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My Son, the Pink Boy

Parenting a Boy who is Different

by Sarah Hoffman

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Who's confused? My son knows exactly what he likes.

A random mom on the playground, looking serious and a little bit concerned, asks me, "Do you think your son might grow up to be gay?" It's never crossed my mind. Really. Not since that last random mom asked me five minutes ago. Watching Sam on the monkey bars, his long hair blowing in the wind, I say, "I don't know. He's always just liked feminine things."

As social acceptance of gay people grows, it's time to look critically at the lingering disapproval of things we once thought were precursors to gayness.

Random moms across America think they know: My son has got to be gay. He wears khakis today but wore a dress to school from age four to six; he used to do ballet and still doesn't like sports; in pre-school he was all about playing princess but now is all about Pokémon; and, in spite of the clear gender

divisions in third grade, he plays with both girls and boys. I mean, what straight boy is into that kinda freaky gender mash-up?

Well, my husband, for one. And all metrosexuals, for another coupla-million-ish. My husband used to help his mother choose curtains. He now drives a motorcycle and hunts deer. He still likes curtains, which he now calls "window treatments" (How gay is that? random mom mutters). But really, haven't you met a guy like this, the one you think is gay when you first met him, but then realise that his sexuality doesn't match his gender presentation?

And if you get busy thinking about femmy boys who grow up to be straight, you might also start thinking about butch boys who grow up to be gay, like all those bears and leather daddies I see walking around the Castro. Then you might have to admit that, though it often does, childhood gender expression doesn't always correlate to adult sexuality.

I recently discovered that America's favourite tele-psychologist and I actually agree on that. Dr. Phil's website tells Robby, the mother of a five-year-old boy who loves Barbies and wearing feminine clothes: "This is not a precursor to your son being gay." I got a little excited reading this. The conflation of gender expression and sexuality is so ubiquitous in our society that it was refreshing to hear our country's second-highest-rated talk show host giving the same message to millions of Americans that I've given to dozens (literally dozens!) of random moms on playgrounds across my fair city. Reading on, however, the beautiful Dr. Phil/Ms. Hoffman mind-meld crumbles. Dr. Phil — who implores us all to "get real" — tells Robby that she should not buy her son Barbie dolls or "girl's" clothes, and that she should "Take the girl things away, and buy him boy toys ... Support him in what he's doing, but not in the girl things." Support him, but take away the things he loves to play with?

And does Dr. Phil really imagine that Robby's son will stop being interested in Barbie just because Robby throws his dolls in the trash? What kid forgets about his favourite toy just because it's been taken away? (What kid doesn't want the forbidden thing more when it's taken away?) As Dr. Phil advises Robby, random moms advise me to encourage my son to do "boy" things like play soccer and get fixated on trains. But really, has that ever worked?

Think about it: How easy is it to force a tomboy into a dress? A girly-girl into playing football? And I'd really like to see Dr. Phil make a sports-loving he-boy wear Tinkerbell underpants. And like it.

Gender identity isn't something we just impose on kids and expect them to suck it up, like eating vegetables or going to school. It's part of who they are, whether that satisfies us as parents or not. I write (under a pen name) about raising my gender-nonconforming son for magazines, radio, and my blog. I get all kinds of e-mail from readers telling me that if I just stopped encouraging my son to be girly that he'd man up and try out for the football team. Ah, yes: I am the "All Powerful Mother", whose magic is strong enough to make boys run from Thomas trains to pink tutus. Really, I'm that good. And if I just directed my magic toward good and not evil, then my boy would become all boy.

The problem is that, as a mother, I'm too powerful. Or too weak. We're not sure which. Because I've also been told that I need to learn to parent forcefully, to learn to stand up and say "NO". That my son wouldn't be like he is if I simply didn't allow him to be like he is. But here's the truth: I'm actually kind of a "NO" saying badass. Check me out: Can we throw this baseball in the kitchen? "NO". Can we eat

chocolate cake for breakfast? "NO". Can we make fun of the girl in the wheelchair? "NO". I really can haul out a "NO" when I need to, and I whip it out many times a day. But I try to save "NO" for things that actually cause demonstrable harm to property, to my children or to other people.

Is it really my maternal strength/weakness that caused my son to adore pink Marabou-feather slippers at age three? You decide. But consider that mothers have regularly been blamed for their children's — especially their sons' — quirks and challenges.

In the 1950s, psychologist Leo Kanner coined the phrase "refrigerator mother" and used it to blame mothers for causing autism in their children (needless to say, Kanner's theory was later discredited by actual science). From the academic paper "Children, Work, and Family: Some Thoughts on 'Mother Blame'" we learn that mothers have similarly been blamed for a host of issues in their offspring including schizophrenia, bed-wetting, learning disabilities and, my personal favourite, "homicidal transsexualism."

You may remember mom blogger Nerdy Apple Bottom (who goes by the name of Sarah — no relation), whose November blog post "My Son Is Gay" went viral and has now generated over 46,000 comments. After her post, Sarah was chastised by her church for standing up to the other pre-school mothers who criticised her and her son for the way he busted out of gender norms (on Halloween! We're not even talking about the glamfest that has walked out of my house on any old Tuesday). Her church accused her of "promoting gayness" and threatened to kick her out of the entire denomination. The notion that parents are responsible for spreading gayness (like butter, or an S.T.D.) is one buoyed by conservative religious organisations like Exodus International and Focus on the Family. Focus's ousted founder, the famed radio evangelist James Dobson, offers his book *Bringing up Boys* as a guide for "parents to lay a healthy foundation for heterosexual identity for their children." In other words, to use reparative therapy to try to un-gay them before the gayness spreads.

Joseph Nicolosi, founder of the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (N.A.R.T.H.), penned the D.I.Y. reparative therapy bible, *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*. N.A.R.T.H. has long and loudly argued that feminine boys are pre-homosexuals who can be un-gayed with a just-so combination of a mom who backs off and a dad who takes his son out to pump gas and light the barbecue.

It would seem that Dr. Phil has torn a page from Nicolosi's book, a book in which Nicolosi tells parents to replace feminine toys, games and clothing with masculine ones, stressing the importance of "extinguishing feminine behaviour" with "gentle and consistent disapproval." But where these two popular scolds differ is on the moral value of homosexuality.

Dr. Phil sides with the American Psychiatric Association, publisher of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, broadly considered the arbiter of mental health. The A.P.A. declassified homosexuality as a mental illness nearly forty years ago. Dr. Phil tells Robby, "If your son is gay ... it won't be a choice. It will be something that he's pre-wired to do."

Elsewhere on his website, Dr. Phil tells a mother who is concerned about her lesbian daughter, "Homosexuality is not a learned behaviour. A sexual orientation is inherited. You are wired that way." He asks, "What difference does it make if she is gay? Accept her, support her, and do not be judgemental. It is difficult enough for her to live openly and honestly in this society. Don't put your judgement on top of that."

But definitely rain that judgement down on your five-year-old son.

So I'm really trying to figure this out. Dr. Phil tells us that it's okay to be gay (just like the A.P.A.), but it's not okay for boys to play with Barbie (just like N.A.R.T.H.), because ... well, that's where I get stuck. Because ... they might grow up to be gay? But ... they won't necessarily, he says. And around we go.

Perhaps Dr. Phil's thought process is just terribly muddled (the more charitable explanation among those I've considered). A more likely explanation is that Dr. Phil really isn't okay with homosexuality and thinks that it can be prevented in boyhood if you just chuck the Barbies and say "NO". If so, he hides this message fairly well — or at least confuses his viewers with his homos-good/proto-homos bad schtick.

And speaking of confusion, Dr. Phil tells Robby, "Direct your son in an un-confusing way ... You don't want to do things that seem to support the confusion at this stage of the game."

Who's confused? My son knows exactly what he likes. When Sam was four and his male peers trick-or-treated as Batman and Spiderman and gorillas, Sam was a princess. At five, he was a queen, regal and proud and full of the royal prowess that Disney offers all little girls. He liked feather boas and lip gloss and dancing. Did he think he was a girl? Nope. Was he confused about being a boy? Nope. Did he need to be taught what boys are supposed to like? Nope — how boys are supposed to behave was abundantly clear from the trains and trucks we bought him before we realised he was a pink boy, the behaviour of all the boys he knew, the messages on television, and the judgments of all the random moms. He just liked what he liked, the way other kids did — only his likes were different.

Anti-gay organisations are clear about why boys like Sam need to change. But Dr. Phil's muddled message reflects a broader, mostly unspoken cultural bias in America — even among Americans who are accepting of gay people — that femmy boys are somehow nebulously bad (though no one can actually articulate why). Dr. Phil — or N.A.R.T.H. — isn't making a stink over girls who wear jeans and play soccer. So what, exactly, is wrong with a boy who likes Barbie?

America, talk to me. I'm all ears. And if you can't think of an un-muddled answer, then think about this: Everywhere — on playgrounds and in homes across America, in Disney movies and on national television, on high school and college campuses — pink boys are the brunt of jokes, made to feel inferior, mocked until they take their own lives. Feminine boys are among the last people it's okay for our culture to hate.

Indeed, one of the most popular arguments against letting boys express their feminine sides is that people will make fun of them. Which makes me wonder: should we hide who we are because people are mean? Or should we — parents, teachers, bystanders, infotainment talk-show hosts — stand up and say it's not acceptable to make fun of people who are different?

Random mom doesn't know who or what my son is going to grow up to be, any more than she knows who or what her kid is going to grow up to be. Whether or not she shares the judgments of America's religious conservatives and reparative therapists, or even Dr. Phil, she's repeating cultural biases that she's absorbed, raising her eyebrows at the things that might, to her, signal future gayness.

In this I can hear the click of the first domino falling into the second in the cascade that flows from judgement to disapproval to bullying. As social acceptance of gay people grows, it's time to look critically at the lingering disapproval of things we once thought were precursors to gayness.

Because the problem ain't Barbies. It's bullies.

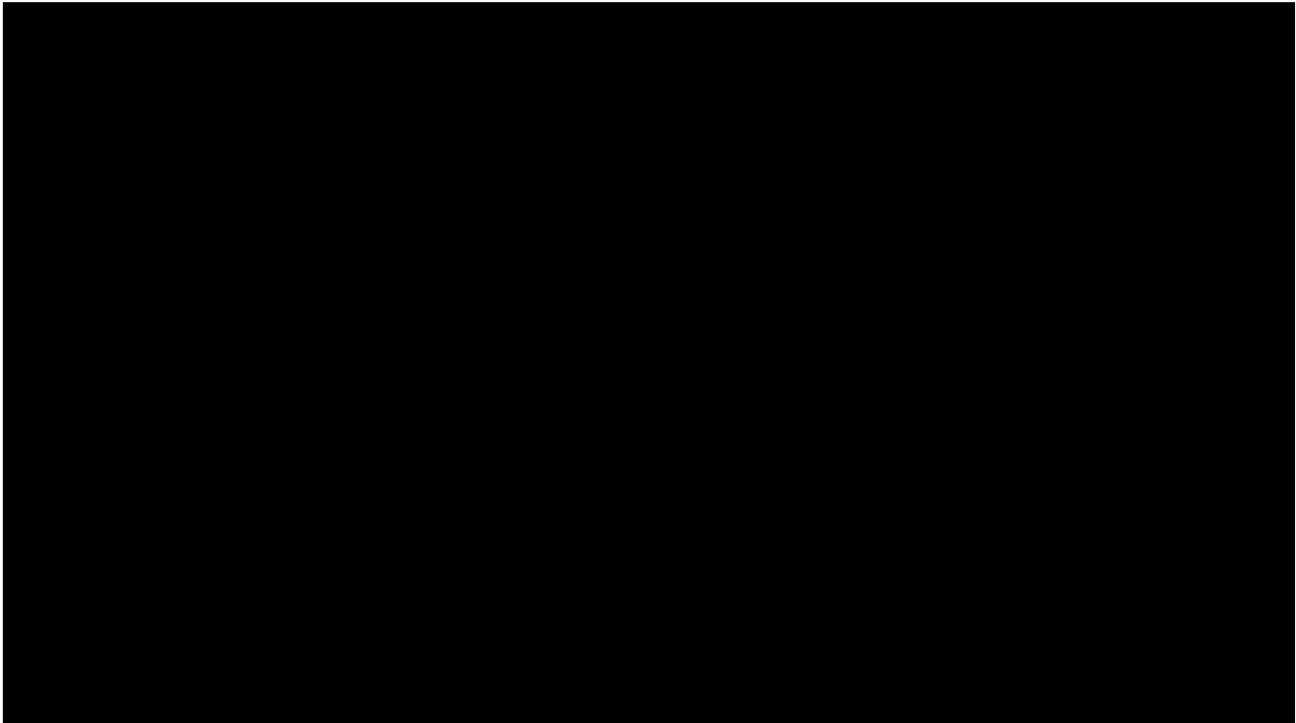
Sarah Hoffman

From [Sarah Hoffman's blog](#)  Sarah Hoffman is the mother of a pink boy and a girl whose favourite colour is yellow. She writes for national magazines, newspapers, and radio, and speaks publicly about raising her gender non-conforming son. She uses a pseudonym to protect the safety of her family.

Sarah's son loves the colour pink. He wore a dress to preschool, spent years pretending he was a princess, and now, as a third-grader, he has long flowing hair and a fondness for the soft, the sparkly, the pink. He is a pink boy. Like a tomboy, only different. Perhaps your son is a pink boy, too. Or your nephew, grandson, neighbour, student, or friend. Or you were when you were a boy. Maybe you are right now. Chances are, if you know — or are — a boy like this, you know all about playground taunts, bullying, or worse. You know the struggles that families experience as they try to support and protect their sons, and the lack of acceptance pink boys face every day. We all wish these things were different.

Sarah says that she started writing about her son because she doesn't think there is anything wrong with being a pink boy. She thinks being pink is just a natural variation of being a human being. She wanted to let other parents, doctors, teachers, and families of pink boys know that there are other pink boys out there — boys who struggle with the same sorts of things, with families who strive to support them in all their sparkly glory.

[Sarah Hoffman's blog](#)  is an excellent resource for pink boys, their families and allies.



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