

## **Child's sex-role disorder contested**

**by Kevin Mayhood**

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The parents of a boy could be pushing him to act like a girl to gain attention and sympathy for themselves, a lawyer argued in Franklin County Juvenile Court yesterday.

"There is a suspicion of Munchausen syndrome by proxy," said Rebecca Steele, a public defender appointed to represent the best interests of the child.

Steele talked about the rare syndrome -- in which parents make their children ill or create symptoms to gain attention for themselves -- as she argued to keep the 6-year-old boy in custody of Franklin County Children Services.

Attorneys for the agency and the county prosecutor's office agreed with her.

But the parents, Sherry and Paul Lipscomb of the Northeast Side, said they're all failing to acknowledge that a specialist in Cincinnati has diagnosed a gender-identity disorder in their child.

"The condition is, it feels like you are in the wrong body," Mr. Lipscomb said outside the courtroom yesterday.

"All this basically boils down to is the school couldn't handle a child going to school in a dress. There's no law that says you can't go to school and express your gender."

Gender-identity disorders, recognized by the medical community, can be seen in children as young as toddlers, specialists say.

The Lipscombs are fighting to get their child back. He was taken late last month after the parents enrolled him in the first grade at McVay Elementary School in Westerville. He had been in kindergarten there the year before.

The Lipscombs had informed school officials that the child would wear girl's clothes and have a girl's name this school year.

Children Services this week withdrew its original complaint that the child needed the court's involvement and filed a new complaint yesterday that added allegations the Lipscombs neglected the youngster's medical and psychological needs.

"The gender-identity issue, we feel, is a red herring," Steele said. Juvenile Court Magistrate Lorenzo Sanchez yesterday ruled Children Services would have temporary custody until a trial scheduled for November concludes.

Steele said the couple had taken the boy to 13 doctors and had him hospitalized four times between January 1998 and this past June.

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, a syndrome related to autism, was diagnosed and violent and obsessive behavior also were noted, records show. A host of medications had been prescribed by at least 11 doctors.

But, "Over and over again, the child does not exhibit the diagnosis the parents are seeking," Steele said.

She and others argued that the Lipscombs often failed to follow through with prescribed treatment and were shopping for a doctor who would diagnose the gender-identity problem.

Keith Cornwell, an attorney for Children Services, said symptoms of a gender-identification disorder have not been apparent during the child's stay in a foster home.

But Mark E. Narens, attorney for the couple, said the parents weren't shopping for a diagnosis, but rather searching for someone to help their boy. They took him to specialists at the direction of their pediatrician, he said, and continued until they were able to find a proper diagnosis. Sherry Lipscomb said there is no way she wanted this diagnosis for her child.

"A transsexual in our community is the most taboo of all areas," she said. The child faces gender and sexuality issues that the public will not accept, she added.

"We're all looking at a 6-year-old kid who is dealing with these issues," she said. "It is much easier to squelch it and not let her be what she is supposed to be."

According to court testimony and motions filed in the case, the child went to school last year wearing boy's clothes and using his given name.

But at home, he wore girl's clothes and went by a girl's name that the parents say he chose. The parents say their child should be accepted as a girl.

In his motion to return the child to the Lipscombs, Narens said that while staying in the custody of Children Services, the child would "meekly acquiesce to the requirement to live as a male . . . while under the control of authority figures." But he said that will send the child into "a major bout with depression."

Steele, however, said the boy improves when away from the Lipscombs.

She said he had threatened to kill his parents and had suicidal fantasies while he was with them.

But the child's mother said, "She had made homicidal threats in the past. She's never tried to hurt us."

"She's comfortable expressing her anger with us -- she knows she's loved unconditionally."

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