**Today’s Masculinity Is Stifling**

As boys grow up, the process of becoming men encourages them to shed the sort of intimate connections and emotional intelligence that add meaning to life.

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In hindsight, our son was gearing up to wear a dress to school for quite some time. For months, he wore dresses—or his purple-and-green mermaid costume—on weekends and after school. Then he began wearing them to sleep in lieu of pajamas, changing out of them after breakfast. Finally, one morning, I brought him his clean pants and shirt, and he looked at me and said, “I’m already dressed.”

He was seated on the couch in a gray cotton sundress covered in doe-eyed unicorns with rainbow manes. He’d slept in it, and in his dreaming hours, I imagine, stood at a podium giving inspirational speeches to an audience composed only of himself. When he’d woken up, he was ready.

He walked the half block to school with a bounce in his step, chest proud. “My friends are going to say dresses aren’t for boys,” he told me casually over his shoulder. “They might,” I agreed. “You can just tell them you are comfortable with yourself and that’s all that matters.” I thought of all the other things he could tell them. I began to list them, but he was off running across the blacktop.

I scanned the entrance to see whether any parents noticed us as they came and went. I hadn’t expected my stomach to churn. I felt proud of him for his self-assuredness, for the way he’d prepared for this quietly and at his own pace, but I worried about what judgments and conclusions parents and teachers might make. And of course I worried somebody would shame him.

When he walked into his classroom, sure enough, one child immediately remarked, “Why are you wearing a dress? Dresses are for girls.” A teacher swiftly and gently shut down the child’s commentary and hugged my son tightly. He didn’t look troubled, didn’t look back at me, so I headed home, tucking a backup T-shirt into his cubby just in case his certainty flagged.

In the afternoon, he was still wearing the unicorn dress. He skipped down the sidewalk, reporting that some kids had protested his attire, but he’d assured them that he was comfortable with himself.

With that, the seal was broken. Most days since, he’s worn a dress from his small collection, though he also favors a light-blue guayabera—the classic collared button-down worn by men and boys in Cuba and the Philippines. Classmates’ objections continued, but with less frequency and conviction. One day when my husband dropped him off, he heard a little girl stand up to a naysayer and shout, “Boys can like beautiful things, too!”

But they can’t. Not without someone looking askance. To embrace anything feminine, if you’re not biologically female, causes discomfort and confusion, because throughout most of history and in most parts of the world, being a woman has been a disadvantage. Why would a boy, born into all the power of maleness, reach outside his privileged domain? It doesn’t compute.

As much as feminism has worked to rebalance the power and privilege between the sexes, the dominant approach to launching young women into positions that garner greater respect, higher status, and better pay still mostly maintains the association between those gains and masculine qualities. Girls’ empowerment programs teach assertiveness, strength, and courage—and they must to equip young women for a world that still overwhelmingly favors men.

Last year, when the Boys Scouts of America [announced](https://www.scoutingnewsroom.org/press-releases/bsa-expands-programs-welcome-girls-cub-scouts-highest-rank-eagle-scout/) that they would begin admitting girls into their dens, young women saw a wall come down around a territory that was now theirs to occupy. Parents across the country had argued that girls should have equal access to the activities and pursuits of boys’ scouting, saying that Girl Scouts is not a good fit for girls who are “[more rough and tumble](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/us/boy-scouts-girls.html).” But the converse proposition was essentially nonexistent: Not a single article that I could find mentioned the idea that boys might not find Boy Scouts to be a good fit—or, even more unspeakable, that they would want to join the Girl Scouts.

If it’s difficult to imagine a boy aspiring to the Girl Scouts’ merit badges (oriented far more than the boys’ toward friendship, caretaking, and community), what does that say about how American culture regards these traditionally feminine arenas? And what does it say to boys who think joining the Girl Scouts sounds fun? Even preschool-age boys know they’d be teased or shamed for disclosing such a dream.

While society is chipping away at giving girls broader access to life’s possibilities, it isn’t presenting boys with a full continuum of how they can be in the world. To carve out a masculine identity requires whittling away everything that falls outside the norms of boyhood. At the earliest ages, it’s about external signifiers like favorite colors, TV shows, and clothes. But later, the paring knife cuts away intimate friendships, emotional range, and open communication.

There’s research connecting this shedding process to the development, in some adolescent boys, of depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. In her 2014 documentary *The Mask You Live In*, the filmmaker Jennifer Siebel Newsom features the voices of dozens of teen boys describing their progression from childhoods rich with friendships to teen years defined by posturing and pressure to prove their manhood. Some of the boys, who present tough exteriors, admit to having suicidal thoughts. The film flashes news clips from the most notable mass shootings of that time—Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook—each committed by a young man.

“Whether it’s homicidal violence or suicidal violence, people resort to such desperate behavior only when they are feeling shamed and humiliated, or feel they would be, if they didn’t prove that they were real men,” the psychiatrist James Gilligan, who directed Harvard’s Center for the Study of Violence, says in the film.

There are so few positive variations on what a “real man” can look like, that when the youngest generations show signs of reshaping masculinity, the only word that exists for them is *nonconforming*. The term highlights that nobody knows what to call these variations on maleness. Instead of understanding that children can resist or challenge traditional masculinity from within the bounds of boyhood, it’s assumed that they’re in a phase, that they need guidance, or that they don’t want to be boys.

Numerous parents of gender-nonconforming children report initially trying to stifle their child’s tendencies out of a protective instinct, thinking they might forestall bullying if only their child would fit more neatly into the box that’s been set up for them. Ultimately, though, most realize that their child is less happy when prevented from gravitating naturally toward their preferences.

It’s important to note that there are children who do feel they’ve been born in the wrong body, who long for different anatomy, a different pronoun. Trans kids need to be supported and accepted. And, at the same time, not every boy who puts on a dress is communicating a wish to be a girl. Too often gender dysphoria is conflated with the simple possibility that kids, when not steered toward one toy or color, will just like what they like, traditional gender expectations notwithstanding. There is little space given to experimentation and exploration before a child’s community seeks to categorize them. Boyhood, as it is popularly imagined, is so narrow and confining that to press against its boundaries is to end up in a different identity altogether.

According to the San Jose State University sociologist Elizabeth Sweet, who studies gender in children’s toys throughout the 20th century, American gender categories [are more rigid now](https://www.elizabethvsweet.com/tedx-talk) than at any time in history, at least when it comes to consumer culture. There may be greater recognition in the abstract that gender exists along a spectrum, but for young children (and their parents), consumer products have a huge influence over identity development and presentation. “Toymakers are saying, well, we can sell each family one toy, or if we make separate versions according to gender, we can sell more toys and make families buy multiples for each gender,” Sweet told me. The same holds true for clothes, baby gear, school supplies, even snack food. And parents begin gender-coding their children’s worlds before those children are even born, sometimes kicked off by [“gender reveal” parties](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUvXVq_zTWc), a sort of new version of the baby shower, in which parents-to-be discover the sex of their baby alongside family and friends through a dramatic, colorful display.

There is so much parents can’t know when a baby hasn’t been born—they can’t know the baby’s hair color or eye color or whether they’ll be colicky or peaceful, healthy or sick. But they can know their child’s anatomy, and with that information they can create a to-do list full of tasks that quell the angst of knowing so little else. They can paint a nursery, buy onesies, pick names. A baby’s sex creates a starting point on a cultural road map that the whole family and community can use to direct the child towards defining who they are, and who they are not.

Of course today, among a certain set, there’s an active rejection of pink for baby girls, whose parents don’t want them treated as delicate flowers. But again, the reverse still has no purchase. Exceedingly few parents dress their baby boys in a headband and a dress.

Somewhat ironically, those pink-foresaking parents of infant girls often find themselves, three years later, remarking that in spite of shielding their daughters from overly feminized colors, toys, and media, they’ve still turned out to be princess-obsessed preschoolers. The parents display lighthearted self-consciousness that they couldn’t render their girl immune to sparkles.

It’s unlikely, though, that they shame their girls for their “girliness.” They throw up their hands and acquiesce to an Elsa costume. By contrast, boys’ parents tend to double down on reinforcing masculinity.

“Most nonconforming adult men, when they talk about their upbringing, say their first bully was their dad,” reports Matt Duron, whose wife, Lori Duron, wrote the book *Raising My Rainbow*, about their gender-creative son. Matt, who had a 20-year career as a police officer in Orange County, California, has been a vocal supporter of his son, though in their conservative region, his stance has been attacked. The Durons’ son, now 11, gave up dresses years ago, but he still loves makeup and wears his hair long. Classmates bully him, but he finds support from his family, and lately at Sephora in his local mall, where male employees demonstrate a different way to be grown men in the world.

The idea of Sephora as a haven for gender-creative suburban American boys is touching and wonderful in its way, but it’s bittersweet that alternate models of masculinity are so scarce and relatively unvaried. There are now quite a few books featuring boys who like dresses, but almost all of them follow the same arc: Boy dons dress among friends; boy gets shamed and bullied; boy becomes despondent and hides at home; then, finally, boy returns to friend group and they see his value and embrace him (usually after one last-ditch attempt to reform him through shame). Each time I pick up one of these to read to my son, I find myself wanting to change the narrative or skip the portions where rejection and suffering show up as inevitable.

“But little kids live in the real world,” Ian Hoffman argued when I questioned the trope. Hoffman co-authored the children’s book *Jacob’s New Dress* with his wife, Sarah. “Would it be nice to have a book with a boy in a dress with no conflict? Yes. Are we there? I don’t think so,” Hoffman told me. He says when the book was published in 2014, he and Sarah dreamed that someday it would seem quaint that a boy in a dress was a big deal. Then, just a year ago, their book was banned in North Carolina, cut from a public-school unit on bullying and harassment. “The initial first-grade book selection, which focuses on valuing uniqueness and difference, has been replaced due to some concerns about the book,” the superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools system [told](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/24/us/north-carolina-school-jacobs-new-dress-book.html) *The New York Times*. One can imagine that if it had been about a girl who dressed as a firefighter, such extreme measures would not have been taken.

There’s a word for what’s happening here: misogyny. When school officials and parents send a message to children that “boyish” girls are badass but “girlish” boys are embarrassing, they are telling kids that society values and rewards masculinity, but not femininity. They are not just keeping individual boys from free self-expression, but they are keeping women down too.

It is lopsided to approach gender equality by focusing only on girls’ empowerment. If society is to find its way to a post-#MeToo future, parents, teachers, and community members need to build a culture of boyhood that fosters empathy, communication, caretaking, and cooperation. But how? Could there be a space or an organization for boys where they’re encouraged to challenge what’s expected of them socially, emotionally, and physically? What would the activities be? What would the corresponding catchwords be to the girls’ “brave” and “strong” other than “cowardly” and “weak”?

It’s a societal loss that so many men grow up believing that showing aggression and stifling emotion are the ways to signal manhood. And it’s a personal loss to countless little boys who, at best, develop mechanisms for compartmentalizing certain aspects of who they are and, at worst, deny those aspects out of existence.

This fall, our son will start kindergarten, and with kindergarten comes a school uniform. This means pale blue collared shirts for all the kids, paired with navy blue pants, jumpers, or skirts. Currently there don’t seem to be any boys at the school who choose the jumper or skirt, and it remains to be seen whether our son will maintain his penchant for dresses even when the sartorial binary becomes starker—and the dresses more plain.

Whatever he decides is fine with us. My only hope is that if he chooses to stop wearing dresses, it won’t be due to feeling that his fullest self-expression no longer has a place. What I want for him, and for all boys, is for the process of becoming men to be expansive, not reductive. I know I’m not alone. More than a century ago, in the October 1902 edition of London’s *Cornhill Magazine*, the writer and poet May Byron wrote a piece called “The Little Boy,” in which she talked, among other things, about boys’ evolving mode of dress as they move through childhood. She tied it then, as I do now, to a mildly tragic departure from a boy’s richest relationship with himself:

“Petticoated or kilted, in little sailor suits, and linen smocks, and velvet coats, and miniature reefers, he marches blindly on his destiny,” Byron writes. “Soon he will run his dear little head against that blank wall of foregone conclusions which shuts out fairyland from a workaday world.”

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