SCIENTISTS HAVE CARRIED OUT THE BIGGEST EVER STUDY ON TRANSGENDER CHILDREN—

If we Let them Choose without pressure, they turn out OK

Trans children who Live as the Gender they Identify with and Choose, Act and Develop Similarly to their Cisgender counterparts, according to a new study.

In the largest ever study of transgender children, scientists recruited 317 3 to 12-year-old transgender children, 189 of their siblings, and 316 cisgender kids who acted as controls. The transgender participants had socially transitioned, meaning they were living as the gender they identify with rather than what they were assigned at birth. For instance, a child with a penis assigned a boy at birth who has come out as and is living as a girl.

To conduct the study, the researchers met families across North America, study co-author Selin Gülgöz, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Psychology at the University of Washington, told Newsweek. They spoke to children and parents about the former's gender identity. That included showing kids toys and asking which ones they preferred, and quizzing them on how similar they felt to boys or girls. The cisgender control group followed the same steps.

"The most surprising finding is, overall, just how similar transgender and cisgender kids looked," Gülgöz told Newsweek. "What this means is that, if I saw the data of any random participant, I would not be able to tell if that child is transgender or cisgender."

"Within both transgender and cisgender children, we find a wide range in the strength of their identity and preferences. For example, we had some 'tomboy' transgender girls in the study, just as we had 'tomboy' cisgender girls."
As the trans rights movement has gained mainstream attention in the past half decade or so, some have debated the legitimacy of the marginalized group's experiences. Some have controversially argued that teaching children about trans issues is confusing, that children shouldn't be allowed to transition, or that doing so perpetuates damaging gender stereotypes, for instance that girls wear pink or are submissive.

Gülgöz said the study can't answer whether children should be allowed to socially transition due to its design. But the findings "show that the time a child spends living as transgender does not appear to change their gender identity, or make their preferences in gender-stereotypical clothes or toys more prominent, which lends support to previous research suggesting that early social transitions are not likely to be the cause of transgender children's gender identities."

"This study does show that in fact not all trans girls (or cis girls) want to wear frilly pink dresses or play with dolls. We in fact see plenty of trans kids violating these stereotypes, just as we see cis kids do so," said Gülgöz.

"Other work in our lab has shown that trans kids either endorse gender stereotypes at equal rates or less than cis kids so the idea that trans kids are perpetuating stereotypes does not appear to hold up."

According to her team's findings, Gülgöz said it's not possible to speculate why children—both cis and trans—appear to be drawn towards different interests, styles of clothing, and whether this is due to socialization, biology, or something else entirely.

"This is the question that perhaps any gender researcher would love to debate and ultimately be able to answer. However, I don't think we are there yet," Gülgöz said. Gülgöz acknowledged the study was limited because all of the children had socially transitioned, and the participants were studied in one moment in time. The cohort was also skewed in favor of children from higher-income homes with educated parents. It's unclear if the same patterns would be found in other samples, she said.

The team plans to revisit the families and chart the participants' development every three years.

Professor Julie Fish, an expert in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (LGBTQ) health at De Monfort University in the U.K., who didn't work on the
study, commented on the authors' conclusion that "that neither sex assignment at birth or child rearing practices define how a child later identifies or expresses their gender."

"The authors present these practices as neutral which contrast with narrative accounts in which transgender children have reported experiencing distress, disturbed behaviour and withdrawal if their feelings are not acknowledged by their family and friends," Fish told Newsweek.

Simona Giordano, an expert in gender identity and Reader in Bioethics at The University of Manchester Law School, who also did not work on the study, told Newsweek: "The study provides further timely evidence that a child's gender is unlikely to be determined by how parents respond: there is something that comes 'from within', and that the child discovers despite having being encouraged otherwise. The child will follow this internal clue and gravitate towards toys plays and peers that are congruent with the inner gender in the culture of belonging. Parents and families cannot instigate such process: they can facilitate it or impede it."

Giordano went on: "In recent years, some in the literature have argued that enabling a child to transition socially might increase the odds of later medical
transition, and that being supportive of a child's gender expression is not just being accepting, but is a form of psychosocial treatment that has consequences."

"This study confirms that being supportive is unlikely to push children in one or in the other direction, according to Giordano. Give them freedom to choose.

However, Giordano said by studying children who have transitioned socially the authors "might inadvertently reinforce the mistaken view that certain discrete categories exist: the binary of male and female (cisgender category), then the binary of transboy and transgirl (transgender category) and then another binary (cisgender and transgender)."

"We instead need to recognise that none of these categories has precise boundaries," argued Giordano. "Even the biological categories of male and female are blurred," Giordano explained. "We know today that not just the X and Y chromosomes but at least twelve other chromosomes across the human genome govern sex differentiation, and at least 30 genes are involved in sex development. "If 'transgender' is defined as a person whose gender does not align with the gender expectations constructed around the biological sex, but we have difficulty in defining biological sex, the notion of transgender loses its epistemological clarity," she said.

Giordano also argued the term "social transition" does not have clear contours, as it means different things for different people.

She concluded: "The study thus provides important reassurance to families and clinicians: being responsive to a child's expression and needs is not going to 'make them transgender'; enabling a child to choose freely toys, clothes, hairstyle, a name and pronoun, or even to present in the experienced gender outside the domestic environment does not 'cause' children to become transgender or later transsexual adults."

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