

Snakes and Snails and Mermaid Tails: Raising a Gender-Variant Son

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KEYWORDS

• Gender nonconformity • Gender atypical • Gender stereotypes • Parenting • Support groups

“There’s the penis,” the sonographer pointed out after we had repeatedly confirmed that we wanted to know the sex of our baby-to-be protruding from Tricia’s stomach. Immediately my heart dropped swiftly into my own stomach. For a few moments of slow-motion haze, all the life went out of me. How could it be? Both my wife and I knew we were having a girl. My mom said we were having a girl. Every friend who knew us well said we were having a girl. I wanted a girl.

Sitting in the reception area waiting for Tricia to finish changing her clothes, tears began to edge slowly down my cheeks. Pictures of my childhood flashed before my mind’s eye—not just any images, but scenes between my father and me: the time he shouted at me like a wild man through an entire wash cycle because I had splashed through a few puddles on my way home from school. The time he threw me into the bedroom after choking me in the hall, then a few minutes later called me out of the room to ask with a syrupy voice if he had hurt me and finally screamed after I had nodded yes through my tears, “GOOD!” The time, as my mother came to a halt in the driveway to take me swimming after she had vanished for days to escape my father’s unending wrath that he slugged her so hard she bit her tongue, oozing her warm blood onto the front seat. The time he verbally attacked me, then 11 years old, for not fighting the divorce my mother had recently filed for. The time, while my parents were separated before the divorce was final, my mom and I checked into a motel for the night because she had received a call from her best friend in Nebraska who said she had just heard from my father, who revealed that he was on his way to murder us. The time I came home after a Pony League baseball game to discover my battered mother shivering and huddled in a corner after my father had broken into the house through the milk shoot to greet her with force. The Sundays after the divorce when he would pick me up, speed 60 miles per hour down the residential street from my house with a crazed expression, stop in a parking lot, then hostilely explain to me how my mother

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was a pig and a whore who hung out with other pigs and whores. No, I was not prepared to father a son.

Eventually though, before the birth I came to terms with having a baby boy. Once our baby graced our lives, despite my selfishness and my own angry temper, I struggled to become the best parent I could be. There's no doubt I felt the sensation a friend had once said I would when I looked into the eyes of my new baby. "It's like falling in love again," he smiled. Honestly, how could you not love the little fellow? My God, he was cute. And not in that he's-my-baby-so-of-course-he's-cute sort of way. I could tell he was adorable by anybody's standards. Pretty, even.

Later, soon after Aron had learned to walk, I privately gloated over what a progressive parent I was when I bought him a pair of striped girls' platform flip-flops. After all, didn't Aron show fascination for the girls' shoes sitting beside the sandbox while toddling through the playground? Why not get him his own pair? He was only a year old—it didn't mean anything. Nor did I find it alarming to walk through the park with my son as he held a blond-haired doll a friend of Tricia's had just given him because he had noticed it on her shelf and wanted to play with it. Sure I received a few stares from some of the other ambling fathers—but it wasn't my problem if they were closed-minded and couldn't match my liberal propensity to go with the flow. I knew it was just a phase.

"Boy, you sure are pretty," I said to Aron, now 3, while he displayed the first dress we had given him. Truth be told, I loathed looking at him in the light violet and flowered gown he was wearing. But I forced myself to pretend and say something positive. Could he tell I was faking? Then again, was I really feigning? Realizing he needed my approval, I was sincere in my fakery. His eyes beamed and his smile lit up the room as he hugged me. Filled with convoluted emotions, I could clearly recognize only one of them—guilt.

The guilt haunted me day after day. Yes I allowed my son to dress like a girl (only at home), to act like a girl, to play with dolls, to draw mermaids, to watch *Angelina Ballerina* on television. But always through gritted teeth. I scolded myself for merely tolerating who he was, for not utterly embracing his gender-nonconforming activity. On top of that, I berated myself for not living up to my convictions. Here I was, a PhD-holding scholar of media, a professor who lectured students in his Race and Gender in Mass Communication courses about the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes, gender fluidity, and the damage that identity biases could evoke. I had read the books. I could quote Judith Butler, a feminist post-structuralist philosopher. Intellectually I understood and adopted the ideas associated with "queer theory." Yet on a visceral level, as much as I strove to make it happen, I could not bring myself to swallow the everyday experience of seeing my son enter our apartment after returning from nursery school and immediately ripping off his clothes in the hallway, running to his bedroom, and putting on his dress and the cap that held in place his "long hair"—a green and white pom-pom that we had brought home after a father-son night at a college basketball game.

The moment of epiphany when Tricia and I suddenly realized our son was definitely "different" occurred the evening Aron's day care center held a graduation ceremony for the 3-year-old children who were moving on to nursery school. As the young girls and boys lined up before us in their shiny white caps and gowns, "Miss D" (the moniker she chose to go by) read off the name of each youngster and said a few words about him or her. Summarizing her general impressions, she delivered a string of predictable capsules. ("Suzi loves to sing," "Nathan is great with Lego," and so on.)

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