

From gender identity disorder to gender identity creativity

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In exercise books, sports line-ups, or in the simple act of going to the bathroom, school children have to answer the seemingly simple question, "are you a boy or a girl?" For Canadian school kids who exhibit cross-gender behaviour or presentation, this question is not only limiting, it's the source of angst.

Childhood gender independence, or gender creativity, is often viewed as an abnormality in need of a cure – but it's that attitude that needs to be fixed, according to Concordia University political science professor, Kimberley Manning. "The majority of gender independent children suppress their identities because of societal pressure. In reality, it's at this young age that these kids need the support and freedom to explore who they really are so that they have a better chance to grow up to be healthy and happy adults," she says.

Gender nonconforming children, many of whom will self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer by the time they hit adolescence, are more likely to be called names, be made fun of, or be bullied at school. Tragically, these same young people are also among the most vulnerable to harassment, violence, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide. According to a recently completed survey by Egale Canada, a national organization that advocates for human rights, 95 percent of transgender students feel unsafe at school. Clearly, the time to act is now.

There is hope. In recent years, more and more Canadian families have

been actively asserting an affirmative approach to gender expression, seeking to understand and support their child's declared gender. There are few resources, however, to support families or to inform educators who are interested in creating safe and inclusive spaces for these children.

Manning is leading a multi-disciplinary group that is doing something to address this lack. "Social science and humanities research can play a vital role in puzzling through the structural oppressions faced by gender independent children and their families," she says.

Along with her colleagues, Elizabeth Meyer, a professor of education at California Polytechnic State University, and Annie Pullen Sansfaçon, a professor of social work at the Université de Montréal, Manning received a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Development Grant last year to study the challenges faced by parents and educators as well as the opportunities for social mobilization. They are also working with Shuvo Ghosh, a developmental-behavioural pediatrician at the McGill University Health Centre, to establish a Montreal-based Interdisciplinary Research Alliance on Gender Expression in Youth (MIRAGE-Y).

This month, the group will host the National Workshop on Gender Creative Kids, which will welcome social scientists, educators, social workers, health professionals, parents, advocates and students to explore new questions and perspectives in the complex subject of [gender identity](#) in children.

The National Workshop on Gender Creative Kids takes place at Concordia University October 25-26, 2012. Although the conference is limited to registered participants only, a public keynote address will be held on Thursday, October 25, 7 – 9 p.m, at the D.B. Clarke Amphitheatre (1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W.). Speaking will be Dr.

Diane Ehrensaft, Developmental and Clinical Psychologist and Director of Mental Health Child and Adolescent [Gender](#) Center, San Francisco. Although the talk will be given in English, simultaneous translation will be available in French.

Provided by Concordia University

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