

The circle of life starts in the laundry

MICHELLE HAMER

I need help. It's something I realised about a year ago, somewhere between the birth of baby number three and the prolonged (well, it was only 39 weeks, but it felt like I was gestating a baby elephant) pregnancy of child number four.

Well there you go — I mean, I was asking for trouble with all those babies underfoot, wasn't I? Suddenly, making a busy job, the needs of three children, the demands of growing another and housework fit into a day became impossible and something had to give. Yippee, my toilet cleaning days were over — I hired a cleaner, and then increased my workload to pay for her.

This year, with baby Oliver now part of the family, life has got even busier, and even without all that dusting and stuff, I still can't seem to cope. Yippee, my nappy changes were decreased — I hired a nanny and increased my workload to pay for her.

I often wonder what would happen if I stopped work. I'd probably be much richer than I am now, but I'd have to wash my own dishes, make playground and go to playgroup every week, and the thought is so terrifying that I keep heading for my home office — here for emergencies and breastfeeding, but with such lovely clean hands!

It took me a while to get used to the whole Lady of the Manor bit, but now I think it's just the best! I can do things for the kids when I'm feeling maternal and generous, like wandering out of my office unexpectedly and announcing "Hey, who wants to go and get ice cream?"

For once, I get to be the good guy occasionally. But, more often than not, I'm shouting distractedly "Yes, I'll be there to help with your maths in a minute", or ridiculously trying to coax the toddler — "Darcy, drink the drink Louisa has made you, it won't taste any different if I mummy pours it" — all the while typing furiously, nursing the phone while on hold for someone-or-other important and popping my hidden stash of M&Ms like a crazed addict.

My mother-in-law is a big help. In a house where ironing has been outlawed, except for those rare occasions when mummy and daddy go out somewhere special together (the last time was our wedding day), Nanny Hamer is a Sunbeam tour de force who runs through the house stiffening and starching garments, the very fibre of their being.

I don't think it's so much the heat of iron, but her Austrian heritage that's our otherwise slack, sloppy, undisciplined clothes suddenly rigid with fear. Once told me that Austrian women prize for their bed-making and ended to teach me the tuck-and-thrust method of gaining compliant linen, but I shed so much she never offered again, and he has an amazing ability to come for us, throw clothes in the wash, hang in a stern, tight rows on the line and a whip them off, folding them with precision creases, ironing them (jocks, socks, the lot) and stacking them in the robe before I can choose the right item to begin my next story with.

I'm there's something unnatural in a crumpled, baby-spit-on T-shirt he laundry basket and having it ironed, pristine, fresh smelling and taut, no-nonsense briskness in wardrobe before the sun has set, shining is a process of time and sheer astute avoidance that cannot be led with. There's the dirty-washing and the neatness of a least two to three allowing plenty of time for the stain. Then the hasty dumping of the contents of said basket in the machine very late one night with its feeling of achievement and self-hardship of life for the modern woman. Two days later, comes mandatory re-wash to get rid of the tub-and-moulded-a-bit odor. "God, I'm a good mother", hanging-the-line burst.

There's where it gets weird, where I — who cares not a lot for its protocols — can't bear to see my clothes hung inside out. I stand, battling with myself to just let inside-out trunks daks stay that it just can't do it. I blame my genes, which, try as I might, I tirely resist. Thanks, mum.

I move on to three good days of Look, it's raining, oh well, rinse won't hurt", or burning fades everything two shades the time it gets brought in and on a couch somewhere until needs to wear something. That is the true process washing and undergo and then, by the time that T-shirt again, with most of pit gone, a bit less the color it and with a friendly crumpled neat, a surprise and an echo of life.

Born a boy. Wanting to be a girl. Dealing with gender confusion can be a long and distressing process.

By ELISSAR MUKHTAR

Peter has a dream. At first he's scared, because he doesn't know what's going to happen to him. Then there are storms, huge waves come and envelop him. He wonders how they got there, but then, somehow, without him feeling any pain, the waves take his penis away. It vanishes.

Peter is six. At his age, boys are saying "I hate girls" and girls are saying "I hate boys". But what happens when a child not only likes the opposite sex, but wants to be the opposite sex?

Peter disturbs our definitions of gender. Although he has male genitals, he identifies as female. In clinical terms, this is known as gender dysphoria, where the child experiences discomfort because he feels his anatomy does not match his gender identity.

There is a game Peter likes to play called the "Princess Di Fashion Game". He has a collection of Princess Diana in various outfits, and you have to guess which is the favorite one.

He also likes Marilyn Monroe and Dolly Parton, women with large breasts and exotic clothes. He pretends he is a catwalk model and speaks in a high-pitched voice when he wants to. He won't play with boys. He says he's got the wrong body. He gets laughed at, teased and bullied. Peter is seeing a psychiatrist.

In the US and Britain, Peter's condition rates its own definition in the official manual of mental diseases. It is classified as Gender Identity Disorder (GID) of childhood, where children display an array of sex-typed behavior signalling a strong identification with the opposite sex.

The director of the New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry, Dr Louise Newman, is a child and adolescent psychiatrist who specialises in gender problems. She says "young children don't understand that gender is something fixed about a person".

She helps these children deal with the world, rather than trying to change their gender identity. She believes not only are there several ethical and philosophical questions in pigeon-holing children into two narrow categories, but that usually it's already too late.

In extreme cases, the girlish boy will become the adult transsexual. In several studies where feminine boys were re-examined in their early 20s, 60 to 70 per cent were homosexual, 20 to 30 per cent were heterosexual and only a few were either transvestite or transsexuals.

A recent study in the Netherlands estimated the number of adult transsexuals to be one in 11,000 men and one in 30,400 women.

No one really knows if gender identity disorders are biological or environmental. Newman believes it's likely to be a combination of both. She says it's "very hard to explain the whole thing in psychological terms if it starts sometimes as young as two years old".

Associate professor Gary Warner, director of endocrinology and diabetes at the Royal Children's Hospital, and a specialist in intersex births, says adults born with ambiguous genitalia often face identification problems. He says that if you are uncertain about your gender identity, it affects relationships. "For a lot of adults

with intersexed disorders, it's very common for them to wonder who they are, not just 'what sex am I?', but 'whom am I?'

Melbourne writer Jennifer Spry, 52, prefers the term "transgendered" to "transsexual", as she feels it is not her sex or sexuality that has been changed, but her gender.

Jennifer's walk is slow, bouncy and blokey. She has tinted red hair and good skin. She dresses elegantly, with not a crease in her fitted black suit. Construction workers take a perverse, but she doesn't flinch. As she speaks, she slouches over with a hand on her knee like a football player, then daintily sips on her cafe latte like a real lady. Her lipstick smudges and stains the glass.

"I've always tried to be totally mediocre and totally unnoticeable,"

she says. Her voice is deep. "As a child, you're not going to do anything that gets you into trouble... if you don't get noticed, you're not expected to do anything."

A neighbor once told Spry she had beautiful hair and it should be

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DR LOUISE NEWMAN

on a girl. She says she wanted so much to say: "I am a girl, why can't anyone see it?"

The little boy Peter knows he wants to grow up to be a bride and a wife and marry a man. He already sees himself as having sex-change surgery and becoming a girl. His psychiatrist says it is very unusual that, at six, he already

knows about this surgery. When Peter told the children at school that he was in love with an older boy, they were bewildered.

Newman says boys such as Peter don't identify themselves as male and, therefore, don't think of

themselves as homosexual, but rather as a heterosexual woman.

When asked what made her feel like she wanted to be a girl, Spry throws the question back. Imagine, she says, being in the body of the opposite sex. Going home with short hair and telling the family: "That's it. Today, I'm going to be a boy."

Spry wasn't able to talk openly

to her father until she was in her 40s, when her mother had already passed away. After a 20-minute discussion over the dining-room table, her father said to her: "I can handle that. It's not as if you're going to be wearing a dress, are you?"

At first, she was shocked. Now she sees it as a response based on ignorance. She later wrote him a very personal letter, going into detail about her childhood and relationships with family members. He photocopied it and circulated it to all her friends and family. His reason for doing so, Spry says, was to show everyone how "crazy" she was. Later, he told her that she was no longer his child.

Her sisters no longer speak to her. One said her transformation caused nothing but disruption and pain, and says she still expects to

see "John" walk through the door. Spry grew up in the 1950s, when there was no option of being "transgendered".

She remained in the closet during her childhood and adolescence. The only chance she had of expressing herself was through cross-dressing when the house was empty. At the time, her mother was the only one who knew. She responded by going into denial. Jennifer says "the stigma to be found out to be gay was huge... transsexual wasn't even discovered as a topic".

There is now more public knowledge about gender issues: popular women's magazines have articles about people who have changed sex, movies (such as the 1996 release *Max Veen Rose*, or the 1998 release *Transsexual*, and more mainstream, Australian hit, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) contain transsexuals, cross-dressing and raise gender identity questions.

Melbourne psychoanalyst David Pereira suggests "there's more awareness about the notion of sexuality... it is more spoken about in various media. Part of that is, frankly, pornographic, which is to do with the visibility of the body... and some of it is the reclamation of erotic literature". But he believes we still live in a conservative political era, where not all people are as accepting as others.

Spry says if she was a kid growing up now, things would be different. "Society has changed so much... there are young boys walking through the city with a kilt or a skirt on."

Even though times are different, children still tend to be cruel. Peter suffers from chronic depression. At school he is aggressive. He kicks, punches, bites, pulls other kids' hair and breaks their things. He hates school because he doesn't fit in, the other kids like to call him "faggot". He has no friends and is only ever invited to family parties.

He gets angry when his mother stops him from dressing up and blames his psychiatrist when she tells him it's not appropriate. His parents are worried about his future; the fact that he already wants a sex change.

When kids are separated into boys' and girls' lines at school, Peter cannot help but feel different.

Newman says she tells parents not to punish their child for their

transsexual identity, but to protect them against victimisation. A boy who wants to put on his mother's bra underneath his school shirt needs to be told that all children who go to school wear appropriate school uniforms.

It is important, she says, not to try to modify behavior into something we call "normal". She tries to broaden their interests at school and in play, so they are not so stereotyped. There are times when it's more appropriate to express cross-gender identification and times when it's not. If they are left alone and allowed to fully express themselves, they will continue to face alienation and be ostracised, she says.

Spry remembers only one dream from childhood. Her compelling memoir, *Orlando's Sleep*, is about that dream. She knew that, like Virginia Woolf's character Orlando, one day she would simply wake up as a woman. Her choice came one day when she was sitting on the edge of the road, deciding whether she'd step in front of the truck or do what she wanted. She decided she'd do what she wanted.

She says she feels sorry for a little boy wanting to be the opposite sex in the '90s, because there's still such a stigma. "When you see someone who's so obviously going to have a gender problem, well, I just don't know what's ahead of them."

Some names have been changed to protect privacy. *Orlando's Sleep* (New Victoria Press, \$22.95) is available at Hares and Hyenas Bookshop, Collingwood and South Yarra.

JIM PAVLIDIS

Crossing the great divide

MONEY

Clothes maketh the woman... poorer

By JOCELYN EASTWAY

There's nothing wrong with trying to look smart in the workplace. In fact, good personal grooming can be a big plus if you're going for a new job or a promotion. However, research by Macquarie Investment Management Ltd (MIML) suggests some people — particularly women — are spending more than they need to on personal appearance and, as a result, are missing out on huge opportunities to build wealth.

The MIML research shows an ambitious woman earning \$40,000 a year — about average annual earnings — spends \$4948 a year maintaining her appearance and wardrobe, compared with \$2665 for a big-spending male on the same salary.

If the woman cut her spending to the man's level, she would have an extra \$2283 in her pocket at the end of each year.

If you invested this amount annually for

(Earnings from the non-super investment are taxed at your marginal rate of tax. Earnings from super are taxed at 15 per cent.)

Robyn FitzRoy, a division director at MIML, says women need to spend far more than men to look professional in the workplace.

"But, sometimes, they may take that too far," she says. "That money could be put aside for investment."

FitzRoy says there's a pressing need for women to invest in their financial future, rather than spending all their money on looking good.

"This (research) comes from a strong belief that women are spending too much on their image and it's not going to be returned," FitzRoy says.

"You don't have to spend quite as much... and even small amounts (of savings) make a big difference over time."

The MIML research focused on white-

women in maintaining their appearance and wardrobe. (It is assumed people have a basic working wardrobe to begin with.)

The cost of wardrobe items is based on an estimated average over three years. People on higher incomes are assumed to spend more time, and money, on work-related activities.

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ROBYN FITZROY

"Men and women in the small-spender categories are maintaining a reasonable standard of personal presentation and differences in levels of spending between the sexes," the survey says.

If, for example, your basic wardrobe is in neutral colors, it is a lot easier to mix and match scarves and shirts to produce several different outfits. And if you buy quality items to begin with, they are likely to last a lot longer.

"Keep your ego out of it, be disciplined and shop smartly," she advises.

"In the end, it can work in women's favor that they don't appear to be concentrating too much on clothes, which can appear to be somewhat frivolous."

Vivienne James, executive vice-president at Bankers Trust, says new clothes — unlike food, transport and shelter — are not an essential item. And, with a bit of thought, it's not that hard to cut back your spending in this area.

In *The Woman's Money Book*, James offers a few tips on "cutting your coat to fit the cloth".

James says it's all a matter of getting

