

Let's Talk it Out: Anecdotes of an Askable Parent to Break Gender and Sexual Myths

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Abstract

This article is about a mother's journey with her growing son to find answers to the toughest questions. Yes, tough questions that were related to gender and sexuality. They are still there but perhaps growing age and experiences have opened up more sources to explore. Being an askable parent probably prompts him to ask his questions outright. In this article, such experiences have been discussed which parents must have faced at one time or another. These are not difficult questions; we make them so. By ignoring simple queries, we make them taboo. And the child starts hiding such things. There can be no better and reliable source than parents to get answers to their queries. We have to be askable parents to give sound understanding to our children especially about matters related to sexuality.

Each age brings its own kind of queries and seeks answers to them. No questions are wrong and should not be rejected but sometimes the way of answering somehow isn't appropriate and carries 'wrongness' in it. Such responses may put the children in more dilemma than ever before. And this is largely reflected in the answers to questions related to gender and sexuality. Most of the parents get nervous after hearing these questions. They tend to forget that children's questions are based on their experiences. As a result, they keep on making adult speculations on those questions which put barrier on any kind of dialogue between the children and parents. Further, the children find themselves in a state of confusion which impacts their overall growth and development.

Not getting answers to questions encourages doubts that this cannot be asked to the parents, and the questions asked probably wrong and should not have been asked. And in this way, we not only kill the curiosity of the children, but we deprive them of a proper understanding. At the same time, it has to be accepted that most of the parents feel that they cannot talk easily with their children on some topics. Children instinctively ask these questions to their parents because they consider them the most reliable source. So why can't we give age-appropriate answers with same credibility? That is why our discomfort on many issues makes them turn to other mediums to find their answers.

In present times, the world of internet has become an elusive world. Immense knowledge and information come to the fore with a single click. What is right or wrong you have to sort it yourself. At this young age, children are not able to connect with internet independently, so mainly their own peers and siblings become their biggest resource for information, whatever that information may be. And along with this, Television has become one of the biggest medium in present times to get any information.

Like other parents I too had questions regarding the upbringing of my child. I was also skeptical about what kind of questions my child will have. Will I be able to answer those questions? Will he come to me with his curiosities? Such questions used to occur in my mind. Though they still occur. I have been fortunate in this regard as my child has established an effective communication with me. My being a teacher and perhaps his being an only child in a nuclear family can be considered as the reasons behind this. I could be wrong to believe that. Sharing our daily routine with each other, whether it is sitting together or through phone, we have always encouraged communication and interaction between us. And sometimes we have adopted written communication in the form of writing letters and lengthy messages to each other, when we felt that verbal mode is not workable at that moment. Expression is important, no matter which method is adopted for that.

Since I teach a course on Gender, I felt that I was able to orient him in the appropriate direction about it. Rather I believed that it helped me in orienting him as a gender conscious being. Probably I wouldn't have realized this if he didn't bring up some stereotypical queries and questions. He was able to bring up all his stereotypical observations to me due to open communication we had about our daily worldly experiences and interacting about the same. I would like to present this through some observations.

At the age of 6, he furiously asked me why don't I put his father's surname with my name? Whereas mothers of all the children in his class have done so. When I discussed a little more, then he said this is what happens. Then he insisted that I should also do it. He seemed quite upset. He further revealed that he finds it very awkward when even the teachers ask again and again to confirm my name. All this is happening because of my surname, he concluded. It was difficult to talk to a 6 years old child to talk about a stereotypical tradition that has been going on for centuries. But it can't be avoided at all. It wasn't just a matter of my child's displeasure; it was a matter of narrow mindedness and a stereotypical ideology which was being instilled in this generation as well and reinforced by the women teaching staff by protecting and promoting through their gestures and questions. This may have been a contemptuous situation for the child and may continue to be so, but I felt necessary to discuss this issue. Necessary, also because he could have been a messenger for the class and may be even for the school. It became a great teachable moment for me where I was able to tell him about identity, individuality, choice and decision making. To explain that every individual has an identity which should be respected. Took a long time on this, because he wasn't seeing similar examples in the neighbourhood and in the family. Examples were found and discussed in detail. I don't know how much he was able to understand but it became a topic of discussion during the lunch break in the class. It turned out to be a long battle for him, for taking a defence for his mother. This probably became his own

battle with growing age. Later, I also came to know such discussions where woman's higher education was linked with her existence and identity and how education gives her power to think and act. Discussions like, job and earning might have helped to take such decisions, was it a sign of change? If you look closely, then not on a large scale as it was happening then in my son's group. But if a gender related issue remains a point of discussion amongst children for so long, so it's definitely a mark of change. It is necessary to keep questioning to ensure your first step towards the change. My child now has an independent thinking on this which is an indicator of change.

I would like to talk about a few more anecdotes related to school situations when he was around 7 years. One day he came from school very sad. He remained upset but didn't say anything all day. On asking, he said that he would break friendship with the girl he liked most in the class. When I asked why do you like her? He responded that because she is very fair. On probing, he added that fair people look beautiful. On further asking, what happened now? He said that I saw from outside the washroom that she washed her face and there was a big scar above her lip, then she applied some cream to cover it. I was not aware of that. She told me that she is applying a medicine. And she told me not to tell anyone in class especially not to boys, if they come to know then they will make fun. Now she doesn't look beautiful to me. Later, she went to a boarding school but is still a good friend. This gave an opportunity to talk about the social dimension of gender and how it is depriving and dividing everyone in some way or the other.

The girls of the class like to talk to him. I thought that he might be popular so could this be the reason behind it. But talking to him for girls was like talking to someone from their own group because he was a low built and soft-spoken boy. When other boys got to know this, they made fun of him and teased him. Some boys asked him why he talks to a girl who is taller than him. He should talk to a girl shorter to him. And she'd look great with the other tall guy in the class.

There were many doubts and dilemmas related to skin colour, height, body, looks and a patient listening was required for that. Children do not disclose such things readily. And if they do not share, then they do more harm to themselves. These were not just questions; they were myths that needed to be broken.

Fair is norm and fair is beautiful, this is the cultural construction of beauty we have. Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth* emphasized the societal desire where “physical appearance, bodies, face, hair, clothes-matter so much... something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty (9). Beauty of the body is incomplete without defining the skin colour. The desire of white skin is perpetuated not only by the society but also the media which is flooded with the fair and lovely campaigns. May be the colonial past of the country is still trapped under the beauty definition of white skin empire or the ancient religious scriptures which describe the beauty of the goddesses and fairies(apsara) with milky complexion manifested as pious, pure and symbol of peace. From our own indigenous folklores to fairy tales, all the construction of femininity are with the fair skin. On the contrary wicked characters possess dark skin. The description of beautiful woman will not be complete without describing her body, features and colour (Gupta,2019:310).

These children are part of this heterosexual society which gives power to patriarchy to define heteronormativity. Children have constructed the notion of woman’s beauty as per the set norms of femininity. Tall boys are not only considered macho but also presented sexually desirable. Children at this young age think about heterosexual romantic relationships where the compatibility of physicality plays crucial role in match making.

Children are developing their own construct about ideal femininity and masculinity by observing and imitating. These stereotypical experiences will further become part of gender schematic processing. Chodorow in (Seidman,2010:20) states that perspective is important because she assumes that ‘sexuality

emerges during individual’s development. The family plays a crucial role in the making of the sexual life. She insists that our gender identity shapes our sexuality in profound ways, as boys and girls experience different parent child dynamics, they will have somewhat different sexual values and orientation’. Parents’ discomfort to talk about such issues is because they are afraid that ‘too less is too much’, what to discuss and how much to discuss but most importantly how to discuss.

Parents have their own ideological constructs about gender and sexuality and nothing else they want to add to that. Such rigidity of thought stops the child from confiding in their parents and talk about the experiences which are new in their lives. It always turns into a value laden discussion which could not help child to come out from his/her dilemma. Parenting practices (re)produce heteronormativity as children taught themselves to see the world through a heteronormative lens (Martin,2009:190-91) and it strengthens its hold as a universally accepted truth and reality.

Mary Douglas (1966) in her classic work ‘Purity and Danger’ (in Seidman,2010:53) argues that cultures try to impose order and meaning on a chaotic, meaningless world through classify somethings as ‘dirty’, ‘polluted’, ‘dangerous’, or ‘taboo’ while other things are labelled as ‘clean’, ‘pure’, and ‘safe’. Mary further explains how purity /pollution dualism invoke by culture to draw symbolic boundaries around groups. The moral criteria and boundaries constructed by the community decide the inclusion or exclusion of people ... (54). These boundaries conveniently marginalise the peripheral groups with their non-normative sexual preference and push them out from the morality circle. Bullying in school by the classmates for certain behaviours and choices are the reflection of these binaries and boundaries created by the society. School as an institution itself is heterosexual and divides everyone into these categories. If we parents are not attending the queries of our little ones then we are hindering their reflective thinking. Moll (2009) makes it clear, ‘Modesty, austerity, and clean living on the part of parents will counter

balance much negligence in direct guidance or protection'. We need to value their experiences. Researches proved that children feel most comfortable with their parents to get any information. We all must have had such

experiences with children. It is very important to encourage them to share with us for their sound emotional and all round well-being.

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