



Intersex

When we talk about a person's sex or gender, we are usually referring to whether they are male or female. This is generally based on what's between their legs and what is in their chromosomes. We think of a person's sex or gender as an either-or thing—pull down their pants, and either a penis or a vulva will be staring back at you. While this is true for the vast majority of people, it's a distinction humans make, not nature. Nature is not constricted by pink or blue.

Nature made the sexes on a continuum, with most of our bodies falling toward one end or the other. However, there are a number of people born with an intersex condition, where their genitals don't shout "Boy!" or "Girl!"

Many people with intersex conditions look typically male or female on the outside, but inside there may be some blending of the parts we call male and female. An example is the girl who is a high-school cheerleader and who feels 100% female. Every straight guy within 100 yards gets a stirring in his pants when she walks by. But she has what's called androgen insensitivity syndrome or AIS. She has XY chromosomes like most men do but her androgen receptors did not work like those of a typical male. So she has a woman's brain and a woman's body, and her vulva looks like that of most other girls', but her vagina isn't quite as deep as that of a woman who is XX and she doesn't have ovaries. Chances are, she won't learn about her AIS until she goes to see a gynecologist to find out why her friends have started their periods but she hasn't. To say she's in for a bit of a surprise is to put it mildly, but this doesn't change the fact that she's every bit as much a girl as any other female at her school.

Rolling Out Gender

Gender is what it means to be a man or a woman, and it usually lines up with what's in our pants.

Cultures have always assigned certain roles to one gender or another. Fortunately, some of the more confining gender roles have been falling by the wayside: we no longer assume that a doctor is going to be male or that a nurse is going to be female. We no longer assume that "the wife" does the cooking at home while a master chef in a restaurant is a man. Most people, however, continue to assume that only male soldiers should be on the front lines during combat, which is based on our gender-role idea that only men's bodies should be shot at and blown up on the battlefield.

There are other aspects of gender that are not an invention of culture.

Born With It vs. Taught

Until not long ago, psychologists assumed that we learned our gender roles as we were growing up, as opposed to biology having a strong influence. Since they believed our male and female gender roles were learned instead of being innate, they were sure you could take a baby boy, remove his testicles, make his genitals look female, and raise him as a perfectly happy girl who would never know the difference.

And that's what they did to a lot of children who were born with ambiguous genitals. Ambiguous genitals is when there's a painfully long silence in the delivery room before the doctor or midwife says "It's a boy" or "It's a girl." It would then be only a matter of time before physicians and psychologists would suggest to the parents that they raise the baby to be a Katie instead of a Kyle. That's because it was cosmetically easier to cut the gonads out and remove anything else that looked like a penis than it was to create a penis from thin air. They would then shoot the surgically constructed female child full of estrogen at puberty. (There were also babies who should have been raised as girls but were declared to be boys, although it was more often the other way around.)

While this arbitrary assignment of gender might have worked for doctors and parents, it didn't always work for the children. As it turns out, our sense of gender isn't as socially constructed as we once thought.

Certain gender stereotypes are creations of culture, such as the long held assumption that girls are more helpless than boys and women want sex less than men. But your feelings about yourself as a man or a woman are mostly determined in the womb before you were born. This is something that cannot be changed by surgically altering your genitals or gonads after you are born.

So we ended up with a number of boys who had been born with ambiguous genitals who had been raised as girls but who never felt like girls. Once they started going through puberty, they felt even less like girls. Ditto for bio-girls who were raised as boys.

Today we know to leave well enough alone. While there will be social hurdles, kids with ambiguous genitals will probably do better if their genitals are left alone. Their parents can raise them as boys or girls based on best guess, the way we were all raised. And if those kids decide to reshape their genitals later, that will be their choice. As we have discovered, only a very small percentage of intersex people who are raised with the freedom to make their own choice go on to change gender or feel bi-gendered.

This is particularly important to appreciate now that there are so many chemicals called estrogen disruptors in the environment. These estrogen disruptors are impacting the sexual development of the human fetus. So we should be ready for more intersex babies in the future.

Teens and Young Adults with Intersex

The following thoughts for readers of *The Guide* are from William Reiner, MD, a professor of urology and psychiatry who works with children and teens who have intersex conditions:

“Often, teens with intersex conditions have been afraid of their sex organs, embarrassed by them, and they have had them examined by doctors far too many times. They tend to think that their sex organs make them freaks or weird. In fact, their sex organs are designed for pleasure just like anybody else’s, even if theirs look a little different (typical penises and vaginas actually look a little bizarre anyway).”

“For teenagers in particular, how they feel about themselves and how they feel about their bodies can be very important to their happiness and sometimes even to their successes in relationships.

Many typical teenagers have fears about being rejected by the person they are sexually attracted to. Teenagers with intersex conditions often have these same fears, but they may be far more than in other kids.”

“Teenage boys and girls fall in love with a person (so do adults). They do not fall in love with penises or clitorises or vaginas. I try to help teenagers with intersex conditions learn how to talk about their sex organs to their lover, before they touch each other’s genitals or try to have sexual intercourse. And I let them know that they must ask what makes their lover feel good. How else would you know? Sexual relations among teenagers, as among adults, is all about relating to the one you are in love with.”

Intersex vs Transsexual

When your feelings of being a man or a woman don’t line up with what’s between your legs, you fall into the area that’s called transsexual or genderqueer. The official medical term is Gender Dysphoric or GID (Gender Identity Disorder).

GID is usually very different from being intersex, given that people with gender dysphoria usually have typical genitals and the “right” chromosomes. There’s nothing ambiguous about what’s between their legs, and their factory equipment is just fine. It just doesn’t match the gender they feel they are or should be.

Resources: These are excellent and highly regarded:

Intersex in the Age of Ethics edited by Alice Dreger, University Publishing Group.

Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex by Alice Dreger, Harvard University Press.

Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self by Sharon Preves, Rutgers University Press.

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