

Chapter 5 Case Study

Can children be transvestites?

N.B. This case study is based on an article written in *The Guardian* in 2001. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of the boy and his mother have been altered.

Writing in *The Guardian*, journalist Sarah Smith (not her real name) talks about her concerns about her three year old son's habit of dressing up as a girl. She describes his wide selection of dresses, tights, and shoes modelled on Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the pleasure he takes in applying his own nail varnish. While Bobby himself seems to be quite happy in doing this, his parents and sisters are embarrassed to be seen with him in public. Friends of the family appear to accept his behaviour as a childhood phase, finding it amusing and entertaining to see the little boy 'playing', but Sarah has noticed that they also reassure her that he will 'grow out of it', implying that to be a cross-dressing adult male would be socially unacceptable. She feels torn between the politically correct attitudes she has learned to adopt, which inform her liberal-minded view of Bobby's 'imagination', and her instinctive response of just wishing that he were a 'normal' boy. Referring to Professor Robert Winston's comments on the BBC programme *Child of Our Time*, she also suggests that it is less deviant for girls to dress up as 'tomboys' than for boys to cross the gender divide. So will Sarah's son turn out to be gay or a transvestite when he is older? And if so, who has the problem?

Questions:

1. What is the difference between Bobby's sex and his gender identity?
2. How does transvestism challenge the 'two-sex' model?
3. Why do you think there is a social pressure upon Bobby to conform to the standards of 'compulsory heterosexuality'?
4. How does Bobby perform his gender through 'repeated stylized acts'?
5. To what extent can we say that gender socialization shapes (a) the desire to cross-dress and (b) the social responses to this behaviour?