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Title	Complicating constructions: middle-class parents of transgender and gender-diverse children
Authors	Neary, Aoife
Publication date	2021
Original Citation	Neary, A. (2021) 'Complicating constructions: Middle-class parents of transgender and gender-diverse children', Journal of Family Studies, 27(4), pp.506-522. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2019.1650799
Type of publication	Article (peer reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1080/13229400.2019.1650799
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Download date	2026-10-31 22:55:23
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17624



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To cite this article: Neary, A. (2019) Complicating Constructions: Middle-Class Parents of Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children, *Journal of Family Studies* (Online First). DOI: 10.1080/13229400.2019.1650799.

Title: Complicating Constructions: Middle-Class Parents of Transgender and Gender-diverse Children

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increase in the visibility of transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) children in the public sphere. Jack Halberstam (2018) is very critical of middle-class parents of TGD children, arguing that much of their activism is based on a normalising model of individual rights as opposed to a more transformative activism that might de-stabilise gender-power systems that are restrictive for everyone. This paper has taken up the opportunity to inquire further into Halberstam's (2018) pronouncement. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve middle-class parents of TGD children aged 5-12 in Ireland, this paper provides in-depth insight into the classed, precarious, gendered, disruptive and arduous nature of parents' work as they negotiated schools and laboured to follow a child-led parenting philosophy amidst the judgement of others and rigidly gendered worlds. In so doing, this paper complicates Halberstam's (2018) figure of the middle-class parent of a TGD child and offers a new perspective on the shape and effects of child-led parenting with TGD children.

Key Words

Transgender, gender-diverse, gender non-conforming, children, parents, child-led parenting, social class, schools.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in the visibility of transgender and gender-diverse (TGD)[i] children in the public sphere with a heightened concern for their welfare (Price Minter, 2012). Multi-disciplinary evidence of discrimination, stereotyping and a lack of compassion has underlined the need for legislation, policies, guidelines and education for practitioners and support for parents of TGD children (See for example Schneider et al. 2009; Rafferty 2018; Anti-Defamation League 2016; Kosciw et al 2015; Riley et al. 2018). A key topic that arises across these fields is parenting. Within this domain, a child-led model of gender-affirming care and support — as opposed to 'outdated models' of 'watchful waiting' that suspend belief and withhold active support until after the onset of puberty — is deemed to be best practice (Rafferty 2018). Within this model, parents are also encouraged to avail of therapeutic support for themselves, their child and family (Brill and Pepper 2008), although, there is often a dearth of such supports available (Von Doussa et al., 2017).

A growing body of empirical research has examined the lived experiences of parenting TGD children. Field and Mattson (2015) highlight four particular concerns of the parents of TGD children: (1) physical and medical changes; (2) lack of media representations of transgender lives; (3) unsettling of their own parental identity; and (4) tensions in public regarding their child's "successful" transition. Building on previous work by Hill and Menvielle (2009), Gray et al (2016) outline two different approaches adopted in parenting gender-diverse children. Underpinned by values of protection, some parents sought to 'rescue' their child by helping them adapt to the gendered world. Others were motivated by more child-

led, choice-oriented values and sought to change their child's social environment. Oscillations between these approaches occurred as parents traversed different contexts but all noted the constant 'nagging sense of "am I doing the right thing?"' (Gray et al. 2016, p. 135). Other parents' accounts also underline how parenting approaches are impacted by culturally mediated concepts of hegemonic masculinity with particularly restrictive expectations for children who were assigned male at birth (Kane 2006).

Exploring the work that parents do in helping their children 'account for' their gender non-conformity, Meadow (2011) highlights the ways in which parents adopt biomedical, psychological and spiritual frameworks. While such mechanisms are systems of social control that serve to reproduce the regulation of gender, Meadow (2011, p. 742) argues that their meanings are reimagined as 'families revise institutionalised tropes and reimport them into the institutions they inhabit and, in that way, make social change'. In a similar vein, Rahilly (2015) categorises three strategies that parents of TGD children adopt in navigating the gender binary: 'gender hedging', 'gender literacy' and 'playing along'. Gender hedging involves attempts to curb early signs of gender non-conformity in their child. Gender literacy signifies a broadening of parenting strategies as parents acquire new knowledges about a spectrum of gender identities. At the same time, parents make judgements about when to 'play along' and avoid explanations or educate others. Rahilly (2015, p. 340) argues that such negotiations are a 'new mode of social response' forging new transgressive pathways in childhood.

A somewhat implicit theme touched upon in this body of literature is social class. For example, Rahilly (2015, p. 357) signals 'class-inflected elements' acknowledging that middle-class parents are typically 'child-driven…using their resources to nurture their child's individual growth' (Rahilly 2015, p.357). A plethora of recent documentaries provide a window into the everyday lives and negotiations of TGD children and their primarily middle-class parents[ii] and in his recent book *Trans*:* [iii]*A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender*

Variability, Halberstam (2018) draws attention to this new visibility. For Halberstam (2018), this new visibility of TGD children holds great potential for rethinking gender and the kind of normative chronological discourses and temporalities that underpin childhood and growing up. But Halberstam (2018) is, very critical of the middle-class parents who are brought to the fore in this new visibility. He laments past transgender activisms that sought to be transformative and disruptive, contrasting them with the new activism of middle-class parents who seek 'mostly to normalize the child and keep radicalization at bay' (Halberstam 2018, p. 53).

Halberstam (2018, p. 54) critiques the ways that these parents and seek 'piecemeal workarounds' — individualising, normalising supports that produce TGD children as the 'problem' as opposed to 'whole-scale solutions' that alter the system. He argues that such approaches 'prematurely stabilize the meaning of the trans* child's gender variance' as a fixed, non-normative subject against which the project of gender normativity is reproduced (id.). The suggestion here is that middle-class parents are deeply invested in normalising solutions to their children's gender identity and that their consequential parenting approaches are playing a significant role in reinforcing gender binaries and the systems of order and control that they uphold.

On one hand, I am intuitively drawn to the sentiments that Halberstam (2018, p. 61) pronounces. His assertions align with others such as Puar (2015, p. 63) who caution against normalising solutions and warn of 'the impossibility of linearity, permanence, and end points' for TGD people. Even his provocative suggestion that the parents of TGD children might engage with a project of 'surrendering their children to the needs of the community at large' in an interrogation and de-stabilisation of the gender-power systems that are restrictive for everybody (Halberstam 2018, p. 54) is alluring. However, while I am philosophically aligned with Halberstam's (2018, p.89) critique of gender normalisation and his allegiance to fore-fronting the always-in-process 'crafting' work of identification, I am also conscious that the

stories that become visible in the media provide just one slant on the everyday lives of middle-class parents and their TGD children. And so, Halberstam's (2018) attention to the figure of the middle-class parent of TGD children that is so visible in the media creates an important opening to inquire more deeply into the shape of the work that middle-class parents of TGD children do.

At first glance, research in primary schools in Ireland appears to affirm some of Halberstam's (2018) claims about individualising 'piecemeal workarounds'. Since 2013, all schools must include homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policies and document and implement 'prevention' as well as 'education' strategies. Yet there remains much confusion about transgender identities and transphobia in primary schools (Neary et al., 2016) and these utilitarian bullying discourses universalise and subsume the nuances and complexities of the lived experiences of TGD children and their families. Furthermore, primary schools in Ireland appear to be taking a largely individualised, reactive approach to supporting TGD children wherein the normative architecture of gender remains firmly intact (Neary et al., 2018). This is further complicated by the legacy of the Catholic Church in primary school education. State policy around gender and sexuality diversity has limited effect because of the power of religious ethos in governing schools (Fahie, 2016; Neary, 2013; 2017). However, at the same time, Ireland has also been undergoing a rapid period of change in the politics of gender identity. In 2015, the Gender Recognition Act provided legal recognition for transgender people over eighteen and a subsequent review of the Act has recommended more comprehensive legislation for U16 TGD children.

Taking the rapidly changing context of Ireland as a rich site in which to examine these new politics of gender identity diversity, this paper is guided by the question: How are middle-class parents of TGD children negotiating their everyday lives? Drawing on data arising from semi-structured interviews with twelve parents of TGD children aged 5-12 in Ireland, this paper

is organised in the following way. Firstly, I illustrate how middle-class parents used their resources to advocate for their child, and in so doing, I raise pertinent questions about social class inequality in parenting TGD children. Secondly, in the remainder of the paper, whilst holding on firmly to Halberstam's (2018) crucial point that a counter-productive project of gender normalisation can happen in and through the politics of TGD recognition, the parents' accounts push back against any slippage of such critique into reducing the experiences of middle-class parents of TGD children to resource-fuelled investments in individualised normalisation and end-point solutions. I provide in-depth insight into the classed, precarious, gendered, disruptive and arduous nature of their work in their school communities. I also reveal the difficult work they do in attempting to stay true to a child-led parenting philosophy amidst the judgement of others and rigidly gendered worlds. While, of course, a child-led parenting approach is not the preserve of the middle classes, it is nonetheless typically practiced by middle-class parents (Lareau 2003) and it was the parenting practice described by all of the parents in this study. At any rate, child-led parenting is widely accepted as *the* recommended practice in parenting TGV children. Furthermore, Halberstam's (2018, p.54) critique of middle-class parents who 'intuit what their very young children need' is suggestive of his orientation towards the promise of child-led parenting. And so, this paper takes up the opportunity to pay close attention to the work involved in adopting this parenting practice when parenting TGD children. Ultimately, this paper's argument is two-fold — it alerts us to social class inequality in parenting TGV children but it also complicates Halberstam's (2018) figure of the middle-class parent of a TGD child, offering in-depth insight into the shape and effects of child-led parenting with TGD children.

Methodology

This paper draws on a qualitative study entitled 'Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Norms in Primary Schools' conducted in 2017 in Ireland. This study is rooted epistemologically by queer and transgender studies theories of gender and, in particular, debates about normativity, materiality and transgression (Butler, 1993; 2001; 2004; Halberstam, 2005; 2018). This paper takes as its point of departure the queer potentiality of 'trans', an acute cognisance of the potential risks that research about transgender lives poses in stabilising and normalising this potential, and a commitment to thinking critically about how the architecture of gender normativity affects everyone (Enke, 2012; Mayo, 2017). At the same time, I hold on firmly to the centrality of the material dimensions of the lives of those who identify as transgender (Mayo, 2017; Namaste, 2009) and the ways in which identities and gender norms are necessary for survival (Butler, 2004).

Conducted in partnership with the Transgender Equality Network of Ireland (TENI), ethical approval for this study was secured from the Faculty Ethics Board in my University. TENI's Education and Family Support Officer acted as gatekeeper and a letter of invitation, information sheet and consent form were sent via e-mail to TENI's database of parents and schools who had or were currently availing of their support services. A total of eighteen people volunteered to take part in the study: (a) Twelve parents of eleven transgender children aged 5-13 (b) six primary school educators. This paper focuses on the parent cohort data. Table 1 summarises the profiles of parents and children. These data were self-reported. All but one of the parents who participated were women. All parents were white and had Irish citizenship. All parents were cisgender and all but one identified as heterosexual. While parents were not asked a direct question about social class, the level of education and occupation details provided were an indicator that the parents in this study fell broadly within the middle-class spectrum: All parents had a tertiary education and their occupations included journalist, soldier, therapist, academic, public servant, lawyer and health care assistant. Several participants could afford to

be stay-at-home parents because of their partner's income. In this paper, I do not attempt a causal, correlative or comparative analysis of social class in parenting transgender children. Rather, in one part of this paper, the middle-class parents' accounts provide an illustrative basis for raising pertinent questions about social class inequality. All of the demographics reported here reflect the database of parents who had contacted TENI[iv].

Data collection involved eleven semi-structured interviews – one with each parent and one with a couple. Each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes. Several questions were asked under the following headings: You and your family; your child; your child growing up; experiences of school. These interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were later sent back to participants for member checking and elaboration. Participants also completed a demographic template that included details about them and their children under the following headings: Name; Age; Gender Identity; Marital Status; National Identity; Ethnicity; Religious Affiliation; Personality; Level of Education; Occupation; Relationship with Primary School; Primary School Type (Patron and Ethos).

Data were analysed in the following way. First, I read and re-read the transcripts making notes in the margins as I read. I then coded the individual transcripts and completed a vertical analysis producing a document with a list of codes under categories and page numbers referencing illustrative quotes. I then completed a horizontal analysis of all eleven transcripts. I constructed horizontal categories and then themes encompassing commonalities as well as outlier codes from individual-level analyses.

Table 1: Parent and Child Profiles*

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Pronouns
Parent 1	Joni	40	Female	She/her
Child 1	Petra with mother & siblings, Peter with father & at school	6	Female	Prefers she/her.
Parent 2	Patricia	42	Female	She/her
Child 2	Daire	13	Female	She/her
Parent 3	Paula	38	Female	She/her
Child 3	Mostly Seán, Sometimes Callie	10	Feels female	Mostly he/him, sometimes she/her
Parents 4.1 & 4.2	Geraldine John	35	Female Male	She/her He/him
Child 4	Tadhg	12	Male	He/him
Parent 5	Helen	46	Female	She/her
Child 5	Kevin	12	Male	Prefers he/him
Parent 6	Ailbhe	39	Female	She/her
Child 6	Darren	6	Identifies as male, presents as female	He/him
Parent 7	Siobhan		Female	She/her
Child 7	Jason with mother, Shauna with father, Jason & Shauna at school	5	Male	Prefers he/him.
Parent 8	Anna	32	Female	She/her
Child 8	Sometimes Phil Sometimes Harriet	8	Identifies as tomboy	Sometimes she/her Sometimes he/him
Parent 9	Jane	42	Female	She/her
Child 9	Justin	7	Male	He/Him
Parent 10	Sarah	44	Female	She/her
Child 10	Richie	9	Male	He/him
Parent 11	Eavan	44	Female	She/her
Child 11	Fred	8	Male	He/him

*All details in this table were reported by the parents in this study. While 'level of education', 'occupation', 'religious affiliation' and 'school type' details were provided by each parent, these details are not identified in the table because this study concerns a small population of people in Ireland and would risk anonymity.

Using Resources to Advocate for Their TGD Child at School

The parents in this study worked hard to manage relations and advocate for their child at school. This section provides in-depth insight into the shape of this work, explicating the variety of ways that parents used their resources.

There were several examples of parents drawing upon their resources in advocating for their child at school. For most, their social and symbolic capital was an advantage:

> …we've a lot of kids in the school, we know a lot of parents and I mix with a lot people…they can't shun us …Maybe…I've always grown up there. My family have been there for 100's generations … maybe it's like 'oh well she's one of them, she must be ok'. (Paula)

Like Paula's, many families appeared to be well-respected and socially connected in their communities and brought with them a legitimised history in dealing with their local school.

Many parents proactively approached their school before the school year started, paving the way for their child: 'I just went to the teacher and said, "this is Seán and he likes to be with the girls and play with the girls and play with girls' toys"' (Paula). Others took it upon themselves to contact parents of the other children and educate them about their child's gender identity and expression:

> I actually sent an e-mail to all the parents…it was just a really honest e-mail. From the heart, this is the way it is…Now, I can't even remember if I asked the school's permission, I just did it…(Jane)

Most parents in this study demonstrated the comfort and confidence that Paula and Jane display here in advocating for their child at school. It is not clear whether such levels of confidence are unique to middle-class parents but Paula and Jane display the kind of comfort that signal the 'quiet mechanics of power' that operate along class lines, positioning some people as inside and others as 'outside the game' of schooling (O'Donoghue 2013). Many parents demonstrated an acute cognisance of the kind of cultural capital valued by their school and this was evident in 'softly, softly' (Joni) approaches in their dealings:

> Now my mum was a teacher, both of her parents were teachers...So I was really conscious when I was down with the school I was saying "What do you suggest should

be done? How can we assist you? It's your school, it's how you run your school". And that goes a long way with the school because at least it allows them to stay in the driving seat…I understand the system perhaps a little bit better. (Sarah)

The parents in this study had a certain orientation to the cultural capital valued by their school (Bourdieu, 1974) and this was central in helping them to advocate for their TGD child. A certain kind of cultural capital was required in supporting the school too. Because schools were largely uneducated when it came to gender identity, the onus was on parents to educate and steer the school in what they considered to be best practice.

Some parents openly reflected on these advantages and demonstrated a strong awareness of the capitals they were drawing on in navigating relations with her school compared with parents with fewer resources available to them:

> I know someone who wouldn't have that social capital and she just wouldn't be able to communicate in the same way so she tends to go off at the deep end and she's gone off at the deep end with the Principal at that school … of the primary school. And you don't get the same results back. There are people who need more support because they could be in the same situations but they're not going to get the same reactions. Because their manner of communicating is different…I've tried to give off an air of…"I'm giving you information, I'm not asking your opinion. So there's no need to give it…You're not being invited to judge; I'm telling you how it is. I'm telling you what decisions we have made. You know … you don't need to be second-guessing me so I'm approaching you with a *fait de complit* and how we work around that". (Helen)

Another parent reflected on how her child's education and development of cultural capital was a central strategy of protection for the future:

> It's hard enough being transgender but if you don't get educated …I see myself, when you're educated, people step back and they're respectful. When you're not educated

> and you're any way different … people treat you terribly altogether…so I keep saying to Daire you have to get educated, I don't care what you do after that. (Patricia)

While all parents in this study fell broadly within a middle-class spectrum, some lower middle-class parents described the kind of difficult, judgemental experiences to which Helen and Patricia allude:

> There were five professionals sitting around a room with me, Tadhg [child] and John [partner] in the middle. They were all asking us questions… it was just so daunting for all of us. And at the end of it, it was "our parenting", it was "anxiety" – they were picking things out of the air around Tadhg…I had to go off on a parenting course…(Geraldine)

Inserting Gerladine's quote here is not to claim a definitive correlative link between having fewer resources and having negative experiences with professional services in parenting TGD children. But her account does provide insight into the kind of experiences that some parents of TGD children have as they engage with professionals and institutions, experiences that are potentially linked to social class. At any rate, when taken together, all of the accounts above underscore how economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital are used as powerful levers in negotiations with professionals and institutions. Given the extent of resources that were required by these middle-class parents in navigating everyday life, it is not a great stretch to suggest that parents who do not have such resources are disadvantaged in advocating for their TGD child.

Precarious, Disruptive, Gendered Work in Schools

While the middle-class parents in this study utilised, to varying degrees, the resources available to them, I turn to explore the nature of the work they did and the ways it resulted in increased vulnerability in their school communities.

Because schools had no previous input related to gender identity and were largely reacting to individual 'cases' of TGD children, the onus was on parents to advocate for their child and educate school staff. For instance, several parents took upon themselves to find and order books on the diversity of family forms for their school and source training opportunities for teachers to learn about gender identity diversity. These efforts were direct attempts to interrupt the gender normative fabric of everyday school life but they were perhaps inevitably interpreted by other parents and staff as being solely about including and supporting their child. Several parents in this study were very uncomfortable with this and tried to avoid being the focus of attention: '"[Education and Family Support Officer] from TENI is coming to talk about transgender people"…And then of course everybody looks at me, "it's not about me I don't know what it's about!" (Eavan). Halberstam's (2018, p. 60) critique of middle class parents seeking a 'dizzying array' of accommodations for their child are complicated by such perspectives. Rather than wanting special accommodations for their individual child, many of the parents wanted the rigid gender practices in their school to change *without* significant attention to their child. This conundrum complicates the figure of the middle-class parent invested solely in individualised solutions for their child.

One parent's sophisticated, intersectional reflection in relation to education about gender identity at school is further illustrative of the idea that parents were not solely concerned with the interests of their own child and were aware of the potentially comprehensive knock-on effects of their advocacy:

> really important for *all* students…policy should be also worked out in conjunction with Women's Aid, with disability rights groups, with anti-racism network…a policy like

> that being developed…could only benefit every citizen of Ireland down the line. Those gender constructs that are harmful to the trans kid are also harmful to the woman who ends up in an abusive relationship. (Joni)

Furthermore, the work of some parents to advocate for their child was no guarantor of acceptance or change and actually caused increased vulnerability. For example, one parent described a harrowing situation where they had been receiving solicitor's letters from one family since an email went around to parents flagging that their child would be transitioning at school.

Such vulnerabilities were further layered with gender. Reflecting the typically central role played by women parents in primary schooling (Reay, 2004), the participants in this study were predominantly women, mirroring the population of people who had contacted TENI for support. While the only man parent who participated in this study was a strong advocate for his child, the vast majority of women participants described their men partners as being more resistant and having a harder time processing their child's gender identity. Another layer of pressure and responsibility was added to their already complex everyday negotiations when there was relationship breakdown and when both parents were not equally supportive of their child's gender identity:

> the fact that I'm the only person she has 100% safety with is extremely exhausting… her Dad keeps going back and forth…he's living with his parents since we separated and they're totally against anything like that. They're very small minded. And you know, they've protested the whole way through having boy's toys for Shauna…when I first moved here…and I'd send Shauna up [to their house], she'd come back in a dress with clips in her hair and she'd open the door and rip everything out...For two days it would be really intense, "I'm a boy, I'm a boy" – like non-stop. (Siobhan)

Educators explained that when there were such diverging perspectives coming from the family, it was impossible to be completely supportive at school and this caused increased vulnerabilities on an everyday basis. This work was characterised as 'exhausting [and] constant' (Joni) and aligns with Johnson and Benson (2014) who highlight how 'mother-blaming' results in secondary stigma for mothers of queer children.

Thus far, by providing examples of middle-class parents using their capitals in different ways to advocate for their gender non-conforming children, I have raised pertinent questions about the necessity to have such resources and the implications for those with fewer resources. But the story doesn't end there because, as this section has revealed, the work that middle-class parents do can result in increased vulnerability. Furthermore, in many cases, it is also going some way towards interrupting the rigidity of gender in schools. In this light, the activism of several parents in this study actually pushes back against Halberstam's (2018, p. 55) notion that 'a clearly identified and identifiable subject, has been offered up as a resolution to childhood issues with gender variance'. We might even stretch to the claim that their activist work in schools realises Halberstam's (2018, p. 54) vision of a return to a more radical approach that involves a transformative transgender activism as parents fought for change in the rigidly gendered practices of schools in spite of the increased vulnerability that such work caused. Of course, the work of these parents is no guarantor of transformative effects but there is nonetheless a hopeful potentiality in their commitments to interrupting the systemic workings of gender in schools and orientation away from gaining special attention for their individual child.

Arduous Work in 'Child-Led' Parenting Amidst Judgement and Gender Rigidity

Thus far, this paper has been concerned with the work that these middle-class parents do in negotiating their schooling contexts. Now, taking as its starting point the well-accepted notion that being child-led is the ideal parenting approach with TGD children, this section turns to focus on their arduous work to follow this approach. It illustrates the difficult work that these parents do in trying to stay true to a child-led approach amidst judgements of family and rigidly gendered worlds. These experiences further complicate the vision of the middle-class parent of the TGD child and resist any simplification of their parenting approaches to teleological projects of gender normalisation.

Being Child-Led Amidst the Judgement of Family

Parents' child-led parenting philosophy was very often articulated in terms of helping their child to feel comfortable in themselves through 'letting them be':

> We didn't label it, we didn't say anything about it other than "ok that's great. You can be whoever you want to be" and we just went with that…What we're trying to do with him is just support him…Whatever it looks like and wherever it goes. (Eavan)

Most parents saw no other option except to be child-led because it was a necessity in avoiding extreme upset. For example, John and Geraldine provided the back-story of their decision to be led by their child:

> Tadhg used go up to [Geraldine's] Mam and Dad's house and he had friends up there who were all boys but they only knew him as Tadhg because they'd been introducing himself as Tadhg…Geraldine's sister, in front of Barry [his friend], turned around and said "sher Tadhg is not a boy, Tadhg's a girl!" And Tadhg came home here to me and he was hysterical, he was screaming and crying…I kind of said "Right, if Tadhg wants to dress in a frog suit and go around saying "ribbet" to everyone, if that

> makes him happy, he can do it. But it just has to end with people making fun of him or…upsetting him like this". (Geraldine and John)

Yet, in many ways, the work to 'let them be' or 'just be a kid and worry about it later' (Anna) was contradictory. For example, Helen reflected that 'let them be children' is also employed as a phrase to denounce parents who support their TGD child: 'people say "just let them be children". And you're kind of going … you *are* just letting them be children. That's the issue — if you force them … you are forcing them to be something they're not' (Helen). As indicated by Helen's quote here, being child-led meant that parents were continuously treading the fine line between 'supporting' their child and 'encouraging' their child and all were very conscious of the delicate nature of this work on an everyday basis: 'We just want to support him and walk by his side through this without encouraging or discouraging. But the encouraging and discouraging are so subtle as well' (Eavan).

Most parents described feeling judged by others for supporting their child and noted that this was partly because of their age: 'I think a child of that age you're second guessing because you're making a lot of those decisions then for them' (Helen). Many parents described being criticised by their family and friends because they were 'indulging' their child:

> So initially she started refusing…to wear knickers that were pink. Then he wouldn't wear knickers with a bow then couldn't have a frill. And so I just bought underpants. To me, I didn't care, I'd buy whatever…Everyone thought I was … kind of indulging her you know … whatever … her tomboyishness or her phase. But she gets so worked up so I give her what she wants to wear and then she's happy…my own family like one sister is extremely against it…Same thing, I'm "indulging in her phase". And I'm "encouraging it"…She said I should be playing it down and not allowing her … she'd a huge issue with Shauna wearing boy's underpants. (Siobhán)

Accounts such as Siobhán's underline the extent of constant monitoring and judgement from family and how many of these parents were continuously criticised for their capitulations to appease the extreme upset of their children.

Parents described anguish and continuous self-questioning related to such decisions. For example, while Ailbhe was confident in her parenting approach, she was constantly questioning herself: 'still with all my knowledge and all the evidence there's so much space for second guessing….And so much space for "what if this is the wrong thing?" (Ailbhe). These accounts provide a glimpse into the extent of self-surveillance and self-questioning involved in trying to be child-led while all the time managing the criticisms and judgements of others. Most were left wishing that, before casting judgement, people could know their everyday realities and the extent of their children's anxiety and upset and give them the support that they need. Of course, the resources available to these middle class parents helped them greatly in advocating for their child and this is a reminder of the classed nature of parenting work. But putting aside the resources available to them, the personal fall-out of supporting their children and the difficult work done in making minute everyday decisions is crucial contextual information that cannot be excluded in discussions about middle-class parents of TGD children. Furthermore, the experiences of the parents here in managing the subtleties of the lines between supporting, encouraging and discouraging indicate the complex, arduous and often contradictory work involved in the somewhat taken-for-granted practice of being child-led in parenting TGD children.

Being Child-Led in a Rigidly Gendered World

Halberstam (2018) critiques middle-class parents for their investments in normalisation and for further entrenching gender binaries in a stabilisation rather than a disruption of the gender

order. Again, while I instinctively appreciate the attention to how such parenting practices are themselves productive of the gender order, the accounts of the parents in this study provide a more detailed picture of these ambivalent investments as parents struggled to be led by their child in a rigidly gendered world.

Some parents were open about how heavily they had been invested in gender norms for their child: 'this is not what I want. I gave birth to a boy, I wanted rough and tumble, trucks and cars and buses and…I didn't get any of that. It's out of my control…I feel like jumping up and down saying I didn't want it! Didn't want my boy to be a girl!' (Patricia). Other parents reflected that, while they tried to be led by their child, it was difficult to leave these investments behind, particularly as they negotiated the assumptions of others in public places:

> we were out anywhere in the playground or people didn't know us in any situation everybody thought he was a boy. And he used to get very upset when I would say "oh actually she's a little girl and her name is Frieda". And he'd get extremely upset at that: "why are you telling them I'm a girl?" (Eavan)

In this light, it is unsurprising that these parents leaned towards the promise of gender normativity. They explained that it was easier when a child 'passed' seamlessly as a boy or a girl and that gender fluidity was very hard to negotiate. For example, one parent said:

> I think she still struggles a bit socially because she doesn't properly fall in either group…I would prefer if we could make a definite decision and move forward in a definite direction…I think if we said "ok, you're Jason in September" or whatever I think it would make the coming years a lot easier…I worry that if we go along like this the whole Shauna/Jason girl/boy thing…it's gonna become a bigger issue (Siobhán).

Here Siobhán worries about the ambiguity, about having two names, two genders and wishes for a 'definite decision' and a clear path in 'a definite direction'. Similarly, Helen said that

while Kevin identifies as a boy, he explains to her that he is 'not a typical boy' but this worries Helen:

> The bain of my life now is flower crowns (uber feminine paper or satin flowers on a hairband). He has at least three flower crowns…I mean I'm there persuading members of my family [he's a boy]…people are going to go [be confused]…I have said you can wear what you like in the house. I have warned against wearing it out. For their safety, I said you cannot wear that and use the gent's toilet. You can't (Helen, Parent of Kevin/Maeve, Aged 13)

This leaning towards normativity was echoed by some parents whose children very clearly orientated them in a linear, gender-normative direction:

> I think once he had made up his mind that he wanted to change his name and his gender pronouns…he wanted it done yesterday. And it was like he had suddenly seen the light. And it was literally like a light switch went on and… suddenly it was like the train had left the station. I couldn't catch up with him fast enough…As far as he was concerned if we do this, everything else follows. (Sarah)

In some ways, these parents' accounts here realise Halberstam's (2018) critique of middle-class parents' project of gender normalisation and stability. They orientated towards the comfort promised by the gender binary and away from the risks that gender ambiguity poses But, echoing Gray et al (2016), the parents in this study were mostly motivated by wanting their child to fit in, be accepted in their families and safe in public places. And so, gender normative orientations cannot be read without keeping in mind the risks to their survival that gender ambiguities pose in such rigidly gendered societies. What also cannot be ignored is the fact that many children were themselves wholly invested in the gender binary and gender norms (Neary forthcoming).

There were some parents in this study who were committed to gender fluidity. But these commitments were constantly curbed and constrained by the rigidity of gender in their children's everyday worlds. For example, Ailbhe described a moment in a playground:

> So she asked Darren directly "are you a boy?" and he said 'yeah…because I've a penis and … I think he quite liked having that…punch line…Generally my kids are fairly comfortable with…the gender thing not being fixed and not being congruous. But they're also conscious that not everybody is. So if they can offer some sort of fixed clarity … and so for Darren fixed clarity tends to be "I'm a boy who wears dresses". And I've kind of try to make it clear that that doesn't have to be the end point (Ailbhe).

Despite Ailbhe's intentions to resist essentialised notions of gender in her parenting and despite her openness regarding an 'end point', Darren mediated his gender fluid display in the gendered space of the playground by employing his physiological make-up as evidence for his gender identity as a boy. Such moments further underscore the regulating force of the gender binary in children's lives and demonstrate how even the most committed gender-fluid, open-ended, child-led parenting, children 'don't have the freedom…to take gender out of it…' (Ailbhe).

Nevertheless, while several parents in this study were orientated towards gender normativity by their children, by their own prior investments or by their gendered worlds, they were not blindly invested in normalising end-points in the way that Halberstam's (2018) critique might lead us to imagine. For example, Eavan's reflection here reveals the level of weighing up that was involved for her at every turn:

> there are no happy endings for Fred. Because he can never be who… never no matter what we do, no matter what he does he will be a transgender man he won't just be a man…it's not something that can be sorted out. We have huge challenges, we've huge decisions …Yeah. Because he's so young. And are we setting him on a path? Are we

> medicalising it? Are we setting him on a path that he's not going to change from? Would he change if we didn't set him on this path?

Eavan and others also displayed a potent cognisance that there would be 'no happy endings' for their children. She went on to elaborate the tendency that a parent has to try to fix or find a solution:

> I think we were feeling pressurised because of the distress Fred was under…we felt under pressure from Fred to do something to fix the situation and that seemed like the right thing…[Now, following transition at school] he's a different child...talking, laughing, that there was banter and chat…happy and relaxed [so]…It was definitely the right thing to do but…I think there is that kind of instinct as a parent just to fix it. And I'm really mindful of that…you can't just fix it. You can't have any agenda; you can't have any pre-set ideas about anything. (Eavan)

Here, Eavan, like other parents, highlights the pull to solutions to ease upset and distress. She points out the difference that the transition has made for her child yet she is at the same time acutely aware that there are no simple, straight-forward solutions and appears committed to not having agendas or pre-set ideas of what the future will look like for her child. While her quote here continues to reference an end-point gender normative ideal, it also counters any tendency to simplify or reduce middle-class parents' decisions to solution-oriented quests for gender normalisation.

In contrast to the middle-class parents of TGD children so prominent in the media (Halberstam 2018), these parents reveal the ways that child-led parenting involved difficult work that comprised an often contradictory mix of essentialising, normalising and transgressive enactments and effects. Parents attempts to 'let children be' and enact gender-fluid parenting styles combined with the often queer enactments of their children point to the ways in which

the architecture of gender is becoming stretched and made more capacious. This perspective affirms Rahilly's (2015) sense that such negotiations are forging new transgressive pathways in childhood, even when they use bio-essentialist notions of gender to do so. At the same time, we can see how all negotiations are mediated by gendered judgements of others, rigidly gendered environments and the ways that children themselves were often vehemently invested in gender conformity and linear paths towards transitions as end points. Motivated by the safety or happiness of their child, many parents leaned towards the promise of gender normativity/certainty and away from gender ambiguity/uncertainty. However, such investments were not taken lightly and many parents demonstrated much agonising with regard to decision-making whilst also being conscious that the promise of gender normativity operated as a kind of cruel fantasy. The parents' accounts provide a window into the extent of self-surveillance involved in making everyday decisions — work that is heavily impacted by their child's age and gender display. When taken together, these accounts further complicate the story of the middle-class parent. Furthermore, they reveal the tensions and impossibilities that are not always immediately apparent in the somewhat taken-for-granted notion of adopting a 'child-led' approach to parenting TGD children.

Concluding Discussion

Halberstam's (2018) provocative reflections on middle-class parents prompt much needed attention to issues of class, individualisation and normalisation in parenting TGD children. Halberstam (2018, p. 60) argues that

> New modes of parenting among white middle class "designer" parents have shifted the coordinates of belonging such that the trans* child that might previously have been

> viewed as disruptive might now be displayed as a trophy, a mark of the family's flexibility, a sign of the liberal family's capacious borders.

For me, Halberstam's (2018) utterance of 'middle-class' here begs attention to how parenting TGD children is a classed activity with unequal effects. The first part of this paper took this up by detailing how middle-class parents of TGD children drew upon their capitals in negotiating schooling contexts. Their accounts highlight the kind of resources required for a TGD child to successfully negotiate (and sometimes just survive) schooling. These accounts coupled with the over-representation of middle-class parents seeking support from organisations such as TENI raise urgent questions about the plight of those parents who do not have the kind resources upon which the parents in this study relied.

Alongside drawing attention to how parenting TGD children is classed, Halberstam (2018) raises crucial questions about individualisation and normalisation. Halberstam (2018, p. 53) claims that a 'new wave of neoliberal incorporation seeks to situate the transgender child specifically, as a victim in need of protection, a minor in need of advocacy, or a patient in need of care' and thus orientates parent advocacy towards a kind of individualised normalisation for their children. Importantly, Halberstam (2018, p. 89) also helps us to think about how the 'trans*' subject comes into being as in need of protection and 'an image of the nonnormative against which normative bodies can be discerned' and how such normative effects can often be brought into being unintentionally (Enke, 2012; O'Flynn, 2016). In some ways, what Halberstam (2018) is saying here is echoed across the parents' accounts in this study. Motivated by the extreme upset of their children on an everyday basis, some parents fantasised about a clear path with a teleological solution — the kind of 'linearity, permanence, and end points' that Halberstam (2018) warns against, in favour of the notion of 'becoming trans'. This upset, combined with rigidly gendered reactions and environments, orientated most parents toward

the comfort promised by ‘orderly arrangements of binary gender’ (Halberstam, 2018, p. 90) and away from gender ambiguity.

But there is crucial detail missing from Halberstam’s (2018) picture of middle-class parents of TGD children — some of which I have provided in this paper: Firstly, middle-class parents of TGD children in this study underwent an exhausting array of negotiations that were an ambivalent mix of decisiveness, compromise and second-guessing as they sought to educate educators and other parents, find resources, manage relations and boundaries with ‘softly softly’ approaches all while they were constantly surveyed, monitored and judged as they carefully watched the fine line between supporting their child while not tipping over into ‘encouraging’ or ‘indulging’ their child. In this study, this work was done primarily by women. While I am not definitively claiming here that women do all the emotional labour in parenting the children in these particular families or indeed in families in general, what cannot be ignored is how the vast majority of women described their men ex-/partners as more resistant and some as actively combative. This, when coupled with the notion that women typically take the more central role in care-giving in families, alerts us to the possibility that women are experiencing increased vulnerability in this domain.

Secondly, while it is clear that parents leaned toward the promise of gender normativity, they were not blindly invested in gender conformity or in permanent ‘end point’ solutions. Their tendency to seek comfort in gender normativity was very often borne out of an attempt to protect their child in a rigidly gendered world. In addition, most parents demonstrated a potent awareness of the gravity of the smallest of decisions on an everyday basis and some were acutely aware that the promise of normalising end-points operated as a kind of cruel fantasy for their children. Moreover, many parents showed evidence of thinking beyond themselves and their child and attended closely to the ways that the architecture of gender affects us all. Much of their work in schools appeared not to be about seeking individualised

supports for their child but rather sought to stretch and interrupt the rigid workings of gender at school. While such efforts might seem small, the parents' orientation towards the more systemic workings of gender, as opposed to the plight of their individual child, promises de-stabilising possibilities for the architecture of gender normativity in schools.

Finally, the queerness of several children's everyday negotiations as reported by their parents is a reminder that TGD children are all the time forging habitable futures in ways that exceed gender normative temporal scripts. In this regard, these parents' commitments to child-led parenting practices might hold some potential in realising Halberstam's hope that 'trans*' might 'throw the organization of all bodies into doubt' (Halberstam, 2018, p. 90). Of course, following a child-led approach to parenting TGD children is not a panacea for achieving gender transformation, not least because children, parents and child-led approaches are continuously informed, shaped and mediated by the restrictiveness of the gender order in families and everyday worlds. Nevertheless, child-led parenting of TGD children has the potential to be conceptualised and operationalised less in individualised, normalised terms and more as informed by a spectrum of gender variance that is not hampered by chrononormative, teleological assumptions (Meadow 2014). While holding, as this paper does, the classed, precarious, gendered, disruptive and arduous work that the parents of TGD children do, this kind of imaginary of child-led parenting might go some way towards enacting Halberstam's (2018, p.87) vision of 'trans*' as 'the basis for very different ways of seeing the world'.

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[i] I use the term transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) throughout this paper to refer to the diversity of gender non-conforming children referred to in this study and in the literature drawn upon in this paper.

[ii] See for example:
Transgender Kids: Who Knows Best? https://vimeo.com/247163584
Growing up Trans https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPuUxZSXR2g
Louis Theroux: Transgender Kids https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6aw7g0

[iii] Halberstam (2018, p.52) uses trans* to embrace the 'non-specificity' of the term "trans", using it to 'open the term up to a shifting set of conditions and possibilities rather than to attach it only to the life narratives of specific group of people'.

[iv] The Education and Family Support Officer at TENI anecdotally reported that the homogeneity of social class in their database was reflective of the population of transgender and gender non-conforming children in schools. They noted that predominantly middle-class parents attended their support groups and that there was a disproportionately high drop-out rate of parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.