



**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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“He’s Always Been My Son” is Janna Barkin’s personal account of parenting Amaya, her transgender son, and is designed to help individuals adapting to life during a transition. Janna Barkin describes raising her transgender son by: (1) giving a chronological account of her son’s transition; (2) relating her personal experiences and feelings; (3) allowing her family to contribute their thoughts; and (4) discussing the unique problems transgender people and their families face. These themes in Barkin’s book may help individuals better understand the unique experience that transgender people face and learn to better support transgender individuals.

Barkin has organized her book into six parts that define her son’s transition on a timeline. For readers who are parenting a transgender child, Amaya’s stages through his transition may give them an idea of how their child’s transition could look. Amaya’s “before years” were when he showed “no obvious signs” of recognizing his own gender identity (Part 1). “The early years” are when a child first starts to express themselves in alignment with their inner feelings gender identity (Part 2). “The tween years” are commonly known to be some of the most challenging years in a youth’s life because of the confusion that comes leading up to puberty, and Barkin contends that these years are when one is living in the “*in-between*” and may express their struggle surrounding their identity (Part 3). “The transition years” are when Amaya worked through his transition,

lasting from early to late teens (Part 4). In the “Complete” stage, individuals have completed their transition and can “live comfortably as their authentic, affirmed self” (Part 5). Lastly, in “Now (And Beyond),” Barkin talks about the aftermath of transitioning (Part 6). Although there will be individual differences for each transgender person’s transition, these stages of Amaya’s experience outline the struggles that come with transitioning that are not just unique to him.

Barkin talks about her thoughts and feelings during her son’s transition, but most importantly, her growth in being a positive support for him. From a personal perspective, Janna Barkin suggests the importance of embracing and opposing tradition. She embraces the tradition of naming by familial lineage, and she opposes the Jewish practice of circumcision. Janna retains some of her family’s values while still being open-minded when facing new challenges, such as Amaya’s transition. Barkin admits that she had closed-minded feelings when Amaya first started showing signs of gender non-conformity, like when he requested to wear boys’ underwear. However, she acknowledges that supportiveness and allyship for transgender individuals can be the difference between life and death. The fact that LGBTQ youth have the “highest suicide rates” and “transgender youth are most at risk for suicide attempts” reinforces the need for supportive adult figures (Part 2; Part 4). Barkin contends that children with non-accepting parents will “protest with even bolder [gender] expression” (Part 2). By allowing Amaya to express himself freely, even at a young age, he has become a well-adjusted transgender individual, reinforcing Janna’s emphasis on the importance of “knowledgeable, flexible and patient” parenting when dealing with non-conforming gender expression in children (Part 3). Supportiveness should apply to all members of a family and overall, to everyone in society. She opposes traditional viewpoints of

gender and sexuality, and by doing so, she encourages that families be open to gender-nonconformity and freedom of expression in their children. Barkin's personal documented use of open-minded supportive parenting methods could be a helpful reference for other parents who are unsure of how they can be there for their LGBTQ children.

Barkin includes thoughts from her family and friends in her book to show how social support has contributed to her son's transition. Family friend Tracey Klapow talks about her struggle with adapting to Amaya's transition, especially when using his correct gender pronouns, which had changed from she/her/hers to he/him/his. Tracey's contribution to the book implies that there will be mistakes when adapting to a transgender individual's correct pronouns. It is okay as long as one corrects themselves and respects that individual's pronouns. Lisa Treadway, a teacher and friend of Janna, talks about the shift in educational attitudes toward gender and the recent recognition that it is not "your body that makes you a boy or a girl" when teaching students about gender and sexuality (Part 2). Changing attitudes toward gender non-conformity reflect that more people recognize that there is not just a gender binary, but rather "beautiful, normal variation[s] of being human" in terms of gender and sexuality (Part 2). This helps children acknowledge that, sometimes, inner feelings of gender do not match the physical body. Amaya attended an alternative school that acknowledged the struggles of transgender individuals, which influenced his academic performance and well-being in a significant way, showing the importance of educational professionals who are aware of gender and sexuality differences in students. Gabriel Barkin, Janna's husband and Amaya's father, also discusses the recent change in attitudes and his past use of derogatory terms like "faggot" and "trann[y]," which cause harm to LGBTQ individuals (Part

3). Eliminating offensive slurs from one's vocabulary contributes to recognizing "the equal and respectful value of gay relationships and commitments" (Part 3). Emily, Amaya's sister, claimed that his transition "vastly improved his ability to show himself and demonstrate his love outwardly," suggesting the importance of allowing transgender people the right to transition and be their true selves (Part 4). All of these family and friend statements included in Janna's book reinforce the fact that support from families, friends, peers and schools positively impact the experience of LGBTQ individuals. Learning about other people's perspectives can help the friends and family members of those going through a transition.

The LGBTQ community faces many struggles different from heterosexual, cisgender people due to the enduring stigma associated with gender (or sexuality) non-conforming people. People who vary from traditional 'norms' face lasting discrimination, among other issues. Barkin notes children may "suppress their feelings" of their true gender identity because of confusion and fear of judgment (Part 2). This suppression may lead to feelings of loneliness or identity problems. Many transgender children and youth are restrained from expressing their authentic selves by their parents; however, this was not the case for Amaya due to his parent's unconditional acceptance of him (Part 2). Another concern for transgender individuals is using public washrooms – typically labelled as female or male – which can cause stress around being harassed, assaulted, or even misgendered. Barkin's mention of the washroom issue emphasizes the need for public facilities to provide gender-neutral washrooms. For individuals like Amaya who are transitioning to male, menstruating, the growth of breasts is a "monthly reminder of who he is *not*" and causes feelings of gender dysmorphia (Part 3). Although there are solutions to these problems, they can be difficult

to achieve and even painful. For example, chest binders can “reduce the feeling of dysmorphia,” however, they can cause “shortness of breath and digestive issues” (Part 4). Transgender people go through challenging things to reduce negative feelings associated with the physical misalignment with their actual gender identity. In some situations, transgender people will change their name to one that better suits their gender. Using old names or pronouns can cause negative feelings for transgender people, so it is important to focus on using an individual’s correct name and pronouns. Testosterone injections also have side effects, such as mood imbalance (Part 4). Regardless of the struggles transgender individuals may face during their transition, Barkin strongly emphasizes that “the risk of *not* allowing [transgender people] to start hormonal treatment would likely be worse than any possible side effects” (Part 4). This statement serves to ease parents’ concerns with worries about their child going through a medical transition. Barkin contends that allowing a child to transition will significantly enhance their well-being and is the most prominent way parents can support their transgender child.

Janna Barkin’s book provides a great reference on transgender people for friends, families and teachers of transgender people. This book is also useful for those interested in psychological, sociological, and anthropological studies in gender and sexuality, as well as social workers, child and youth workers, and health care workers. More importantly, this book is a tool for everybody to learn the struggles of the transgender community and how to be an ally. Barkin promotes that everyone should learn to be an ally to the LGBTQ community and discusses ways in which one can support these individuals by using her own experience and her family’s experience of supporting Amaya and first-hand thoughts of Amaya as a transgender male. One negative aspect

of this book is that it addresses a very fortunate individual. Many transgender people do not have the same level of support Amaya had through his transition. It would have been useful to include more perspectives of other transgender individuals. However, this book is an insightful piece looking into the life of transgender individuals that is great for anyone looking at how to be a better ally. I truly enjoyed learning about Barkin's experience parenting Amaya and Amaya's struggles as a transgender man.