

WHAT SHOULD WE DO FOR OUR GIRLS?

Since I began writing this book, many parents of suddenly trans-identifying girls have reached out to me. Most wanted to tell me their stories. But a few wanted advice.

To those parents who are mid-crisis with their daughter—I recommend seeking out a support group immediately. The good ones will help you navigate staying connected with your child without participating in her indoctrination. “The most fundamental thing I want parents to understand is that this isn’t necessarily about gender at all,” says Sasha Ayad, a therapist who has worked with hundreds of trans-identified adolescents. “When these kids go online they’re essentially being steeped in what could be seen as propaganda.”

Sasha Ayad does not affirm adolescents’ gender identities and she does not encourage parents to do so either. “I tell parents that there’s a way to support your child and to honor this kind of identity exploration without necessarily taking the identity literally.”

Denise, the woman who founded the prominent blog 4thWaveNow after her own daughter suddenly identified as transgender, advises against adopting the child’s name and pronouns. Our kids “need us for a reality check, which is also why I don’t think parents should go all the way down the road to doing whatever the kid wants. Like, ‘Oh, yes, that’s fine. The pronouns, the male name.’ I think you have to find your own limits though.”

To those who simply want to inoculate their own daughters from the fast-spreading social contagion of gender ideology, I can offer a bit more. School districts, teachers, and even other parents are right now sowing gender confusion. Confronting it requires not psychological expertise, but intellectual ammunition. Opposing a school assembly introducing a transgender adolescent to the student body requires something that is squarely within my *métier*, as a journalist: it requires merely knowing the truth.

1. Don't Get Your Kid a Smartphone

Parents will balk; parents will groan. Most consider this an unimaginable amputation. How could I separate a teen from her iPhone? But in terms of obviousness, this one's not even hard. It practically writes itself.

Nearly every novel problem teenagers face traces itself back to 2007 and the introduction of Steve Jobs's iPhone. In fact, the explosion in self-harm can be so precisely pinpointed to the introduction of this one device that researchers have little doubt that it is the cause. If I had told you in 2007 that one device would produce a sudden skyrocketing in self-harm among teens and tweens, you would likely have said, "No way is my kid getting one." And yet, here we are: the statistical explosion of bullying, cutting, anorexia, depression, and the rise of sudden transgender identification is owed to the self-harm instruction, manipulation, abuse, and relentless harassment supplied by a single smartphone.

2. Don't Relinquish Your Authority as the Parent

You're the parent for a reason. Don't be afraid to push back; your adolescent can handle it. You don't have to go along with everything she comes up with (even claims about sexuality or identity).

Many of the parents I spoke with told me that when their, say, thirteen-year-old announced she was lesbian, they immediately supported their daughter. Many of them all but raised a Pride flag over their home. But the fact is, a thirteen-year-old—lesbian or straight—is still only thirteen. Our true sexuality is not an identity we choose online, but a feeling of attraction that emerges and even evolves over time. Understanding it requires us to go into the world, to have in-person experiences with other people.

Sasha Ayad says that parents today are often afraid of upsetting their teens because they have the idea that their job is to ensure their child is "happy and perfectly adjusted and well-balanced 100 percent of the time." Not only is

that an unreasonable goal, it misunderstands the inherently tumultuous state of adolescence. Teenagers are supposed to get angry and emotional. Parents are supposed to set limits.

If you have a fight with your teenager, she might be angry with you, but she'll feel the presence of a guardrail. Sometimes, just knowing it's there may be enough. Your teenager may tell you she hates you; she may even believe it. But on a deeper level, some of her need for individuation and rebellion may be satisfied. If you eliminate all conflict through endless agreement and support, it may only encourage her to kick things up a notch.

3. Don't Support Gender Ideology in Your Child's Education

My best friend attended a posh all-girls' school in Washington, D.C., and each year they would have an assembly on eating disorders. For the few girls who were already dabbling with anorexia, it may have brought comfort. But for the rest of the class, she has often told me, it functioned as an instructional seminar. "So that's how you skip meals without alarming your parents!"

This is something psychologists have known for years: house anorexics on a hospital ward together, and anorexia may perseverate.

As the writer Lee Daniel Kravetz puts it, "Bulimia is so contagious that support groups and in-treatment facilities designed to help patients are also primary spreading agents."

Treatment centers may help those with eating disorders to recover, but they can also provide opportunities for behavior modeling and foster unconscious competition over the worst symptoms, making everyone worse off.

Offer a school assembly on one teen's suicide and you will raise awareness, possibly at the cost of more suicide.

The same goes for depression and cutting.

And now trans identification.

A small number of students in every school are perhaps naturally gender confused or gender dysphoric. If you make them the subject of an assembly, you will spread confusion. There are ways to oppose bullying without putting gender ideology front and center. It isn't hard: you simply punish bullying—for any reason. There is no reason to foment gender confusion merely to impress kids with the critical importance of treating all others with decency.

4. Reintroduce Privacy into the Home

For nearly all of the parents I spoke to, their daughters' announcement on social media of a transgender identity was a turning point. From then on, everyone knew. From then on—and sometimes despite their daughters' lingering doubts—their daughters felt locked in. It became a choice they couldn't easily take back.

Quit the habit of sharing every part of your lives (and theirs) on the internet. And here, I can only acknowledge my own hypocrisy on this score—before I wrote this book, I hadn't realized I was doing anything wrong. But a child is entitled to quit piano without the entire world asking why she doesn't practice anymore. She's also entitled to nurse a passing crush that may end badly and take it all back without ceremony or official decree.

This is obviously true for announcements of sexual identity as well—gay, straight, trans, whatever. A teenager may believe she is merely announcing herself an adult, but she's also sending up a flare to actual adults who will immediately contact her and offer “support,” primed to take advantage. Send prom pictures in an email if you must, but don't post them for the content-hungry eyes of internet strangers. Find some other way to stay connected with those you care about.

5. Consider Big Steps to Separate Your Daughter from Harm

There is a common thread in several stories that I heard from parents who achieved a measure of success in helping their daughters back away from

their new trans identities: these families went to great lengths to physically move their daughters away from the schools, the peer groups, and the online communities that were relentlessly encouraging the girls' self-destructive choices. The trajectory of the life of Chiara, whose story I mentioned in the previous chapter, changed after her mother arranged for her to live on a horse farm that had no internet. Brie from Chapter Five quit her job to travel with her daughter and then moved across the country. Another family pulled up stakes and moved from a progressive city to an immigrant community that shared their values, as you will see in the Afterword.

This can work. If you find your daughter steeping in a tea of gender ideology with all of her peers, do what it takes to lift her out and take her away. If she is still living with you, a move seems incredibly effective, especially if it's early in her trans identification. If she is already at college, bring her home. A family sabbatical incorporating a year of travel was very helpful in one case. Of the parents I talked to, the few who packed up their families despite the considerable inconvenience were among the most successful. In almost every case, the young woman desisted. Not one of the families regretted it.

6. Stop Pathologizing Girlhood

In 2013, I gave birth to a girl. Right away, little differences from her brothers announced themselves—things I would come to learn are very typical of a girl. She seemed to feed on affection; she preferred snuggling to nursing. At four, she dazzled us with her verbal ability and soon proved an impressive mimic, replicating my patterns of speech whenever her grandparents would call and she was handed the phone.

She was empathetic too. She would often ask me how my day was. If she found me asleep on the couch, she would kiss my forehead. She seemed to know that buried inside the grown woman was another little girl.

Girls are different. They are not defective boys simply because they sometimes fail to be single-mindedly self-interested, especially in the face of their friends' announced need or genuine suffering. They are possessed of a different set of inclinations and gifts—a whole range of emotions and

capacities for understanding that boys, in general, are not. If only we didn't make them feel so bad about this.

Adolescence is especially hard on girls. Effervescent with emotion, they buck and bray like wild horses. Parents might be forgiven for assuming that this can't be right—that there is something wrong with them. Parents might even be forgiven for wishing to put their daughters on medication to flatten their moods and short-circuit these crazy teenage years. This is the fantasy of inducing a kind of Sleeping Beauty coma until your daughter is ready to awaken, calm and refreshed, having arrived gracefully at womanhood. (In fact, writing this book made me wonder if that wasn't the actual origin of Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and so many similar fairy tales: the fond wish to place your unmanageable teenage girl in a brief coma.)

Except that it isn't possible. A young woman's unruly emotions in her teenage years—the whirlwind fury and self-doubt of female adolescence—may be a feature, not a flaw. That doesn't mean a parent shouldn't set boundaries or punish bad behavior. But absent a serious mental health problem, neither should a parent strive to banish all her daughter's ups and downs.

Your teenage girl may be driving you crazy. Though this be madness, there is method in it. She may just be beta testing. She's flexing her muscles, discovering the power and extent of an intellectual and emotional prowess that will enable her to be the most compassionate of parents and supportive of friends.

Women feel things deeply. We empathize. For good reason, when asked to identify their best friend, most men name their wives; most women name another woman.

Soldiers write home to mom. And in the dead of night, small children cry out for one person.

A woman's emotional life is her strength. A key task of her adolescence must be to learn not to let it overwhelm her. A key task of maturity is to learn not to let it fade away.

We need to stop regarding men as the measure of all things—the language they use, the kind of careers they pursue, the apparent selfishness of which we are so endlessly envious. We blame men for this obsession, but really, it is our doing.

7. Don't Be Afraid to Admit: It's Wonderful to Be a Girl

My freshman year of high school, I was the starting goalie for my varsity soccer team, which eventually won the league championship. I wasn't a great player, but I was good enough. Physical aggression, in girls' sports, can compensate for a lot.

But then, something changed. Nothing physical—not anything I could see. But an awareness dawned. It was as if I awakened one morning and realized the breasts, the soft belly, the thighs—they were all mine—compromising my toughness. A man who looked at me wasn't merely observing something I carried, like a parcel; he was noticing me.

All these changes combined to produce in me a tic, fatal to athletic success: hesitation. My sophomore year, when I returned to the field, in that fleeting instant before a ball left the opponent's foot, I thought of my nose, my breasts, my belly, all places where I might be open to injury. I was suddenly fearful of being badly hurt. By the following season, I'd been replaced.

In a certain sense, we all transition. Even under the best of circumstances, it's hard. It entails loss. And it takes courage.

Becoming a woman means losing a body almost indistinguishable from a boy's in terms of strength and solidity and growing into one that is softer, more sexually inviting, but more vulnerable, too. For the first few years, you can feel like a hermit crab who has outgrown a shell it must then abandon, blindly scurrying for another. The armor you eventually take up is of a different sort. You can no longer credibly challenge the boys to an arm-wrestling match and expect to win.

Forced to rely on subtler talents, you develop them. You learn to strike with a glance; you learn to soothe with one, too. If done right, you fill your quiver with words, humor, intrigue, and emotion. You'll spend a lifetime learning when to deploy each to greatest effect—and when to forbear and offer none.

But for Pete's sake, whatever type of women young girls become, they should all listen to feminists of a prior era and stop taking sex stereotypes seriously. A young woman can be an astronaut or a nurse; a girl can play with trucks or with dolls. And she may find herself attracted to men or to other women. None of that makes her any less of a girl or any less suited to womanhood.

Young women have more educational and career options today than they ever have. Remember to tell your daughter that. Tell her also that a woman's most unique capacity—childbirth—is perhaps life's greatest blessing.

But whatever else you teach your daughter, remember to include something more. Tell her because the culture so often denies it. Tell her because people will try to make a victim of her. Tell her because it's natural to doubt. Most of all, tell her because it's true.

She's lucky. She's special. She was born a girl. And being a woman is a gift, containing far too many joys to pass up.

'Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters' by Abigail Shrier