

The surprises—and delights—of having a son

I stood in front of a urinal the other day, right behind my three-year-old son. It is only one of many places I never expected to be, and one of many experiences I never expected to have, when I was pregnant and certain I'd give birth to a little girl.

I think I was so sure I'd have a daughter because I had no experience with little boys; they were a foreign land to me, who had grown up in a home with only little girls in it. *And I wanted a girl. I wanted to relive my own childhood with her, reread *The Secret Garden* and *Mary Poppins*, refurbish my old, carefully preserved dollhouse, show off my talent as a clothes designer for paper dolls one more time. What did I know about baseball cards? What did I want to know about baseball cards?*

My child-to-be's father couldn't understand this almost obsessive desire for a daughter. He was concerned about the baby's health, not its gender. I found it hard to explain

BEING SUPERMAN'S MOMMY

to him why I wanted a girl so much, until the weekend early in my pregnancy when we visited his sister and her family in Vermont, and were given her nine-year-old daughter's room to sleep in.

As soon as we arrived at their house, we went upstairs to put our bags away, and on this little girl's bed was something familiar. Lined up neatly in a row lay an assortment of dolls and stuffed animals, all covered to their chins with a small blanket. "There," I said, pointing to the orderly, communal resting place. "*That's why I want a little girl. That I understand.*"

When I learned, via amniocentesis, that I was going to have a son, I was stunned. I thought there must have been a mistake with the tests, that they had mixed up my results with somebody else's. But no, three and a half months later, exhibiting an impatience that turned out to be characteristic of him, my son arrived three weeks ahead of schedule.

And that's when I found out what a jerk I'd been to care about the sex of my unborn child. The fierceness of my love for the small, somewhat battered baby who'd had to be pulled out from me with forceps had nothing to do with whether it was a boy or a girl. I felt like a mommy lion, ready to roar with pride and protect my young with my life. And what I felt, I felt for my child—not my son or my daughter, but my *child*.

Since Jacob's birth, I've thanked almost daily whatever universal wisdom arranged his chromosomes in favor of maleness. My life has taken a whole new direction, and I've acquired a whole new body of knowledge. I've learned more about trucks in the last three years than in all the preceding years of my life. My dollhouse is not some miniature family's home so much as a construction site for daily demolition and repair work. No, I can't relive my childhood with my son, but now that

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by Jenna Hale



Jacob, at one-and-a-half years, ready to take on the world single-handedly

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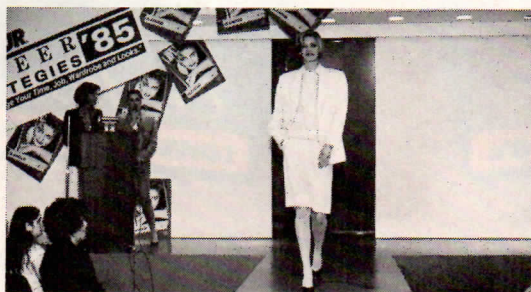
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option looks extremely dull to me.

Being the mother of a son has meant making some adjustments in my sensibilities. Never before have I had such innocent association with the penis, which, in the first days of diapering, I came to see less as a sexual organ than as a trick squirter that often left items like silk blouses fit for nothing but dust cloths. As time went on and my son discovered the wonderful versatility of this appendage, I came to see it as much more: water pistol, fireman's hose, pontoon for the bath (upon which rubber ducks could take their ease), and all-purpose handle and ever-ready ego-booster for its owner. When I think of the limited uses to which I'd always assumed this organ could be put, I pity my own ignorance.

This lack of enlightenment has shown up in many other areas as well. I can't believe, for instance, that before my son was born I was completely ignorant of the existence of the grapple skidder (don't bother looking that up unless you're heavily into forestry), considered fire engines a nuisance, and had never bothered to find out if Popeye was stronger than Bluto, or who, exactly, Aquaman was. I am particularly mortified to admit that the word crane once suggested a bird to me, rather than the most exciting piece of building equipment ever to come from the mind of man.

The way he hugs and kisses me with such generosity and pleasure amazes me; I'd always supposed boys were stingy with their embraces.

Perhaps the most astonishing discoveries I've made in the past forty-two months are those that have forced me to reappraise my assumptions regarding the differences between girls and boys. I am surprised, for instance, at how gentle, affectionate and even maternal a little boy can be. The way Jacob comforts himself by comforting his stuffed bears when he tells me, "they're sad," delights me; I never knew boys could be so in touch with their feelings. The way he hugs and kisses me with such generosity and pleasure amazes me; I'd always supposed boys were stingy with their embraces. His sweet concern for other people's feelings astonishes me; I'd always thought boys were too busy to notice such things. His nursery school teachers tell me that he is the first to comfort another child who's had a fall or a disappointment.

All that said, however, Jacob is all boy—and sometimes more boy than I might wish. During a recent year-and-a-half period when we all lived in the Wonderful World of Trucks (both fire and construction-related), his room looked like a parking garage for the highway department. Conversation was dominated by discussions about the relative merits of the hook-and-ladder truck vs. the

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tanker-pumper when it came to putting out four-alarm fires. All resident stuffed animals had to be evacuated from their resting places at least several times a day as new fires were discovered under the bed, which was itself in need of constant carpentry work, mostly accomplished with a yellow and blue plastic hammer. Until this time I had never understood that a hammer can be as satisfying an instrument for its user as a Steinway baby grand.

These days, we reside in outer space. Family discussions center on the relative strength of He-Man, Master of the Universe (not to be confused with Voltron, *Defender of the Universe*) and Mr. T. Our home is

populated by an assortment of super heroes, one more fearless and hard-hitting than the next. If Mary Poppins ever came for a visit, she'd run for cover.

There are undeniable differences between my little boy and the little girls with whom he plays. They are, on the whole, less energetic and more timid physically than either my son or his male friends. (They could hardly be *less* timid, since this is a three-year-old who is unfazed by the sight of several tough-looking teenagers sauntering down the block. While my own instinct is to cross the street to avoid them, my son prefers to stand belligerently in the middle of the sidewalk and hold up his hand like a traffic cop signaling cars to halt.) Somehow I can't picture any of the little girls who visit our house bursting into her parents' room at

7 A.M. brandishing a sword and proclaiming herself to be Batman *and* Robin, which is the usual way my son's father and I are awakened in the morning.

But the happy fact is that Jacob enjoys playing with these little girls just as much as he enjoys playing with other little Voltrons, and has expressed his wish for a Cabbage Patch doll just as often as his wish for the largest and most vicious-looking gun on the market. (He's not getting either.)

Perhaps, if someone had told me about the delights of the oedipal stage, I might never have been so keen on a girl in the first place. In Jacob's case, this stage seems to have begun about the time he got his eyes to focus, and has yet to end. It has undeniable pleasures: the deliciousness of being hugged and kissed with proprietary zeal; the gratification of being made to feel the most lovely of women, being made to feel incomparable by one who has as yet no basis for comparison; the sweet funniness of inspiring an infantile jealousy that makes my son push his father away from me when he sees us kissing. Obviously these are all things that must be handled carefully, and encouraged to pass, but they can also be secretly enjoyed while they last. Never again will I be so uncritically adored.

In fact, I'm aware that one of my responsibilities as the mother of a son is to encourage my little boy's amorous feelings toward me to be passed along to a woman of his own generation. (So when I say that I'm going to let him start dating just as soon as he reaches thirty-five, I *am* only kidding.)

I'm aware of other responsibilities, too: for instance, making sure that he doesn't expect, from the woman who eventually replaces me in his heart, the same services he receives from me, like rubbing his back until he falls asleep or picking the chocolate chips out of my ice cream for his delectation. I'm even teaching him to pick up after himself.

There's also the matter of handling all that startling male aggressiveness, if not downright belligerence. I would like to make it work in his own service and the service of others, rather than allow it to place him in danger of having several teenagers with no sense of humor step on him. I would like to give him a woman's healthy respect for others' incipient violence, without turning him into a bowl of jelly.

When I look back on the last three and a half years and realize that, given the choice, I would have excluded myself from this new world of experience as the mother of a little boy, I catch my breath and give thanks that chance made a wiser decision than I. Every day I am entrenched more firmly in this feeling. The other night, for instance, when I went into my little boy's bedroom to make sure he hadn't wrestled the covers to the ground while in the midst of dreaming he was Superman, I came upon the following sight: Four baby bears lay neatly next to his pillow, all of them covered up to their little necks with a piece of pink tissue paper purloined from a present I'd received earlier in the day. I looked at those bears and thought: "That I understand." ■

Jenna Hale is the pseudonym of an essayist in New York City.



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