

Acceptance is protection: How can parents support gender nonconforming and transgender children?

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How should parents respond when their four years old son insists on wearing girls' clothes, or their daughter switches to using a male version of their name? These are the questions increasingly being asked of family therapist Jean Malpas who writes in *Family Process* about a new approach to support parents with gender nonconforming and transgender children.

Jean Malpas, the Director of the Gender and Family Project at the Ackerman Institute for the Family, explains how families of gender nonconforming and transgender children can benefit from a multi-dimensional approach to negotiating two understandings of gender: One being a traditional system of male or female which dominates mainstream society, which contrasts with a more flexible and fluid spectrum of gender being expressed by their children.

"Parents of gender nonconforming children often struggle with how to best protect their child from bullying and [ostracism](#), while accepting and nurturing their child's identity and expression." said Jean Malpas. "This research shows how coaching, education, parent support group and family therapy can support everyone in the [family](#) in negotiating this dilemma."

Jean Malpas' clinical findings confirm that a normal diversity of gender expression exists among children and uses anonymous case studies to

demonstrate the varied paths children take when developing their identity. Some nonconforming children will grow up to be transgender, others will eventually feel comfortable identifying with their biological sex, while others will continue to display gender nonconforming traits without requesting social or medical transition.

"Research on gender nonconformity also has implications for [education policy](#)," said Malpas. "It is important that schools are aware and sensitive to the non-binary and non-biological aspects of gender, as it means gendered activities and segregation of students based on gender lines may no longer be appropriate if our children's understanding of gender is expressed in more complex ways."

Clinical approaches based on the non-pathologisation of gender diversity contrast with traditional psychiatric approaches, which have used cognitive-behavioral methods to extinguish atypical behaviours and reinforce traditional gender expression.

"Our clinical findings show that gender nonconformity in children is not a psychopathology but a normal display of diversity in gender expressions and identities," concluded Malpas. "Providing multi-dimensional support to parents of [gender nonconforming](#) and transgender [children](#) allows them to accept and affirm their child's identity while providing valuable protection at home, in school and out in the world."

Provided by Wiley

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