

MODERN LOVE

From He to She in First Grade

By Laurie Frankel

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When our son turned 6, my husband and I bought him a puppet theater and a chest of dress-up clothes because he liked to put on plays. We filled the chest with 20 items from Goodwill, mostly grown-man attire: ties, button-down shirts, a gray pageboy cap and a suit vest.

But we didn't want his or his castmates' creative output to be curtailed by a lack of costume choices, so we also included high heels, a pink straw hat, a dazzling fairy skirt and a sparkly green halter dress.

He was thrilled with these presents. He put on the sparkly green dress right away. In a sense, he never really took it off.

For a while, he wore the dress only when we were at home, and only when we were alone. He would change back into shorts and a T-shirt if we were running errands or had people coming over.

Then we would come home or our guests would leave, and he would change back to the sparkly green dress, asking me to tie the halter behind his neck and the sash around his waist.

Eventually he stopped changing out of it. He wore it to the grocery store and when he had friends over. He wore it to the park and the lake. He wore shorts for camp and trunks for swimming, but otherwise he was mostly in the dress.

My husband and I were never of the opinion that girls should not wear pants or climb trees or get dirty, or that boys should not have long hair or play with dolls or like pink, so the dress did not cause us undue alarm or worry. But school was about to start, and we found ourselves at a crossroads.

It seemed reasonable to say: "Wear whatever you're comfortable in to school. If that's what you want to wear, you don't have to keep changing in and out of it."

But it also seemed reasonable to say: "Dresses are for play at home only. The dress is fun, but you can't wear it to first grade."

The former had the advantage of being fair, what we believed, and what would make our child happiest. The latter had the advantage of being much less fraught.

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So we asked him, "What do you think you'll do with your dress when school starts in a couple weeks?" We said: "You need new clothes for the new school year. What should we buy?"

For weeks, he wasn't sure.

And then, on the day before school started, he was.

I later learned that this is remarkably common, that children who make decisions like this often do so as push comes to shove. They achieve clarity when they are faced with two not-great options.

Our child could go to school dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and feel wrong and awkward and not himself. Or he could wear what felt right and possibly face the wrath of his fellow elementary-school students.

When he woke up on that last day of summer vacation, the first thing he said was that he wanted to wear skirts and dresses to first grade.

"O.K.," I said, stalling for time, as my brain flooded with all the concerns I hadn't yet voiced. "What do you think other kids will say tomorrow if you wear a dress to school?"

"They'll say, 'Are you a boy or a girl?'" he replied. "They'll say: 'You can't wear that. Boys don't wear dresses.' They'll say, 'Ha, ha, ha, you're so stupid.'"

This seemed about right to me. "And how will that make you feel?" I asked.

He shrugged and said he didn't know. But he did know, with certainty, what he wanted to wear to school the next day, even as he also seemed to know what that choice may cost him.

I hadn't met his new teacher yet, so I sent her a heads-up by email, explaining that this had been going on for some time; it wasn't just a whim. She emailed back right away, unfazed, and she promised to support our child "no matter what."

Then we went shopping. The fairy skirt and sparkly green dress were play clothes. He didn't have any skirts or dresses that were appropriate for school.

I didn't want to buy a whole new wardrobe when I didn't know if this was going to last. I envisioned a scenario in which he wore a skirt the first day, got made fun of, and never wore a skirt again. I envisioned another in which he got the skirt-wearing out of his system and happily donned pants every day thereafter. But mostly I was pretty sure the skirts were here to stay.

School started on a Wednesday, so we bought three outfits to get us through the week. Three school skirts. Three school tops. A pair of white sandals.

On the drive home, I asked, "What will you say back if kids say the things you think they will?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

So we brainstormed. We role-played. We practiced saying, "If girls can wear pants or skirts, so can boys." We practiced saying: "You wear what you're comfortable wearing. This is what I'm comfortable wearing." We practiced polite ways of suggesting they mind their own business.

"Are you sure?" I asked him. I asked this while he was behind me in his car seat so he wouldn't see how scared I was. I asked casually while we ran errands so it wouldn't seem like a big deal.

"I'm sure," he said. He certainly sounded sure. That made one of us.

The question I couldn't stop asking myself was: Do we love our children best by protecting them at all costs or by supporting them unconditionally? Does love mean saying, "Nothing, not even your happiness, is as important as your safety"? Or does love mean saying, "Be who you are, and I will love that person no matter what"?

I couldn't ask my child those questions. But the next morning I did ask one more time, "Are you sure?"

Which was ridiculous, given that he had gotten up before dawn to put on the new skirt and blouse and sandals and was grinning, glowing, with joy.

We put some barrettes in his very short hair and took the traditional first-day-of-school pictures. They're all a little blurry because he was too excited to stand still, but it doesn't matter because that joyful smile is all you see anyway.

My husband and I took deep breaths and walked him to school. For my son's part, he fairly floated, seemingly unconcerned. Having decided, he was sure.

The things I imagined happening fell into opposite categories, but both transpired. A lot of children didn't notice, didn't care or stared briefly before moving on. But there were a few who pestered him on the playground and in the hallways, who teased or pressed, who covered their mouths and laughed and pointed and would not be dissuaded by our carefully rehearsed answers.

That lasted longer than I had expected, but it was mostly over within the month.

At the end of that first week, when he was going to bed on Friday night, he was upset about something — weepy, cranky and irritable. He couldn't or wouldn't tell me what the problem was. His eyes were wet, his fists balled, his face stormy.

I tucked him in and kissed him good night. I asked, again, what the matter was. I asked, again, what I could do. I told him I couldn't help if he wouldn't talk to me. Finally I whispered, "You don't have to keep wearing skirts and dresses to school, you know. If kids are being mean, if it feels weird, you can absolutely go back to shorts and T-shirts."

He snapped out of it immediately, sitting up, his face clearing, his eyes drying and brightening. "No, Mama," he chided. I wish I could say that he did so sweetly, but his tone was more like, Don't be an idiot. "I already decided about that," he said. "I never think about that anymore."

It had been three days.

But it was also true. He had already decided. He didn't think about that anymore. And he — she — never looked back. She grew out her hair. She stopped telling people she was a boy in a skirt and started being a girl in a skirt instead.

And we, as a family, decided to be open and honest about it, too, celebrating her story instead of hiding it.

Two years later, our daughter still sometimes wears the green dress, for dress-up and to put on plays, as we imagined her doing in the first place. Now that she can be who she is on the inside and on the outside, on weekdays as well as on weekends, at home and everywhere else, the sparkly green dress has once again become just a costume.

Laurie Frankel, who lives in Seattle, is the author of the forthcoming novel “This Is How It Always Is,” which was inspired in part by the story she writes about here.

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