

## Social Constructs in the Modern Era

Directions: Please read the following article from NBC News. Type your responses to the questions that follow the article and submit to Canvas as a PDF.

A few helpful definitions:

**Gender:** A set of cultural identities, expressions and roles that are assigned to people based upon the interpretation of their bodies (especially reproductive anatomy). Since gender is a social construction, it is possible to reject or modify the gender one is assigned at birth, and to express a gender that feels truer to oneself

**Gender expression:** The multiple ways (e.g. dress) in which a person may choose to communicate gender to oneself or to others; these expressions can be specific to particular cultures or time periods

**Cisgender:** A person whose identity and expression are aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth

**Transgender:** A term used to describe a person whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth

### ‘Boy or girl?’ Parents raising ‘theybies’ let kids decide

July 19, 2018, 10:48 AM CDT / Updated July 19, 2018, 10:48 AM CDT

By Julie Compton / NBC News

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Three-year-old twins Zylar and Kadyn Sharpe scurried around the boys and girls clothing racks of a narrow consignment store filled with toys. Zylar, wearing rainbow leggings, scrutinized a pair of hot-pink-and-purple sneakers. Kadyn, in a T-Rex shirt, fixated on a musical cube that flashed colorful lights. At a glance, the only discernible difference between these fraternal twins is their hair — Zylar’s is brown and Kadyn’s is blond.

Is Zylar a boy or a girl? How about Kadyn? That’s a question their parents, Nate and Julia Sharpe, say only the twins can decide. The Cambridge, Mass., couple represent a small group of parents raising “theybies” — children being brought up without gender designation from birth. A Facebook community for these parents currently claims about 220 members across the U.S.

“A theyby is, I think, different things to different people,” Nate Sharpe told NBC News. “For us, it means raising our kids with gender-neutral pronouns — so, ‘they,’ ‘them,’ ‘their,’ rather than assigning ‘he,’ ‘she,’ ‘him,’ ‘her’ from birth based on their anatomy.

Parents in the U.S. are increasingly raising children outside traditional gender norms — allowing boys and girls to play with the same toys and wear the same clothes — though experts say this is happening mostly in progressive, well-to-do enclaves. But what makes this “gender-open” style of parenting stand out, and even controversial in some circles, is that the parents do not reveal the sex of their children to anyone. Even the children, who are aware of their own body parts and how they may differ from others, are not taught to associate those body parts with being a boy or girl. If no one knows a child’s sex, these parents theorize, the child can’t be pigeonholed into gender stereotypes...

Some developmental experts see gender-open parenting as a noble goal, but they also wonder how it will hold up once kids enter a gendered world that can be hostile to those who don’t fit clearly into categories. Gender-nonconforming children are more likely to be bullied. Last year, [10 states considered “bathroom bills”](#) requiring people to use bathrooms aligned with the gender assigned to them at birth (none passed).

“Once your child meets the outer world, which may be day care, or preschool, or grandparents — it’s pretty much impossible to maintain a gender-free state,” Lise Eliot, professor of neuroscience at the Chicago Medical School and author of “[Pink Brain, Blue Brain](#),” said in an email. “And depending on how conventional your community is, you could be setting your child up for bullying or exclusion.”

Parents like the Sharpes understand these realities — but they’re determined to shield their children from them for as long as possible.

#### DECIDING TO RAISE A ‘THEYBY’

The Sharpes, both mechanical engineers in their early 30s, say their decision to raise their twins without designated genders evolved from a mix of research and personal experience. When Julia found out she was pregnant, she felt conflicted about learning the sex of the twins. As a female engineer in a male-dominated profession, she understood the constraints of gender expectations firsthand.

“It’s taken a lot of work for me to feel confident in my designs and my suggestions, and to really stand up for myself,” she said.

At first, Nate didn't understand why Julia wanted to wait to find out the babies' sex. But after the couple began researching how stereotypes affect a child's development, he changed his mind.

"We read about how from when they're 20-week fetuses, they're already starting to be gendered, and people are calling the little girls 'princesses,' and buying certain things for different children," Julia said. "We wanted to prevent that, so that's how it started. And then about a couple weeks before they were born, Nate just said, 'What if we didn't tell people ever?'"

When the Sharpes arrived at the hospital for the delivery, they asked the staff not to announce the twins' sex. Even after the newborns were put in their arms, their anatomy remained a mystery for several hours.

"It just wasn't something that was interesting," Julia said. "It was all about meeting the children and interacting with them, and just not something that we focused on at all."

Now toddlers, Zyler and Kadyr aren't focused on it either. On a recent morning, they were busy playing with large cardboard blocks. They constructed a tower, then a robot.

Their Cambridge home is littered with toys that come from both the girls' and the boys' aisles — a dollhouse, a play gym, a bedroom full of stuffed animals, a basket of dolls. Their parents want to foster an environment of openness where the twins feel loved whether they grow up to identify as LGBTQ or not. That means learning to see their children simply as "kids" rather than as "boys" or "girls," and encouraging others to do the same.

That's not always easy, or comfortable, in a gendered world. Family, friends and day care workers struggle with they/them pronouns, and not everyone understands the Sharpes' decision to keep the children's sex private.

"We definitely got more pushback from co-workers, who were like: 'Wait, you're not going to tell me what you're having? You're not going to tell me what your kids are?'" Julia said. "I'm like, 'I'm telling you they're children.' But they got really, really frustrated that we wouldn't tell them what their genitalia was, which is kind of a weird thing when you think about it."

Kadyr and Zyler still have little understanding of gender, according to their parents, but have started to pick up on it. One day recently, Zyler asked Julia what "she" and "he" mean.

"Since we've tried to avoid really getting into gender until they're old enough to understand it, I answered that 'he' and 'she' are pronouns and you use them to make sentences simpler, so instead of saying someone's name over and over in the sentence, you'll say 'he' or 'she' or 'they' instead," she said, "and Zyler got distracted after that and moved on."

## IS GENDER HARD-WIRED?

At birth, reproductive organs reveal a baby's assigned sex. Gender, however, comes later, around age 4, when children begin to identify as masculine, feminine or somewhere along that spectrum, experts say.

People tend to think that this gender identity is hard-wired, because most people identify with the gender that matches their sex at birth. But large-scale research suggests gender is largely influenced by a child's environment, said Christia Spears Brown, a developmental psychologist and author of "[Parenting Beyond Pink and Blue: How to Raise Your Kids Free of Gender Stereotypes](#)."

When boys and girls are born, their brains are virtually indistinguishable; while boys have slightly bigger brains on average, they also have bigger bodies. Studies suggest there are some minor observable differences in behavior early on. For instance, baby girls seem slightly better at regulating their impulses and attention than boys, according to a 2006 study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Experts agree that girls tend to speak a few months earlier than boys, though it's not understood why. "But in general," Brown said, "the differences get larger as kids get older, which really suggests that it's society and culture that are shaping the differences that we see — not innate differences from birth."

From the day they're born, baby boys and girls are ushered into blue and pink worlds where they are dressed in different clothes and given different toys. As they get older, they begin to pay attention to gender-based marketing: Recent [research](#) shows that when a girl is given a toy that is pink, she is more likely to play with it, but when the same toy is blue, she's less likely to.

Experts say the way parents interact with their children also shapes them from a young age. For example, parents are more likely to explain [numbers](#) to sons and use emotion-based words with daughters, according to [The Handbook of Parenting](#), an authoritative collection of research on parenting. Parents also tend to encourage aggressiveness in boys and emotions in girls, the handbook says.

Parents raising their children without designated genders aim to block these biases, allowing kids to explore and determine where they fall in their own time.

Dr. John Steever, assistant professor of pediatrics at the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center in New York, sees gender-open parenting as a way to show children that they will be accepted no matter their identity. This could be particularly important for transgender children, who have higher rates of depression and suicide attempts, he said.

While there's a low chance that any particular "theyby" will be transgender — just [0.6 percent](#) of U.S. adults identify as transgender, according to a 2016 UCLA report — raising children in a less gendered environment could help those who need the support, Steever said. And while it's too early to know, Steever suggests this parenting style could prevent gender dysphoria, the distress a person feels when their gender does not align with their assigned sex at birth.

"When a child is told their entire life, 'You are a boy, you are going to grow up to be a man, you are going to like women, you are going to be a father...,' when they start to feel, at a young age, or maybe in their adolescence that isn't right, that doesn't fit me,"

Steever said, “that creates that gender dysphoria.”

Using gender-neutral pronouns is not the only option for those looking to protect their kids from potentially harmful gender stereotypes, Brown said. She said parents can also make a point to de-emphasize gender and explain to their children that there is more than one way to be a boy or a girl.

So few parents are raising “theybies” that there is no research yet on how this type of parenting affects children. Anecdotally, many children raised this way come to their own conclusion about their gender around age 4, just like their peers.

Some experts, including Steever, say it’s unlikely that children would be confused by a gender-open upbringing. Brown, though, said it’s important for parents to prepare children for “a society that’s really obsessed with a gender binary.”

“And people are going to want to put that child into one of those binary categories,” she said. “And so for children to not be confused, parents have to give kids the language and the understanding of recognizing that ‘I’m not taking part in this binary.’”

## HOW PEOPLE REACT TO ‘THEYBIES’

For parents raising their children without gender designation, confrontations with bewildered strangers are as routine as changing diapers.

“People are very, very invested in whether one’s child is a boy or a girl,” said Nathan Levitt, 40, a Brooklyn resident who does not disclose the sex of his 18-month-old, Zo. “It’s usually complete strangers that come up to us and say, ‘Boy or a girl?’ I think it’s been challenging because we don’t always want to have that conversation when you’re just going to the playground.”

Levitt, a family nurse practitioner, remembers an incident when he was on an airplane with his husband, also a nurse, and Zo, who was bundled in a pink sweater at the time. “Oh, you’re so lucky you have a girl,” a fellow passenger said. “Girls are so pretty and ... fragile, and she’s going to grow up and get so many boyfriends.” Not wanting to get into a potential argument, the couple didn’t bother to correct her. But later, after they had removed Zo’s sweatshirt, the same woman became upset when she saw the baby wearing blue. “You didn’t tell me you had a boy,” Levitt recalled her saying.

“I said, ‘We didn’t actually tell you any gender that our child is — our child is going to tell us how they identify,’” he said. The woman became angry and accused the couple of setting Zo up for a difficult life.

Levitt didn’t argue with the woman because he didn’t want to upset his child, but the encounter left him shaken. “If this is what a random stranger is saying on a plane,” Levitt wondered, “what are some other things that people might say in school or on a playground?”

Studies show that many gender-nonconforming children face bullying. A 2012 survey from [GLSEN](#), which advocates for safe school environments for LGBTQ children, found that 20 to 25 percent of elementary schoolers reported seeing gender-nonconforming classmates being bullied or called names. A [2015 study](#) found that over 95 percent of LGBTQ youth ages 13 to 21 heard negative comments about not acting “masculine” or “feminine” enough.

But attitudes are evolving, especially among young people, said Jamey Jespersen, an education associate with GLSEN, who works with K-12 students. Younger generations today are less rigid about gender, especially in more liberal areas of the country, Jespersen said. [Fifty-six percent](#) of “Generation Zers” — the generation born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s — report knowing someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns.

“They’re more used to using pronouns that are not just she/her or he/him,” Jespersen said.

## WHEN THEYBIES VENTURE INTO A WORLD OF PINK AND BLUE

Soon, Kadyn and Zyler will enter grade school — a time when kids put themselves and others into strict gender categories. The Sharpes hope to get them into a Montessori public school in Cambridge, which they believe will be accepting of their parenting style.

“It’s a relatively open environment, and supportive, and so I would imagine that we’re more likely here than in many other places to just tell the teacher: ‘Hey, we’re raising them without gender pronouns. If you could respect that and let the other kids know, that’d be great,’” Nate said.

The Sharpes believe Kadyn and Zyler will know their gender preferences by the time they reach elementary school. No matter how they identify or what pronouns they prefer, their parents are ready to embrace their wishes. The couple doesn’t dismiss the possibility the twins may get bullied, but they aren’t too worried about it either.

“I’d rather have a kid that experiences adversity and deals with it and comes out stronger,” Nate said, “than a kid who is a bully.”

Some parents of theybies, like Ari Dennis, worry about how [their children] will be treated by their peers, particularly as they grow older. But Dennis believes raising them within rigid gender norms would be worse.

“In my opinion,” Dennis said, “assigning your child a gender and giving them gender-coded lessons their whole life is much more coercive than what we do.”

## Questions for Homework:

- Explain the reasoning some parents have for raising their children in a gender-neutral environment. What does it have to do with the idea that gender is a social construct?

- What examples from the article support the idea that a person's experience in society is based on their gender identity?