

The Gender Thing

It's easy to see how parenting in a traditional two-parent, two-gender, family can have its advantages when gender issues start to creep out from behind the sofa. When I found out I was having a boy it occurred to me that issues would probably arise that I was not gender-trained to handle. I tried to prepare myself as best I could but I wasn't sure exactly what would come up or when.

The first such situation took me a little by surprise when my son was 2 1/2 and ready to potty-train. It occurred to me, for the first time, that I had no concept of how to pee standing up, nor how to explain it to Dev. So, in the beginning, I encouraged him to sit and he went along with that, not fully aware he had any other options. But, at daycare he gradually realized that some of the other boys were doing it differently and he just had to be like them.

I turned to the teachers, asking how they handled it. They were all women. How did they explain to the little boys the art of peeing while standing?

"We encourage them to sit," was the flat answer.

Sitting was quickly becoming less and less of an option, so we gave it a try. He tried standing. I tried helping and encouraging. We ended up with a big mess and a ton of laundry.

Finally I turned to friends.

"How does your husband do it?" I asked. In turn, one of my friends actually asked her husband, reporting back the details.

"He'll probably need to use two hands," he warned. "At least to start, until he gets used to it. Make sure his feet are apart and his clothes are out of the way." The details went on, while I tried to visualize the process so I could help my son.

We had greater success but we were still uncomfortable, unsure of what we were doing. And then the solution hit me – we went to my sister's house and her husband spent the weekend helping Dev perfect this uniquely male talent.

It was during a discussion of this scenario, with a male friend of mine, that the question of boy's briefs came up. I knew no more about my son's little briefs than that they were cute. But, what of that mysterious flap in the front, where the fabric folds over and a gap is left like a secret passageway? What's that all about? I assumed it was for quick and ready access, facilitating the process of stand-up peeing. An aspect I had already resolved to ignore.

"God no," my friend gasped, horror on his face. "The poor kid would hurt himself. The opening isn't big enough to do that sort of manipulation."

Images of my son going through some torturous acrobatics with his little-boy parts flashed through my mind. All because I had no clue about guy's underwear. The opening, my friend went on to explain, provides room to move and breathe; some give-and-take so nothing gets too cramped.

Having survived this ordeal, I took a deep breath and prayed the next issue wouldn't come up for awhile. Alas, it was not long before we entered into the-naming-of-the-parts phase. My son, suddenly aware that there were differences between boys and

girls, wanted labels for these differences. He wanted to know what everything was called.

I was determined to give him these names in a matter-of-fact, no-nonsense, and truthful way. I wanted him to know the actual names and to have some respect. And so, quietly, subtly, I answered the questions as they came up, feeling rather secure in my approach and my success.

Then one day I woke up to my son, standing beside my bed, panic in his voice.

"Mama, Mama!"

I snapped my eyes open, instantly concerned.

"What is it? What happened?"

"Mama, your breasts are on the floor!" He pointed across the room to where my bra lay, hastily discarded the night before. He had the names and the respect, even concern, but he was still lacking some understanding.

I pulled him into my bed, wrapping my arms tightly around him. Smiling, I reassured him that all was fine and everything was exactly where it was supposed to be.