

## PINK FOR BOYS

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*Her son wear's frilly dresses, covets long hair and pretty sandals. He prefers Barbie dolls to Bob the Builder and handbags to guns. What does it mean, asks his mother.*

My son James, is a crossdresser. He's just four and started when he was barely out of nappies - as soon as he was old enough to make decisions about what to wear. He loves nothing more than girls' dresses - the prettier and fuller the better. He has a 'day' dress - an old satin bridesmaid's gown belonging to his elder sister - and a 'night' dress, a baggy red T-shirt four sizes too large. He is obsessed. with long hair and has even devised his own, by putting green leggings on his head with the two legs hanging over his shoulders as plaits. He is a deft hand at applying nail varnish, his favourite film is *The Wizard of Oz* (because of Dorothy's ruby shoes) and his preferred toy is a Barbie.

It's only when he goes to nursery that James doesn't ask to wear a dress because he knows he'll get laughed at. But at the moment he's home, he wants to put one on, preferably the outfit that 'twirls' the most. Then he applies his 'hair', puts on a pair of pink tights and his oldest sister's 'clickity' shoes (clogs), sticks his head round the door and, with a cheeky grin, announces: 'I've turned'.

James's obsession - like most all-consuming passions - thrills and frustrates in equal measure. He loves transforming himself, but is disappointed when thwarted - which is often, since his two elder sisters (aged nine and 12) sabotage his 'girly' tendencies whenever they get a chance.

When James recently begged for a battery to put in his Barbie watch, they pretended it was broken and got a battery for his football watch instead (which he refused to wear); when they bought him a *Thomas the Tank Engine* comic, he cried because he wanted one about Sindy dolls instead; whenever they give him a blue plastic cup, he gets up and swaps it for a pink one.

I often hear them coaxing him with rewards if he wears trainers rather than red jellies, plays with Action Man instead of Barbie, and carries a gun rather than a handbag.

All to no avail. I now understand what trying to bang a square peg into a round hole actually means. People have suggested that James is like this because he has older sisters. However, I know plenty of boys with sisters who are far more pink and frilly than his, but who wouldn't be seen dead in a dress.

But I also know boys who would, and whose parents allow it. After all, it's not such an unusual activity. Until recent times, parents dressed their sons in dresses until they were five. Only after that time did boys don breeches to signify their rite of passage into maleness.

The other cross-dressing boys I know have passed through their peacock phase much quicker than James. My friend Sarah was surprised to find her little boy doing it in secret.

'He'd try on his sister's pink silky dress with a net petticoat underneath,' explains Sarah, 'and then, when I'd go upstairs, I'd find him hiding under the bed looking rather sheepish.'

James has never been ashamed. All through a recent three-week holiday in France, he wore a flimsy knee-length, lilac kaftan, and refused to wear one of the many pairs of shorts I'd packed for him.

Already he knows that some people disapprove. A helper at his nursery told him that boys don't wear nail varnish. Sometimes he tries to get his friend Peter to dress up with him, and once Pete got as far as trying on his mother's sarong - at which point his sister screeched: 'Oh pleeeeeease don't let my brother wear that: I saw my daughters looking embarrassed and one of them muttered under her breath: 'Now you know what it feels like.'

Both girls refuse to be seen in public with James dressed in anything that isn't strictly masculine. Only my husband or I will occasionally take him to the local shops in his dress. Out on the street there are plenty of smiles, though I'm not sure if its because people are delighted to see a little girl in a fancy dress, or because he looks odd with his broad boyish face and sturdy build.

Some friends have criticised me for 'outing' James in print, saying that when he's older he might be deeply embarrassed. At one point they almost convinced me that I was doing something wrong. But to keep quiet, I reasoned, would be buying into the whole homophobic premise that there's something intrinsically weird or shaming about little boys wearing girls' dresses. I don't care if James's gay or straight - he's just my little boy.

Older people find it odd and worrying. My mother thought he looked very bizarre when he turned up for lunch one day in his green hair and gold dress. Later she said to me: 'I do hope we're not limbering up for a load of trouble.' My own friends think it more amusing than bizarre, telling him he Looks beautiful, while at the same time reassuring me, He'll grow out of it.' Fathers in particular tell me, I admire your attitude: I'm not sure I could be so relaxed.'

My husband and I are constantly asked if we're worried. But the only thing that worries us is people assuming we should be. In fact, I like the imagination it shows, though, like any child's obsession - whether with Barbies or tractors - it can become tiresome.

I'd been delighted that, after having two girls, dressing a boy would be much easier, with none of the grooming or decorative trimmings. But James, as it turns out, is the worst of the lot.

One theory behind why some boys wear tutus and some girls play with guns is that extra testosterone from the mother makes a girl more like a tomboy, and a shortage of testosterone, or even extra female hormones, makes a boy more feminine.

Generally, boys stop wearing girls' clothes around the age of four or five, when they start school. Peer influence ensures that the sex roles kick in good and proper, with most children conforming to gender stereotypes - boys sticking with rough, unadventurous play and girls preferring creative, inclusive activities. In role-playing games, boys pretend to be dads who go out to work, while girls take on the role of mothers who stay at home; research has even shown that this is still the case, even if the parents have far less traditional gender roles.

While no one is too concerned when a girl turns into a tomboy, parents are often uncomfortable when their sons cross gender lines, and soon demand that they conform. The other day, I heard of one father of a cross-dressing toddler who forbade his son to put on dresses, fearing it would 'turn him gay'. Six years later, now aged nine, the boy is still doing it - but in secret.

Films like *Billy Elliot* demonstrate all too clearly that outlawing behaviour is not going to stop it, should that be your child's inclination. Billy's best friend, who adopts his transvestite father's penchant for secretly dressing in women's clothes, is shown in the last scene to have grown into a predictably stereotypical, effeminate gay man.

The most scientific study of the link between being a feminine boy and becoming homosexual was completed in 1987, in Connecticut, USA. Sixty-six males from a 'feminine boy' group (aged seven plus) were followed through to young adulthood and, while three-quarters were found to be homosexual or bisexual, only one became a transsexual.

In Jan Parker and Jan Stimpson's *Raising Happy Children* (Hodder & Stoughton, £9.99), Dr Domenico Di Ceglie, director of gender development service at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, explains: 'Parents should know that gender exploration is not the same as atypical gender development. The first is much more flexible, the latter is more fixed, with the child insistent that he or she actually belongs to the other sex. This is uncommon.'

Dr Di Ceglie suggests to parents not simply to suppress behaviour which does not conform to gender norms, but to remain open and curious. Otherwise the child may pursue it in a secret way, possibly becoming isolated and even excited by the secret, thus sowing the seeds of developmental problems. 'In a sense, you start with an issue and then, depending on your behaviour as a parent, two or three problems can develop as the child grows up: he says.'

Although a three-year-old boy who looks like Eddie Izzard might be considered cute, what does it feel like to have a son still dressing in frocks at seven? Roberta Taylor has a son who has been dressing up since the age of three. Four years later, Sam still occasionally walks around the house in a dress.

'He's becoming more self-conscious about it now and often includes something more masculine, like a Batman cloak,' explains Roberta, who is growing concerned about her son's distinctive behaviour. 'I'm trying to get him to stop because it doesn't seem normal. It's

probably just a love of theatrics because he's an extremely creative child, but even so, people are always making negative comments.

'By contrast, when my daughter went through her tomboy stage at exactly the same age, people thought she was sweet and comical, even though her obsession was far greater. She longed to be mistaken for a boy, only played with boys' toys and had a crew cut.

In one way, Roberta is right to be anxious because, in a society which encourages everyone to fit to a template, the older a boy with a fondness for the colour, textures and fabrics of girls' dresses, the more likely his behaviour will be considered odd or even deviant.

Professor Joan Freeman, a developmental psychologist from Middlesex Hospital, believes that if influence wasn't a factor and little boys didn't copy their peers, they would continue to wear dresses long after their fifth birthday.

Her advice to parents with sons who continue the habit beyond that age is not to be negative about it, but 'to start to praise the convention'. In other words, accept the dresses but applaud the football shirts.

Childcare guru Penelope Leach, always the sensible voice of parenting, reassures parents in her best-selling book *Your Baby & Child* (Penguin, £15.99): 'If your son wants to dress up as a queen, why shouldn't he? You would probably be happy to let your daughter dress up as a cowboy... Your child's eventual sexual predilections will not be changed by swapping roles in childhood. He or she is going to act out every possible role. If you try to make the child stick to the "right" sex, you deprive him or her of half the world.'

James's behaviour has encouraged much gender discussion among our friends - particularly about how we'd all feel if he turned out to be gay. Women are more accepting, but the male consensus seems to be that while it wouldn't be a problem, nor would it be ideal. As one father said: 'You want your son to be the same as you, and being gay means a more difficult life.' But surely plenty of heterosexuals have difficult lives too? And if you're truly accepting as a parent, you love a child because of, not despite, their distinctions.

All I want for my children is for them to be happy and accepting of others. If happiness for James involves donning a dress, I have no problem with that.

*For information and advice, contact*

*Mermaids - a support group for children and teenagers with gender-identity issues and their families. Call 07020 935066 or visit <http://www.mermaids.freeuk.com>*

DO BOYS WHO WEAR DRESSES TURN OUT GAY?

Just because your child prefers wearing clothes more usually seen on the opposite sex, it doesn't necessarily mean they are gay, says child psychologist Dr Richard Woolfson.

'There is no direct connection between children who like to crossdress and sexuality,' he says. 'The important thing is not to panic. Children have a creative side and enjoy imaginative play; part of that is dressing up. There is no reason they shouldn't put on the opposite gender's clothes - it's a form of role play, and should not be automatically associated with any sense of sexual identity.'

'The problem is if you, as a parent, start telling your son: "You mustn't ever put on a dress or wear a pink jumper", immediately, in the eyes of your child, it will become very attractive. My general advice would be to let them get on with it.'

The best thing to do, Dr Woolfson says, is to encourage your child to experiment with a range of play. 'You'll find that just as their interest in certain toys changes, this particular interest will change as well.'

'If the child still wants to cross-dress as they prepare to leave primary school,' he adds, 'it may have a different significance. But the number of children who enjoy cross-dressing at ages nine or ten is significantly less than those who enjoy doing it at ages four or five.'

***Some Names have been changed by request of the subject.***