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## Introduction: Delicate Moments

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## INTRODUCTION

**gail boldt**

When my son was three years old, he asked for and received a Barbie as a gift. I have a videotape of him on the day he received the Barbie, lovingly brushing her hair, and I remember feeling good, at that moment, about the success of my feminist child-rearing project. What I don't have on tape is the play that began with Barbie a few months later. If I did, the video would show him running around our apartment, holding Barbie with her body bent at the waist at about a ninety-degree angle. Barbie would be in his right hand, and, arm extended, he would be yelling "Bang! Bang!" as he jabbed her well-coifed and apparently fully-loaded and deadly hair at me, the fish tank, a chair, the television, or any number of other real or imaginary enemies. Barbie became the toy gun I refused to buy for him. Once Barbie took on this important role, my son discovered that many things could serve as a gun. Toast could be eaten into the "L" shape of a gun, or paper could be similarly crumpled and bent. Metal kitchen utensils made a particularly satisfying noise if he whacked them against a hard surface while yelling "Pow!" I can only imagine how he used blocks, Duplos, and sticks, and envision the fate of classmates, teachers, and small animals, when he was at daycare.

By the time I noticed my son a year later feeding Barbie's hands and feet to our dog, confidence in my project of feminist parenting, at least as I had conceptualized it until then, was thoroughly eroded. It's not that I suddenly took an "It's all biology" stance. Having spent the previous ten years working with colleagues in early childhood education to critique concepts of the "natural child" or of "natural gender or sexuality," I continued to find the appeal to "natural" gender development to be entirely inadequate. Rather, much as Amy Bauman describes in *Delicate Moments: Kids Talk About Socially Complicated Issues*, these experiences with my child set me on a trajectory that has defined my work since that time. Like Bauman, my work now reflects a desire to talk more effectively with children about identity and to understand the emotionally complicated ways that our iden-

tities as gendered and sexed people structure our experiences, our perceptions, our desires, and our dreams at the very core of our being.

At some point, then, my understanding of who I should be in relation to my son and to the children with whom I worked changed. I had spent years as an early childhood and elementary classroom teacher and researcher working to intervene in and correct children's behaviors and beliefs about gender. As I moved away from my own belief in the efficacy of intervention and correction, I began to talk and listen to children more carefully, as well as to explore my own gendered history. I began to see that children grasp things about how identity works in their own social worlds that I did not understand. I began to see that children's uses of gender are in many cases no different than adults'. Children and adults identify with and perform gender as part of pleasure and desire, shared meaning, and frames for making decisions. I realized that social acceptance often hinges on the ability to adapt certain gendered and sexed identities, and that children truly love and depend upon people and communities whose perspectives are different than my own. I also acknowledged how resentful I would feel if someone else were to look at my life, organizing my desires, experiences, and behaviors into opposing pairs pro- or anti-feminist, good or bad.

In *Delicate Moments*, Bauman offers a thoughtful analysis of the failures and insights she experienced as she worked with a group of primarily white and privileged adolescents at a progressive school. Bauman held discussions with students to explore how they understood and experienced race and identity—their own and that of others. While she encountered students who were willing to take her into their worlds, her efforts fell flat when her questions turned out to be about their experiences of race and class. In response to such questions, Bauman received, on the whole, confusion, a few stories that distanced the teller from the events, and queries about whether this was “what she wanted.”

It is at this point that Bauman started over again. This time she attempted to enter into the world that the children wanted her to experience. She invited them to spend the next three months creating multi-media self-portraits, and along with this work, to talk with her and with each other about their lives. It was only after building trusting relationships over a long period of time that the stu-

dents began to feel their way toward telling themselves, Bauman, and one another all the things that they already knew about race and privilege, about their doubts and discomforts, and about the things for which they hoped.

Bauman went into her project expecting to affirm what she already believed about progressive and critical pedagogy, the nature of privileged identities, and her own work as a teacher and a researcher. In this essay we see her instead having the wisdom and grace to allow herself to be educated. What she finds is that when we ask children to talk about race, gender, class, and sexuality, we are “asking them to unpack the most intimate of their stories” in an environment in which they are unable to control either who their audience is or the uses that will be made of their words. Further, she finds that the students in some ways understand more than many adults around them seem to recognize: that omissions, exclusions, slurs, and misrepresentations do not exist only outside the walls of their progressive school but rather are part of the integral structure of a white middle class culture that “equated community with niceness and comfort” and that encouraged the students to believe that silence about racial issues indicates a lack of bias.

Thinking back to my son and his bazooka Barbie, I am grateful that he persisted in asserting his right to interpret and narrate his own world. Sometimes feeling ethical—demanding that the children in our care conform to and perform our vision of progressive worlds and interests—is far easier than being ethical. I believe that being ethical means forging compassionate and respectful relationships that allow for an exchange of ideas that may cause one or both parties to change. Ultimately, we must grant the other the right to name identifications and attachments different than our own or those we would choose for them.

In the end, Bauman does not give up on the desire to work with children in a way that will lead to critical understandings of race and culture. She learns, however, that their revelations can be slow in coming and difficult to make. They require a relationship in which honesty and respect move among students and between students and teachers or researchers. Just as important, this work requires a deep understanding that politics do not lie somewhere outside ourselves. Politics lie within us and are expressed through the mundane, day-to-day stories we tell about our hopes, desires, and fears. To ask kids to narrate their lives is not necessar-

ily to fall into some sort of apolitical and individualistic feel-good curriculum. Rather, it has the potential to be the most critical step in helping us to understand how the pleasures and abuses of identity and privilege are the stuff of all of our lives.