

Focus On Ethics: Gender Expression and Identity

Resources / Publications / Young Children / November 2019 / Focus On Ethics: Gender Expression and Identity

STEPHANIE FEENEY, NANCY K. FREEMAN, KATIE SCHAFFER

We are pleased to have guest editor Katie Schaffer's help in addressing this sensitive and timely issue. Katie brings extensive knowledge and insight regarding gender issues to this column.

The case

Four-year-old Michael usually comes to school in jeans and a T-shirt but always goes to the dress-up area as soon as he arrives and puts on a dress or skirt.

On the day his mother was volunteering in the classroom, he walked in and immediately put on a ballerina skirt and sparkly shoes. She firmly told him to take them off and instead put on the firefighter's hat and boots, try on the cowboy hat, or do "something that boys do." Michael complied with his mother's demand but soon left the dramatic play area.

When the children went outside to play, Michael's mother told Ana, Michael's teacher, that he consistently plays female roles at home and shows little interest in toys and activities typically associated with boys. She and her husband were very concerned about his behavior, and she asked Ana not to allow Michael to play with any "girl stuff" at school.

Ana also has observed that Michael strongly prefers playing with girls and chooses activities that are stereotypically feminine, like having tea parties and wearing dress-up clothes that have lots of ribbons and sequins. He also frequently tells the other children that he is really a girl and that he wants to be called "Michelle."

Ana knows that some children begin to persistently identify with a gender different from their assigned sex at a very young age (Ehrensaft 2011; Fox 2015). (See "Glossary of Terms" for definitions of words and phrases used in this column.) She is also aware that the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct strongly supports maintaining close, collaborative relationships with families and respecting their child-rearing and cultural preferences. What is her most ethical response?

Responding to the issue

This scenario is similar to the one described in the Focus on Ethics column “Don’t Let My Son Dress Up as a Girl!” in the September 2017 issue of *Young Children*. In both cases, there is a conflict between a family’s request that its son not be allowed to engage in stereotypically feminine activities in school and a teacher’s belief that it is best for children to be encouraged to choose the activities that are most meaningful to them.

Our role as educators is to create a safe and reflective space for children to develop their identities and to counterbalance gender stereotypes.

Despite the similarities, there are some important differences between these two scenarios. Like Victor (the child described in the September 2017 column), many boys are fascinated by glittery clothing and enjoy playing a variety of roles—including feminine ones—in the dramatic play area. Michael’s interest in “girl stuff,” however, is not limited to playing with clothes and roles. Michael consistently gravitates to female-assigned pursuits, identifies as a girl, and asks to be called by a girl’s name. These are examples of how Michael’s *gender expression* (how a person shows their gender to the world through external choices) is currently *gender nonconforming* (it does not follow prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate for their gender). Michael may be—or ultimately identify as—*trans* or *transgender* (a person whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth).

While there is nothing new about gender nonconforming behavior in early childhood settings, advice for how educators can best handle conflicting perspectives has been scarce or absent, and resources to help teachers work with children and their families on this issue have not been readily available (Kilman 2013).

As in previous columns, we will use the process described in *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator* (Feeney & Freeman 2018) to systematically apply the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (2011) to this situation. We will then consider the unique challenges presented by this case and explore some resources that might be helpful to teachers and administrators who are working with children like Michael and their families.

Our analysis is informed by contributions from students in the ECE 200, The Professional in Early Childhood Education, class at Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon; participants at the June 2018 NAEYC Professional Learning Institute in Austin, Texas; Briel Schmitz, head of Spruce Street School in Seattle, Washington; and Rabbi Meir Muller, assistant professor of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina and head of Cutler Jewish Day School in Columbia, South Carolina. We thank them for contributing to this analysis.

Analysis

We begin with the first two steps of the process we use to address a workplace issue.

Identify the problem and determine if it involves ethics

This situation involves ethics because Ana must decide the right course of action to support a gender nonconforming or trans child and the child's concerned family.

Determine if it is an ethical responsibility or an ethical dilemma

While we noticed similarities between Michael and Victor (from our 2017 column), we came to appreciate that Ana faced a more challenging situation than Victor's teacher. She needed to respect Michael's preferences while working effectively and sensitively with his parents.

After presenting the scenario to two groups of early childhood educators and doing some research and reflection, we came to the conclusion that Ana is facing an ethical responsibility (a situation with just one morally justified course of action), not an ethical dilemma (a situation for which there is more than one possible resolution, which can be justified in moral terms). Because we consider it an ethical responsibility to respect children's gender self-determination, we will refer to Michael using her chosen name, Michelle, and chosen gender pronouns, she/her, for the remainder of the article.

Glossary of Terms

Assigned sex: The label given at birth—usually *male* or *female*—based on a variety of factors (usually genitalia, but sometimes also hormones and chromosomes). The term *assigned at birth* acknowledges that someone (often a doctor) is making a decision but there is far more biological, anatomical, and chromosomal variation than captured by the binary labels of *male* and *female*.

Gender: A social construct that categorizes and labels societal and cultural expectations (i.e., gender norms) for how people of different assigned sexes (and thus assigned genders) are supposed to act. Gender varies over time and from place to place.

Gender identity: How a person self-identifies their gender, which may include *man*, *woman*, *genderqueer*, or other gender identities. A person's understanding of their gender identity can begin as early as age 2.

Gender expression: The way in which a person expresses their gender identity, typically through their appearance, affect, behavior, and activities.

Gender nonconforming: A term to describe a person whose behavior or appearance does not follow prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate to their assigned gender (and thus assigned sex). Some people who position their gender outside of a man/woman binary describe their gender as *gender nonconforming* or *genderqueer*.

Trans or transgender: A self-identification of a person whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. For example, someone who was assigned female at birth but identifies as male might use the term *transman*.

Cis or cisgender: A person whose gender identity is the same as their assigned sex. For example, if the doctor said “It’s a boy,” and the child continues to identify as a boy/man, then he is cis or a cisman. People who are not trans are, therefore, cis.

Queer: A term that allows individuals to avoid the rigid categorization of *straight* and *gay*, and can indicate an attraction to people of many genders. For some, queer is also a political statement, expressing rejection of binary thinking and asserting that sexual orientation and gender identity are complex and potentially fluid. Although historically a derogatory term, *queer* has been reclaimed by many communities to have a positive connotation.

Sexuality: Sexuality is not just about sex. It is about individuals’ bodies, genders, feelings, relationships, and ways of experiencing intimacy. In this context, children’s healthy sexual development involves learning about their bodies, feelings, and relationships. Sexuality can also refer to sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and preferences. Sexual orientation often refers to whom we are sexually attracted. Some common terms for sexuality include *bi* (or *bisexual*), *gay*, *straight*, and *queer*.

Guidance from the NAEYC Code

Let’s look at the guidance the NAEYC Code provides for this decision.

The groups who discussed this situation both concluded that they could not justify forbidding a child to behave in ways that express her strongly held sense of self and that, therefore, they could not comply with this family’s request to keep her from activities associated with girls or femininity. They agreed that Ana’s primary

responsibility was to Michelle, and that she needed to honor Michelle’s ways of expressing her identity. The groups also emphasized the importance of Ana listening carefully to the family’s concerns and treating them with understanding and respect.

Some noted that Ana might feel she lacks the expertise to respond confidently to this situation. They recommended that she work closely with her director and seek out other knowledgeable professionals. Together, they could help her prepare to share information about young children’s developing gender identity with Michelle’s family, helping them understand their child’s request to be identified as a girl and to engage in play that she finds meaningful. For suggestions on how to engage families and respond to some of their concerns, see “Practical Guidance for Teachers: Supporting the Families of Gender Nonconforming Children”. It would also be important that Ana and the director work with the program’s other teachers and families to help them accept Michelle’s gender identity with kindness and understanding.

The Code’s Core Values, Ideals, and Principles

Respondents to this case found that the Code’s Core Values, Ideals, and Principles offered guidance that would help Ana address this family’s concerns. They noted, in particular, educators’ responsibilities to children and the importance of nurturing positive relationships with families. The following excerpts from the Code are those most applicable to this situation.

Core Values

- Base our work on knowledge of how children develop and learn
- Appreciate and support the bond between the child and family
- Respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague)
- Recognize that children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust and respect

Ideals

I-1.2—To base program practices upon current knowledge and research in the field of early childhood education, child development, and related disciplines, as well as on particular knowledge of each child.

I-1.3—To recognize and respect the unique qualities, abilities, and potential of each child.

I-1.5—To create and maintain safe and healthy settings that foster children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development and that respect their dignity and their contributions.

I-2.2—To develop relationships of mutual trust and create partnerships with the families we serve.

I-2.5—To respect the dignity and preferences of each family and to make an effort to learn about its structure, culture, language, customs, and beliefs.

I-2.6—To acknowledge families' childrearing values and their right to make decisions for their children.

I-2.8—To help family members enhance their understanding of their children . . . and support family members in the continuing development of their skills as parents.

Principles

P-1.1—**Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. *This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.***

P-1.4—We shall use two-way communications to involve all those with relevant knowledge (including families and staff) in decisions concerning a

child, as appropriate, ensuring confidentiality of sensitive information.

P-2.4—We shall ensure that the family is involved in significant decisions affecting their child.

P-2.6—As families share information with us about their children and families, we shall ensure that families' input is an important contribution to the planning and implementation of the program.

The Code offers strong justification for a teacher to base her actions on the needs of the child and for honoring the family's childrearing values and agreeing to their request. However, the Code also points educators toward putting the wellbeing of the child above all other concerns. P-1.1 takes precedence over all other items in the Code and supports Ana's decision to place the highest priority on the best interests of the child.

Guidance for the director

These items from the Code's Supplement for Program Administrators (2011) provide additional guidance for the director who is helping Ana address this issue:

P-1.1—**We shall place the welfare and safety of children above other obligations (for example, to families, program personnel, employing agency, community). *This item takes precedence over all others in this Supplement.***

I-2.2—To serve as a resource for families by providing information and referrals to services in the larger community.

P-2.10—We shall respond to families’ requests to the extent that the requests are congruent with program philosophy, standards of good practice, and the resources of the program. We shall not honor any request that puts a child in a situation that would create physical or emotional harm. In such instances, we shall communicate with the family the reason(s) why the request was not honored and work toward an alternative solution.

Reflecting on the case

Gender curiosity in children is not a recent phenomenon. Young children have always engaged in various forms of gender play, exploration, and identification. However, in recent years there has been greater recognition of the range of ways that individuals can express their gender identity and significantly more representation of trans people and communities in mainstream media. While this has opened up space for conversations about gender nonconforming and trans-identified children, some adults (including some educators, parents, grandparents) still attempt to stop the behavior (as in the case of Michelle’s parents) or attempt to rigidly categorize the behavior (assuming they can predict the child’s ultimate identity).



It is important to note that in US society today, children who are assigned male at birth receive more intense gender scrutiny than children who are assigned female at birth. For instance, girls are often encouraged by their parents to explore and participate in games traditionally associated with boys. These children are often celebrated as “strong” and “independent.” However, when boys express interests in activities associated with girls, they are typically reprimanded, ostracized, or identified as problematic. This double standard stems from a culture that often demeans behavior associated with women and femininity.

This case warrants particularly careful consideration because of the potential lifelong consequences of respecting or refusing to respect Michelle's view of herself. It is important that the adults in Michelle's life be willing to honor who she says she is. Denying children the opportunity to express themselves by forcing them to accept adults' views of gender-appropriate behavior is likely to damage relationships and the children's sense of self, in addition to making their lives more difficult.

Teachers working with families who are concerned about how their children are expressing their gender identity need to be flexible and well prepared. It may be helpful to refresh their knowledge of child development, specifically identity development as it relates to concepts of gender. Gender is varied and dynamic. All of us express our gender differently over the course of our lives; children should be encouraged and supported to play, explore, and define the gender that feels right to them at the time (without an expectation of day-to-day or month-to-month consistency). Our role as educators is to create a safe and reflective space for children to develop their interests and identities and to counterbalance pervasive gender stereotypes.

Flexibility and preparation are also essential for supporting families. The most important thing that a teacher or director can do with families is listen carefully and try to understand their concerns. Some families may be worried about their children's future school experiences during their middle childhood and teen years. They may be seeking assurance that their children will be safe, happy, and well adjusted. Other families may be interested in knowing if there is research that indicates that a transgender child can grow into a confident and well-adjusted adult. Families with strong religious or cultural beliefs that do not support gender nonconformity need to feel that their perspectives are being heard.

Teachers also need to have appropriate resources in mind for families, knowing that different families will be best supported in different ways. Some will be interested in reading scientific literature; others may just need someone to listen to and reassure them. At times, it may be appropriate to refer the family to a community resource person who is skilled in addressing questions of gender and sexual expression.

It may be helpful to remind family members that the ultimate goal is preserving their positive long-term relationships with their child. By sharing current information on child development, teachers may point out that there are things about the child that the family can neither change nor control. While they can't change their child's gender identity, they do have the power to strengthen the relationship by being loving and supportive no matter how their child self-identifies. (For more specifics to help you work effectively with families, see pages 91–93.)

As we pointed out in our September 2017 column about a father's disapproval of his son dressing up in girl's clothing, many child-rearing values are strongly rooted in families' cultural beliefs. Sensitive teachers must carefully balance their responsibilities to children and to their families—this can be particularly challenging when working with groups that have strong positions about appropriate gender roles. Additional challenges arise when a child's gender preference is at odds with their family culture and values. Those situations will call for exceptional cultural navigation skills and, most likely, additional support from experts and organizations in the community. We anticipate that this topic will continue to be addressed in early childhood education.

As a teacher, you have the ability to make the world a better place for children who are gender nonconforming, are gender creative, or identify as trans. One place to start is with an inclusive classroom that supports a variety of gender expressions and avoids perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. There are simple ways to make classrooms more inclusive, like avoiding consistently dividing children into groups by gender. For example, think about how you call children to the door. Instead of calling boys, then girls, to line up at the door, you might ask children wearing red, then blue, then green, to get ready to go outside. You can incorporate pictures, books, and dress-up materials that avoid gender stereotypes into the classroom. And you can help children move beyond traditional gender roles by encouraging girls to pretend they are firefighters and boys to role-play as nurses. If possible, make your restrooms available to all genders. Respond to children's fears, teach children to stand up for themselves if teased for their gender expressions, and validate their gender identities as they choose to express them. Strive to help all the children and adults in your program embrace a more inclusive, less restrictive view of gender.

Resources for Teachers and Families

Books and articles for adults

Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children. Diane Ehrensaft (2011). This developmental and clinical psychologist provides clear advice about supporting children who do not conform to society's narrowly defined gender categories.

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals. Stephanie Brill & Rachel Pepper (2008). A comprehensive resource with information to help adults guide gender-variant and transgender children.

This Is How It Always Is: A Novel. Laurie Frankel (2017). A family's journey of learning and acceptance begins when their 3-year-old son announces that he wants to be a girl when he grows up.

“Tate and the Pink Coat: Exploring Gender and Enacting Anti-Bias Principles.” Janice Kroeger, Abigail E. Recker, and Alexandra C. Gunn. 2019. This article presents current research on the importance of gender inclusivity in early childhood classrooms and offers practical tips to help teachers support children's explorations of gender.

[NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2019/exploring-gender-enacting-anti-bias](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2019/exploring-gender-enacting-anti-bias)

Websites

Gender Spectrum. This website has links to resources that help programs create gender-sensitive and inclusive environments for all children. Includes resources for children, families, and teachers, and training materials addressing a wide range of topics. www.genderspectrum.org

Teaching Tolerance. This website contains resources for educators committed to diversity, equity, and justice, including classroom and professional development materials focused on race and ethnicity, religion, ability, class, immigration, gender and sexual identity, bullying, and bias. www.tolerance.org/topics

Gender Justice in Early Childhood. This website focuses specifically on young children and offers resources and links to help educators consider their language, teaching practices, and programs from a gender justice perspective. www.genderjusticeinearlychildhood.com

Children's books

The Boy & the Bindi, by Vivek Shraya, illus. by Rajni Perera (2016). (Ages 4–8) A 5 year-old South Asian boy is fascinated with his mother's bindi, the colored dot commonly worn in the middle of Hindu women's foreheads. He wants to have one of his own. His mother agrees and teaches him about its cultural significance.

Elena's Serenade, by Campbell Gleeson (2014). (Ages 3–8) A young Mexican girl admires her father's glassblowing and wants to follow in his footsteps. However, pointing to her size and gender, he disapproves of her aspirations. She disguises herself as a boy to learn the craft and ultimately changes her father's views. Told in both English and Spanish, the story explores the limiting nature of gender roles and the power of children to challenge adult thinking.

Introducing Teddy, by Jessica Walton, illus. by Dougal MacPherson (2016). (Ages 3–6) Errol and his teddy bear, Thomas, are best friends who do everything together. One day, Thomas tells Errol, "In my heart, I've always known that I'm a girl teddy, not a boy teddy." Errol replies, "I don't care if you're a girl teddy or a boy teddy! What matters is that you are my friend."

Julián Is a Mermaid, by Jessica Love (2018). (Ages 4–8) Inspired by women he sees on the subway who are colorfully dressed as mermaids, Julián dresses up like a mermaid when he gets home. He worries about how his grandmother will respond, but she celebrates his transformation.

My Princess Boy, by Cheryl Kilodavis, illus. by Suzanne DeSimone (2009). (Ages 4–8) This story is told from the perspective of the mother of a 4-year-old boy who likes to wear dresses and enjoys things that typically appeal to girls.

Sparkle Boy, by Lesléa Newman, illus. by Maria Mola (2017). (Ages 4–8) Casey loves blocks, puzzles, and his dump truck, but he also wants to try out the shimmer skirt, glittery nails, and bracelets his sister and his grandmother wear. The adults in his life support his choices, but he worries when older boys tease him.



References

Ehrensaft, D. 2011. *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children*. New York: The Experiment.

Feeney, S., & N.K. Freeman. 2018. *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Feeney, S., & N.K. Freeman. 2017. "Don't Let My Son Dress Up as a Girl! – The Response." *Focus on Ethics. Young Children* 72 (4): 90–93.

Fox, R.K. 2015. "Is He a Girl? Meeting the Needs of Children Who Are Gender Fluid." Chap. 7 in *Discussions on Sensitive Issues*, ed. J.A. Sutterby, 161–76. Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

Kilman, C. 2013. "The Gender Spectrum: Move Beyond the Pink/ Blue Binary to Support Children Who Don't Conform to Narrow Gender Norms." *Teaching Tolerance* 44. www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2013/the-gender-spectrum.

NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children). 2011. "Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

NAEYC.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Ethics%20Position%20Statement2011_09202013update.pdf.

NAEYC. 2011. "Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators." Washington, DC: NAEYC. NAEYC.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Supplement%20PS2011.pdf.

Audience: Administrator (director or principal), Teacher

Topics: Other Topics, Equity, Anti Bias, Gender, YC, Focus on Ethics



STEPHANIE FEENEY

Stephanie Feeney, PhD, is professor emerita of education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Stephanie has written extensively about professionalism and ethics and has been deeply involved in developing the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, revising the Code, and developing the supplements for adult educators and program administrators. She is coauthor of *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator* and *Teaching the Code of Ethical Conduct: A Resource Guide*.



NANCY K. FREEMAN

Nancy K. Freeman, PhD, is professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina, in Columbia. She has served as president of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE) and was on its board for many years. Nancy has written extensively on professional ethics and has been involved in the NAEYC Code's revisions and the development of its supplements. Nancy is coauthor of *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator* and of *Teaching the Code of Ethical Conduct: A Resource Guide*.

KATIE SCHAFFER

Katie Schaffer, BA, is a white, cis, queer woman dedicated to collectively envisioning and implementing liberatory educational practices. For the past six years, Katie has worked at the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute. Finding a dearth of teacher education courses or professional development opportunities on gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ families in early childhood settings, Katie has created a training series and built out a facilitation team that has provided support to preschools and child care centers across New York City.