

“We Help Parents Talk with Their Schools:” An interview with Edgardo Menvielle, a psychiatrist at Children's National Medical Center in Washington

--By Lorraine Millot

Dr. Edgardo Menvielle, a psychiatrist at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, is one of the few American specialists on the issue of "gender non-conformity." The Center runs two support groups, where children and adolescents meet once a month, but hosts also a discussion forum online where over 300 parents, mostly American, share their experiences.

You're a psychiatrist in a hospital; does that mean that "gender nonconformity" is currently considered a disease?

No. In the United States it is considered a disorder, but even this designation is controversial. The American Psychiatric Association has just approved the term "gender dysphoria." To me, it is not a disorder but a condition that can cause great suffering and ultimately create disorder. This is especially because of the reaction of society: the pressures on these children and their parents are great.

How many children are affected by this "dysphoria?"

We do not know. There are no statistics. Among adults, it is often estimated that 5 or 6% are homosexuals. This can give some idea, because there is some overlap between these children and future homosexuals.

Are all "gender non-conforming" kids gay?

No, but it is estimated that nearly three-quarters of boys who behave very effeminately will be gay. Some will later want to change sex, others will be heterosexual, but this is less common. Among very masculine girls, figures are less clear. Some will be lesbians, others not.

Are there more and more children who are "gender non-conforming?"

I see more, but that does not mean that there are more. It is possible that the increase is due to the fact that our society is now more open to this. Families have more opportunities to get help. What is new is that the children growing up right now are first generation being raised in families that recognize and support them openly.

In the thirteen years that you have followed these children, what changes have you observed?

I see more and more adolescents -- as young as 13 or 14 -- who say they are transgender. Without a doubt this is due to the fact that our society has become more tolerant. There is more information circulating on this subject and thus more young people can identify with it.

Do you see both boys and girls?

Among the small children, whom we accept from the age of 3, I see many more boys, about four boys to one girl. Again, this is probably due to the fact that our society is much more tolerant of girls who behave like boys. Among adolescents, the ratio evens out.

Does this mean that homosexuality begins well before puberty, in infancy or early childhood?

Sexuality is present right from the start; puberty is just an awakening. Homosexual orientation is probably present very early, in the first years of life. It seems to have a genetic component: something is inherited, but we do not know exactly what. And some people also change sexual orientation in adulthood.

What can you bring to these children and their families?

Needs vary from one child to another. Usually, I direct them to our discussion forum and our online support groups. But some also see therapists. As for parents, we try to provide an idea of what can be expected in the future. A 4 year-old boy who says he is a girl will not necessarily be transsexual. In general, we encourage parents to let their children be who they are. We recommend developing safe spaces in the home where children do not need to hide. But mostly we help parents determine what may be best for the child. Some boys really feel miserable as boys. Going to school in a dress can provide relief, but then it means having to face the reaction of others ... We also give parents tools to engage with their schools. In the United States, they are usually quite accommodating. When a child has a hard time using the "girls" or "boys" toilet, they can allow him to use one that's more "neutral," like a staff bathroom. But of course there are still often problems of harassment at school.

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For more information about the Children's National Medical Center, see www.childrensnational.org. Look for the Gender and Sexuality Psychosocial program.