



Gender (De)Transitioning Before Puberty? A Response to Steensma and Cohen-Kettenis (2011)

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In a Letter to the Editor, “Gender Transitioning before Puberty?”, Steensma and Cohen-Kettenis (2011) cautioned against prepubertal gender transition by referring to two children assigned female at birth who, they say, had “transitioned when they were in elementary school” and subsequently struggled with returning to “their original gender role.” In one case, the fear of being teased or excluded for this contemplated change led to over two years of struggling (Steensma, Biemond, de Boer, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2010).

Using those two cases as an example of distress brought on by social transition in youth whose gender dysphoria will later remit, they cautioned against “taking steps that are difficult to reverse.” In support of the Dutch protocol, which typically promotes waiting until puberty to socially transition (de Vries & Cohen-Kettenis, 2012), they point out that “[i]t is conceivable that the drawbacks of having to wait until early adolescence (but with support in coping with the gender variance until that phase) may be less serious than having to make a social transition twice” (Steensma & Cohen-Kettenis, 2011, p. 649).

Despite its age, the argument continues to influence practice. The Letter was cited in the WPATH Standards of Care, 7th version (Coleman et al., 2011, p. 176) and the argument continues to be used by opponents of prepubertal social transition. However, a core detail is left out of the picture: the two children it refers to had not socially transitioned in the commonly understood sense of the term. Once this detail is brought into view, the argument is revealed to be ethically flawed.

Social transition, as defined by Ehrensaft, Giammattei, Storck, Tishelman, and Keo-Meier (2018), is “a child’s change from living socially as the gender that matches the sex assigned at birth, to another gender, which may involve a change in name, pronouns, presentation, and a request that

others recognize the child in their asserted gender rather than the gender that would match the sex assigned to them at birth (p. 252).” Social transition involves something beyond gender non-conformity and speaks to a shift in lived gender identity. However, in the study from which the two children were taken, social transition is primarily spoken of in terms of gender role.

Steensma et al. (2010) claimed that “as a result of their appearance and behavior, virtually all the girls were largely perceived and treated like boys” (p. 503). Much ambiguity remains in terms of what that means. For instance, while some of the children in the study were perceived to be of a gender other than that they were assigned at birth, none of those assigned female at birth—a group which includes the two children we are concerned with—had “officially” transitioned by changing their name or informing other children that they wanted to be referred to as ‘he’” (p. 503). For instance, one of the two children who struggled with reverting back to their original gender role was used as an example of being treated like a boy and reported that her female peers constantly asked her why she¹ behaved like a boy and whether she was a boy. She expressed disappointment at the fact that they didn’t see her as a boy. It is unclear whether her peers considered her a boy or merely treated her like a boy in the same way that tomboys are often accepted as “one of the boys.”

This is a crucial point. All we can say of the two children who had experienced difficulty with returning to their original gender role is that they were visibly gender non-conforming. They wore clothes seen as boyish—loose t-shirts and pants, perhaps—and had short haircuts. We do not know which pronouns were used to refer to them by their families, teachers, or other children and we do not know whether their unchanged name was commonly used—though one of them did use a masculine short form of their name as a nickname. We do not know, either, which pronouns the two girls wished to use at the time.

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¹ I used the pronoun “she” since the study reports that she identified as a girl at the time it was conducted.

The difficulties they reported in returning to their original gender role were in part related to their gender expression: “When I saw girls wearing earrings and bracelets, I wanted to wear them too, but I couldn’t because I looked like a boy” (Steensma et al., 2010, p. 510).

We do not know whether a social transition that had involved a change of name and pronouns would have generated more distress for these two children or raised a significantly higher barrier to de-transitioning. I believe that we have reasons to doubt it would have. Expectations of teasing and the shame associated with it were primary causes of distress reported in the study. However, most people—let alone children—do not distinguish between gender expression and gender identity for the purposes of teasing. Nevertheless, the absence of evidence suffices to undermine their argument. Unless it can be convincingly established that changes of names and pronouns generate substantially higher distress and barriers to de-transition, the two case examples fail to provide reasons against prepubertal social transitions.

Steensma and Cohen-Kettenis’ conservative proposal takes on a different tinge under this light. They are not only encouraging delaying children’s affirmation of their gender identity, but also appear to caution against visible gender non-conformity in children.

To oppose gender variant children changing their haircuts and clothing is no more than a rigid enforcement of gender norms. It is not in the general interest of society insofar as it drives gender expression into a straightjacket. Many children who do not show indications of gender dysphoria are already allowed to be gender non-conforming: would Steensma and Cohen-Kettenis recommend curtailing their gender expression too? From a feminist perspective, it is ethically questionable to actively perpetuate normative gender roles.² The ill consequences of policing children’s gender expression, both on the children themselves and on society in general, far outweigh the

benefits. As a society, we must move away from gender stereotypes and their attendant norms, not toward them.

Steensma and Cohen-Kettenis’ argument against social transition before puberty is invalid. It is not appropriate to discourage gender non-conformity. Since they provide no evidence that social transitioning generates distress over and above that already brought on by changes to gender expression, their Letter to the Editor fails to provide evidence for delaying social transition until puberty. In revising its Standards of Care for the 8th version, WPATH should reconsider citing their Letter to the Editor.

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² It is beyond the scope of this Letter to the Editor to respond to the critique, levied by some feminists, that gender transitioning itself perpetuates normative gender roles. Nonetheless, it should be noted that even gender conforming transgender people are perceived as threatening to traditional gender roles (Broussard & Warner, 2018).