

Anonymous submission (MISS0061)

I am from a very underrepresented group – I am the mother of a transgender child. Parents like me are in the unique position of having watched our children unfurl as transgender and have witnessed what led them to this place. I am in several support groups for parents of trans kids and there are astonishing similarities across the board, despite the fact that our kids differ in age and some are trans boys while some are trans girls. These similarities are directly relevant to your inquiry.

As I say, my child's story is representative of many trans kids. You don't often get to hear our perspective because we are collectively afraid of being branded 'transphobic'.

I brought by children up with a liberal mindset, I wanted them to know that race, sexuality etc didn't matter. Looking back I think I also tried to steer my daughters away from pink & glitter because I wanted them to feel strong inside without objectification. However stereotyping of the sexes was all around us, fuelled by prevailing celebrity culture.

My eldest daughter was always awkward with people, avoided eye contact, a bit blunt and sometimes socially inappropriate. She was diagnosed with high functioning ASD (autistic spectrum disorder). She was perceived as 'weird' at primary school, which broke my heart. But growing up, she always seemed happy in her body.

However since puberty she says she wants to be a boy and everyone (including school) calls her 'he' and by a boy's name. She says she wants to take testosterone as soon as she can – despite the fact that this will make changes (facial hair & deep voice) that are irreversible. She also wants to have her healthy breasts surgically removed.

So how is this relevant to your inquiry? In the years leading up to this I saw my sensitive, socially awkward daughter struggle with the male gaze. I felt her squirm (and I squirmed for her) when a celebrity came on television pouting & gyrating. She was never going to be one of those girls. It is hard enough for neurotypical girls to navigate this. For ASD kids with more black & white thinking, the options are narrowed – you are either in or you are out. Add to this the fact that society's attempts to be kind and inclusive of trans people has tipped over into 'celebration' and you have the perfect storm. My daughter, who was once branded weird is now, as a trans person, super popular in school. And at the root of it is this : she has found a way to avoid the pressures of being a young woman. The fact that she is continually celebrated for her bravery then straps her to a juggernaut that leads to medical & surgical body modification.

Who is particularly at risk of poor body image?

Clearly for young people poor body image is often the starting point which can develop into full blown body dysmorphia and, for some, transgenderism. But if we break it down, it is accentuated in several categories – all of which my daughter falls into.

- 1) ASD - more vulnerable people on the autistic spectrum who may have less resilience and a more black & white interpretation of media messages
- 2) Girls - there has been an explosion in the number of teenage *girls* who are rejecting their natal sex; this correlates with the sexualisation (pornification) of young women in mainstream media

- 3) Lesbians – are very underrepresented in media. This may contribute to the growing theory that for some young lesbians, transgenderism is a form of subconscious internal homophobia (that ‘being a boy’ makes it more acceptable to date girls). Young lesbians are changing their bodies (making them male) in order to fit society’s expectations, instead of society changing to accept lesbians as a different expression of womanhood

Media is a broad term and in reality vulnerable people (indeed all of us) are affected by everything from ads, films, twitter to posts from friends. The latter is particularly important for young people and whilst we cannot censor what people say to each other, each poster is themselves influenced by society. Therefore if we address content that *can* be legitimately influenced, we can then hope that positive change might filter through.

With that in mind, here’s what I think could change.

Average People Please could we have more average people, with regular ‘average’ problems! Less celebrities, more depth. We are starting to see this more and that is great. Average looks, average bodies.

Lesbians Lesbians are not represented as much as gay men. And when they are, lesbians are often portrayed through the male gaze – usually as ‘fems’ (and often sharing a kiss which is almost designed to titillate). In reality there are both more ‘feminine’ and more butch lesbians. Butch lesbians are completely underrepresented in media! I think my daughter is erring towards that and there are no androgynous/butch models for her. But who still have intact bodies and a healthy acceptance of their own bodies.

BUT Slow Down with *Trans* Role Models

Transgenderism is already actively promoted in schools and through workplace ‘training’. My trans child does not face bullying (thankfully) – because acceptance is already there in that generation. We are now at a tipping point where actually we risk *promoting* medicalisation to young kids who are simply gender non conforming.

Personal Resilience/Flux (The Human Condition, not just Social Justice)

We already see a lot of content about people overcoming diversity. Now it would be good to see more long term human growth represented. Because in reality in life we all go through stages, we grow, we evolve. It is not always as simple as being a social justice warrior. Our own (smaller but longer term) journeys are just as interesting – and are important too. Recent programming has focussed so much on social justice that the personal journey has taken a back seat. Personal resilience and the acceptance of ‘flux’ both underpin a positive body image. To show diverse body imagery alone is not enough.

Finally, more specifically related to transgenderness, I’d like to signal that there are echo chambers (Discord, Tumblr etc) where young people are effectively grooming each other. They coach each other on what to say in order to get hormones. They post glorified accounts of transition. It is very similar to the anorexia/bulimia forums where they ‘support’ each other (give each other tips). Last year we saw an attempt to clamp down on the sharing of images of self harm, after several suicides where the young person had been encouraged – sometimes overtly but sometimes more subtly. There now needs to be a move towards regulating this dangerous content too. We need to step in because within these forums people are not simply advocating a gender non conforming lifestyle (no harm there), they are

advocating – and promoting - surgical and medical interventions which should only be recommended by a medical professional. Serious harm is being done, under our watch.

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