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# Lesbian Motherhood

by Paula M. Krebs

Lesbian motherhood is much less problematic for me at the moment than feminist motherhood.

My daughter, as you can see from the accompanying article, is 10 years old and a bit of a gender-refusenik. She stopped wearing dresses and skirts in first grade, and she rejects any clothing she associates with “girlie.” She doesn’t reject all things girl. Just all things girlie.

This distinction has been an important one for me to get a grip on, and Ruth takes pains to make it clear to people when they get it wrong. She does not want to be a boy, nor does she prefer boy-related toys or clothes. She leans toward an androgynous look—things that aren’t coded as girl. And that’s what gets her in trouble. Everything that isn’t coded girl, she has discovered, is automatically coded boy. This translates into:

*If you’re not wearing pink or fluorescent or pastel, you’re a boy;*

*If your hair is short, you’re a boy; and*

*If your gender is not immediately apparent, you’re a boy.*

In short, boy is the default position.

This system means that ever since she was old enough to play at public playgrounds, we have had to explain to other children and their parents that Ruth is a girl. When Ruth was a toddler, other children often refused to believe us when we told them she was a girl (“Girls don’t have short hair!”). Even when they had clearly understood she was a girl, they seemed to resent her not playing to type. “Is she a boy?” they would ask us, unable to accept the “she” they somehow knew they had to use. Or, more annoyingly, they would refuse to believe Ruth when she told them she was a girl and would appeal to us, “Is she really a girl?”

Whenever we had this kind of encounter, I would ultimately end up feeling sorry for the kids in question (usually girls). What made them have to enforce gender stereotypes so strongly? Why did they feel so threatened by Ruth’s appearance? Did they secretly think, “I’m not

allowed to look like that, so why is she?”

When children or adults consciously or unconsciously misidentify Ruth’s gender these days, it’s usually up to her to address it—her moms are often not present. This means that my daughter is constantly in the position of having to come out as a girl. This, as you can see from her article, annoys her. But she has found that the alternative—allowing people to think that she’s a boy—makes for lots of misunderstandings and even hurt feelings when the truth eventually comes out.

I have a tremendous amount of respect for my daughter’s resistance to gender norms. My pleasure in watching her cope with difficult situations comes from her willingness to claim a position that is, as she explains, the position of a girl—a different kind of girl. That, it seems, is one of the most difficult positions she could have chosen.

She never comfortably inhabited the familiar position of the tomboy. She did not hang out with groups of boys, never played with trucks or guns or boy-identified stuff, never joined the boys on the playground in preference to the girls. She plays imagination games, likes science toys, reads tons of history. She’s decidedly gender-neutral.

This gender neutrality gets recast as boy or tomboy, especially by adults. Ruth has had instructors in camps and after-school programs who persisted in understanding her as a boy even after they learned her

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name. (It's not like we named her Fred or she goes by a nickname like Bugsy. She's always been Ruth.) A few weeks ago at a birthday party I had to patiently correct the young Ben & Jerry's employee running the party. "She," I said, after the woman referred to Ruth as a "he." "She's a girl."

"Ruth is?" she asked, clearly puzzled. "Yes," I said. "It's a girl's name."

The most problematic and yet most supportive place in relation to Ruth's gender resistance is her school, a small public charter school in Providence. From the beginning of her school years, when boys and girls get sent to different bathrooms, Ruth has had trouble. The school has reacted quite well each time Ruth has been harassed in the bathroom by girls who refuse to believe her when she tells them she is a girl. The principal pointed out to us, after the first incident, that Ruth would have to develop strategies to deal with such encounters if she chose to look as she looks. After some initial defensiveness, I had to agree. And yet, I wondered.

The school has an extensive "social curriculum" about community and race and tolerance (white students like Ruth are in the minority at the school). There's a relatively large number of children of lesbians at the school, of many races and ethnicities, some adopted, some not. The school acknowledges the many different definitions of family within its community, and I have never felt alienated as a lesbian mom at a school event.

But the emphasis on acceptance, on tolerance, on community, while welcoming me as a lesbian and Ruth as a child with two moms, has left

out an important aspect of her identity and ours.

The gender choices that Ruth has made in terms of appearance are not choices the school community encourages. Neither, as far as I can tell, does the school do much to encourage Ruth or other children to make choices about play or about reading that push them outside traditional gender limits. Let me be

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clearer. At the same time as her school laudably emphasizes issues of race and class, it neglects issues of gender.

Time and time again, I arrive to pick Ruth up at school and see the boys playing ball (football, basketball, baseball) with "Coach," the gym teacher, while the girls stand around in corners, chatting. The girls don't seem to want to play, he tells me. Hmm.

It's not that the school is especially egregious in reinforcing gender stereotypes in the curriculum or in

everyday social interactions. It's just that the school has such high standards about discussions of race, pays such conscious attention to issues of class and of ethnicity, and, in fact, is so welcoming of lesbian families, that I wonder why it can't encourage a conscious critique of gender norms as well.

Is it too risky to promote a feminist message if your mission is to serve primarily a minority population? But that's a condescending attitude—after all, if the Latino/a, African-American, and other parents at the school accept lesbian parents, why should we assume that they would reject feminism?

Because, of course, it's one thing to tolerate your child's friend having an alternate family structure, and it's another thing to hear that your child's school is asking the child to question his or her own culture's received ideas about gender. The middle-class aspirations that move straight minority parents to enroll their children in an experimental charter school such as Ruth's are very different motivations from those of middle-class lesbian parents who enroll their children in that primarily-minority-serving experimental charter school.

What kind of gender context would I want for my child in her school experience? When I read her article, in which she explains why she likes her baseball league, I understood for the first time why her school experience is so difficult for her as a girl. The small, multiethnic, nurturing community of her school does not offer her a group of girls who are like her. She is understood to be the one who is different. Everyone respects her, I believe, but she always knows that she is different.





Ruth Buck. [Photo by Paula M. Krebs]

At baseball she is like everyone else. As she notes, she still remains the only one with short hair—but everyone wears the same baseball uniform, everyone plays the same game, everyone is rowdy and wants to succeed. No one talks about dolls, or boys, or clothes. They love to cheer at their games, and all over the league, the favorite cheer goes:  
*We don't play with Barbie dolls;  
 All we play with's bats and balls.  
 We don't wear no mini-skirts;  
 All we wear is baseball shirts.*

The baseball context is neither entirely white nor majority middle class. The Latinas on her team are just as interested in baseball as the Asian-Americans and the African-American and the white girls. As their coach, I have no idea whether any of them do girly things outside of baseball, and I have no desire to know. I think that's why Ruth values the experience so much. She has never had any desire to play baseball on a coed team. It's being on a team of girls like her that she values so much.

Playing baseball allows her to be a girl in the way she chooses to be, and I am very grateful that she has

that opportunity. And I am glad that she seems to suffer so little (so far) in her public school as a result of having lesbian parents. But it makes me angry that my daughter's feminist choices about her own appearance should make life so difficult for her. It's annoying to know that being lesbian

moms is now normative and being feminist moms is still seen as controversial. But it also makes me know that I have to get over my own fear of being seen as culturally insensitive and simply get out in the Parents' Association and push a feminist agenda. I know it'd be better for all the kids at the school, not just my gender-resistant white middle-class daughter of two moms. ♦

## Hardships of Being (or Not Being) a Tomboy

by Ruth Buck, Age 10

The problem is I have short hair, I never wear dresses or skirts or anything pink, and it's just really hard having to explain all the time that I'm a girl. I can't even walk into a bathroom peacefully without being stared at. It's really annoying because people are always making suggestions like I need earrings or something, and I don't want earrings. It's just so annoying.

I start to make a new friend before they know that I'm a girl, and when I tell them—I have to tell them sooner or later—sometimes they don't want to be my friend because I'm different from some girls. I have to tell them because I don't want my friends going around thinking I'm a boy when I'm actually not. Sometimes I've decided not to tell them and see what happens and it all turns into a

fiasco. Not always, but because they've known me for several weeks and I haven't bothered to correct them. And they feel kind of uneasy about that when they find out. I think it's because most people see boys with short hair, pants, and shirts, and see girls as long hair, dresses, skirts.

I like short hair better. I don't wear dresses or skirts because I don't feel comfortable in those clothes. It feels like people are trying to turn me into a different person and not accepting me as who I am.

I refer to myself as a tomboy but I don't really like the word. I don't think there should be such a thing as a tomboy—I'm just a girl, like other girls, but I dress and have my hair differently. Why does that make me a tomboy? I like things boys like and I also like things girls like, but I like things girls like in a different way. I like dolls, but I don't like Barbie dolls or Bratz. I like playing baseball because it's on an all-girls team, and I get to meet a lot of girls who might not have short hair but in other ways they're a lot like me. ♦