

CHARLIE'S LITTLE ANGELS

BOYS IN TIARAS

When it comes to girls wanting to play football, we're all gung-ho about sexual equality. But what about when your little lad wants a princess party, asks mother-of-two Charlotte Butterfield



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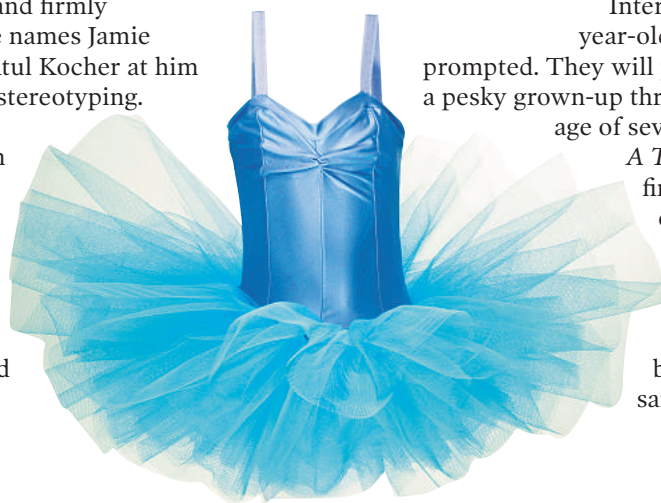
My daughter, who's turning five, would like a Barbie house and a princess party, and my little boy, who's turning three, would like a Barbie house and a princess party. Yep, true story.

Writing this, a large part of me wants to say, "Darling boy, you can be Cinderella and you can go to the ball," and maybe if I'd had children during my heady student days where I resisted every social norm possible and joined every nonconformist student march going, I may well now be planning two princess parties and hammering together two dolls' houses. Instead I'm putting the finishing touches to a pirate party and constructing a garage no one really wants.

Having an older sister that he idolises of course contributes to my son's desire to copy everything that she likes, but the fact remains he is actually happier in fairy wings than a superhero cape, and we've had more than one trip to Spinneys with him wearing a tiara and carrying a handbag. This get-up on a little boy who resembles a rugby player in the first row of the scrum invariably prompts a reaction from everyone we pass. Other mums beam knowingly and nod appreciatively, dads suppress a wry smile and shoot a supportive look at my husband and couples without children look at each other with raised eyebrows, and that unspoken sentence, "When we have children my darling, rest assured that won't happen," hanging like a blinking neon sign above their heads.

I remember being horrified when I asked my friend if I could buy her son a toy kitchen for his birthday and her husband firmly vetoed it. I recall shouting the names Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsey and Atul Kocher at him in exasperation at his gender stereotyping. And yet, little by little, it has crept into my own psyche. I'm appalled by this - I believed I'd be a bohemian mother galloping through fields barefoot with my offspring making up songs about leprechauns. But it turns out I'm not as carefree as I aspired to be.

"I have no hesitation in enrolling my daughter in a football club. So why do I feel so sheepish when I let my son wear a tutu to Dubai Mall?"



There was an article recently in a UK newspaper about a couple bringing their child up 'gender neutral'. They wanted to raise their child free from society's preconceptions about gender so they spent the first five years dressing the infant in both girls' and boys' clothes, giving 'it' both dolls and cars, waiting for 'its' natural preferences to take shape.

The ardent feminist in me (who has lain increasingly dormant in recent years, but has been known to insist on using the term 'herstory' rather than 'history' when referring to women in the past), celebrated this idea. I agree with using gender-inclusive language - firefighter, flight attendant, police officer - and I have no hesitation in enrolling my daughter in an after-school football club. So why do I feel so sheepish when I let my son wear a tutu to Dubai Mall? Turns out the Queen of Double Standards is alive and well and living in Jumeirah 1.

I think the crux of it is that however much we all pretend we don't care what other people think, we're socially conditioned to. We want people to think we're proficient at work, not unpleasant in appearance and pretty decent parents. So when eyebrows are raised and whispers are spoken, it makes you second-guess yourself, which is wrong. We should be encouraging of each other, not judgemental.

I asked Carmen Benton, managing director of Life Works Counselling and Development Centre, what she thought. She says, "Parents should allow a child to find out who they are and what they like doing for themselves, rather than make them do certain activities or wear certain clothes that they deem right."

Interestingly, Carmen says that most three-year-olds have fixed gender roles without being prompted. They will play in a girly or boyish manner without a pesky grown-up thrusting a car or a doll in their face. By the age of seven, the playground is starting to resemble *A Tale of Two Cities*, with boys and girls firmly divided in their growing disdain of each other - a feeling that will take them through to their mid-teens, when they then decide that, actually, the other sex isn't quite so bad after all. And that's a whole other column to write, but thankfully for me (and my husband's sanity), not for another ten years. **A**