

**UFYB 315: Gender Exploration for Everyone:  
A Conversation with Rae McDaniel Author of Gender Magic**



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**With Your Host**

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## **UFYB 315: Gender Exploration for Everyone: A Conversation with Rae McDaniel Author of Gender Magic**

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my chickens. I am super excited for this conversation today with, I'm going to call one of my internet friend acquaintances, an internet acquaintance with whom I have a friendly rapport. We are here with Rae McDaniel who has an incredible book out called *Gender Magic*, which is such a good title as somebody who just went through the titling process for my book. I am newly impressed when people have very good book titles because I know what that took.

Rae: Thank you. Yes, it was many iterations.

Kara: Oh, my God. We had one in our proposal, it took many iterations and then between the buying of the book and the writing of the book, some QVC star sold three million copies of a book with the same title, who I'd never even heard of. But then we had to change the title. So we had to do the whole thing all over again but with 12 more cooks in the kitchen, the editor and the publisher. So *Gender Magic* is so good. Alright, so we're going to talk about a whole bunch of stuff.

We're going to talk about gender identity, gender transition, cognitive reframing, somatics. So many good buzzwords. But tell us a little bit about you, what you do and kind of how this book came to be. So everybody gets to know you.

Rae: Absolutely. My name is Ray McDaniel. And yes, super excited to be here. Definitely internet friend, acquaintances. So I am a gender and sex therapist coach and speaker based out of Chicago. I run and own a large queer centered group therapy practice here in Chicago called *Practical Audacity*. I also just wrote and it came out with my first book, *Gender*

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*Magic*, which we're going to dig into all the juicy stuff about today. And I'm also a transgender diversity and inclusion educator and keynote speaker. So I do a little bit of all the things.

Kara: *Practical Audacity*, also a very good title, a very good naming convention, so I appreciate that.

Rae: Thank you, I appreciate that.

Kara: So in your book you talk about something that I just want to start with this element that applies super broadly, which is the importance of moving towards one thing as opposed to trying to get away from something else. And I certainly coach on this a lot around actually a lot of self-development work of not trying to get, the way I am is bad and I need to get away from it as opposed to who am I trying to become. But I'd love to hear kind of your thoughts on that concept and how this comes up in your specific work.

Rae: Absolutely. So I love this intersection of our work. I've consumed a lot of your content as well. And I was introduced to this concept through *Burnout* by Emily and Amelia Nagoski. And they talk about a study in this book, they call it the owl and the cheese study. And I love it because it involves cheese, so that's always great.

Kara: You're not going to forget, the term, the owl and the cheese. That's really going to stick with you.

Rae: No, definitely not. So what they did is they put two groups of people in a study. One of them had, it's a maze, a coloring sheet sort of maze. And they had to get a mouse through the maze. One group of participants had cheese at the end, that the mouse was getting too. You had to run towards the cheese. The other one had this big scary owl at the edge of the page that was chasing the mouse through the maze. And what they found was

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that the participants who had the maze with the cheese got through the maze faster and with less distress.

So what does that tell us? It tells us, when our brain is focused on our destination and a positive vision for what is our future, it's much easier to handle challenges as they come like the maze. So it literally activates a different part of your brain, which I'm sure your listeners are very familiar with the prefrontal cortex. And it's the part of our brain that helps us make decisions from a much more grounded place.

It is the part of our brain that can be curious, that can be playful, that can be open to possibility versus the part of our brain that's in survival mode, that's running away from something. That it's only concern is must survive to the end of this maze, which is a very, very different energy. And it's a very different decision making part of our brain. The decisions are snap. They are very limbic. And it just makes everything a little bit harder.

And when it comes to gender, so much of the conversation has focused on, well, we're moving away from suffering. That really suffering is at the very, very center of our current narrative about gender exploration and certainly gender transition. And I became very curious in my work of, well, what happens if we shift that focus? If we reframe that to what we are moving towards, to what is the life that we are trying to create? And how does that give us new tools to be able to navigate questions of gender for everybody?

Kara: There's so many rich threads in there that I want to pull on. So I'm trying to organize my brain. I think one of the things that's so powerful about moving towards something. When you're moving away from something, you're defining the whole exercise by the thing you're moving away from. So your only goal is to get away from that thing.

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And I see this, you can be coaching somebody about their business and if what their thought is, is I'm bad at selling or something or I'm not good at this thing. I'm trying to get away from that. The whole conversation is framed in the terms of the thing that you think you're bad at or the thing that you think is the threat. And I love that point you made that when we have a positive purpose, a positive mission, challenges can be empowering. As opposed to also when you are running from something you're already in this mindset of I'm beset and in danger, and so challenges are just adding on to that.

I'm even more of a kind of victim now. I'm even more sort of in danger. It builds on itself. So something you just said I think is so interesting is this sort of because it's of course, not just in gender exploration, you think about feminism, other social justice movements that focus on oppression and suffering is the justification for our cause. What do you think is going on there? Is it because that's what we think is the validation we need for seeking more freedom, why are we stuck on that?

Rae: It's really interesting. I think part of it is so many of these movements, whether it's feminism or anti-racism or thinking about expanding our understanding of gender. The first step is always to acknowledge that there's a problem. So that makes sense as a first place to start. Hey, there is inequality here. There is something wrong with the way that we are thinking about this thing or how we are existing in the world that is hurting people, valid, great place to start. We can't ignore that.

I think our problem though is that we don't get to those next steps of and what does freedom look like? What does liberation look like? What is this world that we are trying to create? And I think part of the reason we get stuck there too is that a lot of us are coming from backgrounds that we've had really hard stuff happen. We have had traumatic experiences and it is easy for our brain and our body to get stuck in that place.

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But I think we're really missing out on doing the journey better, doing the journey with more connection and pleasure and joy. If we're also able to hold with the hard stuff, with acknowledging these systems are really tough that we live in and they are very valid. And what is the world that we are trying to create? And who are we personally trying to be in that world?

Kara: Yeah, it almost seems like it's part of the lifecycle of a movement. I'm just thinking about this with Judaism, where sort of, I mean, there's these sort of waves where there will be sort of a genocide event and then it's over. And then in the aftermath right away, the sort of bond is that trauma bond of this suffering and danger etc. But then as you get further out from that event and people of my generation, certainly in the next generation don't identify with that, it doesn't feel real to them.

And if the whole group identity is built around that suffering and oppression and discrimination, I mean I think you see this in a lot of religions right now, but Judaism too that if people don't connect to that. Then people don't have some positive basis to connect to the movement or to connect to the identity with until of course we go through it again. But yeah, so interesting. So how do you think, I'd actually love to hear. How do you define gender freedom?

It's something you talk about, how do we know if we're experiencing gender freedom or what is that vision that we're moving towards?

Rae: Yeah. Well, I think I define it like any sort of definition of freedom, which is when we feel like we have the choice and the power to be ourselves in the world. So gender freedom is about feeling like we have the efficacy, the power, the choice to be able to exist in our bodies and in the world in the most authentic representation of us. And what is great about that definition and why I like to center the discussion around gender freedom versus gender transition is because gender freedom is something that applies to all of us.

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We've all been greatly, greatly influenced by gender and all of the expectations and roles that our culture and society has put on that. And it is a part of self-growth for all of us to explore. What does that mean for us, is the 'manual' that we were given at birth and really even before birth, is that something that actually resonates with us? And I would say in 99.99 cases, it doesn't, at least not all of it.

Kara: Because all of it is a hyper kind of stereotype. All the full manual's like Barbie. So it's not something that is a person. I love the idea of freedom also because it has that connotation of, it's a way of being rather than a destination. Something that, the transition is if you were one, now you're another. You're doing a thing, and then it's over and you're there.

It opens up the rest of your life is a playground during which you might cycle through different kinds of relationships to your identity or to how you present or to how you operate or to how you live in your body. It feels more like something that's always in process in some way. And it doesn't reify that kind of essentialism of there's fixed points on the gender spectrum, you can transition from one to the other. But this is a 360, which is really beautiful.

Rae: Yeah, exactly. My work really focuses on process and the journey.

Kara: Shocking for a therapist and a coach, I mean, you wouldn't think that.

Rae: Shocking. Wild, I know. But I talk so much in my work about the fact that it is the journey that is the destination. That gender transition, that phrase we often put a period at the end of it. But we never ask ourselves, well, what are we transitioning to? And to bring it back to my language of gender freedom. Another reason I love the term freedom is that it's always freedom to. Freedom is not the end of a sentence, it's the beginning of something. And so I like to think about gender exploration and gender



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freedom as something that is the beginning of us being able to exist in the world as ourselves.

And then what happens? How do we show up to our relationships, to our lives, to our careers, to our hobbies, to the things that we love and the people that we love differently? When we get to do that as the most authentic version of ourselves in that moment, I hope that today the authentic version of me is not the most authentic version of me in 10 years. I want to always be evolving and growing. And that takes so much of the pressure off of exploring gender to end at this kind of so called point B if it's always something that we're growing more into, just like you said.

Kara: Yeah. I mean that's how I talk about self-development. People think I'm supposed to have figured it all out. Whatever it is I'm like, "You want to be done learning things from now until you die? You're just going to spend 40 years being like well, I perfected myself and now I'm just like, what am I doing here?"

Rae: Yeah. I'm now self-actualized.

Kara: Yeah. Now I just sit on a cloud and it's perfect. The way you're talking about freedom too, it sort of comes back to what we talked about at the beginning. It's the difference between freedom to versus freedom from. It's not just getting away from something. It's the freedom to experiment or play in the way that you're talking about the kind of the traps people can fall into in thinking about their gender transition.

I mean, so much of this echoes the way people think about kind of a lot of milestones or achievements or transitions in their life of, well, once that thing happens, once I become that person, once I'm married then I'm going to be this totally different person. Everything's going to be completely different. I'm going to not have my brain. I'm going to not experience the human condition.



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Or it's the stop as opposed to, I mean if we put as much emphasis on what is it like to be married and what kind of relationship you want as we put on what is it like to have your wedding in the way we socialize women, getting to that day. I think there's something there that shows up in so many different areas of our lives of when I just finish this thing or get to that point. That is a period. And then we're like, "Wait, fuck what? Now I'm here, now what?"

Rae: And I think that connects to this idea of success like you're saying. We socialize women to have a wedding, wedding period and now you are a success. You have gotten married.

Kara: Right. Good luck with that whole having a relationship with another person for a long time thing. You're on your own.

Rae: Yes, exactly. And same thing when it comes to gender exploration. A lot of folks who come in to talk to me will view success as I'm going to get to this point to be whatever that is. And then all my mental health struggles will go away. I'll have a different brain like you said. Everybody in my life, including the grocery store clerk and the stranger on the street is going to gender me correctly and see my whole self all the time. And I'm like, "What's this person do you know that lives in that world because I would love to meet them?" I don't know anybody.

But when we frame success as you get the privilege to walk around in the world as you. That is success. You get a chance to explore yourself, to figure out what it means to show up in the world as your authentic self. That's amazing. And your worth and your validity is not determined by a grocery store clerk who might gender you incorrectly.

And yes, it's absolutely important to have people around us who lift us up, who see us for who we are. But those people are available no matter what you look like, no matter where you are in the journey. And it's certainly not

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the stranger on the street, that is not going to think about you when they go home at night.

Kara: Yeah, I mean so much I feel of coaching work is whose opinion are we going to care about here? Whose opinion are we going to focus our lives on trying to persuade? And it is so ironic that it's often the person who knows the least about us and cares about us the least, how are they reading us? What do they think of us? So I know you use both kind of the cognitive and somatic practices or techniques that people can use as they're starting this exploration and it's obviously a huge topic.

But I would love to hear, I guess at a broader level, how you see those two different types of techniques working with gender? Which is something that is obviously both mental and somatic, both how you see and understand yourself and then also how you feel in your body. And that kind of reintegration, that can be really difficult if you felt alienated from your body.

Rae: Absolutely. I think like any sort of self-growth work, it's always got to be both. We live in our skin, we hold memories in our body. We hold reactions there. And our brains are incredibly powerful in dictating how we experience the world. And it's no different with gender exploration. So I do a lot of work around reframing, around cognitive restructuring, shifting mindsets. And those are absolutely essential. And I've named some of them. The gender exploration and transition as self-growth is a really big one, moving towards versus away, getting into a mindset of self-efficacy and doing the thing.

And then also the body work. I am a sex therapist by trade and I became a sex therapist because number one, I had struggles with my own body that were both related and unrelated to gender. I had a pelvic pain disorder when I was young. And so I knew what it was like to not feel connected to my body, both just generally and also when it came to intimacy and to sex.

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And every single client that I had who was exploring gender also talked to me about sex and their body.

And we obviously kind of know the narrative of folks who are exploring gender, have gender dysphoria and often have a hard time with either feeling connected to their body as a whole or feeling connected to certain parts of their body or feeling a lot of mixed feelings about that. So any bit of work that I was doing kept coming back to the body. So I went back to school and got trained on it so that I could actually help folks move through that.

And one of the biggest things that I took away from that training and that I share in my work is the importance of pleasure and the importance of sensuality. So whether or not you want sex to be a part of that journey, your body is going along with you no matter what. So even if you are not feeling amazing in your body, even if there are parts of yourself that you don't love, we can always show our body respect. And we can use it as a way to tap into our yes.

If we're thinking, going back to what we're moving towards, one of the biggest clues of this is a good thing is that gut yes. And listeners, you can't see me, but I'm pointing to my gut because I think most people know that feeling when you're like, "Oh, yeah, fuck yeah, that. That thing." But it's really hard to do that if we don't feel connected to our body. So pleasure is a way into getting connected to our five senses literally sensuality. That's what that means as a way to give us this yes, to understand what that feels like in our body, which gives us a compass for where we are moving towards.

Kara: I mean I coach obviously people mostly who are socialized as women or are women. And I think especially if you have lifelong socialization as a woman, that pleasure is so fraught. And you're so disconnected from it as you're saying, most people know that. Yes, and I

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have coached so many women who would be like, “I have a gut, I don’t know what’s down there. What I have is my mother’s voice and my teacher’s voice and the voice of Cosmo Magazine and I have all these voices.”

But that is why that reestablishing that connection to the body is so crucial, because when you’re up in your head, you just have all the programming and all the conflicting opinions. And of course, people socialized as women especially are socialized to not trust their own judgment and not trust their own discernment and not think they have any idea what’s going on. And so the voice in your head of your third grade teacher becomes more powerful than that little gut voice that you have to reconnect to.

So if somebody was listening to this and they’re very beginning of their gender exploration journey, maybe has not even really thought about it before. Maybe has had just the slightest inkling that something feels like maybe, but they have not really dived in, in any way. Is there a particular kind of practice that you would recommend that somebody can use to just start even asking themselves a question that might be helpful or starting to probably open that box a little bit if they feel maybe there’s something there?

Rae: Yes, it really dovetails off what we were just talking about is that pleasure and that gut yes and that tapping into curiosity. So I’ve found that a lot of people come to me and they have a big question. Am I trans? This huge, big question. And it’s often way too big of a question. So if somebody is just starting out and there’s just this little tickle in the back of their head that hey, maybe I need to think about gender a little bit. A great place to start is, what do you know for sure now about what makes you feel good? And it doesn’t even have to relate to gender.

We’re building that muscle to figure out or to tap back into our intuition like you’re saying and figure out what is that yes? So maybe the thing that you

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know for sure is that you really like it when you wear a certain blouse that feels a certain way on your body. Cool, that's a great piece of information. I've had people who have had that tickle about, hey, I went to Starbucks and they used a gender neutral pronoun for me and that felt good.

Or, hey, I'm going to play with using a different name with just this really tight knit group of my friends and just see how that feels or even stick it on a Grubhub bag or whatever it may be. It's about how can I take that little tickle of does this make me feel more like myself and more free? And start to dive down that road. So it's just these tiny, tiny, tiny, little steps. What is the easiest, tiniest step that you can take towards something that you are curious about when it comes to your gender?

Maybe it's buying a few pairs of clothing from a section of the store that you don't normally, online, and having them delivered to your house. Maybe it is watching a show or reading a book that has a gender diverse character. And seeing if there are parts of that that your body is responding to. So how can you start getting curious and playful and experimenting in these tiny non-pressured ways?

Kara: Yeah, I love that, especially that sort of the technique of being, maybe all you know is you like chocolate ice-cream. You know what it feels like to like one flavor versus another. That's a yes. How can you look for that same feeling of certainty or pull or attraction in other areas?

Rae: I wouldn't even say certainty, because a lot of folks are searching for certainty. And if we view this as this is about a journey and not a destination, it's not about certainty. It's about what makes me feel half an inch closer to more like myself, to more free instead of searching for yes, I definitely like chocolate and that's the only flavor that I like.

Kara: No, that is a good correction/adjustment. I mean I think for a lot of women, people socialized as women hearing, move closer towards who

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you are. I think their response is, I have no idea who I am. I don't even know what I like. And that's that big picture question. Similarly if I have somebody come in that's like, "Well, I don't even know what I like." I'm like, "I don't know either, but I guess we're going to have to figure it out piece by piece." We're not going to figure it out cognitively up here and unlock the real you that's going to pop out of a shell.

You're going to have to try a bunch of things and see how you feel. And then see what you're thinking that's making you feel that. You're going to have to go through these iterations. But I also think anybody listening to this, even if you're listening to this and you're like, "I really don't have even a little whisper in the back of my mind about", even if you're comfortable in your gender, kind of assigned gender and gender identity. Still that same practice because the way you've been socialized, what you've been taught it is to be a certain gender is such an extreme.

It's such a version of drag in its own way to do that even for yourself. Maybe you were assigned female at birth and you're completely comfortable as a woman and you feel like it's this woman. And also you kind of hate wearing heels, but you wear them to bridal showers because you know that you think your friends would judge you if you didn't, whatever it is. The way that you are, maybe you don't like the kinds of sex that you think you're supposed to like.

Or you want to watch a kind of porn that you think maybe you're not supposed to watch or you don't, whatever it is. That practice I think is so valuable to anybody, regardless of whether, you may not be having any question about your kind of big picture gender identity. But your small picture gender identity of even how do you navigate what you're socialized with, in the gender you have is still so useful.

Rae: Absolutely. And I view it too, it kind of in the conversation like we're talking about, compulsory monogamy. There's nothing wrong with

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monogamy at all. The problem is when we don't think there's any other choice and we don't actively choose it for ourselves. So when it comes to gender, I think about one of my editors for the book is a cisgender woman, a queer, bisexual woman, but cisgender. And she was going through the book and editing my stuff.

And she started asking herself the questions in the book and started thinking about it and getting curious about her own gender, as you would want to do when you spend months and months wanting to talk about gender. And I loved her conclusion, which was, I'm a super, super ciswoman. I have no doubt about that after going through these questions. And she started asking herself, well, am I dressing and presenting myself in a way that I want to?

And she's like, "Yeah, actually, I love wearing dresses. I love wearing heels." And it was such a moment of empowerment for her of saying, "Well, I'm going to buy more of the dresses that I like. I'm going to buy more of the heels. I have a new sense of self because I actually took the time to question it."

Kara: Yeah, that's so good. Okay, there's two things came off of that for me. One is monogamy is a perfect example where there's nothing wrong with monogamy. And also a lot of people are monogamous and never actually defined monogamy or talked to their partner about what monogamy actually means. And they have completely different definitions of it. So similarly, even if you're really sure you're monogamous, okay, what does that mean? Are you allowed to flirt? Are you allowed to make eyes across the room? Are you allowed to, whatever?

What is, allowed isn't the right word but what does monogamy mean to you, what is that? So all of these terms that we just take to be the default, of course mean 10 million different things to different people. And if we don't explore them, we aren't choosing them in the same way. And I think I



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can already hear the question that will come up from my listeners which is, but how do you know if you like dresses because you really like dresses or you're socialized to like dresses? And the answer is you don't fucking know, nobody knows.

Socialization also teaches you how to use the bathroom and not pee in the street all the time. We're not trying to get to completely de-socialize ourselves to some state of nature, but that's not the point. That's why using that as you've been talking about, that somatic practice of checking in is so important. Because we're not looking for the ultimate objective pre socialized truth of who your gender is, like it's the Rosetta Stone.

Rae: Yeah, which is impossible.

Kara: Right, impossible. But people with perfectionistic brains come to coaching and they learn about socialization or they learn about gender socialization. And then it's, okay, well, I have to undo it to get to the real me. But that's that same kind of essentialist thinking of there is that somehow real you that is static that we can uncover and then you have done it. As opposed to, you're engaging with your gender throughout your life, you're engaging with your body and your mind and it's just a constant conversation and relationship.

Rae: And instead of the question of do I like dresses because I was socialized to like dresses? The question becomes, do I like wearing this particular dress today in this weather? Which is a much easier question.

Kara: Yeah, totally. So good. So I want to talk a little bit about, we've sort of talked about people thinking about their own gender identity. But of course then there are people who are trying to figure out how to support and show up for people in their lives who are going through gender identity questions or are non-binary or are trans or whatever it is. So I'd love to hear kind of how you think in general, first, I mean, I think there's different categories.

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There's, if it's your friends versus it's your partner, versus it's your child. Do you have general advice or do you think it makes more sense to go kind of by category?

Rae: I have some general advice and then we can get into some of the other stuff if there's some remaining things. So number one, even though my work is really oriented towards what is the world that we are creating, who do you want to be in that world? We can't ignore our current political moment. We're in a rough spot for trans folks and for queer folks. And anybody who is looking to support trans people, the number one thing, get politically active. We really need your voice right now. We need you at the protest if you have the ability to do that.

We need you call in your law bankers. We need you doing the actions because it really, really matters right now. And there are places to help you with that, like the Transgender Law Center and Equality, blank, whatever your state is. It's equality at Illinois here. We have some really great things we can get involved with. The other thing which is great news for all of your listeners is that the basics go a really long way. It's low hanging fruit. Using someone's correct name and their correct pronouns and gendering them correctly, huge. Huge, huge, huge.

You are ahead of 90% of people and it's such a basic thing, but so appreciated. Another thing with language is to be mindful of the ways that we use language to gender things that don't need to be gendered. I'm thinking of greetings. We'll hear ladies and gentlemen a lot or things like that. When it's just as easy to say, "Hi everyone. Hi team. Hi, you all." And once you see this, you can't unsee it. But we gender a lot of absurd things really, really silly things like earplugs and pens and tea and Kleenex and silly things.

We do the same thing with our language. So just becoming aware of that is a big one. Another thing which is pretty low hanging fruit as well is actually

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getting to know some trans folks. So hopefully the people who are our listeners might have people in mind that they know. That they're partnered with, that are their kids. That's amazing. Don't let them be the only trans people you know. Get out there, fill your social media feed with trans people and trans content.

Go out of your way to read a book by a trans person, watch a show. Anything that is going to help you understand what that culture is like and what it's like to exist as a trans person. And then we can get into some of those specific questions if you have a specific way you wanted to go.

Kara: Yeah. I think talking about how parents can help. I mean, I think because the culture has changed, it's more common earlier in life for kids to express any kind of gender feelings they may have or different gender identities. And so I think that's a place where you get the generational transition happening from what it was like if you were raised 50 years ago and what your seven year old is growing up as now. And I think as anybody who's parented a young child knows, I can understand why people sometimes aren't sure.

My kid said once this thing, does that mean that they're or is that just my kid also, once said that they hated apples while they were eating them or that they were a dinosaur? Kids say a million things. And so how to approach something where parents, I feel, especially people who come for coaching are very well-intentioned and want to do it right. But aren't sure how to think about a young child expressing something. Are you looking for consistent expression of it? How can you encourage without sort of getting overly involved kind of in the kid's process basically, if that makes sense?

Rae: Yeah, absolutely makes sense. This is where the concept of gender exploration as a part of self-growth and identity development for everybody comes in really handy. So if we actually believe that gender exploration was a place of self-growth and development like any other part of identity

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development. I think we would treat young kids and even teenagers who are exploring gender a lot differently. In particular, we would celebrate it. And we would celebrate that they are curious about something to do with themselves, without necessarily putting a ton of pressure on it.

Kara: Yeah. You have to figure out which, I think that is that, if it's freedom and exploration, then it's freedom and exploration. And it's not, "My kid said this word, are they announcing they are this thing then I now have to decide if they are or not and proceed accordingly?"

Rae: Yeah. And that's a really, really big question. And gender is something that some people know very, very early on, a good solid core understanding of their own gender. And that's for cisgender folks and for trans folks. So a lot of kids will understand themselves and their gender pretty well by the time they're about three years old. And that's kind of across board. And we grow and change throughout our lifetime. So if a kid wants to, let's say someone who is assigned male at birth wants to wear a dress to school, does that mean that they're trans? Who knows.

Maybe they just want to wear the dress to school. So it's about being open to these possibilities of exploration. And encouraging that exploration without necessarily needing to name it unless your kid comes to you and says, "Hey, this is how I feel. This is who I am." And in the majority of cases, that is not going to involve any sort of permanent medical decisions for a long, long time.

There is room and space to play with names and pronouns and identities and ways of showing up in the world that are safe, that can be fun and playful. And that allows your kid to have that full breadth of I get to explore this part of my identity like any other part of my identity.

Kara: Yeah, I think that's so crucial. If your kid is like, "Maybe I want to be a fireman." You're not like, "Oh my God. Okay, are they a fireman or not? We

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have to know for sure, because then we have to decide how we're going to." It's, you're like, "Yeah, okay, let's talk about that. Let's go to a firehouse. Let's see the firemen." But I think that's sort of, as with so much in parenting, it's the anxiety comes from being like, "Oh, my God, there's a right or wrong way to do this and decision to make and if I do it wrong, I'm going to fuck it up, so I need to do it right."

It's that very fixed binary thinking, which are also then applying to gender. Whereas if you're able to see the whole thing as an exploration for the kid for you, the stakes are much lower.

Rae: Exactly. You don't have to decide with a capital D. We don't really put that on most other parts of identity development for kids and teenagers. And maybe they do know. And I don't want to minimize that. And maybe they're just exploring. And there is room and there is space and we don't need to panic. We just need to respect who they say they are.

Kara: Right. And I think part of what we're saying is if you aren't all up in your head about it, you'll hear the difference between a kid who is like, I'm curious about exploring, a kid who's like, listen, this is the wrong body. I'm very clear, this is not it. That's not my name, wrong. Versus you'll be able to hear and understand your kid better as always when you take your own kind of anxiety about doing it right out of the way.

Rae: Exactly. And you're also not alone in that hopefully. I always recommend that folks get a transforming therapist for both themselves and for their kid simply because it's helpful to have somebody to walk along that path with you and maybe you don't talk about transness the whole time. But making sure that whoever your support system is, is on the same page as you. As this is a part of exploration that we want to encourage, not push, but encourage as part of curiosity.

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Kara: It really connects so much to what I think so much of coaching, at least the way that I do it and therapy and all these practices are about which is releasing layers of the story you have. There's the world and then there's the stories that you have about the world. And releasing those stories more and more. What does it mean to have a kid who just says these words and does these things when you don't have a whole story about what that means? And you don't feel the need to define it and lock it down or react to it.

So beautiful. Is there anything you feel you were hoping I'd ask you or I should have asked you or something you really wanted to share that you didn't get to share?

Rae: Ooh, it's such a juicy question. The main thing I think I want to leave folks with is an invitation into a vision. A vision of a world where we all get to walk around as our most authentic selves, free from fear and free from shame. And I hope that everybody listening can agree that that is the world that we all want to live in. And gender is simply another lens, another way for us to get there. And so I invite people in to join me in that mission and in creating that world.

Kara: I love that. And for my perfectionist listeners, even if we're just 10% authentic now and we go to 20%, that's great too. Don't stay home until you're your perfect authentic self. Where can people find the book? It's everywhere. Go order the book, *Gender Magic*. Where can people find you if they'd like to be in touch with you more?

Rae: Instagram is a great hub, so you can find me on Instagram @theraemcdaniel. That's Rae R-A-E. You can find me at rae-mcdaniel.com. And you can find my practice in Chicago at practicalaudacity.com.

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