

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sat, Sep. 11, 2010

Gender concepts evolving

BY CASEY WOODS

cwoods@miamiherald.com

The advertisements weren't subtle: in one photo, a little boy carefully applies lipstick in front of an ornate hand mirror; in another, he tries on his mother's red high heels. In the corner, in small type, are the words "Karate Lessons," and beside them, the logo of a South Florida martial arts studio.

So your boy's a sissy? Let us pump some macho into him!

The ads set off a firestorm online, and the school, Key Biscayne's Academy of Martial Arts RDCA, was widely vilified for using "gay panic" to sell lessons. The thing is, the campaign was never approved by the academy.

It was created by an art director at the local Zubi Advertising Agency and posted on a site that people in the industry visit to solicit commentary from their peers.

Joe Zubizarreta, the agency's chief operating officer, is deeply apologetic, acknowledging that the pictures could be "considered offensive." He pointed to the agency's motto: Erase Stereotypes.

Yet the controversy was instructive. It showed just how much our concept of gender has evolved. Not only is it outdated to ascribe rigid roles to the sexes, but gender-bending behavior is increasingly tolerated. And if you try to shame a child into conformity -- as this tentative ad campaign was designed to do -- brace yourself for the appropriate admonishing.

Signs of this progressive trend are becoming more prevalent. Angelina Jolie openly accepts her daughter Shiloh's desire to dress like a boy, an attitude that might have seemed much riskier not long ago.

In her new book *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, author Cordelia Fine methodically debunks the notion that male and female brains are "hard-wired" differently.

And in last month's landmark ruling overturning California's gay marriage ban, Judge Vaughn R. Walker dispatched the concept of gender roles to the dust bin of history. The exclusion of same-sex couples "exists as an artifact of a time when the genders were seen as having distinct roles in society and in marriage," he wrote. "That time has passed."

Yet despite this high-minded push from certain quarters toward a post-gender society, parents know that the day-to-day reality of raising children is far more complex.

No matter what environment my husband and I try to create at home for our son, messages about what a little boy is supposed to be like bombard him from all sides --

from the kinds of toys he gets as gifts to the "boys will be boys" comments at the park that condone rough-housing.

My husband and I began grappling with the issue before our son was even born. We had a very spirited discussion (i.e., argument) about the nursery décor. My husband was excited about a car theme, while I insisted on something that wasn't so "male." After all, why should we assume that because he's a boy he'll like cars? We eventually settled on a safari-animals motif.

Since then, we've been on the same page. Almost all of our son's toys are gender-neutral -- musical instruments, pull toys, wooden blocks. Neither of us frets when he enthusiastically commandeers the pink toy stroller at the park -- in fact, I think it's kind of cute, and I've contemplated buying him one.

What I worry about, though, is that he'll get ridiculed one day for expressing some interest that defies social norms.

Yet that fear of what others might say can serve as a cop-out. "I just don't want you to get hurt," we might say, as we steer our kids toward conformity.

But what are we really protecting: our kids, or our self-image as suitable parents?

In the introduction to her book, Fine wrote about this internal struggle: "Children, keen to understand and find their place in society's most salient social divide, are born into a half-changed world, to parents with half-changed minds."

Our kids are brave -- or perhaps naïve -- enough to transgress boundaries and conjure a world in which gender categories no longer confine the sexes.

We parents just need to find the courage to let them go there.

© 2010 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>