

COACH'S CORNER: A RESPONSE TO GENDER CONFUSION



Parents have asked us for pointers on counteracting the cultural message that masculinity is **toxic** and hetero-normative culture is both **evil and oppressive**. Impressionable children are understandably fearful of acquiring those labels. Their desperate need to fit in by claiming a different "identity" is both predictable and likely.

Fortunately, when a young person leave that oppressive environment, or when they have matured enough to realize they don't need their "herd" to be safe, get ahead or be happy, most of those adolescent feelings become inconvenient and unsustainable. That's why more than 80% of gender-confused teens resolve those feelings post-adolescence.

To navigate it, parents and concerned adults will do well to remember that the higher reasoning center of a child's brain is not fully developed until age 25. Teens are literally incapable of understanding surgical or hormonal therapies that attempt to match their bodies to their feelings will have long-term consequences. In light of this, there are some things parents **can** do, and others you absolutely should NOT do, with a teen who wants to be called by a different name, or dress in the attire of the opposite sex.

First, remember you were a teen once, too. Remember that phase where you thought you knew everything and were convinced that adults (especially parents) were woefully misinformed? There is a certain poetic irony in realizing you are parenting a child in that phase. Instead of insisting you are right and they are wrong (and will one day know it), you can smile at the thought of their future discomfort when their wisdom catches up to Real Life.

Second, pick your battles. Will fighting over attire improve your family life and relationship? Probably not. Self-expression in clothing, hair style, and make up are all temporary. Keep your opinions about how unattractive you think their style is to yourself, since making a big deal about it will only increases tension. By all means capture their style in pictures! Don't deprive yourself of the day when you can all enjoy a good laugh the way you do at Mom and Dad's clothes and hairstyles from the 60's.

Third, draw the line at anything permanent. Give your adolescent an opportunity to discuss or make their case for hormone therapy, surgery, or a legal name change. Discussions can't hurt anybody. In fact, it will hone their ability to defend their beliefs.

(cont.)

However, do NOT forget **their brain is still under construction**. Your child – no matter how “smart” or gifted they are – is unable to comprehend the long-term consequences of permanent, irreversible actions. Facilitating or encouraging hormone therapy or surgery when your child lacks the ability to give informed consent is **child abuse**. It’s the teen who will have to live with the permanence of those procedures.

It might not be pleasant to listen to the whining and complaining about how unfair you are, but standing firm until their brain has developed is more loving than giving in now and seeing regret later. Perhaps the simplest response is,

*“I hear you. If you still feel this way when your brain is fully developed, then you can do whatever you want, on your own dime. My job as your parent is to be sure you don’t do something **permanent** based on a **temporary** feeling.”*

Lastly, do not allow your love for your child to blind you to potential abuse. It’s not uncommon for gender-confused teens to have emotional or physical experience driving it. Teens will go to great lengths to hide trauma from you, usually for one of two reasons. Sometimes it is to “protect” you. Adolescents believe angering or disappointing their parents feels as world-ending to you as it does to them, and therefore ought to be avoided at all costs. They rationalize hiding distressing information is a noble gesture. They are “protecting” Mom from being upset.

But another reason for keeping experiences secret is to protect the person who has molested them. Grooming is gradual and incremental. The steps an adult takes to gain trust and convince a child they are on a “special adventure” with their adult friend are undetectable to an adolescent who lacks higher reasoning functions. They are unaware how their abuser is shaping future preferences and behaviors, and can become convinced the relationship must be protected, even if they have

to lie to your face.

If your child has a close connection to an adult (no matter who it is), squelch the inner voice that says “Invasion of privacy!” and monitor their communication: text, Snapchat, email, IMs – everything. **Better to be mistaken than oblivious.**

The cry for “tolerant inclusion,” even with good intentions, can set your child up to be miserable later on. So be firm, remember adolescence is pretty confusing for most people, and **avoid making permanent decisions based on temporary feelings**. You can both survive it.



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