

Experimenting with gender is perhaps most dramatically on display in the rare cases of ablated penis — where the penis of a physically and genetically male infant boy is irreparably damaged in a botched circumcision.

Two case studies, both involving boys who were turned into girls, may help explain parenting gender conundrums. One made headlines and ended as a failed “experiment.” The other embraced what she had become.

DAVID REIMER was 21 months old when he was surgically reassigned to be a female. He was 38 when he died in 2004 from a self-inflicted shotgun blast. In between was a life of constant struggles — with his sexuality and depression.

Reimer and an identical twin brother were born in Winnipeg in 1965. The accidental burning of his penis sent him on a path that took his parents to Johns Hopkins Hospital and a controversial doctor.

Using criteria established to guide doctors dealing with infants born with intersex conditions, the late Dr. John Money decided it best that Reimer should be made a girl.

David became Brenda.

A follow-up study by Money found Brenda, although tomboyish, living as a girl at the age of 9. The doctor concluded that nurture had trumped nature.

“Her behaviour is so normally that of an active little girl, and so clearly different by contrast from the boyish ways of her twin brother that it offers nothing to stimulate one’s conjectures,” Money wrote in a 1975 scientific paper.

His conclusion was, at best, premature. Curiously, he stopped writing about Brenda.

Subsequent studies by peers revealed Brenda to be struggling with her assigned female identity. At the age of 14 she rejected the sex reassignment.

There was surgery to remove breasts. Brenda became David again.

David had always been attracted to women and at the age of 25 married one, adopting her children.

He also went public.

As detailed by writer John Colapinto in an article for *Rolling Stone* and later in a book that saw profits split with Reimer, Reimer became one of the most famous patients in medicine.

His was the first infant sex reassignment done on a developmentally normal male. In a piece in *Slate*, published after Reimer’s suicide, Colapinto wrote that Reimer could never forget his “nightmare childhood.” As Brenda, he rejected female clothing, wouldn’t play with dolls and beat up his brother and complained in school that he felt like a boy.

At 14, a psychiatrist persuaded Reimer’s parents that Brenda should be told the truth. “Suddenly it all made sense why I felt the way I did. I wasn’t some sort of weirdo,” Reimer later told Colapinto.

Life remained a struggle, however. Reimer’s brother died of an overdose of antidepressants. Depression ran deep in the family, and Reimer himself sank deep. His marriage was in trouble and, in May 2004, he killed him-

self.

PATIENT TWO is alluded to in one of Money’s papers and more fully explored in follow-up assessments in a paper written by Toronto researchers and published in the July 1998, issue of *Pediatrics*.

Once again, an ablated penis in a botched circumcision led to a decision to reassign sex in an otherwise developmentally normal male baby boy — a 46-chromosome XY.

This time, however, the botched surgery happened at two months and the reassignment surgery began at 7 months, much earlier than David Reimer’s first surgery.

Once again, the surgery was done at Johns Hopkins, where he was admitted as a female. Patient Two started female hormone treatment at the age of 11 and, wondering if something was wrong with her, was told of the botched circumcision.

By 16, she knew her genitalia were different but didn’t voice any worries over gender identity.

She was a girl.

She had two surgeries to make her vagina suitable for sex.

At 26, she was in a relationship with a man but told researchers that she found women more physically attractive than men. She reported three sexual relationships with women. She remarked that male genitals looked “funny” but said she was attracted to clothed men.

Outwardly, she was perceived as a female and met a male partner. That did not last, however, and by the time the review of her case was published, she was living with a woman.

She described herself as bisexual, and said she never had feelings that she should be male.

Researchers noted that more study was needed to determine how best to deal with traumatic loss of penis in infancy, but concluded that in this case, “the experiment of nurture was successful” and the “most plausible explanation” was that the sex change began so early.

Nature

VS.

Nurture

excerpted from

Toronto

Star

MAY 27, 2011



Four-month-old Storm is being raised by parents Kathy Witterick, 38, and David Stocker, 39, to be genderless.