

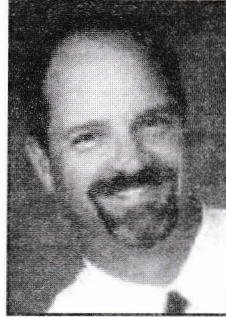
Boys With Gender Identity Disorder Raised By Single Mothers

By S. Scott Sutherland, M.A.

Introduction

Basic Terminology

Historically, there has been a great deal of focus on the treatment of adult men struggling to overcome unwanted homosexual feelings. However, preventing homosexuality is vital, too. Since 75% of children diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) will report a homosexual or bisexual orientation as an adult, I consider GID to be a pre-homosexual condition; one which demands our attention. Although not all pre-homosexual boys develop GID, treating GID in the early stages of its development would prevent a great deal of pain and suffering.



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Since the origins of GID have a great deal to do with overly distant relationships with fathers and overly close relationships with mothers, boys being raised by single mothers may be at a higher risk of developing GID. As such, this presentation will focus on those aspects of the origin and treatment of GID relative to single mother-headed households. But let me be perfectly clear. The vast majority of boys raised by single mothers grow into well adjusted young men who never manifest any GID traits.

The scope of this situation is significant. The overwhelming majority of single parent households are headed by single mothers. First, we have a divorce rate in excess of 50% and in over 85% of these divorces, mothers are given sole custody of their children. To make matters worse, fully half of the fathers discontinue all visitations with their children within three years of divorce. Also, according to the National Center for Health Statistics Report on Births to Unmarried Mothers, one out of every three births in America is to an unmarried mother and from 1980 to 1992 the annual rate of births to unmarried mothers almost doubled to 1.2 million.

Clearly, millions of children are growing up with little or no contact with their fathers and the potential impact must be examined.

Sex and gender are terms that are often used interchangeably. However, these terms have very different meanings that are important for a clear understanding of this topic. Sex refers to our biological femaleness or maleness. There are two aspects of biological sex: genetic sex and anatomical sex. Genetic sex is determined by sex chromosomes and anatomical sex consists of the uniquely physical aspects of males and females. Gender is a psychosocial concept of masculinity and femininity. Although the concepts of "masculinity and femininity" are largely defined by culture, congruent sex-gender identity begins with biology. The anatomical design and physiological functions of the reproductive system make humans predisposed toward gender identification that is congruent with their given sex. When gender identification is incongruent with a child's given sex, there is a reason.

What Is Gender Identity Disorder?

I have spoken with scores of parents who initially did not know how to respond or even if they should respond to their son's gender confused behavior. Should they be worried that their son only plays with girls and avoids rough and tumble play with boys? Was their son's preoccupation with traditionally feminine activities such as dressing in female clothing, playing traditionally female games, and consistently portraying female characters in their fantasy play, just a phase? And should a parent do anything when their son expresses a wish to be a girl and pretends not to have a penis by pushing it between his legs? The majority of these parents received well intentioned but misguided counsel by teachers, family doctors, pastors, and even mental health professionals. They were often told this was just a phase, or worse, that these behaviors were just a reflection of their son's "inner self" and that as loving parents they should accept this.

So, just what is GID? Technically speaking, a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder requires strong and persistent cross-gender identification; there must be evidence of ongoing discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex; there must also be a significant degree of clinical distress or impairment in social, academic, or other important areas of functioning.

Etiology Of Gender Identity Disorder

I've broken down the primary issues regarding the development of GID into four categories. As always, categories are oversimplifications of complex dynamics; however, they can be useful in helping us to understand and address behavioral and emotional problems. These categories are: identification with the feminine, failure to identify with the masculine, temperament, and development of a false self.

Identification With The Feminine

Mother

A boy may develop an overly close relationship with his mother for many reasons; but when his father is not available, or desirable, a boy may have little choice but to identify with his mother. Regardless of her personality, she dominates his life. The boy may be companion, confidante, and even play the rescuer role if he perceives his mother to be a victim.

It's easy for him to identify with his mother because she is familiar, comfortable, and safe. As he feels increasingly familiar, comfortable, and safe with females, he feels increasingly unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and unsafe with males.

Sister

Sisters don't cause GID, but they can exacerbate underlying dynamics thereby contributing to their brother's identification with the feminine. It's normal for brothers and sisters to play together; however, for boys struggling with their gender identity, too much interaction can be detrimental. Often times, after a boy has experienced some sort of trauma, an older sister becomes an oasis of comfort and safety. Many GID boys have idealized an older sister.

Disidentification From The Masculine

Father

Gender identification requires time and contact in order to develop. Non-custodial fathers face an uphill battle building close relationships with their children. Dr. William Pollock, author of *Real Boys*, states that divorce is difficult for children of both sexes but is devastating for boys. He says the basic problem is the lack of discipline and supervision in the father's absence and his unavailability to teach what it means to be a man.

Brother

An older brother-younger brother relationship can be extremely helpful for a young boy when his father is not sufficiently available. However, an older brother-younger brother relationship can also be equally negative as well. Again, sibling relationships don't cause GID, but they can exacerbate the pertinent underlying dynamics between child and parents.

Male Peers

Boys generally long to have male friends and to be accepted by them. This is normal and healthy. But when a boy struggles in his relationship with his father, he often struggles in his relationships with his male peers. It doesn't take too long before the other boys realize that he doesn't play sports, doesn't play with them, that he hangs out with the girls and maybe possesses some feminine mannerisms. Teasing ensues. Being the object of teasing is difficult for any child, but can be particularly damaging for sensitive children (I'll discuss the sensitive boy later). For the boy already struggling with his gender identity, teasing can confirm his worst fear, that he is different from other boys, that he is not "one of the guys" and never will be. While feeling increasingly disenfranchised, he feels increasingly inadequate and his social alienation from boys grows. Feeling increasingly rejected by peers, he may react by rejecting them and their "male-ness."

Gender Condemnation

According to Dr. Judith Wallerstein, author of *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark*

Classic Family Triad

Study, post divorce anger is very damaging for boys. It is probably not surprising that over 80% of women expressed intense anger regarding their failed marriage and divorce and that the most common form of expression of post divorce anger was denigration of their former spouse. Furthermore, over 50% of the mothers were extremely critical in their comments about the other parent.

Over-Protection

Some mothers, with their natural tendency toward caring and nurturing, try to protect their son from getting hurt. Guilt over a divorce can exacerbate the desire to protect their child. This can result in mothers not allowing their sons to play rough and tumble games because they might get hurt. Some mothers will overly attend to a child who is hurt such that the boy gets the message that physical pain and discomfort is bad and to be avoided at all costs. These boys will often over react to normal bumps and bruises, cuts, and scrapes. Boys thus avoiding physical games make it more difficult to connect with male peers and are set-up to endure teasing.

Temperament

It has been my clinical observation that "sensitive" boys are more vulnerable to developing GID. They are frequently emotionally intense, physically un-aggressive, and avoidant of rough and tumble play. According to Dr. Elaine Aron in her book, *The Highly Sensitive Child*:

Highly sensitive individuals are those born with a tendency to notice more in their environment and deeply reflect on everything before acting, as compared to those who notice less and act quickly and impulsively. As a result, sensitive people tend to be empathic, smart, intuitive, creative, careful, and conscientious. They are also more easily overwhelmed by high volume or large quantities of input arriving at once.

They try to avoid this, and thus seem to be shy or timid or party poopers. When they cannot avoid over stimulation, they seem easily upset and too sensitive.

The classic family triad usually begins with a strained relationship between mother and father. The mother's lack of emotional fulfillment from her husband sometimes results in her unconsciously seeking fulfillment of some of these needs from her son. The sensitive boy is more emotionally attuned and will often side with his mother in an unspoken alliance with her against his father. This dynamic provides the foundation for the GID boy's disconnection from his father and concurrent enmeshment with his mother. Because the father is not physically present in the single mother headed household, the family is prone to the emotional dynamics of the Classic Family Triad. However, the single mother headed household does not have to succumb to the dysfunctional emotional dynamics of the Classic Family Triad.

Treatment

I am restricting the scope of this paper to prepubescent boys because the onset of puberty qualitatively changes the issues involved with GID and therefore the treatment. With physiological, mental, and emotional changes that occur in boys' passing through puberty, boys previously displaying symptoms of GID often begin to eroticize their unmet needs for healthy connection with males. The onset of same sex attraction requires the intervention of direct, individual psychotherapy.

Since the origins of GID have to do with family dynamics and a sensitive temperament, treatment focuses on altering family dynamics and learning how to work with the boy's sensitive nature. I do not work with the boys directly; instead, I work directly with the mothers and, if possible, the fathers. Parent-only counseling is desirable because this avoids unnecessary stigmatization of the boys. Generally speaking, it is not in the boys' best interest that they believe that there is something "wrong" with them. Ideally, the boys will never know that their parent(s) are working with a mental health professional.

Resistance

There are typically two types of resistance. There is the resistance of the child and the resistance of the parent(s). Even though the boy is usually unaware of

the involvement of a mental health professional in his life, he frequently will become aware that his parents are behaving differently or are treating him differently. Many of the changes he'll enjoy, but some changes he will dislike because he is being nudged out of his comfort zone. Effectively dealing with a child's resistance requires a skillful working alliance between the parent(s) and therapist. Trouble-shooting and brain-storming are often required to find the interventions that will be effective for each child and their unique combination of personality and family dynamics.

It is important to reassure the parent(s) that most people are not aware of the origins of this condition and are therefore ill equipped to effectively handle this issue without professional guidance. Little information is available regarding GID and even less about treatment. Furthermore, the majority of physicians, educators, mental health professionals, and clergy are misinformed about this condition and therefore give out misleading advice to parents.

Identification With The Feminine

Mother

Single mothers should be careful not to develop an inappropriately close relationship with their sons. It is all too easy for newly singled mothers to let some of their hurt and anger toward their former spouse spill out onto their children. Some mothers inadvertently turn one of their children into their confidant. This is usually a sensitive child who then becomes mother's rescuer, assuming a disproportionate level of responsibility for his mother's well-being. Some parents justify their behavior by saying "I'm just telling them the truth."

It is particularly important that single mothers have same-sex friendships in order to have a healthy place to vent their worries and frustrations regarding the pain of divorce, the challenges of single parenting as well as other life issues. The best way to prevent an overly close relationship with their children is for mothers to get their emotional needs met by other adults.

Single mothers can meet some of their needs for male companionship through healthy relationships with

male family members and friends. Dating should only be undertaken when sufficiently healed from the marital loss. Also, many churches have ministries that specifically address the needs of single parents and their children.

Sisters

If a boy has an overly close relationship with an older sister, her cooperation can be enlisted. Depending on her age and maturity, be prudent about the amount of information you give her about her brother because even good kids can misuse sensitive information when upset. Encourage her not to do "girl things" with him like play with dolls or dress him like a girl; but rather, play games where they assume traditional gender roles.

Disidentification From Masculinity

Father

The father-son relationship is the foundation of a boy's masculine identity. Even a non-custodial father has a profound impact on his son; he will always have a special place in his son's heart. Unless a father is actually abusive to his son, a mother should do everything in her power to facilitate a healthy relationship between her son and his father. This includes being flexible and generous with visitation even when she has the legal right to do otherwise. I have worked with single mothers who were so angry at their former spouse that they wanted nothing to do with him and they wanted their children to have nothing to do with him. For these mothers, it is a bitter pill to swallow to foster a relationship between her children and her adversary. But it needs to be done. Remember, "Mothers make boys, fathers make men."

A positive male image is still important even when the father is permanently absent. Father's don't have to be viewed as perfect by their sons, but particularly in the early years it is helpful to a boy's development that his father be viewed as someone he would like to grow up to be like.

Mentors

When a father is unable to fulfill his child-rearing responsibilities, other men must be found to pick up the slack. By establishing a mentor relationship, a boy can receive valuable affirmation, emotional connec-

tion, fatherly guidance, and a same sex role model to emulate. Family members such as grandfathers, uncles, or older brothers are generally more committed and more likely to stick with the relationship. A mentoring relationship that starts and then fades can backfire causing further distrust of males. However, in our mobile society suitable family members are often not available and other sources must be pursued such as family friends, church members, or a youth pastor.

Organizations exist that provide mentors such as The National Mentoring Partnership, Young Life, Youth For Christ, Youth Builders, One Kid At A Time, and Boys to Men with City Impact. Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America is the largest mentoring organization in the nation; however, they allow gay-identified individuals to be mentors and gender confused boys need mentors with strong gender identification themselves.

Brothers

It's important to monitor sibling relationships. Parents must intervene to stem adversarial relationships between brothers, particularly between an aggressive older brother and a gender confused younger brother. Conversely, helping brothers to build a positive relationship can be very beneficial for a gender confused boy. Enlist the older brother's help, but again, depending on his age and maturity, don't give him all the details.

Friendships

Foster male friendships. Friendships with male peers are almost as important as relationships with fathers. Boys in groups have the unique power to bring out the masculine potential in each other. The natural ebb and flow of good-natured teasing and joking, shoving and wrestling, insulting and encouraging each other, is part of the process of bonding with peers, developing a particular kind of toughness (a "thick skinnedness"), and molding of the male identity.

Males tend to bond through the joint experience of activities, the more intense the better. Military service, sports, and challenging work are prime examples where men typically bond. For young boys, sports may be an available avenue to bond with their peers. If the boy has an aptitude for sports, encourage his

involvement. Team sports in particular foster comradeship and mutual dependence. But let me be very clear, these bonding activities don't have to be sports. If he doesn't like sports, then don't force him. This would only set him up for failure and confirm in his own mind his inferiority to other boys. The opportunity to get to know other guys, to de-mystify them, to get comfortable with them, and to eventually bond with them is infinitely more important than the nature of the activity. Organizations such as the Boy Scouts or the YMCA Indian Guides provide boys with non-competitive, activity-based environments within which to connect with male peers.

Affirm Masculine Identity

Single mothers need to make a conscious effort to encourage and affirm their son's masculinity by clearly differentiating between their femininity and their son's masculinity and making it clear that these differences are good. They should treat their sons differently from their daughters. This is a time to be a little politically incorrect by assigning different household duties that reflect traditional gender roles and explaining the importance of being a gentleman and teaching him how to treat girls differently than boys. Stroke his budding male ego by complimenting him on how big and strong he is and congratulating him on his accomplishments.

Conclusion

In summary, good treatment for boys suffering with Gender Identity Disorder really means good parenting. This is not brain surgery, but it does require effort and persistence. Help him to build healthy relationships with male peers. Help him to separate and individuate from his mother and other females.

Encourage the mother to address her issues so that she can be a better parent. Allow the boy to be a child and attend to his own needs. Allow him to be "one of the guys." And finally, listen to him and encourage him to appropriately express his needs, wants, thoughts, and feelings.

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