

“We don’t know what the color of their light bulb is yet and maybe it will change.”

Gender Socialization in Families & Gender-Neutral Child Rearing



Sasha Kasem-Beg
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Research Questions:

What is involved when some parents decide to adopt some form of gender-neutral parenting?

How much influence do parents have on their child's gender construction?

How does gender-neutral parenting change this gender development?

Background:

- The concept of gender-neutral child-rearing is seen as a product of second-wave feminism, especially liberal feminism in the late 1970s (Martin 2016).
- Since then, there has been research showing that people **who have been exposed to non-gendered terms and roles tend to grow to be more open-minded and egalitarian.** (Rogers 2019)
- Research suggests that deferring to people's preferred pronouns is more than mere “political correctness.” It's a way of giving people new, more inclusive ways of seeing the world.
- “You perceive not different realities, but you place more or less emphasis on different things.” (Rogers 2019)

Research Method:

- In-Depth Qualitative Interviews
 - Ranging between 30-90 minutes
 - Participants were asked questions regarding their parental role, parental style, and what exactly “gender neutral child-rearing” means to them.
- Subjects were parents who self-identified as raising their children in a gender-neutral or gender creative way.
- Subjects were recruited via “Gender Neutral Parenting” Facebook groups and/or through snowball sampling.
- This resulted in 9 total interviews

Parent Qualifications:

- Parents raising their child(ren) as gender neutral or gender creative
- Parents who are consciously not putting a gender binary on their child(ren)
- Parents of “theybys”
- Parents who have child(ren) that don't use gendered pronouns
- Parents who are actively not choosing gendered toys or clothing

Literature Cited:

Martin, Karin. 2016. “William Wants A Doll. Can He Have One? Feminists, Child Care Advisors, and Gender-Neutral Child Rearing.” *SAGE Publications* 19(4):456–79.
Rogers, Adam. 2019. “Actually, Gender-Neutral Pronouns Can Change a Culture.” *Wired*.

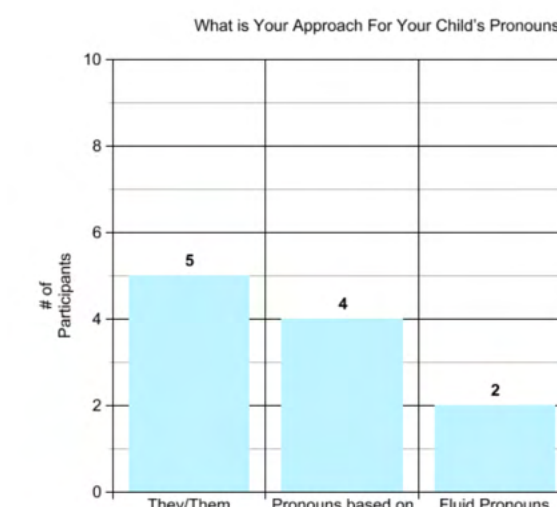
Results:

Names of Respondents	# of Children	Age of Child(ren)
BS	1	8 months
JM/NM	1	8.5 months
MM	1	9 months
SH/NH	2	2 years & 8 months
KS/NP	1	2.5 years
SD	2	5 years & 2 months
CH	2	7 & 4 years
AR	1	2 years
AR	1	14

*pseudonym acronyms are used

Pronoun Usage

- Of the 11 families total, the plurality used they/them pronouns exclusively with their child(ren).
- The rest either used the pronouns for their assigned sex, or used gender fluid pronouns (changing regularly according to child).



“I just think of this time, as they’re growing and personality is developing, its like a lightbulb. It’s just kind of turning on and turning off. . . but we just don’t quite know what the color of their light bulb is yet and maybe it will change.” -MM

- Additionally, of the 12 kids being referred to in the interviews, **54% of them have a gender-neutral name.**

Different Names of Parenting Practice

- Gender Spectrum Parenting
- Gender Affirming Parenting
- Gender Creative Parenting
- Gender Fluid Parenting
- Gender-Neutral Parenting
- When asked how they refer to their parenting style, each parent had a different title for their type of parenting.

Choices about Finding out the Sex

- **72% of Families chose not to find out the sex of their child before they were born.**

“Finding out the sex when you’re pregnant is really a small thing, you’re really just finding what their equipment is [haha] Seriously! We don’t even know this person yet, how are we supposed to gender them?!” -AR

- Of the families that decided to know, they expressed the same fear of being disappointed on the day they were to give birth, if the sex was not what they had expected or hoped for. Even though they had made the decision to parents their child in a gender creative fashion. There was also a common fear of **Toxic Masculinity.**

“I was surprised to see myself hoping they were female. . . that I still had that preference. Part of me wanted to know the sex so that if there was any internal disappointment, it wouldn’t be when they’re born.” -KS

“I am afraid that they are going to be the victim of male violence and it’s going to perpetuate the cycle of toxic masculinity...It starts young, and it starts early.” -MM

Gendered Clothing

- All parents share the **same frustration with overly gendered clothing**, and choose clothes for their children based on comfort, having a full color spectrum, and/or letting their child choose what they would like to wear themselves.

“The clothing for boys is just ridiculous, phrases like ‘lady killer’ or ‘ladies’ man’ and for a minute you can’t even choose from what’s available. So we just leaned into what [they] were most into and we gave [them] free rein... we end up shopping in all the departments” -AR

Conclusions:

This project developed into **examining the spectrum of gender-neutral parenting** and finding the commonalities between the parents’ styles of parenting.

Ultimately, while all of the parents have similarities in parenting, everyone’s was **different and personal to them**, this is seen in the specific titles that they choose when discussing their parenting style.

All parents stressed to me that they wanted to ensure that their children **always feel loved and accepted for who they are.**

“My goal is that we know who they are, they who they are, and they know that they are loved. I never want [them] to have to come out to us.” -SH

Parents of gender-creative children’s main commonality is **a strive for more openness** in letting their kids explore their interests and identities outside of narrow gender constraints.

“We’re just respecting the child’s views and not trying to project any outside ideas on to them. We want them to be free to express [whatever] way that feels the most authentic to them.” -CH

Limitations:

Due to the young age of the children involved in this research, it is hard to determine the outcome of gender-neutral parenting long term. Additionally, because of this factor, the question of “What is your child’s understanding of their own gender/sexuality?” was difficult to answer fully for some parents, most of the children were too young. One parent said,

“I don’t think [they] really understand it yet. I mean the most I’ve seen is sometimes when I change their diaper they’ll reach down and touch their genitals. But that doesn’t mean anything it’s just another fun thing to touch.” -MM

Definitions:

“Theyby”- a baby who has been brought up in a gender-neutral way and not outwardly identified by its parents as either a boy or a girl.

Gender Neutral Child Rearing- allowing children to be exposed to a variety of gender types so they can explore their gender without restriction from society or the gender they were born with.

Further information:



Kasem-beg_Anastasia@wheatoncollege.edu



skasem-beg

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