

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *Dissolving Gender Barriers*

“**M**Y PURSE,” SAYS MY TWO-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON. He proudly walks around with a small cloth bag, the long handle strung over his shoulder, beaming about calling it his purse. One day he holds his “purse” for his auntie to see. When she hears the word “purse,” she says protectively, “That’s your bag. It’s your fishing bag.”

At two, he doesn’t know that purses are thought of as feminine. However, changes in the world occur so rapidly that one can blink and see that many businessmen often carry small leather bags without claiming that they contain fishing bait. Maybe in a few years the word “purse” will have a more gender-neutral association. My bigger point is that if my grandson has to limit his vocabulary at age two to say “fishing bag” instead of “purse,” what other ways will his perspective on the world be restricted?

The subject of gender stereotypes can be confusing and emotional. A father finding his son in a princess dress when he picks him up from preschool may find the sight viscerally disturbing. He projects the sight of his boy wearing women’s clothing into the future, while his son is exploring what wearing something beautiful and soft feels like. Children want to learn about fresh experiences—what’s it like to be a bug, an elephant, a unicorn?

When a teacher in preschool asks who wants to play the part of a boy in the story they are acting out, as many girls raise their hands as boys. In elementary school, even after boys and girls begin playing more separately, they are willing to play a character of the opposite gender. JanLee Marshall, one of our drama teachers, says, “When audience members find out the lead boy they thought was so great was actually a girl, they realize that people can do anything.”

Anyone who has children or teaches observes that there are differences between girls and boys beginning in infancy. Boys are often more active, girls more verbal. Traditionally, high school boys have done better in math. The most interesting findings in the research, however, are that the world is changing, and differences between boys and girls academically are decreasing, with girls holding their own in math. In the area of emotions, research shows that girls are more willing to express difficult emotions, while boys often keep silent about anger and depression.

Here are some ideas for widening your child’s perspectives:

**Praise boys for communicating feelings.** Use conflict situations as opportunities to bring out feelings, and show appreciation for expressions of sadness or anger.

**Encourage girl-boy friendships.** When preschool parents ask about play dates, they tend to think in terms of the same gender. Yet all of the children in a class can potentially be wonderful friends.

**Support interests in non-traditional areas.** Young children love the book *Ballerino Nate* by Kimberly Bradley, about a boy who wants to dance. On the other hand, one of our kindergarten girls loves trucks and construction, an interest that her family has encouraged.

**Talk about men and women in non-traditional professions**—female firefighters and soldiers, male teachers.

The world needs females and males to grow up with a desire to understand and encourage each other in every area, rather than concentrating on making themselves different from each other.

*January 16, 2013*