

# Raising their children without gender restrictions had no ill-effects, say parents

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## ABSTRACT

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## FULL TEXT

Note: .902 words, with 137 in optional trims

While the story of a Toronto couple who are trying to raise a genderless child has raised some eyebrows and created debate about the well-being of their child, another Canadian couple who employed a similar strategy nearly two decades ago say their children have turned out just fine.

Prabhakar Ragde and his wife, Naomi Nishimura, had their first child in 1992 and a second three years later. The children's birth announcements intentionally omitted the sex - both are girls and were born at Ontario's Kitchener-Waterloo Hospital - as part of an ongoing strategy to prevent gender bias from entering their children's lives.

Ragde said the effect of his family's decision was mostly felt by the parents, not the children.

"This had no significant effect on the children or on their interactions with others," Ragde told Postmedia News in an email.

"It had a significant effect on us, their parents, and a mostly short-term effect on our interactions with other adults," he said.

"The children are now 18 and 15 and are happy, well-adjusted, well-integrated socially, and on good terms with us."

In the Toronto case, parents Kathy Witterick and David Stocker have withheld the sex of their four-month-old child Storm, provoking questions about their choice when the story was reported in the media. The couple has been quoted as saying they are hiding the sex from the outside world as a "tribute to freedom and choice" that they hope will let Storm grow up unfettered by the values of others.

With a few exceptions - not even the child's grandparents are aware of the sex - Storm's sex is a mystery.

Ragde said reaction he and his wife got from others varied.

"Some (people) were supportive, some were not. Some were mildly negative, but resigned, some were strongly negative and raised a fuss. It was sometimes surprising: a progressive feminist friend who was pretty freaked out; a mechanic at a garage (in San Francisco) who idly inquired, then said, 'Good. People don't need to know'; and my wife's grandmother, in her 10th decade of life, who bought us a baby T-shirt with the slogan 'Raise Boys And Girls The Same Way.' "

Ragde and Nishimura both teach at the University of Waterloo's school of computer science.

The birth announcements were eventually published in an academic text on Canadian gender issues, offering the couple's reasoning for their decision.

"Studies have shown that adult perception of infant behaviour is affected more by the perceived sex of the child than the actual behaviour of the child," read the announcement for their first child, Arju.

"There is a difference in the way adults talk to girl babies and boy babies; there is a difference in the way adults hold and play with girl babies and boy babies.

"We think that the sex of a newborn child who will still be sorting out its senses and perceptions for weeks if not months after birth is the least interesting bit of information about that child."

Ragde said by the time Arju and her younger sister, Zazuki, were in school, the parents "weren't as careful about it," but Ragde said he still doesn't use gendered references very often.

The couple also made other decisions to keep gender stereotypes out of their household while the kids were growing up. Gender-specific toys, such as Barbie dolls, were not found in the girls' toy box.

"That came more naturally, since our priority was to provide them with toys that encouraged creativity and thought (and) stereotypical toys tend not to," he said. "In dressing them ... the goal was not to be somehow generic, but to put them into sensible and attractive clothing in the colours we (and later they) wanted, which meant picking such clothes off whatever rack we happened to find them on."

Ragde said their choice not to openly reveal the children's sexes made those around them more aware and gave the children more liberties to decide what they wanted for themselves.

"They were in daycare early, and were exposed to plenty of gender stereotypes," Ragde said. "They tried some of them out, adopted some, discarded others. By the time they started school, they weren't so superficially unusual as to draw attention to themselves."

He said his daughters have grown up well. Arju is studying at a liberal-arts college in the United States, while Zazuki is still in high school in Waterloo. She hopes to join her sister at the same college in the U.S. once her high school studies wrap up, her father said.

Judith Rich Harris, a U.S. author and psychology researcher - who, in her 1998 book *The Nurture Assumption*, said that adult personalities are often shaped by the way they were raised as children - told Postmedia News that raising a child without gender restrictions is not necessarily negative. She noted, however, that the parents' reasoning may be flawed.

"I don't think genderless rearing will do the child any harm in the long run - or even in the short run - but I think the parents are misguided," she said. "Their philosophy seems to be based on the idea that male and female are artificial categories imposed by society."

Ragde said he finds the "dire predictions of some commentators on the recent (Toronto) story quite amusing," and that there are "many and more serious threats to the welfare of children ... than one Toronto couple trying something different."

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