

## Letter To My Only Brother, And To Kids Who Aren't Quite Kids Anymore

*By Erin Strubbe*

Dear Ethan,

Truth be told, I should have had this conversation with you a long time ago. Or started to at least. You're ten now, turning eleven before the end of winter, and I'll tell you now: things are going to start changing for you real soon. How soon, I'm not sure, but I can promise you that within the next three years, the way people treat each other – and probably the way they treat you – will start to look very different. I can also promise you that these changes will, more than anything else, come in the form of boys and girls learning that there are certain things that are expected of you depending on which of the two you are. Your sister and I, with the help of two unusually open-minded parents, have done our best to make sure you never felt defined by being a boy. And equally, we have done our best to make sure you would never define anyone else by whether they are a boy or a girl either. Though to my knowledge we have never sat you down and explained all of this (it never seemed to be quite the right time, we always told ourselves), since you were little we have told you, silently, through actions rather than words, that there is no wrong way for a person to express themselves. But at this pivotal time in your life, the final years of your childhood, I have decided that the time and place for words is now.

Up to this point in your life, you've probably thought of yourself as a boy, plain and simple. Our sister, our mom, and I are girls, and you and dad are boys, and we are different because of it; what more could there be to it? The answer that I need you to understand by the end of this letter is this: a lot more. A whole lot more. Just recently I had to read an essay called "Masculinity As Homophobia," by a man named Michael Kimmel for one of my classes. You can read it if you like – I know how much you love reading beyond your grade level – but honestly I would recommend waiting until after you find your way to the other side of this mess called middle school until you try. Not because you won't understand it now – I also know as well as anyone what a smart kid you are – but because it just won't mean anything to you until you've lived the experiences he describes.

Defining individuals by their gender starts younger than most people even recognize, Kimmel argues. Kids are not only taught from the time they are born that boys and girls are just naturally different, but they also quickly learn to think that the traits associated with these genders must always be kept separate. There are things for boys, and there are things for girls, children are told, and there must be something wrong with anyone who can't quite be defined by either. I'm sure you have seen plenty of this already; I certainly remember losing my fair share of childhood friends to other boys who made fun of them for hanging out with a girl. But as kids get older this problem gets more pronounced, and the backlash against people who mix gender markers too much for their peer's comfort gets more vicious. "As adolescents," Kimmel says, "we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us..." (104). People talk about how hard it is to be a teenager, and honestly, I think this is a major reason why. Kids your age, on the awkward brink between childhood and adulthood, are taught to hate each other, to hate themselves, for falling short of their own stereotypes. The point both I and Kimmel are trying to make is this: gender has less to do with who you are as a person than with who you're told you have to be. No force of nature dictates that boys must love cars and sports and being dirty, or that girls love dolls and makeup and ballet. You don't have a hidden

corner of your brain telling you how to fix cars, just like I have no gene teaching me how to apply eyeliner. We're not so different, boys and girls; not nearly as different as we're led to believe anyway. And that's the biggest thing you're going to have to keep in mind as you become less like the kid you've been and more like the adult you'll become.

I'm telling you this, Ethan, because I wish I had been warned when I was your age. I won't lie to you: in the coming years you are going to experience a lot of fear and insecurity. Or if by some happy miracle you are the one in a million who is able to maintain every drop of well-earned self-confidence you currently possess throughout your early teens, I can guarantee that you will have had to fight every inch of the way, against the opinions of friends and strangers alike, to keep it. When you are young, no one much cares who plays hopscotch and who plays handball; people may be labeled with the stigmas of their gender from the day they are born, but in the earlier years of their life, other children are classmates, peers, or friends before anything else. But as you get older, this is less and less the case. Expectations and standards for being "normal" will start to spring up around you faster than you can even recognize them and teach yourself to act accordingly. Girls you were once close with might pull away from you, fear you, make fun of you for reasons you won't understand. Other boys will start to talk differently about girls in your class – they will start to single out the girls who still look young, to make fun of the girls who aren't skinny or don't shave or neglect to work to make themselves look like "women." Boys will try hard to be mean and tough, and girls will try just as hard to be pretty and desirable. As you can probably imagine, this makes life very difficult for gentle boys and for girls who are a bit rough around the edges, as well as anyone else whose peers decide they don't fit the roles of "boyish" or "girly" closely enough. But you and I have both lived the past several years of our lives under the same roof as a teenage sister with an eating disorder and an endless appetite for the approval of people who have anything but her best interests in mind, so I know you don't have to imagine.

You have always been an independent person, marching to the beat of your own drum, as Mom would say. This is a luckier place to start than most people get, but it is still no get out of jail free card. I'm being honest when I say that from this point on, gender will constantly influence your life and the way you interact with others. There is no way to escape that (for now at least), and the sooner you come to terms with it, the easier it will be to move on to dealing constructively with this place in society you have been shoved into. There are two phases in this process, and if nothing else, these two things are what I want you to take away from this letter.

First, none of the insecurity or discomfort you will begin to feel as you get older will go away by changing yourself, and nothing is wrong with you for not fitting the strict and standardized mold of "normal teenage boy" laid before you. In fact, the expectations your peers will place on you *are* impossible. No one fits them perfectly. Your school's star athlete with bulging muscles and confidence enough to conquer nations will fit these expectations no better than the scrawny kid at the back of class eating boogers, he will only be better at hiding it. Remember that, Ethan: this perfect person, this perfect man you are told to be *does not exist*. You will never measure up to him because he is not real, and you are. And no one else will ever measure up either, no matter how hard they try, and no matter how harshly they are ridiculed for failing. Because we, as beautiful, imperfect human beings, are so much more than the version of ourselves being sold to us in plastic wrap.

Some people live their whole lives without making it past this first phase. In fact, I would argue that most people live their whole lives thinking that gender is some sort of inescapable

destiny, that they must always change and edit and censor themselves to be more like this mythical “real man” or “real woman.” I do not expect you will be one of these people, Ethan, so I feel comfortable explaining to you what the second phase of understanding gender’s place in your life will be. Phase number two is this: accepting that you now have a great responsibility to guide others down this same path of understanding that you have (hopefully) chosen to walk. It is not enough for you to simply feel comfortable in your own skin if you do not extend the same opportunity to others.

Your friends will try to make fun of the girl in the back of class with an oversized hoodie and unshaven legs: do not let them. You will overhear murmurs and giggles as a boy in your P.E. class struggles to make a single goal: do not let them pass unchallenged. You will see girls get interrupted in class and talked down to for their supposed lack of academic ability: use your voice to lift hers up and *make* people listen. I know you’ve never had much interest in superheroes, but there is one quote from Spiderman that strikes me as being quite fitting here; I’m sure you’ll recognize it: “With great power comes great responsibility.” It is not enough to simply free yourself from living your life in fear of judgment, and from seeing your gender as something that requires a sacrifice of some part of who you are. This might sound harsh, but I wouldn’t say it if it wasn’t important: finding individual strength in yourself independent of gender is meaningless unless you lend that strength to those still struggling to do the same.

I said earlier that for now, there is no way for us to totally escape from the bad things that come with expectations attached to gender. And this is true, but the only way we might one day be able to truly be who we are without being squeezed into a cookie cutter shape of who we ought to be, is if those few (that means you) who recognize how arbitrary and imaginary and harmful these gendered roles are find the strength to pass the torch. As Michael Kimmel said of well-intentioned men who say nothing in the face of the unfair treatment of others, “Our fears are the sources of our silences, and men’s silence is what keeps the system running” (104). I know that the changes and challenges in your own life will be difficult enough to conquer on their own, but as a boy in a male-centered world, and as a person with maturity beyond your years, you have a responsibility to be the change the world needs. You must speak up, speak loud, take the quirks and strangeness and abnormalities that have for so long kept people distant and alien to each other and celebrate them for what they are: proof that humans (whether they are boys or girls or both or neither) are all different and all unusual and all the more beautiful for it.

The stage of your life you are about to enter is universally difficult for just about every human being alive, so you will be getting lots of advice from various wise and perhaps not-so-wise sources over the next few years. I hope mine stays somewhere in your mind, and helps you find your way at some point, as you grow into the remarkable and strange and unique and very much real man I know you will one day be.

Don’t forget to take care of yourself, but always remember to take care of others too.

With love always,

Erin

#### Works Cited

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