

Constrained freedom

By [David Warkentin](#)

June 1, 2011

If you watch or read the news, likely you've heard the story of the [genderless baby](#). A family in Ontario has decided to keep the gender of their baby - named "Storm" - a secret, so as to not allow social expectations around gender influence the development of their child. In the words of the parents, "We've decided not to share Storm's sex for now — a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation."

As you can imagine, their choice has caused quite a stir.

It got me thinking though, how does/can/should society influence our development as human beings? Or more close to home, speaking as a parent myself, what role do parents play in their child's identity? For this family, they say as little as possible. Unconstrained personal freedom, they suggest, is the path to true humanity.

This approach to human identity is nothing new. Ancient philosophers, medieval mystics, modern rationalists, and postmodern spiritualists - and yes, Oprah! - often approach identity from this individualist perspective. Freedom to choose one's own path is of utmost importance. Canada's [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) serves to protect our fundamental freedoms: "Freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression."

But

I wonder, is "unconstrained freedom" realistic? Or even healthy? Much of the emphasis on freedom is placed over and against the countless examples in history where authority is abused (e.g. Communist Russia, residential schools, abusive parents, etc...). And true, the many examples provide good reason to maintain the freedoms we protect. But if I put these easy targets aside, I wonder: is it possible, necessary even, to have a positive view of *constrained* freedom? I think so.

As

parents, this starts with the basic fundamentals of life in the world - e.g. teaching our kids to look both ways before crossing the street. We accept this constrained freedom as necessary for the well-being of our kids. Beyond this obvious example, however, I think a level of constrained freedom can be healthy in many relationships, not just parent-child interaction. Sharing wisdom, maintaining accountability, and mentoring are all examples where individuals can speak constructively into each others lives providing opinion and direction to positively influence our development as people. In our haste to reject abusive authority, we tend to forget the possibility of positive influence in our lives.

I realize this issue is far more complex than this brief reflection identifies, but I think we need to consider the possibility that constrained freedom doesn't have to be negative or harmful. We should heed these words from St. Paul: *"Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing"* (1 Thess. 5:11).

Originally posted at [Considerations](#).