

Gender lines blurring between male and female

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GENDER IDENTITY

A Metroland Special Report

It's the small things — buying underwear, for instance.

There's the boys department, and the girls. Which one do you pick, when your child isn't sure which gender fits?

Mandy Klein made a big mistake when she picked a pack of undies for her teenager Micah from the girls' section. Turns out, one pair was pink.

Micah was so upset thinking about the girlie pink pair donned that morning, her parents say, that by the end of day she'd cut the underwear into tiny pieces and tossed them in the trash.

Randy and Mandy Klein are doing their best to treat their child's gender identity with respect, but sometimes, the Newmarket family struggles with the day-to-day details.

Micah, 16, came out as gay last year and several months ago, said they are gender fluid. Micah prefers "they and them", dresses generically and considers themselves male or female depending on the day, and sometimes the time of day.

It's all new territory for the Kleins as they navigate a minefield of language and lifestyle for their only child, who is also autistic.

"I avoid using pronouns when I can," Randy says. He uses Micah's first name when he thinks of it, but it can get confusing and sometimes, emotional.

"I tell her — them — 'when you correct me...don't yell. I understand you're passionate about it, but I forget. It doesn't mean I'm being disrespectful.'"

The Kleins say they will stand by their child, wherever this journey takes them.

"If it's important to Micah, it's important we fight for them," Randy says. Micah is a smart kid, he adds, a member of the school LGBTQ club, not troubled with bullying. "They're doing well. They'll figure it out."

In the meantime, Mandy says gender-neutral departments in stores would make life easier.

It could happen.

Our changing approach to gender impacts more than just the English language. Other parts of society that have been traditionally segregated are undergoing a rapid re-think.

Anthems are being rewritten (goodbye to "all our sons com-

mand"), Facebook invites you to customize your gender profile, the Oxford Dictionaries website added "Mx" as an alternative to Mr. or Mrs., and everywhere, lines are blurring between male and female.

Some are calling it the new post-gender era.

Here are some of the shifts we've noticed:

PUBLIC WASHROOMS

All-access washrooms are popping up everywhere. This summer, Toronto's CNE garnered accolades for its cheeky take on the topic.

Instead of the traditional porta-potty signs showing a man in pants or woman in skirt, the Ex cubicles displayed icons of someone wearing half dress/half pants, along with the words "We Don't Care".

General manager Virginia Ludy told the Toronto Star the CNE approach diverts the debate to focus on what matters.

"Who cares who uses them, right? Men, women, doesn't matter. You go in, you use it, you do your business, you leave."

SPORTS

Hockey in Ontario now has new trans-inclusive rules, unveiled earlier this month thanks to Oshawa teenager Jesse Thompson.

Thompson, born a girl, challenged the Ontario minor hockey league's dressing room policies that prevented him from using the boys change room.

His complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal led Ontario branches of Hockey Canada to post new policies allowing players to choose their dressing room based on whether they see themselves as male or female.

FASHION

Welcome to the age of "non-binary refinery."

Fashion runways have become gender-fluid with androgynous-looking models in heels and skirts, trousers and tweed. Fashion design-



Rick Mandonik/ Toronto Star

Gender-neutral bathrooms at this summer's CNE in Toronto showed society's changing attitudes towards gender. They each displayed a half woman-half man graphic with the wording 'we don't care'.

ers are promoting gender-free clothing, U.K. department store Selfridges has introduced a pop-up agender store and Women's Wear Daily calls "Going Gender-Neutral" one its top stories of the year.

Ben Barry, professor at Ryerson's school of fashion, applauds the trend.

"Everyone has a masculine and feminine side ... Why should clothing fail to reflect that part of who we are?"

In researching his book, *Refashioning Masculinity*, he discovered many men shop in the women's section because they're looking for a more playful esthetic or are looking for something that fits.

"Maybe it's time for fashion to play a role in stripping away the divisions and offer us different ways to express gender."

CONSUMER PRODUCTS

From Entrepreneur Barbie to gender-free nursery decor, marketers are responding to the gender-bending trend.

International Spa Association Foundation has recognized men are visiting spas more than ever before and increasingly, shopping for cosmetics (although skin

care for men still comes in mostly "manly" packaging).

Target is phasing out gender-based signage and colours — the company's website still directs buyers to gendered clothing sections, however — and Amazon.com removed its boy and girl options from their toy department search page. (On the Canadian site, the gender division remains.)

This summer, following a petition by DadDoes.com, the Toy Industry Association announced it would drop its gender-based Toy of the Year awards.

Gender is one of the top four trends to impact the marketplace, research group Mintel says.

"People are questioning traditional notions of gender, rejecting restraints of stereotypes and embracing freedom to be themselves."

EDUCATION

Amid controversy over Ontario's new sex-ed guidelines, school boards across the GTA, Simcoe County and Muskoka are addressing gender in a variety of ways such as teacher liaisons, professional development, symposiums or gender-neutral washrooms.

"Labels and identities should

only be self-selected by individuals, not assumed by others," Toronto public school board's 29-page guideline advises. "Biology does not imply identity. Nor do behaviour and expression alone."

Paul Woods, principal of inclusive school and community services with the York Region District School Board, believes the mental health strategy is clear.

"We need to reduce the stigma and emphasize safety and accessibility for all."

Watch for part 3 next week.

FASHION FLIP-FLOPS

- Pants didn't really come into fruition until the Renaissance as a solution to men riding horses, and it wasn't until the Victorian era that a gender divide developed in dress.

- Pink was a boys' colour because it was considered stronger, while blue was more delicate (and for girls) until the 1940s.

- Heels were worn by men to help them stay in their stirrups and supplement their stature (the higher their heel, the greater their social rank) until the 18th century.

- Source: The NPD Group

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