My Son Wears Heels

Tarney, Julie, Ehrensaft, Diane

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How Do You Know I’m a Boy?

Harry whooshed past me, sputtering his own version of airborne sound effects. He jumped into the slew of stuffed toy animals that lined his bottom bunk bed and rolled up onto his knees. I watched him pat first his left shoulder, then the right, making sure the Velcro tabs of his red cape were still attached to the top of his size 2T Superman pajamas. He sat up and put his barefoot soles together on the sea of bright-colored Mickey Mouse heads that patterned his quilt.

I sat in the middle of Harry’s bedroom carpet in a laundry-folding reverie. Aside from the whir of air blowing through the AC vent in the ceiling, the house was quiet. His tie-dyed t-shirts and bandana shorts made by a friend at work were still warm from the dryer. I breathed in laundry freshness mingled with the scent of watermelon kids shampoo and felt comforted by the hominess of this before-bedtime solitude. After an intense all-day client meeting, I was ready to kick back and relax during some welcome alone time.
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Harry watched me, and his right thumb and forefinger played with what he called the “flippy piece” edge of his “lamby,” a lambskin-wool baby blanket. He was waiting for something.

“Momma?” he finally said, tentatively.

“Yes, Harry?”

“How do you know I’m a boy?”

I looked up. What brought that on? Why wasn’t he asking me what book we were going to read? Then I remembered that the son of a friend was two when he wanted to know why girls had two butts, so I figured this was an age-appropriate question. I decided to stick to the basics.

“Well, honey,” I said, clearing my throat. “Boys have a penis and girls have a vagina. You have a penis.”

Harry tilted his head of downy blond curls and I recognized his pose—he was processing the information. A few days earlier he and his neighborhood posse of Billy, Allison, and Travis had spent an afternoon running naked through the backyard sprinkler, so I thought maybe he was verifying my answer with a playback of that outdoor scene.

But as I stacked the last of his brightly colored socks in spectrum order, I noticed Harry’s expression shift to a “Hmm.” Then, holding his feet, he rocked back and squinted. I could tell he was sorting through ideas. I wondered what it was about my answer that was making him think this hard. Maybe he wanted to say something and was trying to figure out how to say it. I decided to probe a little.

“That was an interesting question, Harry. What made you think of it?”

“Well, inside my head I’m a girl.”
“Oh,” I responded, with an air of upbeat acknowledgment. Now I was the one processing. He was so matter-of-fact, so self-assured in his reply.

Harry’s blue eyes were staring straight at me and it seemed as if the eyes of all his stuffed animals were fixed on me, too. Stalling for time, I slowly rolled up my small frame and smiled. In the few seconds it took to go from seated and stunned to upright and upright, my brain speed-scanned every “How to Talk to Your Child About . . .” article I kept stashed in a folder at work. As the marketing agency for OshKosh B’Gosh, we subscribed to every parenting magazine, so I began clipping articles for future reference as soon as I knew I was pregnant. But I couldn’t recall anything that would help me in this moment. My head was throbbing and I wasn’t sure I was breathing. I wanted to be Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, who would have just the right answer.

“Well, it’s a good thing you know that about yourself, Harry.”

He rocked back and flashed a wide, baby-toothed grin. I could hear the game show host of Family Feud praising me with an enthusiastic “Good answer!”

God Bless America.

After story time with Frog and Toad, a few verses of my made-up Little Kitty lullaby, goodnight kisses, and lights out, I left Harry’s door open a crack and stood motionless outside his room. My thoughts were back in Speed Racer mode. I recapped the scene. “Inside my head I’m a girl.” I knew what it meant, but what did it mean?

Maybe Harry was trying to tell me he was a girl in a boy’s body. Or possibly he was giving me the heads-up he was gay without
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even knowing the concept. Then I wondered if that’s what famous transsexual Christine Jorgensen told her mother when she was two years old. It was 1992, and she was my only reference for someone who’d undergone a sex-change operation. I didn’t know much about people who identified as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth and I figured most people knew even less. Rock Hudson’s death from AIDS was the prevailing image of homosexuality; being gay was a stigma and a pandemic. I wasn’t sure what any of this meant for me or for Harry.

I walked straight to the shelves in the guest bedroom and scanned our small collection of parenting books, all bought two years earlier after a blue plus sign appeared on my at-home pee test. My forefinger brushed over the spines of the retired volumes of What to Expect When You’re Expecting and What to Expect the First Year. Where was What to Expect When Your Two-Year-Old Comes Out to You?

I settled on Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care. It was a fifth edition paperback of the only parenting book my mother considered an essential reference for new moms. “It’s like the Bible,” she insisted in fourth grade when my teacher was going on maternity leave and I wanted to buy her a present. Even though my mother was dead, I heard her peremptory voice saying I’d be sorry if I were pregnant and didn’t have Spock’s book. While I’d rebelled against her advice even into adulthood and didn’t want to be anything like her, I figured Dr. Spock was a known expert and maybe had some insight.

I tucked my wavy chestnut hair behind my ears, searched the index for “sexuality,” and found an entry for “homosexuality.”
“See!” I heard my mother say. The memory of her dictatorial tone was sharp enough to pick the lock on a fear I’d hoped to bury after her death: The possibility that I could become like her. I surely didn’t want to read about any of the theories that controlling mothers were the cause of homosexuality in boys. I hesitated turning to the page; in some ways I was controlling and I didn’t want to be condemned.

It was true that no two colors of my Fiestaware plates or bowls touched each other in their stacks. My knife drawer was organized from largest to smallest. My husband Ken teased that if he got up at night to use the bathroom I’d make his side of the bed. He even joked to friends I was so obsessively clean that I’d put a coat of Mop & Glo on the driveway after shoveling snow. I knew I color-coordinated Harry’s sock drawer, made sure his fingers were never sticky, and left five pages of detailed, typed-up notes for his babysitters. But that wasn’t the same as my mother telling me not to touch my face or to close my mouth when I breathed.

I sank onto the guest room bed, found the page, and then wondered why I bothered to sit down at all. What the hell? There were only two measly paragraphs.

In the first one, Doc Spock said the majority of what he referred to as “feminine boys” and “masculine boys” grow up to be heterosexual. The next paragraph was longer. I read it and then reread it. Spock gave a few hypotheticals, which I understood. But it was his overuse of certain adverbs that threw me off. I was stumped by the absolutes of only, exclusively, and always.

According to the good doctor, if Harry wanted to dress exclusively in girl clothes and play only with girls, he might have some of
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his ideas mixed up. And if he wanted to play only with girls and was always unhappy about his biological gender, I might want to consult with a child psychiatrist. But if the dress and play activities occurred only occasionally, the door was still open for Harry to join the hetero majority.

I wanted Harry surrounded by the safety and protection of large numbers on the school playground. I fast-forwarded to him as a gay adult not being able to get married, or have kids, or keep the job he loved. I thought of my close childhood friend in Los Angeles who was dying of AIDS. I would never wish for my son to be gay. I took a deep yoga breath in and exhaled slowly.

Spock’s unspoken words were: if after age five or six the “only-exclusively-always” modifiers predominated, it was time to schedule an appointment with a shrink.

“Huh!” I thought. I’m supposed to wait until Harry is five or six to know what’s going on? What about now? What about the next three or four years? What about Harry’s next question or surprise statement? I studied those two paragraphs several times, and then put a purple sticky tab on the page. At least there was no mention of controlling mothers. Still, I decided I liked Dr. Spock better as a peace activist.

I recounted the whole story to Ken when he got home from a dinner meeting.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“I have no idea what it means!”

I read aloud to him what little the Spock book offered.

His face twisted in puzzlement. “That doesn’t tell us much now, does it?”
“No,” I said. “It says nothing. And who takes a happy, confident kid to a shrink anyway?”
“Well, we’re definitely not doing that.”
“But what do we do?”
“We don’t have to do anything. He’s two.”
“Really? Nothing? Don’t you think Harry was revealing something kind of heavy?”
“Julie, he’s two. Let’s just see how it goes.”

I didn’t say another word. Maybe Ken was right. Our differences had found a sweet spot the summer we met in 1978. He was Beatles, I was Stones. He was mountains, I was beach. He ran, I did yoga. He didn’t believe in astrology, I read my daily horoscope. He was the glass half full that filled mine up with positivity. I needed his inborn patience now to balance my natural compulsiveness as my mind stayed in overdrive.

I wondered if I had missed any earlier signs from Harry. I flashed back a few months to the day he asked my dad and stepmother a question that seemed to come out of nowhere.

Our pint-sized comic Harry scrunched his face as he squatted in front of the living room couch to smell my father’s sock-covered feet. “Eww,” Harry said, pinching his nose as he stood up. “Stinky feet!”

It was two weeks before his second birthday, and Harry had created this new bit of toddler entertainment with his twenty-two-year-old nanny, Heidi. Ken and I had laughed a few days earlier when our feet were first declared stinky, but I wasn’t so sure how my dad and stepmother would take the news.
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Grandpa Don’s blue eyes widened as he exploded his staccato laughter, and, encouraged, Harry bounced across the room to the blue leather chair occupied by Grandma Fran, where he gave a repeat performance.

“Oh my!” Fran said, blushing the color of her rescue-squad-red turtleneck sweater. She tousled Harry’s curls while my father roared again. Harry bounded back to the couch and landed between Ken and my dad.

“You are such a nutcase, Harry,” Ken teased.

“Do you know what a nutcase is, Harry?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s like a suitcase, but for nuts.”

His audience of four chuckled.

“It means a little kooky or wacky, and funny,” Ken said.

Harry slid off the couch to twirl in the middle of the rug. When he stopped he was facing Fran.

“Do you know the difference between men and women?” Harry asked.

Fran winked at me, amused.

“No, Harry-who-lives-on-Hackett,” she answered. “Tell us, what is the difference?”

I turned from the stereo cabinet to exchange raised eyebrows with Ken. I had no idea where that question came from and couldn’t imagine what Harry’s answer would be. He took occasional baths with Ken and had walked in on me in the bathroom a few times, so my silent guess was “boobs.”

Harry laced his fingers and held his arms straight out.

“Earrings!” he said, with a little jump.

“Well, yes, I guess that is a difference,” Fran conceded.
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As Harry walked up to examine the large gold knot designs that hung from Fran’s earlobes, she shot a quick glance in my direction, apparently unsure if she should say more. Instead she took off her earring for Harry to look at more closely.

As I lay in bed later next to a snoring Ken, who clearly didn’t think Harry’s pronouncement was any big deal, I felt panicked and couldn’t sleep. I flipped through recent memories for more missed clues. And then came the nagging thought that Harry’s confusion was somehow my fault. Maybe if I wasn’t so manic and controlling and overprotective. When Harry was born partially blind in one eye, the pediatric ophthalmologist told me Harry would need to wear glasses without a prescription just to protect his good eye. That warning turned me into a vigilante. “No playing with sticks, ever!” I told babysitters. I decided Tinker Toys would be banned. I wore nonprescription glasses over my contact lenses and asked Heidi to do the same, thinking Harry would want to wear his glasses if we wore them, too. I knew I was being overprotective, but I couldn’t back off from keeping Harry’s good eye safe. I wondered if I’d made the wrong call. Maybe I should have been more lax.

In the weeks that followed Harry’s “inside my head” statement I spent a lot of time inside my own head trying to understand my two-year-old son. I wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that his friend Billy’s older sister Natalie didn’t allow the two of them to touch her Barbie dolls or play with her Barbie Dream House in their attic playroom across the street.

I knew from Billy’s mom that the two boys were regularly in trouble over there for sneaking into Natalie’s Barbies. Was it the
plastic blonde’s off-limits status that made her so attractive to Harry? Did he think he might be a girl in his desire for her as a toy?

When Ken and I took Harry on his first outing to Toys R Us to spend the twenty-dollar bill Ken’s dad in Florida had sent him in a Fourth of July card, we said he could buy any toy he wanted that didn’t cost more than the money from Gramps. Harry passed the first aisle of squirt guns, beach toys, and summer sporting goods with the eagerness of a kid headed downstairs on Christmas morning.

Guided by pink and purple signs, he found his way to the girls toy section and slowed his pace at the doll aisle. He stopped in front of the stacked shelves of Barbies and pointed to a box holding Cinderella Barbie. Ken and I looked at each other with questioning shoulders raised and eyebrows arched.

“Are you sure that’s what you want, Harry?” I asked.

He nodded.

“You know, Harry, we haven’t even really looked around,” Ken said. “There are a lot of toys in here.”

Harry’s lower lip quivered before he started to jump up and down screaming. It was an instant meltdown, and other shoppers were turning to see what we could possibly be doing to our child. Mortified, Ken reached for Cinderella Barbie, whose box became the magic wand that quickly returned our son to his happy self.

Harry, beaming, wanted to take her out of the packaging right away, but we said he had to wait until we were in the car. It took the entire drive from Toys R Us to K-Mart for me to unfasten the seemingly endless number of thick plastic ties while Harry wriggled in his car seat, impatient to hold his very own Disney princess. The
two were still inseparable when my brother Jack came from San Diego to visit us in hometown Milwaukee over Labor Day weekend.

Wearing the new neon pink swim trunks he wore every day and clutching a naked Barbie, Harry ran through the kitchen past Jack and me to the back door. He was headed outside to the hot tub, where Ken and his sister were relaxing before dinner.

Jack rubbed his chin. “Are you trying to raise a gay kid?”

I laughed. I knew my brother was joking and not some awful homophobic uncle. Still, I couldn’t help but feel like I was being blamed for Harry’s love of Barbie. I wasn’t going to let Jack try to make a big deal out of it. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Julie. A Barbie doll?”

“So what? He wanted it. You had a doll when you were little, too.”

“I did?”

“Yeah, you were jealous that June and I had baby dolls to play with when the three of us were in the bath together. So Mother got you one, too.”

“Huh. I don’t remember that.”

I had listened from the other room when my mother called my grandmother, worried about Jack’s request for a doll. She didn’t think it was a good idea. But Nana must have said it was okay, because Jack got the doll. He only wanted to play with it in the bathtub. And when water didn’t squirt out of its butt like my Betsy Wetsy, but only dribbled drops from its belly button, he soon lost interest.

Harry had two plastic wind-up bath dolls of his own when he was a baby, a lookalike boy and girl who swam when their arms
spun. The girl swimmer, with a red-and-white polka dot swim cap painted on her head, was Harry’s favorite tub toy and soon broke from overuse. Now, after the last two months of watching him play with his Barbie doll, and knowing his best friend Billy liked playing with her, too, I was determined to view Barbie as just another tub doll.

“You know what I think?” Jack asked.

*I can’t wait.*

My brother fancied himself a pop psychologist. He was sure the reason I used to smoke cigarettes was because our mother hadn’t nursed me as a baby.

“No, what do you think, Jack?”

“I think Harry’s in love with Heidi, and Barbie reminds him of her.”

Harry’s nanny Heidi was the German version of Barbie, the friend of a friend at work. She was blonde, willowy, and supermodel stunning, with the disposition of Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. I thanked my lucky stars for her every morning when I left for work.

“Are you sure you’re not in love with Heidi and just projecting your fantasies on Harry?”

A corner of Jack’s mouth turned up into a half smile. I had busted him, and he knew it.

“Well, feel free to play with Harry’s Barbie as your replacement. If he’ll part with her, that is.” Then I followed Harry’s wet footprints out to the back deck, where nude Cinderella Barbie sat in regal splendor on a cup holder built into the edge of the hot tub. She looked like a leader, presiding over the happily splashing subject
who adored her. But after defending Harry’s prized possession to Jack, I wasn’t so sure I trusted her to be my son’s leader. I remembered that moment in Toys R Us when Ken and I had exchanged our Harry-wants-a-Barbie look. Was this something I should still be concerned about? Was Barbie going to become Harry’s role model?
Before the Halloween block party, 1992