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Real Boys Play with Dolls

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It began when our son was a few months old. We were at the shore for a summer vacation and had found some artsy shops not far from the beach. In one store, my wife, Amanda, approached me, grinning, with a little cotton doll.

"Don't you think this would be great for Nathan?"

"Uh . . . it's a doll."

"Yes, I know. The doll's face doesn't have any expression, to allow the child to use his imagination when playing."

At that, my expression left nothing to the imagination. But because my mother was with us, hell-bent on buying as much as possible for her first grandson, I knew that if my wife wanted it, I was fighting a losing battle. The doll was no more than four inches long, expressionless, apparently genderless, and wearing a sewn-on nightcap that matched his, or her, nightgown.

"I think I'll call him Ollie," my wife said. "Why?" "You know, he's a cute little dolly, and it rhymes: Ollie the dolly. Cute, right?" She seemed pleased at the find, someone else was going to foot the bill, and, after all, we were on vacation.

"Yeah. Cute." I tried to look as expressionless as the limp Ollie in my hand. Nathan was not yet a year old. In the next few years there would be plenty of time to undo this affront to his masculinity. It would mean I would just have to buy him his first BB gun sooner than I'd expected, or start giving him baseball cards and sporting equipment at every religious holiday—even holidays I'd never heard of before.

As the weeks went on, I began a propaganda campaign against Ollie. At every opportunity, I told Nathan that Ollie wasn't a dolly, he—he—was an operative: a highly trained, undercover agent of the US military. Ollie was expressionless because he'd been trained to be impervious to all feelings of discomfort. Even in his night-shirt and floppy cap, he was a lethal weapon. Once, when Amanda caught me reeducating Nathan about the dolly—I mean, operative—she said nothing more than, "Aww, is Daddy playing with Ollie the dolly, too?" My attempts to teach my son—who at first did little more than chew on Ollie—about the doll's true nature and mission were failures.

Over time, Nathan took Ollie with him everywhere. My wife taught Nathan to give him hugs. Hugs! I figured hugging was something a boy stopped doing when he went to kindergarten. I'd stopped willingly hugging my own dad before my first day of school, and didn't resume any such overly emotional father-son displays until after I was married. I assumed that being a guy was all about being tough and strong. Women were supposed to be sensitive nurturers who bandaged cuts and kissed boo-boos; men were supposed to say it was "just a scratch" and rub some dirt on it. Right?

I grew up in the rural south, steeped in traditional gender roles: Girls played with dolls and wore girl clothes, boys played with trucks and wore blue jeans. I wasn't exposed to anything different until I went to college, where my freshman-composition professor made the class read essays about such things as "inclusive language," and then respond by writing an opinion piece. When that first semester was over, my roommate and I still left a seat vacant between us at the movies: Real men respect each other's space. Even the chairman of the psychology department, who used his "Introduction to Ethics" class to drive home his views about vegetarianism, nonviolence, and nontraditional gender roles, had to admit to feeling concern at seeing his son playing with a Barbie doll. Despite being an enlightened and educated man, he, too, drew the line at boys playing with dolls.

So I was not a little pleased when Nathan began leaving Ollie on the car's floorboards or under the table. I knew that having a doll was a fad, something he'd later regret—like a spring-break tattoo. But just when I thought I could go back to daydreaming of our son winning college football's Heisman Trophy, Amanda approached me with an idea for a Christmas present for him.

"Honey, I like these catalogs full of natural toys. Do you see anything in here that Nathan might like for Christmas?" She handed me some catalogs that advertised things like play silks, dress-up outfits, wooden kitchen items for "dramatic play," and... dolls. But this time, the dolls were bigger. There were even photos of the dolls being carried around by boys. My daydreams of Nathan going first round in the NFL

draft were replaced by disturbing images of him walking across the stage at graduation, sucking his thumb and carrying his dolly.

"I like the wooden toys, but I am not going to get him another doll. I absolutely refuse."

"But why? What's so bad about boys playing with dolls?"

I didn't have an immediate answer. The question pushed me to find a logical response to why I felt so set against the notion. But the more I thought about why children play with dolls at all, the more I had to accuse myself of being irrational and reactionary. It's not unreasonable to think that children began playing with dolls and other toys not only for amusement, but also as a form of training for adulthood. In eras when women, by necessity, did the bulk of the community's childrearing, "taking care of" a doll could be a sort of practice for becoming a mother. By the time a woman assisted in the care of other children in the clan or village, or perhaps her own children, she would have already fed, nurtured, cooed at, and rocked to sleep a doll.

Men, also by necessity, were expected to nurture the clan or village in other ways. A boy's makeshift spear, or bow and arrows, were the beginnings of learning the skills he would need to hunt for food—just as a crude hammer or saw would ease his way toward a vocation of converting raw materials into shelter from the elements. I had to admit that my aversion to my son's playing with a doll might be based on obsolete traditions that no longer served their original purposes.

But even if there was nothing inherently wrong with Nathan having a doll, was there any actual benefit to it? When I asked Amanda this question, I was floored by the level of thoughtfulness and insight revealed by her reply.

"Do you want Nathan to someday grow up and be a good dad?"

"Well, I hadn't really thought about it," I said, "but of course I do!"

"So he'll need to have qualities like compassion, sensitivity, and patience, as well as some practical experience with things like holding a baby, right?"

I couldn't disagree. Having refused to hold babies in the past, I had no choice, when Nathan was born, but to learn quickly. And never in his life had my brother looked as uncomfortable as when he held Nathan for the first time. "Of course," I said

"Then the earlier we start teaching him these things, the better. What better way to begin than with a doll?"

She was right. In my own experience, I had already begun to learn that, sometimes, being a man and taking care of others meant doing things that looked a little, well, sissy. I thought about my job as an administrator at a preschool for low-income children. While I handled most of the services for the children's parents, I quickly learned that many preschool children love having men in the classroom. Some men must have little-kid magnets under their kneecaps—I would go into a classroom to drop something off for a teacher, and quickly find two or three kids clinging to my

legs and asking me to sit by them at lunch. Lunch? I'm just dropping off an envelope of paperwork! Despite my resistance, they would continue to cling to me, pleading, turning up to me their poutiest faces, until I would finally give in.

Then would begin my worst nightmare: I had to sing songs with these children, accompanying the tunes with gestures and motions I considered way too goofy for any self-respecting man. Judging by the fact that all three parents volunteering in the classroom were women, I suspected that these kids' dads felt the same way. But I would clumsily trudge my way through "Rockn'Roll Body Parts," even the air guitar, as the other staff laughed at me. Early on in my job, I had learned that these children needed to see people step out of their comfort zones to relate with kids in the kids' own world. It made these children feel needed and loved, and helped them develop a positive self-image and a more positive view of the world around them.

The traditional masculine response might have been to decline, then retreat to the office to push papers, but I knew that the right thing to do was to join in the songs, then sit in a plastic chair built for a five-year-old and listen to these kids talk about their pets and siblings and homes over a tray of dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets and broccoli florets. When someone who didn't have to spend time with these kids would nonetheless enter their world for an hour or two, it made them feel special. I had acted like a sissy for only a short time, but it was the right thing to do. This was a value I would want to see in my son, but without the irrational aversion to doing anything that might be perceived as feminine. Perhaps Nathan's having a doll would allow him to learn such values earlier than I did.

As I read the natural-toy catalogs, I began to see that these companies embodied important values in the ways they made toys. Every so often, there would be a blurb about a company's use of natural materials, or the importance it placed on conservation and environmental activism, or giving back to the community, or simply hiring artisans whose skills were in danger of being lost. These were values that I wanted to teach Nathan about as well—not only through a traditional, fatherly lecture beginning "You know, son, you really ought to think about..." but also through real action and purposeful living. What better way to show him this than being able to pull his toys from a box in the attic when he gets older and tell him about the values of the companies that made those toys?

I also became aware of a paradigm shift that had already taken place in my parenting choices. My dad and I would occasionally talk about what life had been like when he was growing up. He told me that, more than once, he'd heard his father say to his mother, "My job is to go to work and earn money to pay the bills." He shook his head and said to me, "You just can't do it that way anymore." My dad has a tremendous respect for his father, from whom he learned many valuable skills. But Dad made it clear that because my grandfather had accepted his role as breadwinner, the factory sometimes got the best of his time, his energy, and, to a certain extent, his loyalty. That was the value system of his generation: Work hard, give your employer all you have, stay loyal to the brand, and the company will take care of you and your family. However, time has shown that many corporations have been unable to meet such expectations. Nearby communities that once thrived on a solid base of automotive manufacturing now barely subsist on retail and service jobs.

Taking my family and community histories as lessons learned, I decided to become a more involved father. I had never thought that my choices to do such things as

change Nathan's diapers and give him his evening bath were such radical departures from the traditional father role. I'd never thought much about the puzzled looks I got at the grocery store when I wore Nathan in a backpack-style baby carrier. But as I thought about the fathering choices I'd made, I saw that I had already chosen a more nurturing approach because I believed it was in the best interests of our child. This led to a sort of epiphany: By allowing Nathan to have a doll, I would not really be doing anything other than trying to teach him the parenting values I had already learned and accepted for myself.

So on Christmas, our son unwrapped a red-haired, blue-eyed doll that we named Petey. I must admit, Petey has been one of the best teaching tools for modeling humane behavior for Nathan. It's not uncommon for our son to "include" Petey in an activity that Nathan finds enjoyable. He hugs Petey, pats him on the head and back, and sometimes lays Petey down for a nap and covers him with a blanket. And once, when Nathan hit his doll, we asked him, "How do you think that makes Petey feel?" He quickly gave Petey a hug and a kiss in apology.

In a culture that often equates masculinity with violence and exploitative behavior, I can think of no better toy for a young boy than a doll to help him model kindness and responsibility for his actions. Perhaps our ancestors were right to think that training for the responsibilities of adulthood begins with childhood toys. If we want the next generation of men to be good fathers, compassionate citizens, and sensitive leaders, perhaps this process begins with something as simple and as countercultural as a childhood doll.