

Should children be allowed to choose their own gender?

There has been a lot of discussion on this topic since the Church of England made its decree regarding CofE primary schools in England and Wales. The decree is that children should be allowed to choose their own gender. The story has appeared in all mainstream newspapers in the UK and was the subject of discussion on BBC's Question Time last week. It's surprising that in none of this writing or discussion have I read or heard anybody either a: define gender, b: make clear the distinction between gender and sex or c: disagree with this decree in any degree. Apparently, it's a no-brainer.

Actually, it's not a no-brainer but rather it is quite a complex issue.

The word 'gender' itself actually has two meanings in common usage as well as in dictionary definitions. Gender could mean the same as 'sex' - i.e., male or female, according to physical traits. The second meaning of gender, which (I think) is the one being used by the Church of England, regards behaviour, or the behaviour traits adopted by or associated with one or other of the sexes. This must be the meaning in the minds of the Church because their example is about allowing children to dress up and make-believe however they want to, such as boys wearing a tiara or girls playing with trucks. Because of the dual meaning of the word 'gender', the issue has become confused and it is crucial that the word be clearly defined whenever it is being used. In this case, let's define gender as 'the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex' (*online Cambridge dictionary*).



So gender is *a state of mind* which manifests itself in behaviour, which includes dress but is much, *much* more than that - not that you would know it from the mainstream discussion. 'Sex' is the physical reality of being either male or female. Gender is how you act based on your understanding of how your sex should behave, whichever sex you identify with (so a transgender man who identifies as a woman sees wearing a dress as the correct behaviour for a woman and is therefore following a gender stereotype just as much as a woman who wears a dress). So the question as to whether children should be allowed to choose their own gender is also the question of whether children should be allowed to choose their own *behaviour*. That's a very different question. When it comes to children dressing up for fun, or adults for that matter, of course everyone should be allowed to dress however they like. That *is* a no-brainer. However, a boy who likes to pick up a gun and run around pretending to shoot people in the face, who is also acting out some kind of gender realisation, might be discouraged and coached that being really aggressive to others makes people not

like you and makes for an unhappy world.

The debate gets trickier when we remind ourselves that actually gender is necessarily *cultural* and therefore not all behaviour is gender-related, even if people think it is. For example, some men in my experience think that gardening is effeminate, but many men do it. Men who like to grow marigolds are not affecting gender, it is just something they enjoy. Likewise, I



I don't think that women who play football are affecting gender either, because some women like to and some don't and there are 'girlie' women who play football and there are 'butch' lesbians who don't. For a behaviour trait to be considered gender there has to be a cultural, however localised, element to it. For example, aggressive men who operate in gangs forcefully imposing their will on others are manifesting gender.

If this is not complex enough, there is also an irony to the Church's statement. Given that behaviour manifested by gender must be cultural (in other words, either a generally adopted or generally associated trait with either males or females), the decree itself can be seen to be perpetuating the stereotypes that it claims to be trying to combat. Saying that boys should be allowed to wear tutus and tiaras is saying that tutus and tiaras are a girl's thing. Saying that girls should be able to play with trucks is saying that trucks are a boy's thing. Furthermore, you have to ask yourself what kind of schools, in the first place, are banning boys from trying on a tiara or preventing girls from playing with trucks? Do such such places even exist in 2017 Britain?

So to what conclusion does this lead us?

The question posed by this article needs to be rephrased in this way:

Should children be allowed to behave in any way which is generally associated with one or the other sex?

When it comes to dressing up for fun then the question is easy. Where would British comedy be without men dressing up as women? Shakespeare and his players did their fair share of drag, ironically because of gender roles



preventing women from being actors, and in the plays there are multiple instances in plots where women (played by men) dress up as men. Unfortunately, the discussion of clothing is where the mainstream debate stops, when this really needs to be where the debate begins. The question is asking not only should children be able to choose their own gender behaviour but it is also asking: What kind of society, what kind of culture, what kind of male-female relationships do we want? If a boy wants to be gentle and meek and submissive, then perhaps this should not be discouraged. But what about girls? Should shy, submissive girls be encouraged to be more assertive? I would say yes. Should boys being very aggressive and fighting be encouraged to have more humility. Again, I would say yes.

Do we all have the right to dress and appear however we want? I believe yes, we have the right, because we are doing no one harm. Should we be able to do this without ridicule or marginalisation? Again, yes, but in reality that will probably never happen. If I walked down the street in 500 BCE Athens in a navy-blue pin-striped Saville Row suit with wing tips, people would probably laugh at me. If I walked through my village today in a toga, people would laugh at me. That would have to be my choice, knowing the reaction I would receive.

But do we have the right to *behave* in any way we want? Of course not. Should children be allowed to express their gender in any way they choose? The sensible answer is the same for all behaviour exhibited by children. Education *is* necessary and good education involves adults allowing children freedom up to the point where the behaviour is detrimental to the child or to the wider social group, at which point the detrimental behaviour needs to be discouraged. The real problem in the UK and elsewhere is not that boys don't get to wear tutus and girls don't get to play with trucks. The real problem is that there is too much aggression in society and there is universal exploitation of the weak by the strong, especially of women by men. However, this has not been debated and the Church's decree, intentionally or not, has had the effect of limiting the debate about gender.

In this light, the Church of England, itself a long-time perpetrator of male dominant gender roles and wearer of dresses, yet generally supported in the mainstream news in England, can be seen to be overly simplistic and potentially harmful.



Gender roles and gender behaviour, by their very definition, are copied by children, modelled by adults and delivered through education and culture. The education system is not in reality or historically the medium for the creation of gender fluidity or the breaking down of gender roles, but rather education of children by adults is and always has been the delivery system of the gender roles themselves. Any society could create aggressive

and dominant men or submissive and gentle men; dominant or submissive women. Whether or not we allow children complete freedom of choice, the behaviours which the children adopt in their gender discovery will be behaviours borrowed from the adults they see at school, at home, on TV and on the Internet. You can allow boys to dress in a tutu at play time, but if at the end of the day all the parents at the school gate are mums, the tutu experience is soon overwritten. You can allow girls to play with trucks, but if you teach them about Henry VIII and Winston Churchill, don't expect them to associate women with power. You can bring in a transgender man to meet the kids and show them that he is a friendly, intelligent human being, and not a freak, but if that is the only transgender man they ever meet then they are not going to consider transgenderism part of the daily norm - nor should they, because it's not. The choice regarding gender roles, whether we like it or not, lies *not* with the children, but in fact the choice of how to behave and how future generations will behave lies squarely with us, the adults.

No matter how tolerant society becomes of transgenderism or alternative sexuality, this will always be true. The Church of England decree is irrelevant. Schools, on the other hand, are far from irrelevant but they are not places where children independently discover gender. Schools are places where young children experience the wider society that is already in place. Boys raised to be gentle will discover aggressive alternatives; girls raised to be subservient and meek will discover feminism and lesbianism. Then they will make their choice in their play and in the interactions with each other.

Whether or not we give children the choice, they will anyway choose from the alternatives we, the adults, present to them and offer them through our own behaviour. This is true for all children whether they end up L, G, B, T, Q or none of the above. I suggest that the reason there is a proportionally high number of transgender women in Thailand, for example, is because there is a proportionally high number of transgender women in Thailand! Same applies for hookers in Las Vegas or suicide bombers in Syria. The choice then is not ultimately the children's choice; they will copy us. Ultimately, the choice is ours.

November 21 2017

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