

Boys who want to be girls

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Last August, Warner, a seven-year-old from Ottawa, told his parents he would rather die than look like a boy anymore. Since then, he's been allowed to wear his girl stuff to school and in public—ponytail, pink backpack, sparkles, and all.

Warner describes himself as a girlish boy. Yet, according to his mother, he also once said that he got put into the wrong body by mistake.

These are two very different ways of thinking about Warner. Either might describe Warner accurately, but they need not both be true together. If he's a girlish boy, then the idea of being in the wrong body goes fuzzy. What relevance could his anatomy have to his girlishness? A person can be girlish or boyish (or neither) whether male or female (or neither).

Girlishness and boyishness are matters of temperament and preference, and come in degrees. Now, in any large population, many more biological males will be boyish than girlish (not that the categories male and female are themselves well defined and always easy to apply). But even if correlations between biological category and sets of preference are strong, neither we as individuals nor our social institutions should take them as normative. A young female whose preferences are boyish would be miserable were she forced to act girlishly, and who wants to make a child miserable?

One of the experts Warner's parents consulted characterised children like Warner as having a psychological "gender opposite to what their body tells them." That's to endorse the second description, the wrong-body one. I doubt that our bodies really have much to tell us about what shape our personalities should take. Just as plausible, if not indeed more likely, I'd say, is that Warner would like to be female because he envies girls. Warner saw repeatedly that girls, in the sense of physiological females, were free to express the preferences that he, Warner, shares with many of them. We often want to be what we envy.

Of course, a person might be physiologically male and want to be physiologically female, and not just so that he can be girlish without attracting attention. A person might have a penis but want to have a vulva instead, entirely for the sake of having a vulva. This might be true of Warner, or, in a few years, come to be true of him. But Warner at three years old or even five lacked the experience and hormones required to form such a sophisticated desire. (No five-year-old can really want to be a police officer.)

Warner's parents say that as Warner enters adolescence, and with his consent, they will put him on puberty blockers until he's old enough to decide whether to alter his anatomy, as far as surgery and medicine allow.

We certainly should be happy that science and technology can help us with our choices regarding fitting our bodies to our desires. But we should understand the risks involved. Puberty-blocking drugs can have harmful side-effects, psychological as well as physiological. And we all know that sometimes getting what we wanted isn't all we thought it would be.

The ease with which experts and others speak about people, even young children, being in the wrong body indicates how wide-spread and deep-rooted is the idea that the genre into which our genitals fall (vulva or penis-and-scrotum) has an obvious and natural significance for our self-presentation, comportment, and sexuality. Yet there's nothing obvious or natural about it at all. Girlish ways and vulvas might go together statistically, but there's no reason to think girlish ways need a vulva, or even go better with one.

My point is that all of us would do ourselves, our children, our friends, and our neighbours a great service by keeping the categories male and female separate from our descriptions of people's temperaments and preferences, especially when it comes to children. "Girlish" and "boyish" might be useful descriptions to have in our repertoire, but we can be up to no good if we propose that the first should imply a vulva, the second a penis. Best just to allow that some girls—Warner, for instance—have penises, while some boys have vulvas. Maybe that would reduce the desire for surgical intervention.