Talking to Kids About Gender Identity

Guest: Andrew Walker
From the series: God and the Transgender Debate (Day 3 of 3)
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Bob: In a day when new thinking, untethered from the Bible, about gender and sexuality is being celebrated in our culture, how does that affect us, as parents, and where we send our kids to school? We posed that question to Andrew Walker.

Andrew: There’s a range of opinions on what parents should do for their kids’ schooling. But what I’m going to say is this—if your kid is in public school, we are fast approaching a day where the very best thing a Christian parent can hope for in a public-school setting is that a teacher will not be actively hostile to that child’s view. Because it’s growing increasingly unlikely that that teacher can be affirming or supporting of your child’s view.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Wednesday, March 28th. Our host is Dennis Rainey; I'm Bob Lepine. We are living in a brave new world in many ways. How do we, as Christian parents, raise our children to live counter culturally in this world? We'll explore that today with Andrew Walker. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. When we were raising our children, I remember the big question that parents would have is: “When do you talk to your kids about the birds and the bees?” and “What do you do if your kids come home and they start asking questions about human reproduction before you’re ready to have that conversation?” Well, that almost seems laughable today; because the questions kids are coming home with in the second and third grade are less about the birds and the bees and more about basic gender issues.

Dennis: Bob, I just want to unashamedly give an advertisement for Passport2Purity® and also Passport2Identity™—two tools that FamilyLife® has produced for a mom and her daughter / a father and his son to take a weekend and to talk about the birds and the bees between the ages of 10 and 12 / 10 and 13. And then, when you get a child 14/15/16, talk about this issue of identity; because your teenager today will struggle with identity issues. Peer pressure is powerful—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —powerful for good but also powerful for not so good.
Bob: Well, and not just gender identity. I mean, what 15-year-old isn’t asking the question: “Who am I?” “What am I good at?” “How do I get people to like me?” “Where do I fit in this world?” There are all kinds of identity issues. Gender is one aspect of that, but Passport2Identity gets into the variety of gender issues: “What about your spiritual identity? What about your personality and who God made you to be there?” and “How do you use those things for kingdom purposes?” I'll just mention—if our listeners would like more information about either Passport2Purity or Passport2Identity, they can go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com, and all the information is there.

Dennis: I want to use that as a springboard to talk about “How do you prepare your children today to face the issue of transgender in school as they grow up?” Because they will experience this—not just in high school and junior high—but at earlier and earlier years.

Andrew Walker joins us again on FamilyLife Today. Andrew, thanks for coming back on a very thorny subject.

Andrew: It’s great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Dennis: Andrew has written a book called God and the Transgender Debate. I didn’t ask you on the first day, but why in the world did you tackle this subject? I mean, you’ve got a seven-year-old daughter and a three-year-old daughter. Why did you take this one on?

Andrew: Well, first off, because there’s virtually no other resource available for lay Christians—the Christians in the pews—who can grapple with the transgender issue in a clear, accessible—and I would say—deeply biblical way to handle and address the issue. I would say, also, as well, I’m really, really interested in these issues of—it’s a big theological term called Theological Anthropology—it’s a big fancy word—but anthropology is simply the study of: “What does it mean to be made in God’s image?” It’s kind of a doctrine of man.

I think a lot of the challenges that we’re facing in the church today are these issues around what it means to be a human. You look at issues of racism and abortion—reproductive technology issues. All of these questions are emanating back to the central question of: “Who is man?” “Who made man?” “Who is man accountable to?” When you look at the transgender issue, there is no issue more foundational to the question of “What is man?” and “What is woman?” than the transgender issue; because the transgender issue is seeking to kind of subvert and overturn a biblical ethic on biological sex and where gender comes from.

Dennis: Andrew—my wife Barbara and I are working on a book called The Art of Parenting. One of the fundamental principles or precepts of that book is that parents have to know what they believe the Bible teaches, increasingly around these issues, as we confront the culture. Because, if you’re going to guide your child—into elementary
school, into junior high, high school, and beyond—to adulthood, you need to know where you stand, as a follower of Christ, and what you believe. That doesn’t mean you have to be a theological anthropologist—[Laughter]—like you just described—but it does mean you have to have a construct,—

Andrew: Yes.

Dennis: —theologically, of what the Bible teaches around the major moral issues of our day.

Andrew: You are certainly right, because we are fast living in a day in America where America is kind of no longer propping up a Christian ethic on many issues at all. And unless Christians—and parents especially—are attentive to these issues, the culture will do the formation and the teaching for you. It’s really, really incumbent on parents to have to do some homework on these issues.

And that’s where this is particularly challenging—is because I grew up / I’m 32—I grew up in a culture that still kind of affirmed a basic biblical ethic of maleness and femaleness. Parents coming of age today are going to have to go deep on these issues, because the culture is no longer affirming and supporting what they might have grown up when they were children.

Bob: Yes; in previous generations, whatever case you were making was in alignment with the culture. Today, the case you’re making is out of alignment with the culture. So, you better have your understanding pretty clear; because you’re taking a contrary position, not a compatible position.

I want to know about the conversations you’ve had with your seven-year-old, who said. “Daddy, what’s your book about?” Daddy wrote a book called God and the Transgender Debate. Have you explained transgenderism to a seven-year-old?

Andrew: We have talked about the subject without me ever using the term, transgender.

Dennis: Okay; let’s hear how you did it, because I want to hear that conversation to a seven-year-old.

Andrew: Sure. What I think is really important right now is for my daughter, who is seven—she is beginning to come into her own understanding of femininity. What I want to do with my seven-year-old—very, very basic things. I want to affirm her femininity / affirm feminine instincts—and have conversations with your child and say: “You know what? Isn’t it neat how God made you a girl?”

I’m not using big convoluted terms like transgenderism with my seven-year-old. But what I’m beginning to do is just subtly work in conversations, where she’s beginning to
understand that how God made her matters, and it’s beautiful. It’s not something that we want to reject—or tamper with for that matter. I would just encourage parents—you don’t need to have a long 30-/45-minute conversation where you sit down and work through the terms with a seven-year-old around the issue of transgenderism. You’re just beginning to build the scaffolding for what a healthy feminine or healthy masculine identity looks like for a child at that age.

**Bob:** Some parents have had to deal with this a little more head-on when their child came home from school one day and learned that the teacher said that: “Susie—we’re now going to call Susie ‘Sammy.’ We need to be careful because Susie is not a girl anymore. Susie is becoming a boy.” And the kids have been like “What is that?” They come home: “Mom/Dad explain this to me.” So, if you’re that parent, what do you do in that context?

**Andrew:** And this is a live issue. I’ve had one of my closest friends text me about that very circumstance. He was basically asking, “What do I do?” In that circumstance, you have to have a different mode of kind of action. That means you have to engage and correct false teaching that your child is getting at the school level. That means that you’re saying to your child: “You know, I know your teacher might say this; but your teacher is actually wrong, because your teacher is teaching contrary to the Bible. Your teacher is not a bad person, but we just disagree with her right here. You need to believe what Mommy and Daddy say about these issues in terms of how God made us, as boys and girls.”

I think, more importantly, especially if you’re a parent, your opinion matters just as much as any other parent. It’s appropriate for you to raise concerns with a school administration and say: “Listen, I understand there are lots of different opinions on these issues. I think it would be fair—in the interest of fairness—to have different perspectives at play here and not my child’s view made to feel inferior, or bigoted, or discriminatory.”

This is where you need to be asking your children, “What is your teacher talking to you about maleness and femaleness?” You need to be having those conversations, actively and attentively, because chances are—the direction we’re going—you might have to correct what your child is learning in school. Because, unfortunately, and with great regret, we are fast approaching a day where the very best thing a Christian parent can hope for in a public-school setting is that a teacher will not be actively hostile to that child’s view. Because it’s growing increasingly unlikely that that teacher can be affirming or supporting of your child’s view.

**Dennis:** I really like how you handle this subject in your book, *God and the Transgender Debate*. You have a list of several points that you make of ways to prepare your children to encounter these issues in school. You just talked about the first one: “Help your child understand that people see reality in different ways.” You’re helping your child to know how to love people, who think differently and believe differently than we do, as followers of Christ.
Andrew: What you just said is really important, because I think it brings us back to the issue of worldview. We can begin, already at very young ages, tying gender and sex to this issue of worldview and understanding that people see reality differently, occasionally, if they’re not Christians. It means they’re going to have a different value system. What that means is—we don’t want to create little Pharisees or little legalists that just want to judge people. This is a time to talk about a doctrine of sin—that sin roots itself in all people’s hearts—and that means there’s disagreement about what the best way to live is, and there’s disagreement about who God is and what God has revealed about Himself.

Dennis: This was kind of a funny thing that happened when we were raising our kids, as they grew up into junior high and high school. We’d be going to a baseball game/a football game and some of their friends would be in the back seat. Occasionally, I’d turn to one of their friends and I’d say, “So tell me about your worldview.” My kids would go: “Oh Dad! Dad!” [Laughter] Inevitably, he would say, “What do you mean worldview?” I’d say: “It’s how you think about the world and from what moral and spiritual basis. I’d just like to know kind of how you think about it all.” It was interesting to begin to hear kids begin to unravel what they do think about the world. The idea of preparing your kids to know what their worldview is and how we think from the Bible—that’s a key construct in helping your kids develop a sense of morality.

Bob: With a seven-year-old—if your daughter said, “I want to get a crew cut,”—how would you respond to that, as a parent? What would you be concerned about? How would you approach something like that?

Andrew: I think the first thing to ask is to evaluate whether what the culture believes around gender is appropriate or not. I think it’s appropriate that the culture teaches that women traditionally have longer hair. I would say: “We’re not going to do the crew cut, because that is something our culture assigns for boys and for men. That’s not something that it associates about girls. I don’t want you to send the wrong signal about who you are or who you’re trying to be. So, we’re going to just stick with your hair as it is. That means we can maybe style it differently, but we’re not going to get a short haircut.”

Bob: And we’ve got to be careful that we don’t assign some biblical quality to cultural gender norms and teach kids that: “If you’re a boy, that means that you’re going to like sports; and if you’re a girl, you should stay off the monkey bars.”

Andrew: That’s right. This is one of those instances, where we want to ask: “Is what the church has adopted as a gender norm a proper gender norm, based on what the culture is saying? Has the culture kind of gone too far in what it is assigning or expecting males to be?” One of the examples I’m most occasioned with here is—you know, a lot of churches do wild game dinners. I’m in favor of wild game dinners—I’m not criticizing those.
**Dennis:** Good; good. I’m glad you’re not. [Laughter]

**Andrew:** That’s good, but it sends the signal—

**Dennis:** I’ve contributed game to those wild game dinners.

**Bob:** Rarely—I’ll just add it’s rarely that he’s contributed anything. [Laughter]

**Dennis:** Animals are safe with me—they really are. [Laughter]

**Andrew:** Those dinners—if there’s not some nuance to this, they can communicate that masculinity is summed up in wearing camouflage and going hunting.

**Bob:** Right.

**Andrew:** It can send the signal to a young man—who might be [gentler] or maybe a little bit more effeminate than other boys—that he is not being a biblical man. I look at my own life. I don’t like to hunt. I would rather sit in a coffee shop and read. I don’t really enjoy watching sports. I couldn’t tell you how many people belong on a football field, but I still consider myself biblically masculine.

**Dennis:** Are you saying my camo vest that I’m wearing in the studio today doesn’t fit? [Laughter]

**Andrew:** That’s between you and your Lord. [Laughter]

**Bob:** I want to go back, though, to the crew cut. What if your 25-year-old daughter comes home with a crew cut—what do you do then?

**Andrew:** If it’s an older child—I mean, the most important thing that I tell people is: “You want to keep that relationship going,” and “You’re not in control of what that 25-year-old is going to do.” So, what that means is—you can control one thing—and that’s your relationship with them. You’re going to say to them: “Listen, we might disagree on how you’re styling your hair right now, but I love you. I want you in this house, because you’re my child. We can disagree, but I want you to know you’re loved.”

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dennis:** One of the conclusions Barbara and I came to, by the time we raised six teenagers, was the power of peers. What if your daughters were hanging around peers, as they move into junior high and high school, who clearly don’t embrace your view of male and female?—in fact, embrace what the world is teaching. How would you handle that? Now, I know—again, your daughter is seven right now—but you’ve immersed
yourself in thinking about this in your book, *God and the Transgender Debate*. What coaching would you have for parents in handling that?

**Andrew:** I think, given the emotional kind of vulnerabilities at stake when someone, who’s in middle school—first and foremost, I would not want my child around individuals that could influence them poorly. That’s not because I’m trying to be a goody two shoes Christian.

**Bob:** It’s because bad company corrupts good morals.

**Andrew:** That and, also, because how a child is formed in those pivotal years of 12, 13, and 14, end up having *massive* repercussions down the line. What I would say to my daughter is: “Listen, I understand these are your friends. I’m glad that you love them. I’m glad that you love them even in their difference from us and from you. But because of how they can form you and the habits they could teach you, I don’t feel comfortable for you hanging around with them. That doesn’t mean you can’t be friends with them at school. It doesn’t mean you can’t talk to them. But what it does mean is that we need to be extra attentive to what you’re being exposed to and being formed by because, again, you’re at a very pivotal age, where what you learn right now is going to be super transformative for the rest of your life. We want to be kind to your friends. We want to welcome your friends into our home that disagree with us. But as far as you being friends with them, that needs to be done in our oversight.”

**Dennis:** We encountered challenges like this—not around the transgender issue—but our son, Benjamin, had a friend who was rubbing off on him as he grew up through middle school and into high school—we could see it happening. The more we found out about what he believed, and who he was hanging around with, the more it spelled out that Barbara and I needed to have a pro-active approach to our son spending time with the other young man. We didn’t have a big confrontation—say, “We don’t want you to spend time with him,”—we just slowly began to ease our son away from that relationship; and make it increasingly difficult to spend time with him; and set him up with other friends, who were more likely to help him do what was right.

**Bob:** This is something that is addressed, at some length, in the *Art of Parenting™* video series that’s going to be released, here, in another couple of months. One of the contributors to the series—our friend, Tim Kimmel—talks about your children having asset friends and liability friends. He says you need to look out and say: “Some friends are asset friends and some friends are liability friends.” You want to make sure that your kids are spending most of their time with their asset friends and that they know—with a liability friend—you can be friends with them, but don’t take advice from them / don’t follow their path, because they’re not going to lead you in the right direction. You can have that kind of a differentiation, even with your kids.

Now, you don’t want them saying to their friends, “You’re one of my liability friends”; [Laughter] but you can help them understand: “There are some friends, who are going
to inspire you to do good and right things. There are some friends who are going to
tempt you to do bad and wrong things. Who do you think you should hang out with
more?—your good friends or your bad friends?”

Andrew: And I think, especially, if your child has expressed faith at this age, this a good
time to talk about grace and truth: “We, as Christians, have these as our values that we
want to live by. We don’t want to be judging [of] others or harsh toward others; but this
is how we want to live, because we think this is what’s honoring to God and we want
this for your friends as well. We’re not trying to shut you off from your friends all
together, but we want you to evaluate how your involvement with your friends is
impacting you.”

Dennis: Bob is working on a project he referred to earlier, called The Art of Parenting.
One of the experts we interviewed, and is on this video series, is Alistair Begg. I love
this one piece he does, where he challenges parents to be the parent—not the
buddy/not the friend. And he calls it nonsense for a parent to try to get down on the level
of a child and just be one of them. Now, it doesn’t mean you don’t go have fun with
them / you don’t play together. But it does mean that you, as the parent, take full
responsibility for where that child is headed—you train them / you correct them. This is
why your children were given to you, as parents, so that you could make those
corrections while they’re at home.

And by the way, I think we also just need to talk again about Passport2Purity and
Passport2Identity. As you talk about these tough subjects, I think we need to have a
positive illustration of what identity looks like, for a follower of Christ, and how a young
person, as they move into their adolescent years, develops morality that is able to
withstand the cultural winds and not cave in to their peers.

Bob: Yes; here’s the key: “If you’re going to teach your kids to think biblically about
issues like this, then, as a parent, you need to know what the Bible says about things
like transgenderism and the whole gender identity question.” That’s why we love having
books like God and the Transgender Debate by Andrew Walker in our FamilyLife Today
Resource Center. You can order the book from us, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or
you can call to order at 1-800-FL-TODAY.

Once you’ve read the book, or gone through it with your teenagers, let me also
encourage you to get away with your kids and go through the Passport2Identity for
young men or young women. Two different kits, designed to help our sons and our
daughters—ages 14/15/16—that age group—designed to help them think about their
own identity, and where identity comes from, and how it is shaped, and who God made
them to be—not just in the area of gender—but in the area of gifting: what their spiritual
identity is all about. Find out more about Passport2Identity when you go online at
FamilyLifeToday.com or call 1-800-FL-TODAY for more information about all of these
resources.
You know, you think about the conversation we’ve had today—and Dennis, you said it—there may not be a tougher day, certainly in our lifetime and maybe in the last couple hundred years, for moms and dads to be raising the next generation; at least, when it comes to thinking, biblically, on issues that face us in the culture. At FamilyLife, we want to help equip moms and dads as they raise their children. We want to give you some practical counsel.

We’ve assembled a group of about a dozen-and-a-half contributors, who have all pitched in to be part of FamilyLife’s Art of Parenting video series—a series that is designed for small groups to go through together or for a husband and a wife to go through in a digital experience, online. We’re going to be releasing this video series coming up in May. We’re kicking it off with a film that is going to be in movie theaters for two nights only, May 1st and May 3rd—a theatrical film that was produced in conjunction with our friends, Alex and Stephen Kendrick. Alex plays a role in the film, along with Alan Powell and Micah Lynn Hanson. There’s a trailer for the film, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com. Tickets are on sale now if you’d like to go ahead and start getting tickets—plan to bring a group. And again, more information about that at FamilyLifeToday.com.

We also are working on a strategy to try to get biblical parenting content into the hands of people—who are not currently listening to FamilyLife Today / they’re not going to a local church. But we believe that this content is something that can help a lot of young moms and dads begin to think about their own relationship with Jesus and about how they want to raise their children. We’re asking you to help us reach more folks, who are outside of our orbit. It costs us about $10 to get this content into the hands of a family, who is not currently going to church. We’re asking you: “Would you pitch in and help us with this outreach effort?”

If you can help, we’d like to say, ‘Thank you,’ by sending you a series of seven prayer cards; so that you can be praying more purposefully and intentionally for your own children and your own grandchildren. You can donate, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call to donate at 1-800-FL-TODAY. We hope to hear from you. We hope to reach a lot of people—in fact, our goal over the next three years is to reach a million people with this practical biblical content on parenting.

Now, tomorrow, we want to invite you back to hear from Carolyn Weber. She shares with us her story of how God intersected with her when she was a student in England. It was an out-of-the-blue experience for her that changed her life. We’ll hear the story tomorrow. I hope you can tune in for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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