



Gender Disappointment 11.7.22

Envisaging yourself with your child, the shared activities, how they may look or what they may enjoy is all part of the natural transition to parenthood. As we start to imagine these things, it is difficult not to consider their gender. Though the research is sparse, having a gender preference is common. However, gender disappointment specifically is the term used to describe the emotional reaction, predominantly distress, that some parents feel, in relation to discovering the biological sex of their child is not what they had hoped for. It can happen to any parent.

Gender disappointment is real but can be hard to discuss with those around you.

For many parents having a child of a particular gender holds deep significance which may be linked to religious, social, cultural or personal beliefs. For some, the parent may have imagined a life with a particular gender, for example, they may have a family full of boys and then wished for a girl. In other cases, the parent may have had a past trauma and in order to protect their child they hope for a different gender than themselves.

With so much more focus on gender from early testing and/or gender reveal parties etc, it may be difficult to come to terms with the gender of your child. As a result of these practices you also start to develop a relationship to the pregnancy much earlier. Gender disappointment can appear at any stage – at conception, pregnancy or birth of the child. For some, this feeling of distress is temporary but for others it can be very unsettling with a lasting impact.

Gender disappointment can be a complicated feeling for parents to talk about, even with their loved ones. Many feel a sense of shame over the disappointment they feel, or a fear of being judged by others. For others there is a sense of guilt that they should feel more grateful for the pregnancy or the children that they have. Whilst others might keep it to themselves and may be

tearful and even angry or feel disconnected to their pregnancy or baby. It is a complex experience to navigate as we tread a line of love and attachment alongside loss and grief.

There is no right way to deal with gender disappointment, but it can help to talk about it. The experience of gender disappointment does not mean that you will not be a good parent or that you will not or cannot love your child.

Some ideas below:

- Remind yourself that it's ok to be happy about being pregnant or a parent and disappointed that you are not having the baby you imagined all at the same time.
- Find a safe person to talk to and reflect on your expectations.
- Allow yourself space to grieve the loss of the child imagined or hoped for. This does not take away from the child that you will ultimately have or have now.
- Develop understanding about your reasons for the disappointment.
- Give yourself time to overcome your gender disappointment. It is a difficult process working out how to grow to love a new and different future.
- If pregnant, come up with a plan of where and when you want to find out about the gender.
For some having the gender revealed at the birth can help to minimise the disappointment as they see their new baby. For others being prepared prior to the birth and working through feelings in advance can be helpful.
- Set aside time to think about how you feel and process your loss if that helps. For example, you may want to try writing in a journal, or doing something creative.



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- Turn off social media and alerts on your phone for a while, allow yourself a break from contact and the pressure to respond to messages. We all have a tendency to pay attention only to information that reinforces our feelings (e.g. only looking at parents of girls now you know that you are having a boy). So, switching off from social media can help with that cycle of compounding the loss.
- Give yourself time to bond with your new baby. Like any relationship, bonds do take time to develop. If you are pregnant, you could try some daily 'connecting' e.g.: rub oil on your tummy, or play your favourite music to them and talk to them. Balancing the loss as well as attaching is the key task.
- Be gentle with yourself and with some time, and being able to talk it through, the feelings of distress you may have will most likely lessen as you develop a relationship with your newborn.

WHAT OTHERS CAN DO TO HELP:

- Be supportive. The individual dealing with feelings of gender disappointment may find it so difficult to talk openly about it.
- Validate their feelings. Whilst you may not understand why it's so important to them all feelings are valid.
- Be empathic. Empathy doesn't include 'but at least...' statements, so try to avoid these.
- Give them time to adjust and your reassurance. 🌸



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Gidget Foundation Australia exists to support the emotional wellbeing of expectant and new parents to ensure they receive timely, appropriate and specialist care.