

Raising a gender-variant child

Neither you nor any other parents of a gender-variant child are responsible for a child's gender variance or sexual orientation—any more than you or they are responsible for the child's being right- or left-handed. Remember that eventual sexual orientation is uncertain and will remain so until your child becomes fully conscious of his or her sexual attractions, is able to label that sexual orientation appropriately, and is willing to disclose it to others.

Whatever the final outcome, here are some tips on what you can do to make your child's life (and your own) easier:

Make your home a safe space. It may be the only safe place the child has. Allowing the child to be who he or she is at home builds self-esteem. Preschoolers may need your help to recognize social situations in which people might react negatively to gender-variant behavior. Older children learn to make decisions on their own about how to express themselves and what interests to pursue in public.

Encourage appropriate activities that fit your child's interests and talents. Activities “prescribed” to change the child are always a failure. Children overly focused on very few interests should be introduced to alternative activities, given adequate time with each parent to support these new activities, and praised for trying. Protect a regular time for the child to spend with the parent or other adult of his or her gender. Try not to withdraw emotionally because your child's interests are very different from yours.

Encourage communication. Listen to the child's concerns and wishes without criticizing, so that the child feels understood and remains open with you. Talk with the child matter-of-factly and in positive terms about being different. Model tolerance and acceptance of diversity for your children. Include siblings in these discussions.

Avoid stereotyping. Don't say things like “only girls play with dolls” or “boys love to play ball but girls do not.” Instead, tell your child there are many kinds of boys and girls. Become vigilant about the language you use, avoiding assumptions about boyfriends, girlfriends, and marriage. Keep in mind that gay men and lesbians form long-term committed relationships that often include children. Express affirming opinions toward well-known openly gay individuals and couples through family discussions of news events, books, and movies.

Help the child with bullying. Look for resources to guide you on how to teach the child to handle bullying. Do not blame the child if he or she is bullied. Ask the child to tell you if bullying occurs. Be alert to possible warning signs, such as school refusal, aches and pains, or excessive crying.

Advocate with schools. Insist that your local schools adopt policies to eliminate bullying. Teachers are more likely to intervene if parents explain the issues and anticipate problems. Request that children's books on diversity, including sexual orientation and gender identity, be available in the library.

Advocate with extended family and friends. You might also need to educate grandparents, aunts and uncles, and neighbors. They may also benefit from some of the materials suggested as resources. Use all opportunities to educate children and adults about the value of respecting those who are unique or in some way different.