WILLIAM WANTS A DOLL. CAN HE HAVE ONE?
Feminists, Child Care Advisors, and Gender-Neutral Child Rearing

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Using an analysis of child care books and parenting Web sites, this article asks if second-wave feminism’s vision of gender-neutral child rearing has been incorporated into contemporary advice on child rearing. The data suggest that while feminist understandings of gender have made significant inroads into popular advice, especially with regard to the social construction of gender, something akin to “a stalled revolution” has taken place. Children’s gender nonconformity is still viewed as problematic because it is linked implicitly and explicitly to homosexuality.

Keywords: gender nonconformity; children; advice books; homosexuality; feminism

William wants a doll, so when he has a baby some day,
he’ll know how to dress it, put diapers on double,
and gently caress it, to bring up a bubble,
and care for his baby as every good father should learn to do.
William has a doll! William has a doll!
’Cause some day he may want to be a father, too.

Other societies assign roles to men and women that are quite unlike ours. But no country I know of has tried to bring them up to think of themselves as similar. Such an

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A major thrust of second-wave feminism was the revisioning of the socialization of children. This article asks, What is the legacy of this political project? Are the goals of second-wave feminism now incorporated into contemporary child care advice? More than ever, parents, especially middle- and upper-class parents, seek advice from experts on the rearing of children (Geboy 1981; Hays 1996). According to Hochschild (1994), advice books can provide a window into how social issues are culturally understood. Contemporary child care advice books—manuals for socialization—help parents by providing culturally appropriate understandings of gender and interpretations of children’s doings of gender. Analysis of these is one way to assess how gender socialization is popularly understood today. However, first let me address the question of why a contemporary feminist researcher, in the age of gender as done and performed, is interested in an outdated notion such as gender socialization.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, many feminist sociologists used a combination of sex-role and socialization (sex-role socialization) theories to understand gender. However, by the mid-1980s, role theory had met with much critique for being ahistorical and failing to conceptualize power, and it had fallen out of favor as an approach for understanding gender (see Connell 1987 for one such account). Socialization fell (although perhaps not as hard) along with sex-role theory, especially as attempts at gender-neutral socialization did not begin to radically transform gender, and as gender began to be seen as a more complex phenomenon. Socialization has also been challenged by sociologists of childhood who rightly critique its exaggerated view of children as unagentic, blank slates (Chaput Waksler 1991; Thorne 1993). However, socialization may have been too hastily abandoned by feminist researchers. While feminist sociologists have theorized that gender has multiple locations, in identity, interaction, social structure, and discourse, one might argue that it is through socialization (and the management, negotiation, and resistance of it) that children learn how to operate in gendered structures (Lorber 1994), learn the repetitive stylized performances that constitute gender (Butler 1990), or learn how to do gender in interaction and how to avoid sanctions for doing it wrong (West and Zimmerman 1987). Furthermore, most feminist sociologists, regardless of theoretical bent, are likely to find it problematic that children’s access to clothes, toys, books, playmates, and expressions of emotion are severely limited by their gender. Understanding gender socialization remains important not only to explaining gender but also to the construction of gender inequality. This article is an attempt at uncovering new ways that research on gender socialization might continue to contribute to feminist research today.

Specifically, in this article, I ask if the proper socialization of children today includes gender-neutral socialization. Through an examination of parenting books
and Web sites (see appendix), I find that most advice now acknowledges and even emphasizes the social component of gender, and most suggests that girls can play with boys’ toys and vice versa. However, like previous researchers, I find a “stalled revolution” (Hochschild 1989). As the data below suggest, the problem of homosexuality thwarts child care advisors’ embrace of gender-neutral child rearing. Just as Stacey and Biblarz (2001) reveal the heteronormative presumption that shapes the discourse and research on lesbigay families, I find that this presumption also limits the discourse and advocacy of gender-neutral child rearing among popular child care advisors. This examination of gender socialization, through a contemporary lens, points to the important connections between gender and sexuality.

**FEMINISTS AND CHILD CARE ADVICE**

The concept of gender-neutral child rearing is a product of second-wave feminism, especially liberal feminism. Through consciousness-raising groups, early second-wave feminists developed a critique of how girls were raised and outlined the inequalities of girls’ socialization (Statham 1986). Feminists wanted to open up possibilities for girls and to remove limitations on their lives. They encouraged expanded roles for girls at home, at school, at work, and in the media. They argued for girls to have access to sports, trucks, math, science, blue jeans, and short hair, all previously off limits. Furthermore, they encouraged renouncing or at least limiting, for example, dresses, makeup, fairy tales, and housework, all understood as constraints on girls’ lives.

Liberal feminists, especially, took up this issue wholeheartedly and translated it into advocating for gender-neutral parenting for both girls and boys. Ms. magazine’s premiere issue in 1972 included the essay, highlighted on its cover, “On Raising Kids without Sex Roles.” Under the auspices of Ms. founder and writer Letty Cottin Pogrebin, the magazine continually published pieces on raising children in a nonsexist way, annually evaluated children’s toys, and published a regular column called “Stories for Free Children.” In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminists produced several books about gender-neutral parenting, including Greenberg’s (1978) *Right from the Start: A Guide to Nonsexist Childrearing* and Cottin Pogrebin’s (1980) *Growing Up Free*. However, perhaps more than any other vehicle, it was Marlo Thomas’s (1974) record, book, and television special *Free to Be You and Me* that popularized gender-neutral parenting in American culture. The book was a *New York Times* best seller, and the record sold millions of copies.

Gender-neutral parenting, as liberal feminists constructed it, drew from social and developmental psychology and social learning theory. “The early feminist movement enthusiastically took up the implications of social learning theory, and many if its recommendations for change were based on an implicit acceptance of behaviorist principles underlying social learning theory” (Statham 1986, 97). This
perspective emphasized the socially constructed aspect of gender and critiqued biological and psychoanalytic explanations.

Given this social learning orientation, these feminists emphasized changing children’s environments, especially what children played with, how they dressed, what they read, what they watched on television, and the roles that parents modeled. They also emphasized changing how parents responded to gender-nonconforming behaviors in children. *It’s All Right to Cry*, sung by a former National Football League football player on the *Free to Be You and Me* (Thomas 1974) album, epitomizes this tendency.

However, the feminist call for gender-neutral child rearing, especially as it was popularized by liberal feminists as they tried to market it to the larger public, fell short of earlier, more radical feminist visions. First, the liberal feminist call for gender-neutral child rearing did not fully grapple with how sexuality is entangled with gender, nor did it fully eradicate heterosexism and homophobia from its writings about gender socialization. Liberal feminists attempted to address issues of sexuality and to critique homophobia and heterosexism but did not do so successfully. For example, Cottin Pogrebin (1980) tried to address parents’ fears of homosexuality in children raised in nonsexist families. Her chapter on this begins by dispelling three “erroneous assumptions of our culture”: “1. that sex roles determine sexuality; 2. that specific ingredients make a child homosexual; and 3. that homosexuality is one of the worst things that can happen to anyone” (p. 274). However, she later constructed homosexuality as problematic, writing, “Don’t try to ‘prevent’ homosexuality. It won’t work and it may backfire” (p. 292). That preventing homosexuality may “backfire” continues to suggest that homosexuality is problematic. Similarly, she wrote, “Don’t make children feel they are the ‘wrong’ sex as this too can result in homosexuality,” (p. 295) and “Don’t use sex stereotypes as a vaccine against homosexuality. Trying to mold children to match stereotypes sometimes inspires just what parents meant to avoid. The all-male military school where fathers send boys to make them into men and the convent that was supposed to turn little girls into ‘ladies’ are often the scene of active homosexual experimentation” (p. 295). These arguments stop just short of saying that gender-neutral child rearing is good for children because it prevents homosexuality. This chapter from Cottin Pogrebin was also published in *Ms.* in 1980 under the title “The Secret Fear That Keeps Us from Raising Free Children,” where the comment about “backfiring” was edited out but the rest remained. Similarly, Greenberg’s (1978, 46) book *Right from the Start* asserted that homosexuality is okay and that children suffer when parents or schools are not accepting, but it went on to say that fathers “whose relations are positive, warm, and nurturing do not tend to have sons who grow up to be adult homosexuals.” She presented an implicit argument that gender-neutral families will prevent homosexuality. Both of these feminist authors drew on current-day science, citing medical and psychological research, to make implicit, strategic claims that might motivate parents to take up gender-neutral child rearing. One of these
claims was that gender-neutral child rearing would not cause homosexuality and might even prevent it.

Second, as gender-neutral parenting advocates, feminists understood such parenting to be a route to social change. “For rationalist feminism had always had a program of social change, and not just individual empowerment” (Ehrenreich and English 1978, 289). However, as feminists set out to popularize the idea of gender-neutral child rearing, they sold it to parents as a strategy for raising successful, happy children. Liberal feminists emphasized again and again that gender-neutral parenting was good for children as individuals and a way to “raise free children,” and in doing so, they muted the call for social change that it originally embodied.

While feminists of the second wave were calling for a revisioning of gender socialization in childhood, they were also critiquing much expert advice directed to women and mothers (Ehrenreich and English 1978; Friedan 1963). In particular, Dr. Benjamin Spock, the renowned pediatrician, received criticism from some of the most prominent feminists of the day, including Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. In the 1974 chapter “Are We Minimizing the Differences between Boys and Girls?” Spock wrote that boys must be brought up to be boys and girls to be girls. He “deplored” similar clothing or chores for boys and girls, and in his famous volume, Baby and Child Care, he advised that fathers should compliment daughters on their “dress, or hairdo, or the cookies she’s made.” Throughout the early 1970s, Spock encountered feminists who interrupted his lectures and mocked his ideas (Maier 1998; Spock and Morgan 1985). These criticisms, or “attacks” in Spock’s view, reached a crescendo when Spock spoke at the National Women’s Political Caucus in 1972. There, Steinem rose and said that he was “considered a symbol of male oppression—just like Freud” (Maier 1998, 353). However, when a few years later Spock reversed his positions and produced a new edition of Baby and Child Care (Spock and Parker 1998), “scrubbed clean of sexism” (Hulbert 2003), feminists seemed to forgive him. In the 10th-anniversary issue of Ms., Spock was named as one of the “heroes” of the women’s movement (Maier 1998; Spock and Morgan 1985).

Feminists have continued to be critical of expert advice to mothers, especially as this advice has grown (Grant 1998; Hulbert 2003). They are critical of a variety of issues, especially how experts speak down to mothers, address advice about child rearing to mothers and not fathers, tell mothers their children will be harmed if they work, see mothers as the cause of their children’s problems, and write of children as “he” and parents as “she” (Chira 1994; Grant 1998; Hays 1996; Statham 1986; Walzer 1998). Also, feminist sociologists have examined and critiqued explicitly gendered advice in women’s self-help books (Hochschild 1994; Simonds 1992). However, there is no examination of how contemporary advice understands or encourages the traditional gendered socialization of girls and boys. This article seeks to fill that gap and to understand what has been the legacy of feminists’ revisioning of gender socialization. To this end, I examine contemporary advice to
parents in the hopes that it will also offer insight into larger cultural understandings of the gender socialization of children.

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD**

To look at contemporary parenting advice about gender, I examine 34 parenting books and 42 articles on 15 Web sites that offer advice to parents. Since there is no comprehensive list of the best sellers in parenting (Hays 1996), I generated a list of books from a variety of complementary sources. I compiled recommended book lists from a variety of organizations that provide services or advocacy for parents and children, for example, National Parenting Information Network, Pediatric Nursing Association, Civitas, I Am Your Child Foundation, Lamaze, La Leche League, American Academy of Pediatrics, Zero to Three, and National Association for the Education of Young Children.

From these lists, I chose all the books that were general child care books—books that are a comprehensive manual about parenting and not only about one aspect of parenting. These books describe child development. They are the reference books that are intended for everyday parental consultation rather than those that parents consult about a particular problem. Each book at a minimum had to include advice on children age two or older, as a quick perusal of books that were only about baby care suggested that they would unearth few concerns around gender and are more focused on physical care (diaper changing, feeding) and milestones (when baby smiles, sits up, walks). I also excluded books focused only on teens as virtually all are discipline and problem books. I also excluded books that were not comprehensive and were only about sleeping, feeding, shy children, or spirited children. This sample does not consider how advice about gender might be entangled with advice about specific issues: sleep, discipline, shyness, spiritedness. However, most of the books in the sample include discussion of these topics as well, so this sort of advice is not entirely overlooked here. I included any other books that fit these criteria and had an Amazon.com sales ranking equal to or better than the lowest ranked book on the originally compiled recommended list as an attempt to gather the best sellers that might not be recommended. Finally, I included three comprehensive books that are about parenting the Black child to examine any racial differences that might exist in advice about gender socialization; however, on this dimension, I found none.

Parenting Web sites are a prolific source of examples of expert advice. I compiled the list of parenting Web sites in the same way that I collected the book sample. I examined the Web sites during two one-week periods in September 2002 and May 2003. I included only those that were directed primarily at parents and not at professionals. I omitted any sites that were only about babies and sites that were sponsored by a product, with the exception of Disney.com and the Pampers site, both comprehensive parenting sites. Finally, I note that parenting magazines are
another major source of parenting advice but did not examine these independently as many have Web sites that are included here, and many Web articles come directly from the magazines.

Recent histories have suggested that the field of child care advice is dominated by men, with Penelope Leach as the exception (Hulbert 2003). While this may have been true in the past and of the most famous advisors, this sample is composed of 16 books by women, 12 by men, and another 6 by both. The authors of the articles on the Web sites are evenly split between men and women. There was no apparent correlation between the gender of the author and a child care advisor’s stance toward gender-neutral parenting. The greatest number of authors claim their expertise from their medical or psychology credentials. As I discuss below, to some degree, the author’s profession plays a role in his or her understanding of gender socialization (see Table 1).

While the authors of these books and Web sites are easy to classify, their audiences are a bit more difficult. While many new parents read an advice book, it is likely that far more advice books are read by middle- and upper-class parents or the “baby boomer middle class” (Hulbert 2003, 364). Web sites require education, skill, and resources to access, and thus the digital divide likely gives more access to middle- and upper-class parents. It is also likely that more of the advice is read by women than by men, especially given that advice books are written to mothers and often have only one chapter addressed to fathers. Finally, while the authors generally assume that the readers of the books and Web sites are white, as evidenced by their lack of discussion about race or ethnicity, I could find no data to get a sense of whether readership varied by race or ethnicity.

About two-thirds of the books and all of the Web sites included explicit and substantial discussions of gender. Another five books made passing remarks about gender but did not provide any substantially developed advice about it.

From these sources, I analyze all text that explicitly offers information or advice about gender. By “explicitly,” I mean all sections in the books on gender development (which often explain when a child has a sense of gender), gender behavior (can my son wear a dress?), sexuality (including genitals, where babies come from, homosexuality), and the importance of mothers and/or fathers as caretakers. I do not examine the implicit ways the books are gendered, that is, if there are more pictures of girls versus boys in the book (see Statham 1986 for such an account). I am interested not in the books’ gendered biases but in their explicit advice about how to understand or manage gender in children. Finally, I pay only secondary attention to issues of how fathers and mothers should share the responsibility of care. There is a significant scholarly literature on this already (Grant 1998; Hays 1996; Hochschild 1989; Risman 1998; Walzer 1998). I examine how parents share child care responsibilities only when it arises as important to how children understand gender.

I read these materials inductively and asked the following questions: (1) Which theories of gender do experts offer to parents? (2) Do they advocate gender-neutral parenting? and (3) How do they recommend coping with a child’s gender nonconformity?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources with</th>
<th>Authors' Expertise</th>
<th>View of Gender-Neutral Parenting</th>
<th>Sales Ranking</th>
<th>Order in Sample</th>
<th>Bowker Bestseller&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td><strong>I. A theory of gender development,</strong></td>
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<td><strong>by theoretical paradigm</strong></td>
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<td><strong>A. Biological differences</strong></td>
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<td>Ames and Haber (1989), Your Eight-Year-Old</td>
<td>Ph.D. psychology, M.D.</td>
<td>Will not work/do not push</td>
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<td>Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway (1996),</td>
<td>R.N., M.D.</td>
<td>Could be harmful, do not push</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>What to Expect: The Toddler Years</td>
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<td>Does not discuss&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>kidshealth.org (2003)</td>
<td>Ph.D. psychology, writer</td>
<td>Will not work</td>
<td>439,965</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>Goldstein and Gallant (2002), The Parenting Bible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>B. Social learning</strong></td>
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<td>Beal, Villarosa, and Abner (1999), The Black Parenting Book</td>
<td>M.D., MPH</td>
<td>Advocates</td>
<td>59,387</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Butler and Kratz (1999), Field Guide to Parenting</td>
<td>MSW, parent</td>
<td>Advocates</td>
<td>171,732</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>Butler and Kratz, family.go.com, Disney (2003)</td>
<td>MSW, parent</td>
<td>Advocates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis and Keyser (1997), Becoming the Parent You Want to Be</td>
<td>Parenting educator, parent</td>
<td>Advocates</td>
<td>7,622</td>
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<td><strong>C. Psychoanalytic</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazelton, totalbabycare.com, Pampers (2003)</td>
<td>M.D.</td>
<td>Does not discuss&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>677</td>
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<td>Brazelton (1992), Touchpoints: The Essential Reference</td>
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<td>Advocates</td>
<td>16,341</td>
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<td>Leach (2000), Your Baby and Child</td>
<td>M.D.</td>
<td>Advocates</td>
<td>729</td>
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<td>Lieberman (1993), Emotional Life of the Toddler</td>
<td>Ph.D., psychology</td>
<td>Does not discuss&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Mayes and Cohen (2002), Yale Child Study Center Guide to Understanding Your Child</td>
<td>M.D.</td>
<td>(as personal choice)</td>
<td>66,551</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Spock and Parker (1998), Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care</td>
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<td>Advocates</td>
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<th>Order in Sample</th>
<th>Bowker Bestseller?</th>
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<td>Galinsky and David (1988), The Preschool Years Ed.D.</td>
<td>Advocates, perhaps will not work, do not push</td>
<td>66,029</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Includes biological, learning, and psychoanalytic Sears, askdsears.com (2003) M.D.</td>
<td>Could be harmful, do not push</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>American Academy of Pediatrics (1999), Caring for Your School-Age Child AAP.org (2003) M.D.</td>
<td>Will not work, could be harmful, do not push</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Stoppard (1995), Complete Baby and Child Care M.D.</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td>38,164</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Other Reiss (1997), Focus on the Family M.D., religious</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td>17,262</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. Discussion of gender but no explicit theory of gender</td>
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<td>Comer and Poussaint (1992), Raising Black Children M.D.s</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td>127,812</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reichlin and Winkler (2001), The Pocket Parent Preschool teacher, writer (as personal choice)</td>
<td>Advocates</td>
<td>8,821</td>
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<td>Rosemond (1990), Parent Power Family psychologist</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td>21,615</td>
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<td>Rosemond (2001), New Parent Power! Family psychologist</td>
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<td>Segal and Bardige (2000), Your Child at Play: Five to Eight Ph.D., Ed.D.</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td>663,993</td>
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<td>Segal (1998), Your Child at Play: Three to Five Ph.D., Ed.D.</td>
<td>Will not work</td>
<td>146,657</td>
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<tr>
<td>babycenter.com (2003) Mother, writer</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td></td>
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<td>babyzone.com (2003) Mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>mothering.com (2003) Parents</td>
<td>Mixed personal stories—does not advise</td>
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<td>Source</td>
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<td>Gender-neutral Parenting</td>
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<tr>
<td>naturalchild.com (2003)</td>
<td>M.Sc.</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Atkins, parenting.com (2003)</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Advocates (as personal choice), will not work</td>
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<td>Craig, parenting.com (2003)</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Advocates, will not work</td>
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<tr>
<td>parentsoup.com (2003)</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Does not discuss</td>
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### III. Minimal or no discussion of gender

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<th>Role</th>
<th>advocate?</th>
<th>Gender-neutral Parenting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazelton and Greenspan (2001), The Irreducible Needs of Children</td>
<td>Religious with M.D. coauthor</td>
<td>47,175 22 No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ezzo and Buckman (2000), On Becoming Preteenwise</td>
<td>M.D. coauthor</td>
<td>1,833 7 No</td>
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<td>Religious with M.D. coauthor</td>
<td>824,090 34 No</td>
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<td>Parent/Writer</td>
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<td>Hopson and Hopson (1992), Different and Wonderful</td>
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<td>Iovine (1999), The Girlfriend's Guide to Toddlers</td>
<td>Columnist/mother</td>
<td>3,484 9 No</td>
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<td>Parenting educator</td>
<td>27,000 18 No</td>
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<td>Sears and Sears (1998), The Baby Book</td>
<td>M.D. and R.N.</td>
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<td>Sears and Sears (1997), Complete Book of Christian Parenting</td>
<td>M.D. and R.N.</td>
<td>128,000 28 No</td>
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a. Bowker's Bestsellers are books that have appeared on 1 of 16 national bestsellers lists (e.g., The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Publishers Weekly) since 1998.

b. Many sources that had extensive discussions of gender did not explicitly discuss gender-neutral parenting. That is, there is no passage I can point to where one can explicitly hear the author's view. For some of these sources, I could have inferred a view. For example, it is very unlikely that Rosemond or Reisser would advocate gender-neutral parenting given everything else they say about gender. However, for other sources, it is not as easy to infer the author's view. Therefore, I chose to report only the views of those sources that explicitly discussed them.
RESULTS

Theorizing Gender in Contemporary Advice

While liberal feminists used social learning theory for understanding gender development in children, they often critiqued traditional psychoanalytic and biological theories of gender. Here I ask, Through which lens do child care advisors today understand gender development? Where I could identify a predominant theoretical underpinning for how the advisor(s) understood gender development, I categorized the sources into biological, social learning, and psychoanalytic explanations of gender development (see Table 1). Some sources recounted or made use of all three perspectives, and I could not discern that they favored any one in particular, and many gave no account of gender development.

Four sources emphasized biological difference. These told stories of the importance of hormones and/or fetal development and said that natural differences ultimately determine gendered behavior. While these sources sometimes said that nurturing plays a role, they describe biological differences as more important. For example,

But while certain societal expectations relate to sex roles, there are also certain biologically based leanings, which have led some experts to suggest that the tendency to nurture girls and boys differently actually stems (at least in part) from the fact that girls and boys by nature behave differently. Differences in the brain and in hormones seem to manifest themselves in differences in temperament and behavior that are visible from birth. In general, newborn boys are more physically active and more vigorous, while newborn girls are quieter, and more responsive to faces and voices. Typically, boys are more aggressive, girls more social; boys respond more to objects, girls to people. (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1996, 223)

Similarly, Ames and Haber (1989, 47) wrote, “The basic, genetic differences between the sexes are so central and so strong that even baby boys and baby girls impose their gender on their parents.” Sources like these presented gender as a natural, essential, determined aspect of the child.

Five sources emphasized a social learning perspective, which underscores how children learn the roles of men and women from parents, schools, and the media. While these sources sometimes said that biological differences played a role, they describe the learned component of gender as more influential. For example, while Drspock.com notes many “obvious” biological difference between the genders—“for example, males tend to be larger, their sexual maturation in puberty starts later and ends later, and on average their mature bodies are more muscular”—it emphasizes how gender differences generally are “more likely to be colored, largely, by the different ways boys and girls are raised in our society.” The Web site has a section that outlines “different behaviors praised” (emphasizing accomplishment for boys and appearance for girls); “different ideas about play” (emphasizing differences in children’s media and toys); “different chores: boys are assigned chores in
the garage, in the basement, or on the lawn; girls work inside the house”; and “different expectations” (emphasizing that boys are expected to cover up feelings and girls are expected to have few capabilities in reasoning, logic, and sports). These advisers with a social learning perspective understood gender as a learned role, focused on behavior, and were less likely than other sources to emphasize how gender might be entangled with a deep sense of self.

Finally, I categorized as psychoanalytic eight sources that emphasized the importance of identification, the deep, psychological aspect of gender identity; emphasized the importance of fantasy; and/or presented some discussion about what Freud called “penis envy.” For example,

“Gender” is a complex psychological construction. It includes many different thoughts and fantasies about what it means to be male or female. Some of these thoughts and fantasies are conscious; others unconscious. (Mayes and Cohen 2002, 186)

Both boys and girls are now aware of their own gender and the presence or absence of a penis. His penis is infinitely precious to a little boy, but he also tends to be afraid of losing it, which is what, despite explanations, he believes must have happened to girls. A little girl tends to feel that she lacks a penis; an almost invisible vagina seems no alternative. Despite explanations, she often worries that her body has been damaged by having its penis removed. (Leach 2000, 477)

These sources sometimes discussed the role of social learning and (less frequently) biology in the development of gender, but they emphasized identification with the same-sex parent as the premiere mode through which children established a gender identity. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of advisors make use of psychoanalytic theory. Feminists have long been suspicious of psychoanalytic theory and have had a complex relationship with it (Buhle 1998; Chodorow 1989). As discussed below and seen in Table 1, the advisors in this sample who adopt a psychoanalytic understanding of gender are at least as likely as others to advocate gender-neutral parenting.

In sum, the data on theories point in two interesting directions. First, the role that socialization plays in the construction of gender is acknowledged in virtually all the sources that attempt to explain gender development. It is widely accepted by the advisors that parents, schools, and the media shape gendered behavior to some degree.

Second, many advisors, as will be evident below, entangle the development of sexual identity with the development of gender identity. Many make the assumption of this link, and most assume the development of heterosexuality. Those experts predisposed to a psychoanalytic orientation explicitly outline the link between these two as they explain the development of gender.

Preschoolers’ sensuality is also directed toward their parents. Although some children do not express their feelings in obvious ways, many girls declare they will marry their fathers, and boys their mothers. Like most children of their age, Martha and Simon, feel attracted to and possessive about the parent of the opposite sex and competitive
with the same-sex parent. Even in households with absent fathers, children can express these desires, directing their possessive feelings toward a relative or teacher of the opposite sex. . . . Eventually the feelings of competition and exclusivity are replaced by a strong identification with the parent of the same sex. (Galinsky and David 1988, 163)

Often, especially from a psychoanalytic perspective, the development of a “normal” sexuality coincides with the development of a “normal” gender identity.

**Gender-Neutral Child Rearing**

How do these child care advisors view gender-neutral or nonsexist child rearing? Twenty-five sources directly address this issue, and 16 at least minimally advocate for gender-neutral child rearing. Theory of gender development rather than credential or profession seems to predict an advisor’s view of gender-neutral parenting. Table 1 demonstrates that those who advocate gender-neutral parenting are primarily those advisors who have a social learning or psychoanalytic theory of gender development.

Advocating gender-neutral parenting is different from saying that it is okay for a boy to play with a doll if he wants to. By “advocating,” I mean that these advisors say that parents should not only permit but encourage children to move beyond gender stereotypes for their own good and/or the good of society. Beal, Villarosa, and Abner (1999, 261) minimally advocated gender-neutral parenting:

> Rather than reinforcing rigid gender stereotyping, your goal should be to raise self-assured children. This is especially important for girls who exhibit passive behavior, which can lead to poor academic achievement or, worse, involvement in an abusive relationship later in life. Likewise, boys need to develop their emotions so that they can learn how to express their feelings (including frustration and disappointment) and feel empathetic toward others. Without these expressions, boys learn to push their feelings down, which can lead to inappropriate anger, drug abuse, and alcoholism. Which toys are best to give to boys, and which are the best for girls? There is no such thing as a best toy for a boy or a girl. Some research shows that girls may prefer dolls and boys like to make roaring car noises, but experts are now trying to get parents to steer away from gender stereotypes for the reasons mentioned above.

Fully advocating gender-neutral parenting, *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be* (Davis and Keyser 1997) and *Field Guide to Parenting* (Butler and Kratz 1999) each provide a chapter (24 pages and 5 pages, respectively) largely devoted to how to counter gender stereotypes in children.

Eleven sources provide negative commentary about gender-neutral parenting. Those with a theoretical orientation that is primarily biological and those that review all theories tend to hold more negative views of gender-neutral child rearing. These advisors provide a range of negative commentaries from “it won’t work” to “it could be harmful.” Nowadays some feminists insist that there are no innate sexual differences and that boys and girls would behave alike if we treated them alike.
Common sense, and most parents’ observations, as well as our own, tell us that the two sexes tend to be worlds apart in their behavior” (Ames and Haber 1989, 46-47). Three of these negative commentaries also address some positive aspects of gender-neutral child rearing, but they are often undermined by suggestions that the effort is futile or potentially harmful to a child’s development.

But most children do fit comfortably into their respective traditional gender molds—no matter how careful their parents are to raise them in a non sexist environment, with non sexist books, non sexist toys, and non sexist attitudes. That there is a difference—and some would say, vive le difference—in no way means that one sex is better than the other. On the contrary, society is beginning to acknowledge that men and women are equal but different. Nor does the powerful influence of nature mean that nurture has no influence at all. Continue to offer your son a wide range of toys, by all means, but don’t force or pressure him to play with toys that don’t interest him. (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1996, 224)

The American Academy of Pediatrics (1999, 143) includes this advice under the section heading “When Gender Identity Becomes Confused”:

Some families try hard to treat all their children similarly, regardless of sex. But this type of childrearing can deny inherent differences among youngsters. Also, even when gender-neutral childrearing is attempted, it is very difficult to accomplish. . . . Gender-neutral childrearing has the advantage of helping parents and youngsters identify universally desirable human traits and values they would like to adopt and promote. It also might enhance relationships between boys and girls (and men and women). However, keep in mind that boys and girls are sometimes inclined toward different interests and behaviors. If you ignore biological differences, you can deny children the opportunities to build on their innate strengths.

It is not surprising to find that those who believe that gender differences are biological think there is little chance of gender-neutral parenting’s having much effect on children’s gender. However, it is interesting that these same theorists find such parenting potentially harmful. If gender is fixed by biology, gender-neutral parenting should matter little either way.

Thus far, we have seen that feminist ideas are embodied in contemporary parenting advice and seem to have had some effect on how gender is theorized. Furthermore, a fair number of advisors advocate some degree of gender-neutral parenting, in theory. In the next section, I examine the advice experts give to parents who are faced with a child whose behavior is gender nonconforming. As we will see, boys playing with dolls and girls roughhousing with boys become a bit more problematic as advisors navigate their way through sexuality issues.

Can William Have a Doll? Advice about Gender Nonconformity

Most of the advice about gender management is framed by real or hypothetical questions from parents who are concerned about their boys’ doing “girl” things (wearing a dress, lipstick, or jewelry or playing with dolls or girls) or about girls’
doing “boy” things (going without a shirt, playing with boys). There is, however, a gender difference even in the posing of the problem. These questions are much more frequently posed about boys.

Advice about managing gender is usually in answer to the question, “Is it a problem that my child is doing something gender deviant? And what should I do about it?” At first glance, it appears that these advisors answer “No, this is not a problem.” They find gender nonconformity diagnosable and unhealthy only in its extreme or exclusive form, that is, when it meets the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) categorization of gender identity disorder (GID; see below). However, that advisors usually say it is not a problem does not mean that they have fully embraced the feminist position on gender socialization. Only two sources give feminist answers to this question (although these give other answers as well). I categorize these answers as feminist because they say explicitly that boys’ playing with dolls and girls’ playing with trucks or some other version of gender nonconformity are good for children and society. Spock and Parker (1998, 656) gave the quintessential feminist answer: “When individuals feel obliged to conform to a conventional male or female sex stereotype, they are all cramped to a degree, depending on how much each has to deny and suppress their natural inclinations. Thus, valuable traits are lost to the society. And they are all made to feel inadequate to the degree that they fail to conform to the supposed ideal.” Surprising some, Leach (2000, 530) wrote, “If you try to make a boy stick to the ‘right’ gender, however good your reasons, you deprive him of exploring the potential of half the world, and if you are happy to let a girl switch over but not a boy, you inevitably contribute to the basic gender inequalities that still bedevil us all.”

While these sources explicitly offer a feminist argument for why gender nonconformity is beneficial to children and the social world, a few sources present an argument that finds this behavior acceptable, essentially saying “There’s no harm in that” without elaborating on its benefit (Barnes and York 2001, 53-54).

Finally, most advisors offer some acceptance of gender nonconformity in children, and they advise parents not to worry. However, their advice simultaneously emphasizes that gender nonconformity is problematic. These advisors give qualified and tenuous answers to parents’ questions about gender nonconformity. About 60 percent of the sources can be described as giving (at least) one of three types of advice. Two of these types have long been stereotypic responses to homosexuality: (1) Don’t make it worse and (2) recode the behavior. The third response explicitly addresses the link between gender and sexuality: (3) Don’t worry; it doesn’t lead to homosexuality.

First, advisors tell parents not to worry about their child’s gender-deviant behavior as it is not a problem or it is only a phase, and their worrying about it will create a problem. They suggest that “we may inadvertently cause the very thing we fear if we react [to a boy wanting a dress] with anxiety, however understandable that may be” (naturalchild.com). Advisors suggest that parents’ discomfort with a child’s gender nonconformity creates “the problem.” Or, for instance, in responding to a
letter from a mother whose nine-year-old played with his sister’s dolls, John Rosemond (1990, 151-52) responded,

Your son’s preference for dolls and “girl” toys is unusual, but not necessarily abnormal. There is no law which says that boys must play with trucks and trains and sports equipment, or that girls must play with dolls and wear pink. The problem does not lie with your son’s preference for his sister’s things. The problem is that you have made his choice of toys into a major issue, at the crux of which is the question of his autonomy. As long as you fight with him over whether he has a right to like dolls, he has no choice but to fight back. In the process of defending his “turf,” he builds walls around it which not only keep you out (“Eventually, I always give in”) but keep him in. He won’t have the freedom to expand his range of interests until you put an end to the battle. (emphasis added)

Rosemond suggested more father involvement and recommended that the family seek counseling.

Similarly, Jan Faull, an advisor for family.go.com, in two different columns of advice to mothers who have “hypersensitive” sons (three and five years old), wrote, “By trying to make him less sensitive, you’ll accentuate a personality trait he was born with. . . . Instead of talking him out of it, accept it, validate it and then move on about your day, focusing on other aspects of his personality and behavior,” and “If you try talking or forcing him into being less sensitive, you’ll only magnify this delicate personality trait.”

This admonishment that one’s attention to a child’s gender deviance will ultimately create gender deviance implies that despite the advisor’s assurances that doing gender outside of prescribed norms is normal or a phase in early childhood, parents should not want to see it further develop in children. Ultimately, they provide advice about how to prevent it.

Second, some advisors tell parents not to worry about gender nonconformity because the behavior is not really what it appears. They offer parents new ways to interpret their child’s behavior so that it does not look like a problem of gender deviance. In essence, they recode the behavior or give parents the tools to recode it to make gender nonconformity acceptable gender behavior. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in an advice column from naturalchild.com. A parent wrote that her “soon to be 4” son “is obsessed with wearing dresses” and that she does not “want to hurt, or interfere with [her] son’s true identity. Please help.” After some discussion of “sexual aberrations,” the advisor wrote,

Instead of demonstrating anything to do with sexuality or gender roles, your son may have something much more simple in mind. He may find dresses more comfortable than the pants he has worn. Perhaps his pants are too tight? Is the fabric uncomfortable? Does he get a skin rash when wearing certain fabrics? Does he find it easier to use the potty when wearing a dress? And so on. Or his behavior may have more to do with expressing resistance in general. Has the family gone through some stressful times recently, that he had no control over? . . . If he could have more time with his father or another male, he may begin to recognize why he is being asked to dress
differently from you and his sister. I asked a colleague, Denise Green, for suggestions, and she asked if you might find a compromise, such as a kilt or other ethnic type of dress. She makes an interesting point here, because skirts and robes are worn by men in many different world cultures. It’s the culture that is strange, after all: girls can wear pants but boys can’t wear dresses. Perhaps your son is ahead of his time, or perhaps like other children he likes wearing costumes as a way to understand what it’s like to be a different person. Have you looked into acting classes, where he could wear many types of clothing in an acceptable way?

In this short piece of advice, the expert gives the mother many options for transforming her boy’s dress wearing from a sexual aberration into a normal, sensible desire and behavior. In just a few sentences, the boy’s dress wearing is recoded as an issue of comfort, an issue of toilet training, an issue of resistance or stress, an issue of time with his father, a form of ethnic dress, and a costume. All of these are implicitly more acceptable than his simply being a “soon to be 4”-year-old boy who likes to wear dresses. This nonconforming behavior would “worry any parent” because of its implication of “sexual aberration.” I return to the issue of sexuality below but here emphasize that by offering all these interpretations, the advisor signals that this behavior needs to be interpreted, explained, and transformed into gender-normative behavior.

Naturalchild.com is not the only source that does this recoding. Spock and Parker said that boys’ doll play is “parental rather than effeminate” (1998, 40). Advice from parents.com asserts that a four-year-old boy’s Barbie play is merely a sign that “chances are when he grows up, he will want to date girls who look like Barbie.” Similarly, parentsplace.com advises a parent whose three-year-old son loves to dress up as Cinderella that “the Cinderella fairy tale also includes themes of rescue and protection against evil so common at this stage of development” and thus links dressing as Cinderella to play that many of the books say is typical of boys: heroes and rescue. By offering explanation and recoding, these advisors attempt to make gender nonnormative behavior understandable to parents and also acceptable. Yet in doing so, they reinforce parental notions that it needs justification.

Finally, despite the fact that gender nonconformity is rarely posed as a question about a child’s (adult) sexual preference, and despite much debate among scholars about whether there is any connection between gender nonconformity and homosexuality, more than half of the advisors remark on the connection or lack thereof between gender deviance and homosexuality. The above advice, “don’t make it worse” and “recode,” is likely founded on this assumed, sometimes unspoken connection between gender nonconformity and homosexuality. Frequently, advisors suggest that gender deviance is not a sign of homosexuality and that homosexuality is a problem while gender deviance is not, at least in early childhood. “Relax. There isn’t one shred of evidence that play that crosses typical sex-role boundaries is bad in any way unless it’s the only sort of play your child engages in. It doesn’t make boys sissies or girls tomboys. It doesn’t lead to homosexuality. All it does is give
children a wider range of fun things to do, and parents more options for presents to buy" (Needlman, drspock.com).

The advisors view homosexuality in a nearly uniformly problematic and negative manner. They often sympathize with parents, describing the prospect of homosexuality as understandably “alarming” to parents. For example, “Any parent in this situation would be alarmed. You are probably worrying that your child is a transvestite-in-training or gay” (parentsoup.com). Only Spock (and Dr. Needlman of drspock.com) connects this “alarm” that parents feel to social prejudice. “When parents think that their little boy is effeminate or their little girl is too masculine, they may wonder whether the child will grow up to be gay or lesbian. Because of prevailing prejudices against homosexuality this can create worry and anxiety in parents” (drspock.com). All other advisors leave open the question of whether alarm about having a gay child is warranted. In fact, most leave the impression that this is something parents should be concerned about, while assuring parents that gender nonconformity is not (necessarily) linked to homosexuality. “Many parents who see their little boy straddling gender lines immediately jump to the conclusion that he may be showing homosexual tendencies. But it is too early for such a conclusion. It’s not until around age three that gender-based behavior becomes more entrenched and even at that point, a child’s choice of play things is in no way a sure predictor of future sexual orientation” (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1996, 222). This advice suggests that gender nonconformity (until age three in this case) is nothing to worry about because of the absence of any link to homosexuality; thus, it implies that such a link would warrant concern about gender behavior. This stigmatizes homosexuality.

After sympathizing with parents, some advisors proceeded to describe homosexuality as an abnormal, problematic sexual orientation. They described homosexuality variously as “skewed” (Leach) and a less “appropriate sexual orientation” that comes with “warning signs” (Rosemond), implied it is in a category with “unhealthy sexual identities” (Sears, askdrsears.com) and “sexual aberration” (naturalchild.com), and suggested that such “eccentric” behavior will “alienate or draw fire from others” and thus warrants parental intervention (Reisser 1997, 352).

Similarly, some advisors suggest that parents play a role in whether gender-deviant behavior becomes linked to homosexuality. Rosemond explicitly blamed parental dynamics for homosexuality. In response to a letter from a teacher about a boy who likes makeup and women’s clothing, he wrote,

The more rejecting and verbally aggressive the father is toward his son, the more the mother acts protective. This not only serves to strengthen the boy’s identification with his mother, but further alienates him from his father as well. The closer the boy gets to his mother, the angrier the father gets and the more he blames his wife for the problems. The end result of all this mess is that the feminine side of the boy’s nature comes to increasingly dominate. What the boy needs more than anything else is an open, accepting relationship with his father. Therein lies whatever possibility still exists of helping the boy develop better self-esteem and a more appropriate sexual orientation. (1990, 153-54)
According to Rosemond, the parents are to blame, and the father must be responsible for helping the boy to develop a “more appropriate” (read heterosexual) sexual orientation. The American Academy of Pediatrics (1999, 140), however, blames the mother: “Family studies indicate that effeminate boys often have unusually close relationships with their mothers and especially distant relationships with their fathers. Research suggests that the mothers of some effeminate boys actually encourage and support ‘female’ activities in their sons.”

Many advisors tell parents to seek professional help for gender “deviance,” especially when there is the implication that it is linked to homosexuality. For example, in a footnote to a sentence about what is not “a predictor of sexual orientation,” Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway (1996, 222) wrote, if “a three-year-old plays only with dolls, shuns male playmates, and/or regularly wants to dress in girls’ clothing, a discussion with his doctor may be helpful.”

The medicalization of gender and sexuality has been at the heart of a debate over including GID of childhood in the DSM. With the publication of the third edition of the DSM (which officially removed homosexuality) in 1980, a new category of mental disorder was created: GID. Many critics argue that GID replaced homosexuality in the DSM (Burke 1996; Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993; McKean Moore 2002). The American Psychological Association estimates that 0.003 to 3 percent of boys and 0.001 to 1.5 percent of girls have this disorder, and the referral rate for boys is as much as seven times that of girls (Bartlett, Vassey, and Bukowski 2000). Some researchers critique the inclusion of GID in the DSM because it pathologizes proto-gay children and homosexuality: it psychologically equates liking the “wrong” gender toys, clothes, and playmates with “assertion that his penis or testes are disgusting” or, in girls, “assertion that she has or will grow a penis”; it does not meet the DSM’s own criteria for classifying something as a mental disorder; and it makes social nonconformity an individual pathology (Bartlett, Vassey, and Bukowski 2000; Bem 1993; McKeen Moore 2002). Thus, GID is not a mental disorder that is fully accepted by all clinical practitioners. However, child care advice books appear unaware of the problematic nature of GID. Thirteen sources include shortened versions of the GID criteria and tell parents that these are the signs of a problem for which parents should seek professional help.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Child care advice today embodies liberal feminists’ understandings of gender socialization. Contemporary child care advisors, even some of those who purport biological theories, describe how gender is socially constructed and emphasize to parents that their treatment of girls and boys is often different and produces gender differences. Furthermore, some advisors give their seal of approval to gender-neutral parenting, even if they are unconvinced about whether it will work. Finally, most advisors approve of behaviors that were nearly taboo 50 years ago—preschool boys’ playing with dolls, girls’ and boys’ playing together, girls’ playing
sports, and the like. In many ways, the call of second-wave feminists, especially as it concerns girls, has been heard.

However, these data also suggest that the success of a gender revolution may require a sexual revolution, which is still missing. Experts do not fully advocate for gender-neutral parenting, for “bringing up” boys and girls “to think of themselves as similar” (Spock 1974), because in doing so they run up against the prospect of “advocating” for homosexuality. While there has been and continues to be debate about the relationship between gender nonconformity and homosexuality, in popular consciousness, the homosexual as gender “invert” remains a formidable stereotype (Meyerowitz 2002).

Furthermore, homosexuality in the United States remains stigmatized. While many people and institutions “have a strong interest in the dignified treatment of any gay people who may happen already to exist” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 161), there are few, if any, institutions, including feminist or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender ones, that offer suggestions on how to raise people to be gay. “The preceding asymmetry of value assignment between hetero and homo goes unchallenged everywhere. . . . On the other hand, the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, 161). Child care experts advise parents from within these institutions.

Furthermore, liberal feminism, in its arguments for gender-neutral child rearing, did little to challenge the programmatic undertakings of these institutions that placed such asymmetric value on heterosexuality. Partly, this may be a result of early liberal feminism’s own, sometimes anxious, relationship to lesbianism (Segal 1994). However, it is also likely a result of those feminists who advocated for gender-neutral parenting relying on, rather than critiquing, science about gender, sexuality, and gender development. In trying to sell nonsexist child rearing to parents, feminists including Cottin Pogrebin (1980) used scientific claims about the development of (homo)sexuality to argue that there was “scientific” support for her feminist claims that nonsexist child rearing was good for children and would not create homosexuality. The “rational feminist” critique that feminists applied to scientific advice elsewhere (Ehrenreich and English 1978) was not applied to the science of (homo)sexuality that liberal feminists drew on to make claims that gender-neutral parenting was good for kids. The contemporary popular advice draws on the same heteronormative and/or homophobic bodies of scientific literature (from medicine, psychoanalysis, and psychology) that feminists of the second wave failed to critique.

Finally, the gendered socialization of children seems only to have mildly waned since the height of the second wave. The data from these child care manuals provide insight into this wider cultural trend and suggest that there may well be rich research territory in the area of gender socialization that has been abandoned by many feminist researchers. At the very least, as gays and lesbians become more visible socially, politically, and in popular culture, how parents imagine and treat signs of homosexuality in children are important political and intellectual questions, as
are questions of how and if parents try to ensure heterosexuality in their children. While the data presented here have begun to address these issues, the projects of feminist and queer sociology will benefit from more research about the heteronormative socialization of children—in its most interactive and agentic-child modes.

APPENDIX

Data Sources

BOOKS USED AS DATA SOURCES


NOTES

1. Second-wave feminism was a multifaceted political project encompassing many different and evolving feminisms. These feminisms included a variety of nuanced arguments as well as transformative experiments around socialization (for one account, see Bem 1998). They also had varied understandings of (homo)sexuality and politics. (For good discussions of these, see Chapkis 2002; Echols 1989; Golden 1994; Segal 1994). In this article, my focus is primarily on liberal feminists, who emphasized the need for equality between men and women.

2. More sources (18) included a cognitive account of children’s understanding of gender. This account was quite uniform, regardless of the theory of gender. The account is as follows: Children become aware of gender at 12 to 18 months, know their own gender at 18 to 24 months, understand roles associated with gender at about 3 to 4 years, and become quite rigid about gender and gender stereotype at about 5 years.
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