

UN GENDERING CHILDHOOD

By Meg Crane



Siobhan and Clea, the macro shark. Photo by Meg Crane.

Winnipeg parents let their children decide their gender expression

Three year old Clea is not a girl. She is not a boy. She's a macro shark. At least, that's what her mom, Siobhan, tells people who ask. Clea has told her mom that her preferred pronoun is "baby."

"I don't think she understands what a pronoun means exactly, but what she's saying is that she's my baby and that's all," says Siobhan. Siobhan doesn't try to encourage Clea to be a girl. Or a boy. She lets her child make the decisions.

Winnipeg psychologist and parent Diane Forest says gender norms are a reality in our society. "So, what do we do with them? We teach our children that there are things that they will like and things they won't. We give them the skills to make their



What is gender-free child rearing?

“How I’m raising her is, she’s just a little human. And whatever she’s attracted to or interested in, that’s the thing,” says Siobhan. “I don’t really feel like girls stuff or boys stuff is real. It’s just a social construct.”

Siobhan listens to what Clea says about her gender. After Clea told her that she’s not a girl or boy, Siobhan tried to use neutral pronouns for her. Clea wasn’t comfortable with that, so female pronouns are being used until Clea decides otherwise.

Siobhan also avoids gendering other people around Clea, even people who appear to identify as a woman or man. “So far, she hasn’t known how to gender anyone because culturally appropriate gender markers don’t mean anything to her, which I think is great and cool.”

Britt Ross is also raising their sons, ages six and four, gender-free. “They are free to play whatever they want. If they pick out a dress at the store, we’ll buy it.”

Charlie Primeau plans to raise their baby the same way. “I think it’s fair to use masculine language with him, with the understanding that he has a choice and these things aren’t rigid or set in stone,” says Primeau.

“For my son specifically, I’m trying to not impose any specific gender ideals, be it cis-gendered or alternatively gendered,” says Primeau. “I don’t want to just assume he’s going to be gender-fluid or gender-queer, but I would like to hold a space for him until he is old enough to begin exploring that.” Primeau will validate whatever choice he makes.

Primeau lives in a home with their partner and baby as well as another couple and their children. Both female and male pronouns are used by the children in reference to Primeau and they say that doesn’t matter.

“We talk about sex and gender. We talk about how we don’t define people by

boys and girls,” says Primeau. “We talk about how the assumptions that some people make about people’s bodies and what makes a boy and what makes a girl aren’t necessarily true.”

Primeau says they and their partner are working on using less gendered language. They have stopped correcting those who misgender someone when it doesn’t matter, such as their baby or dog. “She’s a dog. Doesn’t matter to her, right?”

Céline Land lets Felix choose how he appears to the world. With long hair and nail polish, her son dashes to the window to watch for the garbage truck, toy dump truck in hand. “In the end, Félix is Félix,” says Land. “It doesn’t matter what he chooses to wear or if he chooses a specific gender.” She frequently tells her child that he can be whatever he chooses and she will accept it.

This is how Land and her partner have felt since he was born. They have not tried to stick to gender-specific clothing or toys, which she feels is a ridiculous concept.

“He loves bright colours and cats,” says Land. “A friend gave me a second-hand, bright pink Hello Kitty T-shirt. When I brought it home, he gasped and wanted to put it on right away. He loves it. He should be happy without feeling any kind of restriction based on a label.”

Why raise children gender-free?

“I don’t feel like assigning a bunch of attributes based on their genitals is reasonable,” says Siobhan. “It’s like a therapist asking leading questions. It’s directing the flow of a person’s self-expression.”

For Siobhan, it wasn’t a conscious decision she made right away. She began meeting more people who didn’t fit the gender-binary. “I’ve gained more language for what always just felt like a natural way to raise a small human.”

own choices, and respect others for their choices,” says Forest.

Parents should lead by example and give children the tools and language to deal with situations that might make them uncomfortable. “Doing so gives them important skills for navigation through these situations,” says Forest. This is what many parents are doing as they raise their children gender-free.



Charlie and their baby. Photo by Elliana Gilbert.

“I think it’s fair to use masculine language with him, with the understanding that he has a choice...”

Ross and their partner decided to raise their first son gender-free after discovering he does not create testosterone. “It kind of made us rethink the whole idea of what makes someone a specific gender.”

When they started looking into it, they realized that some children whose sex is not clear at birth are assigned a gender that they later do not identify with. “We thought, ‘Why would we want to do that to him?’ And we decided to let him choose,” says Ross. When their second son came along, they decided to raise him the same way.

Ross says this is also a feminist issue. “By telling my son that it’s wrong to be a girl, I’m telling him that women are lesser.” The decision has had a huge impact on Ross. “I didn’t realize I was non-binary until after I had my kids and I saw them free to be who they were. And I thought, ‘Hey, if it’s OK for them to do it, maybe I could, too.’” says Ross. “I feel more free.”

Primeau remembers being a child and not having anyone who they could identify with, but knew they were different. “I felt androgynous, but didn’t have the vocabulary,” says Primeau. They remember feeling alone and unheard.

People would ask if they were a boy or a girl in a way that felt harassing. It confused them. Primeau says they understood they were a girl because of their body, but told people they were neither a girl nor a boy. “If I felt like I wasn’t one way, why did I have to be this other option?” says Primeau. “There just weren’t people who were like what I identified with.”

Primeau grew up in the southern United States where the only models of folks outside the gender-binary were Moose from Pepper-Ann and a character from Peanuts. “It was really difficult because my identity was consistently invalidated,” says Primeau. “It feels like you don’t exist.”

When they looked around, people who did seem to identify differently were

those who were gay and lesbian, so they thought they were a lesbian and came out. They later came out as bisexual. And then finally realized they were gender queer.

“If I had had a better understanding of those things earlier on, I wouldn’t have necessarily have gone through the vast array of coming out as a lesbian, coming out as bisexual and going through all these different things and realizing that it’s never actually been about my sexuality,” says Primeau.

This is why Primeau is raising their child gender-free. And they are lucky to know a group of people who are raising their children the same way, many of whom also do not fall into the gender binary.

“We are blessed to know a trans-man who has given birth to a baby and who is nursing his child,” says Primeau. “My kids are going to grow up with probably more queer people in their lives than people who identify solely as straight or cis-gendered.”

This community will show him that he doesn’t have to follow the binary. “He will have support,” says Primeau. “I am raising him this way to show him acceptance and freedom to be himself no matter what,” says Land.

The consequences

“I don’t get a lot of obvious negative responses,” says Siobhan. She says some people close to them sometimes refer to Clea as a girl, which she finds upsetting. “I usually say, ‘Oh, this isn’t a girl. This is a shark.’” Siobhan has not asked Clea yet how she feels about being gendered.

Siobhan’s mom does have a bit of an issue with Clea’s gender identity. “It’s kind of a weird energy,” says Siobhan. “My mom is another generation.” While those somewhat negative responses have not been affecting Clea yet, Siobhan is thinking about the future. “I’m definitely concerned about down the road if she does decide to change her pro-



Felix Land. Photo by Melanie Skye.

“It doesn’t matter what he chooses to wear or if he chooses a specific gender.”

noun to a neutral one or a masculine one that I might have to not see my mom for a while with Clea while my mom and I can communicate about that, until I can trust that my mom can act appropriately.”

She is also somewhat concerned about how people will react if Clea is trans. “I would love if I could shelter her from all harm and oppression in the

world, but that’s not really realistic. Even if she does identify as female and express that way and everything is easy in mainstream culture for her, people still get shit on for being themselves all the time,” says Siobhan. She’s concerned about it in the same way she’s concerned about Clea falling off a play structure.

“A lot of people are really positive about it,” says Ross. Many think it’s adorable when their children are allowed to be themselves. Other people have an issue. “I think it’s harder because they are male children. There’s this whole thing about femininity is bad, you don’t want to be like a girl, you don’t want to be girly.”

For Ross, it’s not a big deal when people voice their negative opinions about how they’re raising their children. “It’s not their lives.” Plus, they have had a lot of positive support. “My mom buys my kids all sorts of frilly, sparkly things,” says Ross.

Ross admits that it could get harder as their sons get older, but right now it’s not a big deal with other children. “The young ones don’t have the prejudice yet,” says Ross. While many children may become more critical as they grow older, Ross thinks more people than in their generation will be OK with folks not adhering to the gender-binary.

“The more people see it, the more normal it becomes,” says Ross. “Some-day, eventually, maybe there won’t be transphobia anymore.” Regardless, they don’t believe in living in fear and want to set that example for their children and other people.

“It’s confusing to not see many role models,” says Primeau. By raising their child around other gender queer folks and not imposing stereotypes on him, they say he will be able to grow as his true self.

People often mistaken Felix for a girl, but Land does not mind. “If someone says, ‘Oh, what a happy girl.’ I say, ‘Yes. Thank you. Félix sure is happy.’ Usually this opens dialogue or adds confusion,” says Land.

Regardless, it is clear that discussions about gender will be more frequent as gender-free parenting becomes more prevalent.

Meg Crane is the online editor for OutWords and the founding editor of Cockroach.