

## Act like a man

By Jill Storey

*Salon.com* - 9 April, 2004

*The other preschool boys tossed balls, but Matt played house with the girls. What do you do when your son doesn't act like the other boys? Editor's note: Names of the author's children have been changed.*

During my two pregnancies, the air was thick with my wishes for my babies. I searched for dandelion fluff, wayward eyelashes and the first star. I wished every chance I got. I wished for my children to be healthy, brilliant and happy. And I threw in an extra wish, a wish I didn't share with my family and friends.

I thought about that wish as I watched my 3-year-old boy bustle about the play kitchen, scrambling plastic eggs and setting them on the checkered tablecloth next to a vase of yellow plastic flowers. Red toenails peeked out from sparkly pink high heels. My little homemaker deftly fed orange juice to the baby doll while pretending to wash the dishes.

While the other boys in preschool tossed balls, my son played house with the girls. The boys in the playground climbed the jungle gym; Matt hunted for four-leaf clover in the grass. His friends wanted Power Rangers for their birthdays; Matt wanted a toy vacuum cleaner.

"He's just copying his big sister," people said. But he wasn't. Liza, two years older than Matt, climbed trees, raced toy cars and rejected most things feminine. Her first word was "ball." When a friend gave her a Barbie for her fifth birthday, Liza cut off the doll's hair and dumped her, stripped and clipped, into the wastebasket. No, Matt's preferences were completely his own, and as natural as his preference for chicken fingers over fish sticks.

In the beginning, I was delighted by my children's gender-defying personalities. My feminist credentials are impeccable, beginning with ERA marches and a stint at *Ms.* magazine and continuing through my children's hyphenated last names. So it was understandable that the special wish I made was for an active, tomboy daughter and a sweet, sensitive son. A fairy godmother must have been listening.,/p>

My husband, Richard, loved Matt's gentle nature too, but he thought I was dangerously naive. He tutored me on what being a boy is all about, which I can sum up in one word: sports. "It's how they form friendships, it's how they judge each other, it's what they talk about," he said: If a boy is a klutz on the baseball field, the other boys will shun him. What about a boy like Matt, who didn't even want to set foot on the field?

I tried to dismiss Richard's worries. "You're talking about Cleveland in the '60s," I said. "Times have changed, and anyway, sports aren't such a big deal in San Francisco."

"You're dreaming," Richard replied.

So when Matt started kindergarten, I signed him up for the soccer team. The team was coed, the uniforms were cool, and the kids got treats after each game. I was optimistic.

Anyone who has watched 5-year-olds play soccer knows there is a pattern when the ball is in play. Ball gets kicked. Team members abandon positions and swarm toward the ball. Fastest kid kicks ball.

I suppose you could say Matt was just making sure his section of the field was covered. He stayed put, inspecting his cleats, watching the seagulls swoop. He was Ferdinand the Bull in the middle of the field, sniffing daisies while the other little bulls charged. If the ball happened to come his way, he watched it pass by with mild interest.

I wasn't surprised by Matt's aversion to soccer (and every other sport), but I was disturbed that he seemed to be the only one. What happens to boys who don't follow the boy script? I remember a fairy tale about a lad who spends his days quietly tending the fire at home instead of going out into the world like the other men. The young man is an outcast, scorned and pitied, but he has a secret: a magic horse hidden in the woods. One day, the king announces that he has placed his daughter atop a glass hill and he will give her hand and half the kingdom to the man who can ride to the top. All the strong princes and knights of the land try, but it is the gentle lad with his magic horse who prevails.

I am not heartened by this story. There is no magic horse in our backyard for Matt.

So I understood when Richard refused to give up on getting his son interested in sports. He decided to take Matt to a San Francisco Giants game, hoping the excitement of live professional baseball might rub off on him.

They came home after four innings. Matt was bouncing with excitement; Richard looked frazzled. "How was the game?" I asked.

"Really great!" Matt said. "I got cotton candy, and lemonade, and peanuts, and red licorice!"

That explained the bouncing. "What was the score?"

"I dunno."

"Who were the Giants playing?"/p>

Shrug.

I looked at Richard. "We spent the first two innings eating, and the next two at the giant slide. Then he wanted to come home."

We backed off on the sports. Richard contented himself with pitching balls to Liza, who was developing a wicked line drive.

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My friends who have sons talk knowingly about "boy energy": constant motion, wrestling, boisterous laughter, arm punches and the occasional animal sound. Matt is overwhelmed in the midst of boy energy. He covers his ears; he retreats. He flinches at the poking and grabbing that passes for communication among most boys. The offhand comments that boys toss at each other on the playground -- "Hey stupid, you dropped your hat!" -- strike Matt like blows. He is a foreigner in the land of boys.

Matt's native land is the world of imagination. He plays with the toy cars he inevitably receives as presents, but instead of racing them, he sends them to run errands and pick up carpools. He loves to invent whole worlds with their own rules: "What if people did everything backwards? Let's pretend that!" While other boys sometimes play these games with Matt, most are quickly bored and demand to go outside and throw a ball around. The world of most boys is the concrete, physical world.

I confess that the typical male terrain seems alien to me, too. I love my son's quiet, gentle demeanor, his sensitivity, the way his gangly limbs melt into my lap whenever I sit down. At the same time, though, I ache for him. When I send him off to school, I feel as if he's a sheep in wolf's clothing. The wolf pack is still young; they overlook the placid creature in their midst. But any day now, I fear, they will smell the tender skin beneath his sweatshirt and turn on him.

I don't know how much Matt is conscious of the danger. At recess, he wanders among noisy clusters of peripatetic boys, watching them, keeping his distance. "I like to play by myself," he says. Perhaps, but he's not playing. He's observing, listening. It's not as if he wants to be more masculine; he doesn't even know what that means. He's trying to learn the language, maybe, but maybe also defending himself. Isolation is easier than being the target of a playful tackle, a hurtful joke.

But he can't always avoid their world. One afternoon, he told me he didn't want to play "Capture the Flag" at school anymore. "I'm usually on the losing team," he said, "and when we lose, the boys on the other team say Ha ha, you're losers!. It hurts my feelings." His shoulders were slumped, his voice forlorn and bewildered.

"And what do you say when the other team loses?" I asked.

He drew himself up. "I say, 'Good job!'"

I am so proud of him, and so sad.

How does it feel, I wonder, to be different from the other boys? Matt doesn't like to talk about these things much. But sometimes at night, as I put him to bed, when I can't see his face and he can't see mine, and my arm is wrapped securely around his warm body with his hand tucked in mine, we talk. I tell him that he feels things more deeply than most people, that being sensitive is hard, but also wonderful. "But Mom," he countered, "what if I'm 17, and a friend asks me to go see 'Lord of the Rings' with him, and I'm still too scared to go?" Oh baby, you'll toughen up way before then, I said, but I was glad for the darkness that hid my tears.

Liza pays about as much attention to gender expectations as she does to my entreaties to keep her braids out of her dinner plate. When she wrestles with the boys, no one perceives her behavior as a "problem." So why should Matt have to toughen up? What's wrong with being scared of violent battles? Our expectations of how boys should behave are as deeply rooted in our psyches as our expectations of wolves. Wolves, and boys, are not supposed to step out of character.

A friend asked if I'm scared my son will be gay. Right now, the question seems irrelevant. And right now, like any mother, I love my son in all his specialness. Like any mother, I just want him to feel accepted. I don't want him to change; I want the world to change.

Even if the outside world tries to force Matt into the boy mold, I expect that our extended family will cherish him for who he is. Most do, of course, but not all. At a family event last year, Matt was dancing and spinning with his cousin, a young girl. They laughed giddily as their twirls turned into tumbles on the floor. Watching him, one of my relatives smirked and turned to me. "I'm sorry, Jill," she hissed into my ear, "Matt just doesn't act like a boy!" I took a deep breath and willed myself to ignore the comment, but her words stayed in my mind. I thought of all of those fairy tales where the children are cast out by their families.

What if that fairy godmother, the one who was listening when I wished for my backwards children, comes again? What if she offers to reverse my wish, what would I say? I would keep my daughter exactly the way she is. But my son? Would I wish him to give me a high five instead of rubbing his cheek softly against mine? Would I wish him to spend afternoons shooting hoops instead of baking brownies? Would I trade his sensitivity for a sense of belonging, his gentleness for acceptance? He wouldn't be Matt anymore, of course. But would I make that trade, if I could be assured he would have an easier life ahead of him?

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Matt is now 7. He has learned -- from his peers, from the media and from his sister -- that pink is a girl color, that boys don't play with dolls, and that soccer is the reason to live for first-grade boys. He is, it seems, adjusting, trying to find a comfortable place between his natural interests and what the world expects of a boy. His rainbow-hued fingernails went out with the Beanie Babies. Orange is his new favorite color; he stands out from the blue- and gray-clad boys like a carrot bobbing in the ocean. He still plays dress-up, but Snow White and Cinderella have been traded for ghosts and pirates. He started karate lessons (partly because he liked the tunic and

colored belts) and discovered he enjoys it. Karate is a sport, he insists. No need for him to play soccer any more.

He's also reconsidering baseball. He has noticed that the boys at school are obsessed with the San Francisco Giants. One boy, Mark, even cries when the Giants lose. Matt asked his dad to teach him about baseball. Richard, excited at this newfound interest, took him to another game. They stayed through most of the innings, Matt nestled on his dad's lap while Richard pointed out curve balls and sacrifice flies, bunts and pinch hitters. Matt bought a Giants' cap and stuck his ticket stub on the bulletin board, next to his cooking camp diploma. He wants to go again soon, wants to invite Mark.

I wonder: What is being traded, what will be lost? I think of the price paid for trying to live in two worlds. The competing voices of family, self, society. The costs, and the rewards, of making choices. I can't know how Matt's tale will end. The wish is not mine to make. It never was.

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