

FAMILY MATTERS



Just let your children grow!

PHOTOGRAPH: ZUL SWAN | MODELS: NAVYA AND AKSHAT
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Little Niles, aged four, scowls at the shiny red fire truck his mother holds out to him. "I don't want this; I want 'didi's doll,'" he hollers in rage, pushing it away.

His mum tries to cajole him saying, "'Beta', you're a boy; boys don't play with dolls, girls do." But Niles's howling doesn't stop. Finally, his exasperated mother has to give in and coax his 'didi' into temporarily parting with her favourite doll.

What gives? Niles is like any other healthy, happy boy; it's only what his apparently narrow-minded parents think of as his 'abnormal' fondness for dolls that worries them sick.

Like Niles's folks, other parents too, dealing with similar 'unconventional' behaviour, are plagued by some really disturbing questions — has my over-protectiveness made my son a sissy? Could it have been my liberal attitude that has encouraged my daughter to refuse to wear dresses?

Break the gender code!

There is a blurring of gender rules today; all the more reason why parents need to deal sensitively with cross-gender behaviour in children, writes **Veena Patwardhan**

Don't freak out

According to psychologists, there's no need for parents to press the panic button at the first signs of opposite sex behaviour in their children. For, the reasons for the behaviour could be as simple as the fact that the child lacks playmates of his own sex during the early years of socialisation, the absence of an older, same-sex role model, or else, excessive attachment to a parent, resulting in the lack of individuation of a boy from his mother or a girl from her father. Children usually become aware of their gender identity around the age of two. Yet, we might come across a little boy who enjoys wearing his mother's shoes or a little girl who loves playing football with the boys. That's because, though well aware of their identity as a boy or a girl, little children are still too young to understand what, according to their elders, is gender-appropriate behaviour. In other words, they are unaware of the gender code.

The gender code

Kamini Rege, lecturer in human development at Mumbai's Nirmala Niketan College of Home Science, explains, "Parents raise their kids to conform to traditional gender roles, but these roles are not necessarily based on the true capabilities of either gender. For example, in the US, in the 1950s, girls who said they wanted to become scientists were laughed at and told to become secretaries!"

In this context, it is interesting to note that the girl child's interest in male pursuits is increasingly gaining acceptance nowadays, but when it comes to the male child showing 'girlish' inclinations, they

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are frowned upon. Consider this. If a little girl loves to indulge in typical boy stuff, the doting parents wax eloquent about how their Rani is a regular tomboy. But, if Rani's brother, Raja, loves to play 'house-house' with the girls, let alone feeling uncomfortable talking about this, they would rather keep mum about it, lest their darling son comes across as effeminate.

Taking a dim view of such an attitude, Rege says, "I think people, even little people, should be able to do what they want to do

without worrying about them being thought of as gay." In this context, think of that scene in the film 'Monsoon Wedding' in which a young boy is callously chastised by his dad for showing an interest in cooking and wanting to pursue a career in this field... Obviously, in the father's opinion, a profession that involves cooking is not manly enough. Parents with such a rigid outlook don't realise the harm they inflict on sensitive young minds. Similarly, when parents insist that girls are delicate and incapable of engaging in rough and tumble games, or that boys should hide their emotions and fears behind a macho exterior, they are only reinforcing the gender code and not being fair to their children. In fact, preventing kids from breaking out of the gender straitjacket is awfully cruel. So don't be dogmatic or jump to the weirdest conclusions if in some ways, your kids don't conform to gender stereotypes. Moreover, if you over-react to a harmless cross-gender play activity, it could backfire and make a happy kid sullen and combative. Think of your children as just wanting to follow their natural inclinations. Don't make them feel like they're doing something wrong.

Get real

Take a long, hard look around you — you'll see there is a blurring of gender roles in the adult world today. Women pump iron and proudly show off their biceps, without feeling less feminine in any way. Men don't shy from donning an apron and rustling up meals for the family, quite confident that this in no way undermines their masculinity. Cool

GENDER IDENTITY DISORDER (GID)

Only an extremely small number of children develop a syndrome known as GID in which feelings of gender discontent persist through adolescence and even adulthood. Children suffering from GID...

- Insist they are the opposite sex.
- Experience discomfort about their birth gender and express hatred for their bodies.
- Persist with cross-gender behaviour and cross-dressing even as adolescents.
- Show clear evidence of significant distress and anxiety, with these emotions deepening over time. Such kids need professional help. Hence, parents should confer with their family doctor or directly consult a psychologist at the earliest.

dudes flaunt earrings and gals sport radical boy-crops with panache. But that's no big deal.

After all, individuality is everything, and so a person should be free to follow her or his inclinations. Research shows that

most children outgrow tendencies towards cross-dressing and opposite sex play activities in early childhood itself. Rege clarifies, "Once some sort of verbal distinction between words such as 'boy' and 'girl' is made, a process

known as gender-role learning occurs, whereby a child's behaviour begins to match the sets of standards shared by parents, teachers and other children."

All it takes is love, time, a non-judgemental attitude and patience. **E**