

# Chasing Rainbows: Book Excerpt

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The following is an excerpt from Kathy Witterick's chapter in *Chasing Rainbows: Exploring Gender Fluid Parenting Practices*, a collection of essays edited by Fiona Joy Green and May Friedman. It was published this fall by Demeter Press.

*My first two children acquired the words "Dad," "Dog," and a few dozen others before any name for me emerged. So it was an unexpected ode to motherhood when I heard Storm intone "Mum" just after a year. My heart felt full. The story becomes more beautiful. At 18 months, Storm had already been saying "Dad" for a few weeks, when one day, I watched with some mixture of amusement and stunned curiosity as Storm addressed David. "Mom, annie urse?" which translates to, "Mom, another nurse." Storm was asking David to breastfeed!*



A portrait of Jazz, dad David Stocker, Kio, mom Kathy Witterick and baby Storm, taken six months after the family shared their story with the Star. Two years later, Kathy Witterick has written about her experience with gender-fluid parenting in a new book called *Chasing Rainbows*.

*Without hesitation, he cuddled Storm in a nursing position, and a tiny nose tucked itself into David's naked breast. With closed eyes, adult and child were lost in a close embrace for two full minutes. Then Storm climbed down to toddle off full speed and find a new adventure.*

*From that day to this, Storm uses the word "Mom" not to imply a gendered role, but to describe a source of nurturance that can come from any adult*

*with a mind open enough to offer it. Neither of my other children showed much surprise. They did not drag out any exasperated physiological explanation for why nursing with a Dad is impossible. I hope it's a sign that they feel empowered to opt out of norms if it happens that there's a healthier way to get their needs met.*

**There's tremendous untapped** creative power in children's diversification of the gender landscape. We're busy generating new labels (like gender fluid, gender creative or gender independent), organizing task forces and discussing gender non-conformity as if it's an outbreak. While trained professionals in the 21st century write; "yes, a new pediatric problem is in town," the real courage of gender-creative children unfolds.

Gender nonconformity is not a problem to fix. These children are sidelining a dangerous status quo, risking censure to express a diversity that promises to transform the rigid teeter totter of binary gender into a more inclusive, joyful roundabout. Agency and freedom of expression are that important to being human, and gender nonconforming children are sticking up for everyone's right to both.

The Search Institute's developmental assets framework names 40 markers of healthy development in children, including self esteem, integrity, honesty, and personal power. Empirical research suggests that children with those internal assets (and external assets like family support) will be more likely to thrive.

I watch my nonconformers observe the status quo (what's outside), acknowledge with confidence personal preferences, thoughts, feelings and interests (what's inside) and synthesize the two into responsible, self-honouring choices.

Not always, but enough that I understand that these skills would be useful to all children. It's novel to see children gather empowerment in a way that doesn't rely on obtaining it through denying others a fair share.

I'm amazed to see young gender nonconformers practise a Red Cross violence prevention adage that I used to teach to adults: Talk (speak up for what you believe); Walk (find a safe space); and Squawk (find someone who will support you). These skills are at the core of the best expensive, adult-written anti-bullying resources being purchased by parents, teachers and community members desperate to curb unnecessary hurt. And our gender independent children have them already. In bucketfuls.

*My three children are giggling helplessly. Storm arrives in the kitchen, grabs my arm and drags me into the playroom, saying, "Mom, waatch." When I stumble in, all three jump up, hissing like pythons and miming giant arcs of pee all over the room. "You pee!" says the littlest one, as the pretend pissing match dissolves into snorts of laughter. They have tears streaming down their faces as mom joins in.*

I'm grateful that my children have made a place for me in their revolution. It's no neutral spot. Shifting into neutral is an emergency measure for when you're slipping headlong into a crash collision or ricocheting off a bridge into frigid waters. It's a vain pitch for a modicum of control.

This moment, as the discussion about gender creativity gains momentum, feels important. Like if we get it wrong, there is a risk of sliding off the road. So now is the time to take a stand and believe in our own — but especially our children's — agency. Parents are placed at the front line of social influence, which admittedly is a chaotic spot to be intentional.

But parenting must be the future we suggest by the principles we model. Which ones then? Raising feminist sons and daughters addresses inequities, but may depend too much on a two-team foundation — an oversimplification that makes differential power assignment that much easier. Plus, where are the feminist parenting strategies for a once-son, now-daughter? Gender neutral parenting feels like an oxymoron, suggesting the impossible notion of gender as non-partisan. Here's my “radical parenting strategy” — I'm trying to listen. Sounds boring, so David and I made up a fancy name. We call it *gender engaged parenting*.

*Excerpted with permission from Chasing Rainbows: Exploring Gender Fluid Parenting Practices (Demeter Press). For details on the launch of Chasing Rainbows on Nov. 22 or for ordering information, go [demeterpress.org](http://demeterpress.org).*