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[When is it OK for boys to be girls, and girls to be boys?](#)
[Many kids want to look and act like the other sex. For some, it's a phase; for others, it's not. Parents and schools are adjusting.](#)

- [Ilene Lechuk, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Park Day School is throwing out gender boundaries.

Teachers at the private Oakland elementary school have stopped asking the children to line up according to sex when walking to and from class. They now let boys play girls and girls play boys in skits. And there's a unisex bathroom.

Admissions director Flo Hodes is even a little apologetic that she still balances classes by gender.

Park Day's gender-neutral metamorphosis happened over the past few years, as applications trickled in for kindergartners who didn't fit on either side of the gender line. One girl enrolled as a boy, and there were other children who didn't dress or act in gender-typical ways. Last year the school hired a consultant to help the staff accommodate these new students.

"We had to ask ourselves, what is gender for young children?" Hodes said. "It's coming up more and more."

Park Day's staff members are among a growing number of educators and parents who are acknowledging gender variance in very young children. Aurora School, another private elementary school in Oakland, also is seeing children who are "gender fluid" and hired a clinical psychologist to conduct staff training.

Children with gender variant behaviors feel intensely that they want to look and act like

the other sex. They prefer toys and activities typical of the opposite gender. Signs usually start appearing between the ages of 2 and 4.

For some children, it's a passing phase. Some grow up to be heterosexual, some gay. Some children insist they are the opposite sex although they might have a hard time explaining it. One nurse therapist said a boy once told her, "I think I swallowed a girl."

"The point is we don't know the outcome and don't need to know," said Catherine Tuerk, who runs the gender variance outreach program at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., considered a leader in the field.

"What we need is a place where children can express what they want to," said Tuerk, who has been working on gender variance for three decades.

Kids have always explored gender roles, but precisely how many exhibit gender variance has not been estimated, said Dr. Edgardo Menvielle, associate professor of psychiatry with the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

"What is new is how parents and educators are addressing it and being open to it at earlier ages," said Taneika Taylor of the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, an organization in Washington, D.C., that is trying to end discrimination and violence caused by gender stereotypes.

This increased awareness, Taylor said, is fueled partly by the availability of information on the Internet and television. As the school year begins, new Web sites, e-mail support groups, educational materials and conferences offer support and education for parents and teachers of kids who defy gender stereotypes.

Their common message is not to try to change who these kids are, though mainstream mental health professionals are not unified. Some believe such feelings can and should be extinguished through therapy; others believe that can destroy children's self-esteem.

"If you are forced to be something you don't want to be as a kid, you are miserable," said Carla Odiaga of Boston, the consultant hired at Park Day.

Odiaga speaks from a decade of experience counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teens who she says are scarred by early memories -- a daughter forced to

dress like a girl or a son whose dad hit him when he refused to play sports.

In the worst cases, children pushed by parents and picked on by peers grow depressed, suicidal or physically ill, said Caitlin Ryan, a clinical social worker at San Francisco State University who is conducting a long-term survey of gay youths and their families. She said many adolescents she talked to were picked on from kindergarten age -- long before they knew their sexual identity -- for looking or acting "too feminine" or "too butch."

Gender variance is an especially touchy topic when young children are the subjects. The Traditional Values Coalition calls efforts to accommodate these kids "normalizing the abnormal."

The group's executive director, Andrea Lafferty, said gender variance is a Bay Area phenomenon.

"If you talk to your typical person across America, they would be appalled," she said. "God made us male and female, and God makes no mistakes. To teach a child at an early age self-hatred, and that's what this gender variance is, is very sad."

Warren Throckmorton, an associate professor of psychology at Grove City College in Pennsylvania known for his work in the so-called ex-gay movement, agrees that some gender-variant children could be redirected to their birth sex.

"I've treated kids who were quite sure they were the opposite gender and are now quite consistent in their behavior and their feelings with their biological sex," said Throckmorton.

But he warned against dogma on either side of the debate. "It's so individual. I don't want to say there's one answer."

Dr. Herb Schreier, a psychiatrist with Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland who leads a gender variance support group, said studies show children's feelings about their gender are "hardwired" at birth.

"It's really important that the public be aware this is not something parents can turn their kids into. The data is very clear on this," Schreier said.

San Francisco mom Marci Riseman, whose 4-year-old son likes ballet, princess dresses and pink dragons, attributes the acceptance he has met to living in a liberal region. His preschool is open to his atypical play, and others in his ballet class don't care if he wears a tutu, Riseman said.

However, Riseman also gets support from the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., which has a gender variance program considered a leader in the field. She joined the program's 5-year-old online community, which has nearly 200 subscribers nationwide.

Petaluma mom Leslie Hansen knew something was different when her daughter was 2.

"She refused to wear pink, barrettes or anything fancy in her hair. She wanted her hair short. She didn't want to wear lace, dresses, patent leather shoes. She didn't want to play with dolls. Well, she had a dollhouse, but she put animals in it," Hansen said.

Her daughter, now 15, has short blond hair, braces, earrings in both ears. She binds her breasts in a too-small sports bra and could pass either as either a boy or a girl. She rides a skateboard and horses. Her room is filled with her collection of horses and J.R.R. Tolkien books.

Her birth name is Marisa, but she decided to enter 10th grade this month at Petaluma High School as Sasha, a name as androgynous to her as her cargo pants and T-shirts. She told her parents last year that she feels more like a boy than a girl.

Her mom, a family therapist, wasn't surprised. But she said not everyone understands Marisa or her family's response to her feelings. Even close friends have asked, "Haven't you tried to talk Marisa out of it?"

"People just don't get it. She's just who she is," Leslie Hansen said.

Sasha's school has been accommodating, offering her a private bathroom and place to change for gym class if she decides to enroll as a boy. The teen credits her parents for her relatively easy transition and self-confidence.

"Most other kids have had rough experiences. I'm one of the luckiest," she said,

explaining that she recently met other teens in a Santa Rosa support group whose parents kicked them out of the house or who suffered harassment at school.

Other new efforts connecting kids and parents include Gender Public Advocacy Coalition's program Children As They Are, which supports and guides parents and teachers working with gender-variant children in preschool through sixth grade. It is launching a Web site this school year with brochures, meeting announcements and online networking.

Another advocacy group, the California Safe Schools Coalition, based in San Francisco, has been conducting workshops and surveys to determine which schools are best at eliminating discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

And Academy-Award-winning documentarian Debra Chasnoff is producing a film titled "Straight Laced" with Women's Educational Media of San Francisco that features interviews with teens, including Marisa Hansen, about how traditional gender roles affect their lives. The film, due for release in 2007, will be part of a series about nontraditional kids, school pressures and bullies made available to schools around the country.

"We have found out, with an uphill battle, that schools are beginning to listen," said Schreier of Children's Hospital Oakland.

In some cases, schools have been forced to pay attention. The California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000 prohibits discrimination and harassment in public schools on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

In 2004, a federal court ordered Morgan Hill Unified School District to create a sensitivity training program for staff and students in seventh and ninth grades. The order ended a lawsuit brought by six students who said school officials ignored their pleas for help when they were abused by other students who thought they were gay.

According to a GenderPAC survey, students at more than 1,900 elementary schools and 150 preschools across the country are protected by district policies that prevent discrimination and harassment based on students' gender identity and sexual orientation.

While many of those schools were in California, the state is not alone. In a highly publicized case, a couple convinced the Broward County school system in Florida this year to admit their son to kindergarten as a girl.

He's reportedly the youngest transgender child admitted to a South Florida school, but the Broward and Miami-Dade County school systems were ready with pre-existing policies to accommodate such students.

Resources

Read about it: "If You Are Concerned About Your Child's Gender Behaviors" is a Q&A guide for parents, produced by the Children's National Medical Center's outreach program. It can be downloaded from the center's Web site:

www.dccchildrens.com/gendervariance.

Talk to other parents: Join the center's electronic listserv by calling (212) 884-2504 or e-mail pgroup@cnmc.org. In the Bay Area, there is a support group led by Dr. Herb Schreier, a psychiatrist with Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland, and parent Stephanie Brill. The group can be reached by e-mail at sbrill@california.com.

Films for families and educators: Documentaries produced by the Women's Educational Media of San Francisco include "It's Elementary," which explores how kids can talk about family diversity, name-calling and stereotypes. "Let's Get Real" examines taunting and bullying because of racial differences, perceived sexual orientation, learning disabilities, religious differences, sexual harassment and more. Available through the Web site www.womedia.org.

Books for children*:

"Oliver Button is a Sissy" by Tomie de Paola

"The Sissy Duckling" by Harvey Fierstein

"It's Perfectly Normal" by Robie H. Harris and Michael Emberley

"Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: A Book for Teens on Sex and Relationships" by Ruth Bell et al.

* Recommended by the Outreach Program of Children with Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

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