

Play and Art Therapy Interventions for Gender Nonconforming Children and Their Families

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My aim for this article is to: clarify two terms around gender nonconformity that will be used in this article; describe key issues facing gender nonconforming children that may bring them to your office for counseling; provide specific interventions and activities you can use in your work with gender nonconforming children and with their families; and present a list of helpful resources to have on hand for yourself and your gender variant clients.

Gender Language and Terms Referred to in This Article

I will use Brill and Pepper's definition used in the book, *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals* to define gender variance and gender fluidity below:

Gender variance refers to behaviors and interests that fall outside what is considered normal for a person's assigned biological sex. This may be indicated by choices in games, clothing, and playmates, or it may take the form of the child stating and restating that they wish to be the other sex—for example, a girl who insists on having short hair and prefers to play football with the boys, or a boy who wears dresses and wishes to wear his hair long. It should be noted that gender variance does not typically apply to children who have only a brief, passing curiosity in trying out these behaviors or interests (Brill and Pepper, 2008, p. 5).

Gender Fluidity conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender expression, with personal appearance and behaviors that may even change from day to day. For some children, gender fluidity extends beyond behavior and interests, and actually serves to specifically define their gender identity. In other words, a child may feel they are a girl some days and a boy on others, or possibly feel that neither term describes them accurately (Brill and Pepper, 2008, p.6).

Issues Effecting Gender Nonconforming Children and Their Families That May Bring Them to Your Office

There are many reasons a gender nonconforming child and/or family may pursue mental health services—the family may be struggling with confusion and/or acceptance of the child's identity or gender expression; the child may be having anxiety around mixed messages he/she receives between home, community, and/or culture around gender expression; the child may be experiencing depression and/or anxiety around suppressing or expressing their gender identity; the child and/or family may be feeling isolated from others going through the same challenges; and family members may be

grieving the loss of the child's gender. These are some examples—there are certainly more.

Perrin, Menvielle, and Tuerk wrote an article in *Contemporary Pediatrics* noting, “Families with a gender variant child often experience considerable stigma, isolation, and emotional distress” (Perrin, Menvielle, and Tuerk, 2007). When families commit to accepting their gender nonconforming children for who they are, these children are less likely to face these maladies. Perrin, Menvielle, and Tuerk go on to say that:

Researchers have established a clear link between accepting family attitudes and behaviors toward their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children and significantly decreased risk and better overall health in adulthood. The study shows that specific parental and caregivers behaviors—such as advocating for their children when they are mistreated because of their LGBT identity or supporting their gender expression—protects against depression, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts in adulthood (PhysOrg, 2010).

Mental health professionals can work with the family to:

1. Provide psychoeducation about gender variance and gender nonconformity
2. Explore and encourage ways the family can support the child's identity and expression—in incremental steps if needed for resistant families
3. Assist in any grief work with the family
4. Provide resources for the family so they feel less isolated.
- 5.

Other therapeutic issues may arise as well, but these can be key issues where parents and families need added support. Mental health professionals may need to expand their role and act as an advocate for their clients. For example, mental health professionals can connect clients to a greater gender-nonconforming community or other gender nonconforming services, and can advocate meeting other providers to provide a safe community for the client.

There are a number of clinical issues that may arise in individual sessions—including strengthening self-esteem, managing anxiety symptoms, and developing conflict resolution skills. Children are often managing various social situations, enduring bullying, and dealing with questions regarding their gender nonconforming toys or clothing. Peers may even ask the child if they are a boy or a girl.

Play therapy can be a natural way for the child to address difficult issues. The Association of Play Therapy defines play therapy as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development” (Association of Play Therapy, <http://www.a4pt.org>). Play therapists use play to help children express their needs and feelings and develop new solutions to difficult problems.

Play therapy and other creative interventions are discussed in the next section—these are child-friendly activities that address various issues facing gender nonconforming children and their families.

The Gender Nonconforming Friendly Office

The clinical setting should be stocked with a variety of toys and books that are gender neutral or gender nonconforming. Below is a list of helpful books:

1. *Sometimes the Spoon Runs Away With Another Spoon* by Jacinta Bunnell
2. *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis
3. *It's Okay To Be Different* by Todd Parr
4. *William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow
5. *The Princess Knight* by Cornelia Funke
6. *Pirate Girl* by Cornelia Funke

Some toys and play therapy items to have on hand include:

1. Dress up clothes
2. Sand tray figurines representing gender stereotypical figurines, gender nonconforming figurines, and figurines with dual identities or dual characteristics (i.e. a mermaid, half fish and half human)
3. Dollhouse and dolls
4. Vehicles such as race cars and monster trucks
5. Superheroes and action figures

Play and Art Activities

1. Observation during Assessment

When the family comes to the initial session to sign paperwork and complete the assessment, it is helpful to have a basket of toys on hand that the child can play with. The basket can have figurines such as fairies, princesses, mermaids, cars, and monster trucks. The practitioner can observe how comfortable the family members are with the child's choice of play which may provide assessment information about the family's comfort level with the child's gender identity and the family's communication style around gender issues. For example, the practitioner can observe if the family reacts receptively to a male child choosing to play with the mermaids (Mokalla, 2011).

2. Create gender variant figurines for play

Materials needed: art supplies such as fabric, glue, yarn, markers, and wooden peg dolls which can be purchased at crafts shops or online at <http://www.etsy.com/search/supplies?q=peg+doll>.

The child and family members are instructed to create a figurine (each family member designs their own) that represents a gender variant or gender nonconforming person. Some clients have chosen to have a person that is male on one side and female on the other; others have chosen more androgynous representations of a person; and some may even create a male or female figurine that actually looks like the opposite gender than the creator.

Once the figurines have been created, facilitate a discussion. For example, ask each family member to describe the figurine they made and what was easy, as well as not easy, about creating it. Ask, “If your figurine were a real person, what do you think he/she would need to feel happy or loved?”

This activity can also be used in individual therapy. The child creates the figurine and then leaves it in the office (in a safe space) so that the child has the opportunity to use the figurine in a few therapeutic ways:

1. In a family sculpture
2. In sand tray work
3. In pretend play, such as playing with the figurine in the dollhouse

3. Sand tray

Many play therapists are trained in sand tray work with clients. Sand tray work with gender nonconforming children can be a rich and healing experience. Barbara Turner, author of *The Handbook of Sandplay Therapy* notes: “The act of creating a series of three dimensional sandplays facilitates healing and transformation by bringing up conflicts from the unconscious in symbolic form and by allowing a healthy re-ordering of psychological contents” (Turner, 2005, p.2).

A client, for example, may bury or hide objects repeatedly in their sandplay which *may* indicate they have a secret or a need for keeping something hidden in real life. Mokalla notes you can explore this with the client. For example, you can ask, “What does the _____ need to come out from the sand?” (Mokalla, 2011).

4. Paper chains

Once the family and clinician have created a mutually agreed upon goal for treatment they can then break the long term goal down into smaller goals. For some families, small “baby step” goals may be needed. Have the family create a paper chain with these goals written on them—one “baby step” goal per paper link. They can take the paper chain home, if desired, and hang it where the family can see it. As the family progresses they can remove the links as each goal is reached. The family can choose a way to celebrate when the paper chain gets down to the last link. Some examples of paper chains used with gender nonconforming clients may include having the family:

1. Gather information about gender-conformity via texts and supportive websites (listed at the end of the article)
2. Read these resources and discuss in family meetings or family sessions

3. Discuss steps for how to support the child
4. Practice stress management techniques

5. Box of love

Gender nonconforming children may struggle with self-esteem, especially if they sense tension within the family around their gender identity, if they live in a non-supportive community, or experience depressive symptoms.

The parent(s) are provided with strips of paper and markers and are asked to write down positive statements about the gender nonconforming child. If needed prompt using one or more of the following suggestions:

- “What does the child do that makes you smile?”
- “What does the child do really well?”
- “Does the child get good grades in any subject?”
- “Write about a time the child did something kind for someone else.”

When the strips of paper are complete, the child inserts them in a shoebox. When the child is feeling low in confidence or self-esteem, he/she can look through the box of positive messages.

To take this one step further, ask the caregiver(s) to collect more comments and words of encouragement from other people such as family friends, relatives, teachers, and other supportive people.

There are also many play and art activities from general texts that apply very nicely to gender nonconforming children and their families. Some examples are listed below:

Assessment and Treatment Activities for Children, Adolescents and Families **Volume Two: Practitioners Share Their Most Effective Techniques**

Edited by Liana Lowenstein, 2010. Toronto: Champion Press.

1. “Bag of Rocks” by Sally A. Loughrin—a great exercise for families to aid discussion around what it feels like when we hold in uncomfortable feelings or hold on to secrets (pp. 78-79).
2. “Cool and Calm Feather Breathing Dragon” by Joanne Gobeil—an engaging activity for younger children and their families to practice deep breathing as a calming skill (pp. 82-83).
3. “My Future in the Crystal Ball” by Stephanie Niewoehner—facilitates discussion around how the child views his/her future (pp. 94-95).
4. “Inside the Special Box” by Debra Danilewitz—an activity aimed at increasing the child’s sense of importance and self-esteem (pp. 119-120).

Creative Coping Skills for Children: **Emotional Support through Arts and Crafts Activities**

Bonnie Thomas, 2009. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishing.

1. “Support Bracelets and Necklaces”: The child creates a bracelet or necklace with beads and/or charms that represent their emotional supports and passions (pp. 41-44).
2. “Power Animals”: The child chooses an animal he/she can relate to and draws strength from it during challenging life moments. For example, for gender nonconforming children, it can be helpful to talk about animals that transform and change within their lifecycles. Butterflies can be useful when using the metaphor of the chrysalis and/or metamorphosis, as well as the snake and the shedding of its skin when it needs to grow (pp. 59-61).
3. “Coping Skills Tool Kit”: The client creates a kit for themselves containing reminders and objects that help them calm and cope more effectively (pp. 62-63).
4. “Wish Fairies”: Children make wish fairies out of clothespin pegs and craft materials. A wish is written on a strip of paper and wrapped around the fairy before decorating—a fun and creative activity that helps clients state what they wish for or what they need (p. 91).
5. “Wishing Wands”: Children create wishing wands as an imaginative way to express wishes and talk about their hopes and dreams (pp. 92-92).
6. “Worry Vacations”: The child uses playful visualization techniques to picture their worries going on vacation to various places (pp. 147-148).
7. “Worry Pizza”: Creates a visual for client and clinician about what the child is worrying about and which worries are the biggest (pp. 150-151).

Creative Expression Activities for Teens:

Exploring Identity through Art, Craft and Journaling

Bonnie Thomas, 2011. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishing.

1. “Photojournalism”: The client creates a photo journal of his/her transition from one gender to another, or his/her struggle with gender identity in general (p. 23).
2. “Letter to Your Child Self”: The client writes a letter to his/her child self telling him/her what he/she needed to hear from an older person or mentor at a younger stage of life (p. 42).
3. “Secrets with Wings”: If the client has not disclosed to the family or public about his/her gender identity, he/she can create a piece of art that portrays what it is like to have this secret. He/she could also create a piece of artwork that has the “secret” somewhere hidden in it as a way to “get it out” and release it in treatment (p. 44).
4. “Mixed Media Self-Portraits”: The client creates a self-portrait in which his/her gender identity is expressed or represented (p. 50).
5. “Mini Graphic Novels”: The client creates a mini graphic novel/story about his/her struggle with gender identity (p. 88).
6. “Wish Book”: The client writes a journal entry about what life would look and feel like if he/she lived as the “other” gender (p. 90).
7. “Freedom From”: The client writes a journal entry about how his/her life would be different if he/she were born a different gender; if society was more

- comfortable coping with gender fluidity; or if the client were the gender he/she desired (p. 93).
8. “Personal Mantra”: The client creates a piece of art with his/her personal mantra (p. 46).
 9. “Inspiration Decks”: The client creates a deck of cards with inspiring images, quotes, or reminders about what inspires and supports him/her (p. 66).

Helpful Resources

Websites:

1. Gender Spectrum- <http://www.genderspectrum.org>
Gender Spectrum provides resources including:
 - a sample medical carry letter
 - a model school policy
 - recreational sports policy
 - legal support
 - handouts for parents
 - information on medical provider trainings
 - information on mental health provider trainings
 - mental health provider consultations
2. GIDInfo (Gender Identity Disorder Information)-
<http://www.hemingways.org/GIDinfo/therapy.htm>
Provides links to lists of gender therapists in the US and other countries as well as a plethora of information for the person seeking professional support for gender related issues.
3. Mermaids- <http://mermaidsuk.org.uk>
Provides links to resources all over the world for gender nonconforming children and their families.
4. PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)- <http://www.pflag.org>
Offers information, support, and links to multiple resources, including those for transgendered and/or gender nonconforming individuals..
5. TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation- <http://www.transkidspurplerainbow.com>
Provides general information and support for gender nonconforming children and their families.
6. GeMS Clinic (Gender Management Service Clinic at Children’s Hospital Boston)-
<http://www.childrenshospital.org/clinicalservices/Site2280/mainpageS2280P0.html>

If the current page is not loading, go to the Children's Hospital website and search "GeMS". The GeMS program offers medical services to children, including gender transitioning.

Texts for the Clinician

1. Brill, Stephanie, and Rachael Pepper. 2008. *The Transgendered Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals*. San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc.

Handouts for Families

1. "Contemporary Pediatrics Guide for Raising Gender Variant Children":
<http://contemporarypediatrics.modernmedicine.com/contpeds/data/articlestandard//contpeds/092005/148384/article.pdf>
2. "Coming Out Trans to Your Parents and Family":
http://www.pflag.org/fileadmin/user_upload/TNET/Coming_Out_Trans.pdf

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http://www.imatyfa.org/permanent_files/to-the-beat-of-a-different-drummer-6-2007.pdf.

Play Therapy Defined. (n.d.) <http://www.a4pt.org/ps.playtherapy.cfm>.

Study Finds Acceptance of LGBT Youth Protects Against Depression, Substance Abuse, Suicide. (n.d.) <http://www.physorg.com/news/2010-12-family-lgbt-youth-depression-substance.html/>.

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About the Author

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I am very thankful for the consulting, information, and feedback I received from Kerry Mokalla, LICSW, LLC, in writing this article. Kerry specializes in work with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) clients and has an interest and has experience working with gender variant and transgendered children and adults. She is licensed in California and Minnesota, and practices independently in South Minnesota.