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Tell Them I'm a Boy

From the Book - *Transforming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones*

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Setting my daughter free meant more than I'd imagined. My husband, James, and I have two sons. Alex, who just turned fourteen, is a classical musician and computer whiz. Steve just turned eleven. His life revolves around rocketry, soccer, and improvising stand-up comedy routines in the kitchen. He's in denial about puberty being just around the corner.

When I described my child and our family's situation, the "human development specialist" ... laughed reassuringly and said, "Don't worry about a thing, your child has a great imagination."

As his parents, we're concerned about the changes puberty will bring, because we know how distressing it will be for him to begin to develop breasts in middle school. And we're sure that, unless something is done to postpone or stop it, he will develop breasts and begin to menstruate, because this child - who feels and behaves in every way like an ordinary boy - has a normal female body.

During the first year of life, the baby we named Sarah ate, slept, and watched the world in silence from my arms. Then she began to speak and run.

It was hard to keep up with this toddler who would climb to the top of anything with handholds and, later, the preschooler who loved to jump from the tallest branch of our backyard tree down to the roof of the garage.

We were very proud of Sarah. I had always hoped for a daughter who would define herself, who would grow to be a strong, intelligent, and independent woman. This lively, fierce, thoughtful little girl gave me great joy. As her mother, I wanted to create a safe, warm nest where I could nurture her, then set her free to fly.

Sarah tested my resolve to set her free in a way I had never imagined. On her third birthday, she tore the wrapping paper from one of her grandmother's gifts and discovered a pink velvet dress trimmed in ribbons and white lace. I knew she wouldn't want to wear it - she hadn't voluntarily put on anything but pants since turning two, and this dress was totally impractical for playing the way Sarah played. Nevertheless, I was surprised by her reaction.

She looked up, not unhappy, but puzzled and confused, and asked, "Why is Grandma giving me a dress? Doesn't she know I'm not the kind of girl who wears dresses?" Then, with an air of great satisfaction at finding the solution to a problem, she said, "Just tell Grandma I'm a boy."

Initially I assumed Sarah's announcement was simply an attempt to communicate a clothing preference in language she thought grownups would understand. Then, shortly after her birthday, Sarah said she wanted us to call her "Steve." We thought this an odd request, but tried to remember to say "Steve" from time to time. A few weeks later we received a call from the Sunday School teacher who taught the three-year-olds at our church. She told us our daughter had asked to have the name "Sarah" on her name tag crossed out and replaced with "Steve." We realised then that the name "Steve" must be very important to Sarah, so we told the teacher it would be all right to call her "Steve" for the time being.

At home, we talked to Sarah about the difference between a nickname like "Steve" and her real name. But in our neighbourhood and on the playground at the park, Sarah began to introduce herself only as Steve. Within our family, she became more insistent that she was a boy. She never said, "I want to be a boy," or, "I wish I were a boy," but always, "I am a boy." She demanded we use masculine pronouns when referring to her. When we forgot or refused, her face would screw up in fury and exasperation, and the offending parent was likely to be pinched or kicked by this usually loving child. I stopped using pronouns altogether when Sarah was within earshot.

The teacher at Montessori preschool wasn't as flexible as the Sunday School teacher. The children were learning to write their names, and "Sarah" was evidently the only name the teacher was willing to teach. This became an issue as Christmas approached. Four-year-old Sarah came home one day and asked how to spell "Steve" so she could sign her letter to Santa. When I cautioned that Santa might not be able to find our house if the name on the letter wasn't correct, she looked at me with scorn. "Santa knows where I live, Mommy. He knows my name is Steve."

I decided it was time to seek professional help. I had no idea why Sarah was convinced it was better to be a boy. Surely someone could tell me what I was doing wrong. And it must be something I was doing, or failing to do, because the children were in my care 24 hours a day. No one else had nearly as many opportunities to influence them. My husband was pursuing a corporate career that required his attention eleven or twelve hours a day, and I - very much by choice after fifteen years of work and academia - was a fulltime mom.

My first call for help was to our state university's human development department. When I described my child and our family's situation, the "human development specialist" who took the call laughed reassuringly and said, "Don't worry about a thing. Your child has a great imagination. Lots of bright, creative kids try out different roles at this age. She'll grow out of it."

With relief, I took that advice, stopped worrying, and waited for Sarah to grow out of it. For the next couple of years, I supported my child's wish to be called Steve. I no longer made her unhappy by insisting, "You're a girl." Instead I said, "You have a girl's body, though Mommy and Daddy know you feel like a boy."

But I still felt responsible for my second child's inability to accept that she was a girl, and I set out to correct whatever misapprehensions she might have about becoming a woman. Because being a mother was such a joy for me, I told Sarah the most wonderful thing about being a girl is that girls can grow up and have babies of their own. Hearing this, Sarah's face darkened. She shuddered and said, "I don't want to talk about that." She asked if everyone had to get married and have babies when they grew up.

When told no, of course not, she relaxed and said she was always going to live in our house with Alex.

By age five, Sarah had given all her dresses to a neighbour girl of the same age. She wouldn't put on any item of clothing without first asking if it had been made for a boy or a girl. Only boys' clothes would do. I found myself confessing to sales clerks in boys' departments that I was buying these socks and pants and jackets for my daughter who evidently thought it would be better to be a boy. I felt I owed perfect strangers an explanation of something I couldn't explain to myself.

Still relying on the academic advice we had received when our child was four years old, I believed that Steve would eventually yield to "reality" and find a way to accept growing into a woman. The possibility that my child might be transsexual crossed my mind, but seemed so rare as to be extremely unlikely. The most difficult thing for me at that time was trying to keep all the options open - the ambiguity of not knowing for sure where Sarah/Steve belonged on the gender spectrum. As a woman, I hoped my child would learn that she was unique and that she had the right to define the kind of woman she would become. As a mother, my greatest concern was that my child feel wholly accepted and loved.

James and I searched for information about how and why a child's sense of gender can contradict his or her biological sex. There were very few studies available and none of them were well-designed, in my opinion, because they tended to rely solely on adult impressions and observations of children who were deemed "too masculine" as girls or "too feminine" as boys. It struck me as unhelpful and even harmful to judge children's dress and play as appropriate or inappropriate depending on how closely they approximated sex-role stereotypes from the 1950s. According to the studies, very few of these "masculine girls" or "feminine boys" grew up to be transsexual. Of those adults who did later identify as transsexual or transgendered, nothing had been noted about them as children that differentiated them from the others in the studies.

Those early researchers did not ask the children what they thought or felt about their own gender - whether they believed themselves to be boys or girls despite the contrary shapes of their bodies. The researchers' failure to ask that question clearly limits the value of their work. More recent medical research indicates that gender identity is every person's internal, brain-embedded awareness of being male or female (or somewhere in between). Gender identity determines whether a person feels male or female, not how masculine or feminine that person may appear to others.

What was our child's true gender identity? I didn't want to cause Steve more anguish at his young age by pushing him in either direction. Steve was a very bright, sensitive child who was troubled and confused about having a girl's body. He couldn't understand or explain why he had this body, although he continued to state unequivocally that he was a boy. He told me he knew there was nothing a boy could do that a girl couldn't do, but he was a boy. I wanted to give this child plenty of unpressured time to come to terms with being whoever he was.

After a painful kindergarten year during which our child was officially known as "Sarah," we asked the first-grade teacher to use the name "Steve" and to let Steve handle it if other children wondered whether Steve was a boy or a girl. Because we knew this situation was unusual and would very likely cause stress for the teachers, we offered to pay for a clinical psychologist specializing in gender issues to meet with the school staff.

We wanted to provide an experienced resource to answer their questions about gender identity and help them develop strategies for dealing with a gender variant child in their classrooms.

The school principal accepted our offer. However, one week before the staff gender training was scheduled to occur, the principal called to say she was disturbed because she had overheard children asking whether Steve was a boy or a girl. She perceived this as "harassment" of Steve, and she wasn't going to allow it to continue. Without waiting for input from the professional gender therapist, she had decided to call an all-school assembly meeting for the purpose of announcing to the entire student body at once that Steve was a girl, and to tell them that no one was ever to mention it again.

Nothing would more terrify my child. The single most important concern of Steve's life was to be seen as a boy. His girl's body was a source of deep shame to him. He was so fearful of anyone else finding out about it that he insisted on wearing three layers of clothing to bed at night.

Before the school year began, we had asked permission for Steve to use the unisex staff rest room because the girls' and boys' rooms

are the only places in school where children are routinely identified by sex. The principal had refused our request. Because he saw himself as a boy and knew that boys didn't use the girls' room, our six-year-old was in agony from trying not to go to the bathroom at all until he got home at the end of the day.

When the principal told me her plan to make the all-school announcement, I was stunned. I felt powerless to protect my child. I've since learned that parents have considerable rights when protecting their children's welfare in the public schools, but at that moment all I could manage to say was that her decision would be devastating to Steve. The principal was firm, but offered to take Steve for a walk and "explain it to her."

Later, the principal called back to report what had happened. She had asked Steve if he would like the questions from the other children to stop. Steve said he would. Then the principal told him she was going to make the questions stop by telling everyone that Steve was a girl. Steve looked up at her and said, "Why don't you tell them I'm a boy?"

To her credit, the principal listened to him. Startled by this first-grader's logic and assertiveness, she decided to wait until after the visit from the gender specialist to put her plan into action.

The public announcement never happened. The psychologist who conducted the gender training made it clear to the school staff that gender identity is innate, that it is established at a very early age, that it can differ from an individual's biological sex, and that it's neither appropriate nor possible for teachers to try to change a student's gender identity.

Today, Steve is known as a boy by his classmates. He's been elected president of the fifth grade and holds school records for push-ups and pull-ups. He has changed from a frightened, clingy child who had to be pushed kicking and screaming onto the school bus in first grade into a happy, confident boy who cockily practises muscle-man poses in the mirror.

Steve is the only expert on his own experience. He has never doubted his identity. And, although his parents and older brother find it helpful to use the term "transgendered" to describe him, he doesn't refer to himself that way. As far as Steve is concerned, he's just a boy.

Florence Dillon is a pseudonym, and the names of Sarah, Steve, and other parties in this story have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals featured.

Editor: This piece originally appeared in the book "Transforming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones, by Mary Boenke.

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