

# MY SON PLAYS WITH DOLLS, SHOULD I BE WORRIED?

## UNDERSTANDING GENDER VARIANCE IN CHILDREN

By Dr. Charles J. Sophy, F.A.C.N.

"Gender-variance" describes a strong and persistent preference for interests and behaviors usually associated with the opposite sex.

Parents may begin to notice gender-variance in children as young as two or three. For instance, Jimmy insists on wearing his sister's dresses. Nicole only wants to play with her brother's trucks.

Explorations of cross-gender roles and behaviors are a normal part of development, especially for toddlers and pre-school age children. Generally, by age 5 these interests and behaviors fade. Some children, who continue to express strong and persistent gender-variance past this age, will identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (lgbt) later in life. However, many lgbt adults were not gender-variant as children, and many heterosexuals were. It is just not possible to predict one way or the other.

Instead of worrying about these behaviors and discouraging such play, or re-directing your child to activities that are more in line with their gender, try to expose your children to a variety of play activities that reinforce the idea that there are many types of boys and girls – all of whom can explore and have fun doing what comes naturally to them.

The social stigma surrounding gender variance may cause parents to feel confused or somehow responsible for their child's behavior. They may worry about the possibility of teasing by friends and bullying at school. Parents dealing with gender variance may have questions or concerns about how to support their child. Affirming community and religious organization (see our list on this page) can help parents understand and cope with their child's specific behaviors. Support groups for children can lessen feelings of isolation – helping children understand and manage their gender variance in a positive and more effective way.

Children need parental support and unconditional love in order to

successfully navigate the challenges they face in childhood and adolescence. Criticism and behavior restrictions generally cause the child to feel ashamed, miserable and insecure, while suppressing their underlying feelings. If the natural expressions of their interests are supported, the opportunities for raising happy, well-adjusted children are enhanced. Please, love your children for who they are.

### Article credits:

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### Five Things to Know If You Think Your Child is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT)

1. You are not alone. Over 16% of families have a member who is LGBT.
2. Being LGBT is not a phase, choice, or illness. It is simply a natural variation of the human condition, like being left-handed.
3. What would it take to stop loving your own child? Rejecting children for their sexual orientation or gender identity can have many disastrous outcomes, including depression, substance abuse, school failure, running away, and even suicide.
4. Just one trustworthy, supportive adult can make all the difference in the world. Let that person be you. Love, support and embrace your child.
5. Parents of LGBT children need support too. Resources are available at:

**L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center - Family Services**  
323-860-7330 [www.lagaycenter.org](http://www.lagaycenter.org)

**Bienestar**  
East LA 323-727-7896  
South LA 323-752-3100  
[www.bienestar.org](http://www.bienestar.org)

**Congregation Kol-Ami**  
323-606-0996 [www.kol-amি.org](http://www.kol-amি.org)

**Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays**  
888-PFLAG 88 [www.pflagla.org](http://www.pflagla.org)

**Minority AIDS Project**  
323-936-4949 Ext. 110 [www.map-usa.org](http://www.map-usa.org)

**Metropolitan Community Church**  
323-669-3434 [www.mccla.org](http://www.mccla.org)

**Archdiocese of L.A.**  
213-947-4907 [www.archdiocese.la.ministry/mlgc](http://www.archdiocese.la.ministry/mlgc)

For more information, please contact [www.LAchildabusecouncils.org](http://www.LAchildabusecouncils.org)

