus/ thinking about what their child needs**
- **Our goal is to facilitate the realization that their child's gender is not about the parents' dreams about their child but their child's dreams for themselves**
- **What we never do: Recommend that parents have child switch playmates, change toy preferences, repudiate clothing or activity preferences, spend more time with parent of same assigned gender with aim of making child more gender normative**

# Guidelines for Ensuring Healthy Apples, Oranges and Fruit Salad

- Listen to the child, help the child discover gender position that feels most authentic, fortify that child's gender resilience
- From Milton Diamond: Gender does not lie between our legs, but between our ears. To live comfortably in your skin does not equate with living uncomfortably with your genitalia.
- Always keep in mind that penis does not necessarily = male and vagina does not necessarily = female
- Make no attempts to ward off a transgender or gender-nonconforming outcome, including social transitions in pre-pubertal children
- Critical variable = social support, in the form of acknowledgment, acceptance and advocacy

# LET THE CHILDREN SPEAK

- Question asked to a UCSF Gender Clinic nine-year-old patient, **an apple**, who had socially transitioned from male to female at age 8:  
“What would you do if someone told you that now it was time to go back to living as a boy?”
- Emphatic Response:  
“I’d take ‘em to court.” Pause. “Or they can take me to court.”