



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 beautiful, heartwarming, inspiring and well-written educational story of Amaya's transition from female to male. The book is divided into sections that illustrate each stage of Amaya's transitional journey. The book is written mainly from the author's perspective, Jenna Barkin, who is Amaya's mother. Barkin provides a lot of insightful information about her own experience of raising a transgender child. Throughout the book, readers will find that the story is also told from the perspective of friends and family of Amaya. Having different perspectives throughout the book is very educational since readers get to understand and learn about how each family member felt about Amaya's transitioning process, and perhaps this information will allow readers to relate or learn from their experience.

The book begins with terminology, which is extremely insightful and educational and acts as the book's fundamental building block. By beginning the book with terminology, it gives the readers the knowledge that is needed to better grasp the book the further it progresses. For example, Barkin discusses how gender has three components: gender biology, gender expression, and gender identity and explains how these defer. This is significant because readers will see Amaya go through each gender component. Furthermore, Barkin defines different transitioning

levels such as social transition, legal transition, medical transition, and surgical transition; Barkin states that each "transition broadly encompasses the many changes a person makes in order to affirm and live consistently with their gender identity" (p. 23). Barkin also educates readers of words that have become outdated or are no longer appropriate due to being offensive, such as "gender identity disorder," which is now known as "gender dysphoria" in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Throughout the book, Barkin makes it very clear that the transitioning process may look different for different individuals. Barkin notes that each transgender person will have their own unique experience during their journey, such as whether or not they will use a puberty blocker. Puberty blockers, according to Barkin, gives "a child time to explore and understand their gender identity and allows them to undergo puberty in a manner that best aligns with their gender identity" (p 85). Barkin incorporates different transitioning stories of different individuals to emphasize that one's transitioning journey may not appear the same as another to enhance the notion that everyone has their own unique transitioning story; therefore, one's transitioning experience might not be identical to someone else's transitioning experience. One example that Barkin writes about is Jazz Jennings transitioning story, Jazz who was "a natal boy, [that] insisted from 18 months of age that she was a girl" (p. 75). Jazz enrolled in kindergarten as a girl, which is her affirmed gender, meaning living and moving "about in the world as their affirmed, true gender" (p. 29). Jazz's transitioning process differs from Amaya's in that Jazz's transforming process began earlier in her life than Amaya's. Jazz's journey demonstrates how one might transition earlier or later in life; everyone will have a different age when they feel ready to go by their affirmed gender.

Additionally, it is worth noting that each transgender individual might have a different definition when it comes to “feeling complete” or “done” with their transitioning process; Barkin makes a note of this throughout the book, and she dedicates a whole chapter to it. Barkin acknowledges that “each person will experience their own unique process of transition, and only that person can say if their process is ever complete or not. Some people may even complete their transition at one point in life, only to initiate a new transition later on to comport more fully with a growing sense of self” (p.127). For example, Barkin's son Amaya felt "complete" after top surgery and hormone therapy when he was around the age of 17; therefore, Amaya felt "complete, for now." The phrase "complete, for now" is an excellent statement since some transgender people never feel complete, and if they do, they may desire to continue their transitioning process later in life.

Barkin also emphasizes the difficult realities and struggles that transgender people and LGBTQ members face. Barkin states, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) youth have among the highest suicide rates in the nation. While more studies are needed, currently it is believed that at least twenty percent of transgender youth have attempted suicide, and rates as high as forty-one percent have been cited” (p. 14). Furthermore, Barkin discusses gender dysphoria, which is something transgender individuals experience. Gender dysphoria is defined by Barkin as “a profound, persistent state of unease or dissatisfaction, anxiety, or depression that occurs when a person’s internal sense of who they are does not align with the sex assigned at birth” (p. 22). Barkin discussed Amaya's experience with gender dysphoria and offered recommendations to the readers on how to avoid or reduce gender

dysphoria. Barkin noted that Amaya's growing chest was a big cause to his gender dysphoria; thus, Barkin advises puberty blocks to help avoid part of the gender dysphoria by preventing a child from going through the wrong puberty.

Furthermore, Barkin emphasizes the importance of providing a supportive environment in which a transgender child can explore their identity. Barkin indicated that forty-two percent of LGBTQ identified youth ages thirteen to seventeen stated that “the community in which they live is not accepting of LGBT people [and that] twenty-six percent said their biggest problems were ‘not feeling accepted by their family/trouble at school/bullying,’ and fear to be ‘out/open’” (p. 15). Barkin acknowledges that she, her family, and her immediate family circle are quite progressive and have embraced Amaya's transition. Throughout the book, readers will notice that Amaya's parents tried their best to follow his lead and provide him with a loving, accepting, and safe environment in which he could be himself and explore his gender identity. For example, when Amaya was little, his parents allowed him to dress as he pleased, even though others thought he dressed inappropriate for his gender. The parents noticed that Amaya was “happy wearing “boy” clothing, he was more comfortable” (p. 53).

Amaya being able to wear “boy” clothing at a young age led to miss gendering Amaya. During the time when Amaya was a child his pronouns were “she” and not “him.” However, Amaya did not mind the miss gendering, he identified himself as “one of the boys” (p. 53). During the early stages, before Amaya decided to transition and change his pronouns from she/her to he/him, Amaya's parents would correct his pronouns when people referred to their “daughter” as a male, which Barkin thought at the time was causing Amaya embarrassment.

However, Barkin explains that by correcting Amaya's pronouns they "didn't actually avoid his embarrassment; rather, our verbal defense was often the cause of embarrassment" (p 72).

I believe that this book can be beneficial for many different audiences. Whether that is academics like psychologists or sociologists who wish to further their knowledge in regards to the transitioning process, parents who may have a child who wishes to transition or may be struggling with their gender identity, or for the child themselves to feel as though they are not alone. Although the author makes it clear that this is not a step-by-step process guide to transitioning, Barkin emphasizes throughout the book that everyone's transitioning journey is unique. This book is able to help all different types of readers who wish to learn more about the hardships that transgender people go through and how their journey impacts the people around them. Overall, I believe that this book sheds light on the transgender community and was able to help me grasp a better understanding of it. I would recommend this book to anyone who wishes to expand their knowledge.