

My Son Loves *My Little Pony*

At 7, he already knows that's not OK.

By Sean Williams



For Christmas, I gave my 7-year-old son, Barnaby, a **Rainbow Dash** sweatshirt. Rainbow Dash is a character in *My Little Pony*, and Barnaby loves her. But when he put the sweatshirt on, his face did a complicated dance. He was thrilled to be inside the skin of a character that he thinks is really cool, but there was more. A kind of confusion. And when I suggested he could wear the sweatshirt to school after winter break, he said, "I think it will make the other kids uncomfortable."

Apparently, the authorities at Buncombe County Schools in Asheville, N.C., agree. When Grayson Bruce, a 9-year old boy, was being tortured for carrying a Rainbow Dash backpack, the school responded immediately because they have no tolerance for that sort of thing. They've **forbidden Grayson from bringing his backpack to school**. The bag, Grayson's mother says they told her, is a "trigger for bullying."

Parenting is hard. When your kid is learning to climb the stairs, the hard part is deciding how far up to let him go. He can fall one stair, sure, he can even fall two. He'll learn from that. He definitely *can't* fall the whole staircase, though—he could kill himself. So where do you start interfering? In every situation as a parent that's what we have to ask. I want Barnaby to wear that sweatshirt because he loves that sweatshirt, but what if that's letting him fall from the top step?

When I was a kid, I listened to The Cure and David Bowie for a few years before finally one day dragging an eyeliner pencil under my eyes. I'm pretty sure I felt the same rush of conflicting emotions my son felt when we gave him that sweatshirt. I also knew that it was simply a countdown until the metalheads put me in the hospital. And I was right: My church dance pictures have me with stitches in my face, a missing tooth, and, yes, eyeliner.

It's hard for any kid to bend outside assumed identities, but it's particularly hard for boys who want to embrace their femininity. Women's magazines and princess movies are still a horror show of female subjugation, but the battle against that involves encouraging girls to be as masculine as they want to be. "Strong is the new skinny," etc. But men and boys are mostly shamed for expressing anything outside of the macho ideal.

I don't think getting beat up for being different is a rite of passage. I also don't think it's necessarily something parents (or kids) can avoid. But when I wore eyeliner to school, I was also dressed in a jean jacket on which I had written, "I Don't Believe You Exist." In other words, I wanted to piss people off. Barnaby does not want to piss anyone off. It doesn't sound like Grayson did either. (In news reports, he's quoted as saying, "They're taking it a little too far, punching me, pushing me, calling me horrible names, stuff that really shouldn't happen." Yes, Grayson, that is a "little too far.") And I'd bet neither did **Michael Morones**, the North Carolina sixth-grader who attempted suicide, apparently after being bullied for loving *My Little Pony*.

Do you know about *My Little Pony*? It's great. The show has its own mythology and the central tenet is the six Elements of Harmony. These are six characteristics that, when combined, can change the world for the better. Kindness, generosity, honesty, laughter, loyalty, and magic—these are the tools that the heroines of *My Little Pony* use to get out of every mess.

We can all agree on that list, right? It's a good one. What you don't find is ambition, or aggression, or force of will. This is not a list of traits that are considered masculine. And despite the fact that we hear more and more about "**the trouble with boys**"—they're five times more likely to be expelled from school and four time more likely to be diagnosed with learning disorders, and girls score 15 percent higher in "**behavior**" categories—anything a boy does that seems girly is openly mocked. And that mockery now has tacit approval in Buncombe County.

I didn't make Barnaby wear his Rainbow Dash sweatshirt to school. I'm sad that at 7, he already knows what wearing it would mean. I don't need him to stand on the front lines. But he wears it at home.

Rainbow Dash is Barnaby's favorite character mostly because she's athletic and bold, and he doesn't really feel like he's that in his life. There's an episode of the show called "Read It and Weep," where Rainbow Dash is laid up in the hospital and she falls in love with reading adventure books. Barnaby was into that because it seemed like she was more like her nerdy friends.

There's also an episode where a character visits from "Manhattan" and starts bullying the other kids. It turns out that she bullies because she's being bullied at school herself, and the ponies figured out how to break the cycle by simply being kind. Barnaby loved that episode.