



Barkin, Janna. (2017). He's Always Been My Son: A Mother's Story About Raising Her Transgender Son. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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Janna Barkin's book, "He's Always Been my Son: A Mother's Story about Raising Her Transgender Son," is a memoir that recounts the upbringing of her transgender son Amaya and his transition from female to male, paired with advice and resources for families who are facing similar circumstances. In discussing Amaya's transition, Barkin emphasizes two themes: (1) the struggle for acceptance transgender individuals face and its importance; and (2) the role of the family concerning an individual's gender and gender identity. Birkin utilizes two formats to outline the conversation, one of framing transition into stages typical for transgender people (the before years, the early years, the tween years, the transition years, and the complete) and the other of various perspectives ranging from herself, her husband, extended family, friends, and Amaya on his transition. The book is organized into a glossary, chapters that navigate Amaya's transition, a postscript, and resources for transgender youth and families with the overall purpose to educate and inspire others.

Barkin points out that the lack of acceptance for trans people is a significant factor contributing to the challenges they face. In her son Amaya's case, he faced situations where his presence as a transgender boy was unwelcomed. A stark example was an experience he had when he met his online friends, one of the girl's moms said her older daughters knew about Amaya, and

they did not approve- threatening to tell their dad (her ex) that a transgender kid was visiting their sister. The girl's siblings did not accept Amaya based on his identity as a trans boy and held discriminatory views against him. Barkin noted that her son learned that "not everywhere was open and understanding toward people who are different from them, especially toward LGBT people" (p. 171).

Moreover, Barkin asserts that the scantiness of acceptance for the transgender community has led to others viewing certain traits such as being gender-nonconforming as threatening. She recalled an incident where the parents of another child were concerned about Amaya's well-being and had asked, "Why do Amaya's parents make her dress that way?" (p. 79). The lack of acceptance and understanding around the concept of an individual not adhering to society's gender norms made those parents believe Amaya's well-being was at risk because he didn't dress according to his gender biology.

Further, Barkin argues that with familiarity comes acceptance and the latter is proportionate to the former. By telling her family's story, she intends to increase the knowledge and conversation around transgender youth and grow acceptance for them. She explains how the lack of acceptance for children's actions that are uncommon to their assigned gender leads to many responses such as more robust behaviour, quelling of feelings, the rise of other concerning behaviours, or attaining hope that it's just a phase. Barkin describes her own journey of acceptance evolving over a long period that mirrored Amaya's journey of accepting himself. One piece of evidence that Barkin provides for how acceptance increases with familiarity is a study that outlines

how LGBT individuals view "greater social acceptance [coming] as a result of more Americans knowing someone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender" (p. 297).

According to Barkin, family plays a large part in how an individual perceives their gender identity and influences one's understanding of it in earlier stages. Barkin regrets one specific incident correcting Amaya when he expressed he wanted to be a grampa and talking it out with him to conclude that he was a girl instead. In Barkin's perspective she "[felt] strongly now that this was a pivotal moment for [Amaya]. When [she] discounted his early and perhaps first affirmation, he internalized what [she] said, and he was not able to talk about being a boy until years later, after much inner turmoil and counseling (p. 70). Although Amaya was beginning to understand his own gender identity as a boy, Barkin inserting her understanding of who he was changed how he saw himself for the time being, despite it not being congruent with his real gender identity.

Further, a family may also control how their child expresses themselves, whether it matches up with their gender identity or not. Amaya's childhood best friend K revealed that she was jealous of Amaya because his parents allowed him to wear boy's underwear and have a boy's cut, which her parents were against. Barkin makes that realization that "by allowing [their] child to express himself and be himself, [they] were making a particular statement about parenting. [They] were taking a stand. [They] were choosing to honor our child's wishes even though they ran against the mainstream gender norms of the day. (p. 78). K's parents evidently controlled how their child presented herself even though it went against what she honestly wanted. Barkin understands that by allowing Amaya to be his true self, she broke away from normalized parenting behaviour of enforcing your child's outward appearance to align with their biological sex.

On top of that, Barkin stresses the importance of families supporting and helping a child develop their gender identity and expression; by building a proper structure that can provide a safe space to explore one's gender, the transgender community can significantly benefit. She proposes for parents to be proactive and support their child's explorations, especially if they recognize early on that their child is questioning themselves regarding gender. Children who express themselves in ways that do not conform to gender norms require a solid and knowledgeable support system to help them; otherwise, "trans and gender-expansive youth without family support... [are] in the highest risk pools for depression, anxiety and suicide" (p. 120).

Defining the stages of transition was a strong point for Barkin, especially when she likens them to childhood development phases; comparing these transition steps with an established psychological understanding of human development speaks to their significance. Transition begins with the before years, where the child has no sense of self other than what their parents project on them (aligning with psychological development). The early years follow, bringing in a new stage where children start expressing themselves in ways that may not be oriented with their assigned gender (lining up with when there is an emergence of a sense of self in childhood development). Next are the tween years, where incongruence is present, but it's unclear for both the child and parent. Overall, it's a confusing stage, and the child might start experimenting as well (which is an in-between phase on par with the tween years of psychological development). The transition years is when the individual is affirming their gender and living out as their true selves, this may include name and pronoun changes amongst other actions. Further, the complete stage is when an individual has decided that their transition has finished, some may never feel complete with their

transition, but it all depends on the person and where they are with themselves. Additionally, Barkin incorporates different perspectives from Amaya's close ones throughout his transition, which adds to the overall memoir. She also provides helpful resources for transgender youth and their families at the end, on top of a glossary that details the essential words used for gender identity purposes.

Overall, Barkin intended to inspire and educate others on parenting and understanding potential transition stages for transgender children, which she accomplished with "He's Always Been my Son: A Mother's Story about Raising Her Transgender Son." She discussed the impact of the lack of acceptance for the transgender community and the role of family in relation to an individual's gender, powerfully backing it up with Amaya's experiences and statistics. The framing of transgender transition in stages gave valuable insight -along with the various perspectives- on Amaya's transition. Individuals specifically in the sociology and psychology discipline would greatly benefit from the story and lessons shared in this book. For me, Barkin's memoir was a learning opportunity, and I believe I have come out being more informed about the transgender community and the tribulations they face. This book is a crucial piece that succeeds in educating on a marginalized and stigmatized community; we can all become more enlightened on what a transgender individual experiences growing up through reading it.