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Patient Information Handout

Affirming Your Daughter's and Son's Sexual Identity

Although it may seem common sense, research confirms that boys and girls live healthier lives (physically, emotionally and mentally) as adults when they embrace their biological sex as their gender identity. This natural process of human development is influenced by *nature* (genetics) and *nurture* (childrearing and environmental factors). If accommodated, the process produces an adult who naturally embraces his or her biological sex. Development of a child can be summarized as follows:¹

1. Boys have a biological destiny to grow into men: Men who are different from women in ways that go well beyond genetic design and reproductive functions. Similarly, girls have a biological destiny to grow into women.
2. Societal structures have always existed to guide the process of growth from boyhood to manhood and from girlhood to womanhood.

For Boys

The gender development process is quite durable. Remarkably, “the fact that parents in all generations, in all cultures, having all levels of education and skills tend to raise boys (97% of them) with a clear heterosexual identity indicates that the process is fairly automatic, to a great extent a matter of [parents] doing what comes naturally.”¹ (p27) However, during this process, gender identity development can be disrupted by divergent influences or experiences in a boy's life. This process may be difficult for boys as they must separate from the innate mother-infant attachment and identify with the father.

Here is a basic summary of the steps in a boy's gender identity development.

- **I need my Mom.** The developmental process begins at birth with a son's naturally strong *attachment* to his mother. Her womb has been home to his prenatal development, and after birth the primary source of his nutrition and nurturance.
- **I'm different from my Mom.** The boy gradually perceives that he is a boy and that the women in his life (mother and sisters) are *different* from him; they are girls. The fact becomes evident as he notices anatomical, emotional and social differences.
- **I am like my Dad.** In his second year (usually around 18 months of age), the boy begins to *identify* with a primary male in his life, ideally his father, and seeks to move into a closer relationship with his father shifting slightly away from his mother. This process can be facilitated by his father demonstrating to his son that he can have a loving relationship with his mother, while maintaining his own independency.²
- **How am I doing, Dad?** For this natural process to proceed, the boy needs *affirmation* from the male figure with whom he is identifying. Through loving affection and masculine modeling from his father, the son feels approval and affirmation as a fellow male. This process of identifying with Dad and separation from Mom is critical to his masculine development. The son's mother must recognize this fact and encourage the process.

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- **Hey guys, how am I doing?** For the rest of the son's developing life he will *test* his masculinity, seek reaffirmation from his father, and further affirmation from other boys/men in his life. This will typically come through competitive activities with other boys, particularly physical and aggressive activities.

Fathers: To help facilitate normal development, fathers should seek to be actively involved in their sons' lives, even from infancy, and model masculinity to them.

- Let your son see you as being confident, self-assured, and decisive.
- Let your son also see you as supportive, sensitive and caring towards him.
- Be physically active with your son in play.
- Provide appropriate affection, attention, and support to your son, and he will better respect, emulate, and identify with you.³

Fathers, spend time with your sons to develop a strong relationship. There is no substitute for the masculine modeling a child receives from spending time with his father.

- Wrestle on the floor with your son. Play tackle and praise him for being tough when he is knocked down. As you play, always be sure to tune in to your son's cues. If he is not enjoying playing rough together, then it is important to tone it down and play in a way that he enjoys. The goal is for your son to have fun playing with you.
- In your play with your son, allow him to win often. Be careful not to frustrate him in his inability to do what you can do.
- Go on "man time" dates for breakfast or lunch.
- Involve your son in your activities around the house, such as mowing the lawn, fixing the car, fixing the toilet, or shoveling snow.
- Do projects together, such as building a model car, birdhouse or bench.
- Take your son with you on errands.
- Involve your son in your activities and in your associations with other male role models. Don't leave him out just because he is hesitant to go.
- Engage with you son in activities in which he is interested. Seek to understand his perspective and to learn about the things that he enjoys. Participate with him on his level by entering into his world.
- Teach him to throw, kick, and dribble a ball. Even if he chooses not to play sports, this will serve him well on the playground during recess at school.
- If athletic sports do not fit with your son's abilities, look for other activities to do together, such as hiking in the woods, fishing, hunting, scouting, woodworking, or playing an instrument together.

Fathers, compliment your son's qualities of physical and intellectual strength and abilities.

- Talk about his strong muscles, fast running, and quick thinking.
- Acknowledge and compliment his growing up.
- Applaud his physical and intellectual abilities.

Mothers: To help facilitate normal development, mothers should develop warm, affectionate, and nurturing relationships with their sons. A healthy relationship with his mother fosters a son's masculine development.

- Show love and kindness to your son, but don't be overly protective.

- Empathize with your son's struggles or pain in a manner that is not overly sympathetic, or that causes him to feel like a victim. Pay attention to the impact of the feedback you give him.
- In times of need (injured or frightened), balance your compassion toward your sons by allowing him to face his fears or deal with his hurts.
- Tolerate your son's typical boy behaviors, such as running, jumping, fighting, and getting dirty, and yet enforce limits when the behaviors are dangerous, unreasonable or disrespectful of others. Recognize that boys usually play differently than girls.
- Encourage your son's relationship with his father by complimenting the father when possible and by pointing out your son's similarities to his father.

Mothers should not favor a son over his father, even if the son is more responsive and compassionate than the husband. If mothers make this mistake, the son may identify with the mother and fail to bond with the father. Even if there are marital problems, a mother should not turn to a sympathetic son to meet her intimacy needs. Even if divorced or in a setting with an ineffective or incompetent father, a mother can still support her son's masculinity and not display her hurt or angry emotions toward the father. This is a sacrifice for the mother, but a service to her son.⁴

Peers. Encourage your son's friendship with other boys. Same-sex peers are among the most important influences in your son's life. Peers are powerful socializing agents, helping direct a child's gender identity in the direction of his or her biological sex. Growing up with close same-sex friends will strengthen a child's gender identity.

For Girls

Gender identity development in young girls is initially easier since their identity figure is their mother with whom they have bonded since conception. In the current pro-transgender culture, however, girls appear to be at greater risk for developing gender identity disorders as pre-teens and adolescents, particularly if they have a history of depression, anxiety, emotional trauma, or autism spectrum disorder.

Mothers: To help facilitate normal development, mothers should cultivate a loving, interactive relationship with their daughters. While a close attachment is natural in the first year, the relationship is malleable and should continue to be nurtured. Daughters first look to their mothers to model femininity.

- Work to build a close relationship with your daughter by spending time together in ways she enjoys.
- Communicate your love to her through words and deeds.
- Seek to be a good listener, striving to hear her heart and see life through her eyes.
- Connect deeply with her through understanding her perspective, validating her feelings, and empathizing with her.
- Provide positive feedback, letting your daughter know that she is greatly valued for who she is, not just for what she does.
- Be sure to model a good marriage, showing your daughter what healthy male-female relationships look like.
- Set a good example of womanhood – being both nurturing and loving as well as stable and strong. Girls who perceive their mother as either too overbearing or too weak may develop a wrong perception of what it means to be female and may resist embracing a female identity.

Fathers: To help facilitate normal development, fathers have a critical influence on their daughter's gender security. Her gender identity is greatly influenced by the presence of a warm, supportive, and affectionate father.⁴ Fathers should show appropriate physical affectionate toward their daughters. "One of the father's main roles is to affirm his daughter in her femininity... His opinion of his daughter provides affirmation or disapproval in a way that a mother cannot ... Dad can bring confidence into his daughter's sense of feminine identity."^{5 (p106)} If a daughter feels loved, safe, secure, and protected by her father, then she can later transfer these feelings into an adult heterosexual relationship.⁴ This natural development can be derailed by abusive actions from the father toward his daughter or toward other family members. A daughter's impression of men often emanates from her relationship with her father. Sexual abuse or molestation is particularly devastating to the process.

Settings or Actions That Can Disrupt the Natural Gender Identity Process⁶

For Boys or Girls

- A disengaged father preoccupied with work, recreation, or personal struggles
- A harsh, unloving father
- A son with a sensitive temperament who has a father with an overly masculine temperament. They may struggle to identify with one another.
- A dominant, excessively critical or controlling mother
- A mother who is overly critical of the father or other males can negatively influence a daughter's relationship with men or a son's perception of his own masculinity.
- A mother who lacks an intimate, satisfying relationship with the father, and instead prolongs her attachment to her son seeking to fulfill her need for love and companionship through her son
- A mother who is overly protective and overly sensitive toward her son, not allowing him to separate and venture out
- A mother who is not emotionally connected to her daughter may leave her daughter craving female or motherly love. Likewise, a father who is not closely connected to his son may leave a son craving male or fatherly love.
- Molestation or sexual abuse by parent, relative, or other adult
- Exposure to graphic pornography in the home
- Early sexual activity or experimentation

References

¹ Medinger A. *Growth into Manhood*. 2000. Waterbrook Press. Colorado Springs, CO.

² Nicolosi J, Nicolosi LA. *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*. 2002. Inter Varsity Press. Downer Grove, IL

³ Abbott DA, Byrd AD. *Encouraging Heterosexuality: Helping Children Develop a Traditional Sexual Orientation*. 2009. Millennial Press. Oren, UT

⁴ Lauer R, Lauer J. The long-term relationship consequences of problem family backgrounds. *Family Relations*. 1991.40:377-384.

⁵ Howard J. *Out of Egypt: One Woman's Journey Out of Lesbianism*. 2001. Kregel Publications; Grand Rapids, MI

⁶ These settings and actions do not always lead to gender confusion, but can, to some degree, impend normal gender development.