



Not for Ourselves Alone: Gender Politics and Parenting in the 21st Century

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I Was Still A Little Girl, I Was A Little Girl in A Bra

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By **Juliet C. Bond**, April 9, 2015 at 5:35 am

During Sexual Assault Awareness Month, "Not for Ourselves Alone" is running a special series called 30 Days of Bodyshaming, designed to give a voice to the many different experiences of girls and women. This series will feature guest posts by professors, writers, a nutritionist, a cartoonist, young girls, and mothers. Gut wrenching and honest, these stories are presented in an attempt to bring about a deeper understanding of the plight of girls and women as we make our way in world that, for us, is hostile at its best and violent at its worst.



I Was Still A Little Girl, I Was A Little Girl in A Bra

by Debi Lewis

I needed a bra in the middle of my sixth grade year. Like my mother, and her mother, and probably *her* mother, my breasts grew early and eventually large. I was eleven when my mom bought me what she called a "training bra." In reality, it was just a regular bra. It felt awkward – scratchy and thick, with buckles and hooks that always tangled and dug into the soft parts of me that still felt like a little girl.

But in truth, I was still a little girl. I was a little girl in a bra.

My nipples hurt as they grew, and I remember the justification for bra-wearing was that they poked out visibly under my shirt. Something needed to cover those tiny bumps. Those bumps betrayed that I wasn't a little girl anymore.

The problem was that once I was wearing a bra, it was easy to see *that*, too. I could see the outline of the bra straps through my shirt, could see them in the back, too, as I looked in the mirror. I was so small everywhere else that not only was I one of the first girls in my grade to wear a bra, but I was also the littlest of all of them. I was so short that the straps had to be tightened as high as they'd go, and one day, I remember loose ends of my bra straps sticking out near my armpits when I wore a tank top.

"Hey, Debi," a boy whose house we were visiting snickered at me as he shot baskets in his driveway, "the next time you wear a tank top, maybe you ought to wear a bra that doesn't hang out of it."

I cried to my parents later that I didn't want to wear a bra anymore, that I dreaded changing in the locker room at school because the other girls jeered and laughed at me, turning my own name against me as they walked behind me and snapped my bra as I scrambled to get dressed. "De-BRA!!!" they shouted. "Hey, De-BRA! Nice BRA! What?! We're just saying your NAME. Isn't your name De-BRA?!"

"It's Deborah," I'd answer. "And you'll wear one too, eventually." Only I actually answered that just in my head.

My parents only knew that we had to hide my nipples, the mere sight of them, by covering them with something that, even if everyone could tell I was wearing it, was a socially acceptable garment. So, I wore my bra. I wore it, and eventually everyone else was wearing one too, and the snapping and teasing stopped. Some girls had bigger breasts. Some girls had tiny breasts. No one I knew was happy with them, not completely. And why would they be? We were all taught to cover our offensive, horrifying nipples the minute their shape was visible.

Somewhere between the beginning of high school and the end of college, I learned about cleavage and the parts of our breasts we might want to show. I learned about the different kinds of bras used to cover or reveal the most stylish parts of our breasts, depending on what was in vogue. I learned that my breasts – big cups on a small girl – turned out to be just the thing many guys wanted, and I took to wearing scoop-necks, v-necks, plunging lines, and strong underwire bras that lifted.

When I mentioned later in life how much I hated wearing a bra at first, my parents laughed and told me that I *wanted* to need a bra, that I was *worried* about not getting breasts. I have no memory of this. I sometimes wonder if that's a story that was fed to all parents of pubescent girls in those years, or if my parents misinterpreted my worry about when a bra would become necessary as a desire to make it happen faster. Also, maybe even the boys had been instructed as to what they were supposed to like. Someone pulled me aside at my own engagement party and told me that my fiancé had always liked pale girls with big breasts, like me.

All of these rules about my breasts! All of these things I was supposed to want to hide, want to show, want to accentuate, want to have or not have, love or not love! I never did know how to feel about them. From the moment they appeared, no one ever gave me five minutes to consider that question myself.

Then I had babies. My breasts, in pregnancy, grew to a preposterous size, and my husband and I marveled over their capacity. I shopped for nursing bras with support when I noticed stretch marks forming below my collarbones. I nursed each baby for years, turning my breasts into tools. When it was all over, those breasts shrank into loose skin and the memories of milk, barely filling the space of my pre-pregnancy bras, and even those, lightly, like feathers.

Now my breasts are no longer the typical sex symbol, their work done and their expansiveness spent. I care for them like a grandmother, wrap them in the softest jersey and support them without underwire, allowing for comfort and minimizing the space they take up. I don't want anyone's attention on them, not as objects. I claimed them for my own the moment I used them for something that felt like my own choice.

But now I have a daughter in adolescence, and another nearly there, and I'm trying this whole thing a different way. We look at books on development. I ask questions about comfort, I offer options, we try things until we find what feels right. The world will assert its opinion, and someday they'll have to take it or leave it, but not yet.

They're just girls. They deserve a chance to think long and hard about what they show and what they hide.

Debi Lewis is the author of the blog [Swallowmysunshine](#), written about unraveling the great mystery of her daughter's medical issues. Born with a confounding set of digestive and respiratory concerns, Lewis' daughter Sammi became the subject of her research, writing, and of course, constant worrying. In the intervening nine years and through varying diagnoses, Lewis has learned to navigate hospitals, medical specialists, insurance, and a wide variety of special diets and medication regimens, always with the goal of nurturing both her daughter and their whole family, whatever it took.

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* MEET THE BLOGGER *



Juliet C. Bond

Juliet C. Bond is a writer and professor at Columbia College in Chicago. Her first book, "Sam's Sister," was published in 2005, and has sold over 50,000 copies. She went on to collaborate with Newberry winner Joyce Sidman to publish the stage adaptation of "This is Just to Say." Juliet's shorter works can be found in "The Prairie Wind," at [storystudiochicago.com](#) and [citymusecountrymuse.com](#). Juliet serves as the Welcome Coordinator for The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators in Illinois, and has had the pleasure of working under the tutelage of award winning authors including: Jane Yolen, Jane Hamilton, Laurie Lawlor and Audrey Niffenegger. She chose the name for this space as an homage to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony whose hard work on gender equality serve as daily motivation to continue fighting for girls and women everywhere.

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