



the pink dress

Four-year-old Sam demands to wear a dress to school, forcing his parents to make a decision: protect him from ridicule or cultivate his self-expression?

BY SARAH HOFFMAN

At seven o'clock on a Thursday morning, my 4-year-old son announced, "I'm going to wear a dress to school today." I froze, teacup halfway to my lips. I shouldn't have been entirely surprised by the statement, given Sam's history on the pink side of the dress-up box, but this time something was different.

The previous weekend, Sam and I had visited his grandma in Malibu. Looking to cool down after a sunny playground romp, the three of us had wandered into a high-end children's boutique. While his grandma and I snickered over rhinestone-encrusted Converse sneakers and \$600 infant sweaters, Sam was drawn to a frilly pink sundress. "Can I have it?" he asked.

I blinked at him. Trying to keep things light, I told Sam the dress was not his size. He dropped his chin to his chest, big blues fixed on me. "Well, are there dresses in my size?" he asked shyly. I paused, trying to decide what to say. "Boys don't wear dresses" came to mind, but that wasn't true—Sam had always loved trying on his girl



friends' princess costumes. "I'm not going to buy you a \$270 dress from this ridiculous store" also came to mind, but that didn't address the point—his or mine. He would be asking the same question about a \$7.99 sundress at Target, and I'd still be wondering why my boy wanted to wear one—and why, really, he couldn't. As I steered him out of the store, Sam started to weep. "I wish I had a pink dress!" he wailed.

"But sweetie," I said in my best calm, concerned mommy tone, "you have two pink dresses. Your princess dress-up costumes are both pink."

"But I want one I can wear to school!"

At 4, Sam has been expressing his preference for pink for half his life. My husband and I have bought him several pink items that fall in the sort-of-odd-but-socially-acceptable range: pink Converse sneakers (hold the rhinestones), pink T-shirts, and—our most risqué to date—a hot pink polo shirt. His grandparents gave him a pair of pink light-up Skechers that he adores. The dress-up box at home overflows with pink tulle, lace, and marabou feathers.

But for public appearances, my husband and I realize that certain things—hair accessories, flowery clothing designs, dresses—are on the other side of a line we haven't been quite willing to cross, one that sits right between eccentric-but-cute and *is-that-a-boy-wearing-that?* We have tried to find a comfortable place on the near side of the line where Sam can express himself without inviting ridicule, and we knew that a pink sundress would go beyond that. But it was starting to look as if Sam was no longer happy within the narrow parameters we'd established to protect him.

I'd wanted to think that this was just a phase for Sam, but I was beginning to understand that it was not. My son wanted to wear a dress—for real, not for dress-up. He wanted to show the other children in his life, in preschool—the place where he expresses himself publicly—his true self. The pink-sundress-wearing self. And I was going to have to figure out what to do.

I am a woman who rarely puts on a skirt or heels, and I was a kid who preferred overalls to frills. The part of me that thinks outside of the gender box looks at Sam and thinks he should wear whatever makes him feel most comfortable and beautiful. And yet ... I am his mother, and my fiercest urge is to protect him. I know that boys who look and act like girls get tormented, beaten up, and beaten down. A dress on a boy feels like an invitation to mockery.

My husband and I didn't know whether Sam was ready to wear a dress to school—or if *we* were ready for him to. We wondered if learning to fit in with the other boys was more important than

expressing the real Sam. Yet we knew that our attempts to steer him toward the masculine were not working, and that he was becoming increasingly resistant to wearing boy clothes in general. More important, we knew that denying his desire to look the way he wants would quash a part of him and make him unhappy, probably in a more fundamental way than we even understood.

So I bought him a dress, a \$10 pink embroidered sundress from Old Navy. I did not decide if it would be okay for him to wear it to school, because I was not ready to decide. I figured he could try it out at home and see how he felt. How *we* felt.

Sam's declaration that he would wear the dress to school saved us, in a way, from having to make a decision. He had already made up his mind. I warned Sam carefully that if he wore it, he would probably get teased. He was undeterred, adamant about wearing the dress; clearly, avoiding teasing was a lower priority for Sam than simply being himself. I could see that standing up for his choices in a relatively safe and supportive environment was a useful life lesson. And it occurred to me that having confidence—being proud of who he is, even if he's different from other kids—is the best defense against the inevitable ridicule.

So we coached Sam, as best we could, on what to say to the children at preschool who might tease him. We role-played the kinds of things he could say back to them. We talked about how much teasing can hurt, and how teasing is wrong. At that morning's drop-off, my confidence in Sam moved up a notch when he announced to his teacher, "Look at my pretty dress! *No one* is allowed to make fun of me."

After school, Sam beamed as he reported that his teachers had said they liked his dress, and the other 4-year-olds had said he looked pretty. But the kids in the 5-year-old class had teased him and told him that he was "girly," that "boys can't wear dresses," and that he "must not be a boy."

"What did you say back?" I asked, hiding my trepidation behind an encouraging smile.

"I said, 'Don't make fun of me! I can be a boy and wear a dress, because it is *my choice*!'"

I couldn't have said it better. I asked Sam how he felt about his day in a dress, and he said, "I want to wear a dress to school again!"

And how did I feel about the experiment? Well, next week is tie-dye week at school. The class parent in charge of ordering the clothes (T-shirts for the boys, dresses for the girls) called to ask if I wanted a T-shirt or a dress for Sam. Touched by her thoughtfulness, I thought I would give Sam the same consideration she had, so I let him decide.

It looks like there will soon be two dresses in Sam's closet. ☺

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STYLING BY HIROSHI YOSHIDA



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