



# Transgender Teens

Teens born in the wrong bodies

By Sue Rochman

**W**ith his short hair and baggy pants, Shawn Pearson looks like a typical teenage boy. There is little reason for anyone to think otherwise. If you got to know Shawn well, however, you might learn that something *does* make him different from other 15-year-old boys.

Shawn is transgender. He was born with a girl's body. However, for as long as he can remember, Shawn has felt like—and wanted to live as—a boy.

## A Body-Brain Mismatch

Transgender people aren't interested just in imitating the gender that differs from their biological sex; they fully believe they *are* the opposite gender. In fact, many describe themselves as having a body that doesn't match their brain. Transgender people can be born female but identify as male (called

female to male, or FTM) or born male but identify as female (called male to female, or MTF).

Of course, many girls would rather play with trucks than with Barbies, and many boys prefer dressing dolls to throwing balls. As children grow, some continue to diverge from socially prescribed gender roles. They are often referred to as *gender variant*. Most gender-variant girls become teens who think of themselves as female. Similarly, most gender-variant boys become teens who think of themselves as male. A small portion, though, never identify with their biological sex. They are transgender.

No one knows precisely why some people are transgender, says Herb Schreier, a psychiatrist who treats transgender and gender-variant youths at Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland in California. It may have to do with biology, genetics, or a woman's hormone levels during pregnancy.

What is clear, he says, is that people appear to be transgender from birth.

Until recently, most people did not come out as transgender until they were adults—if ever. Then the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, about a transgender teen, won two Oscars and made the topic mainstream. Now transgender individuals, including teens, are becoming more open about—and accepted for—who they are. So friends and classmates need to learn about transgender individuals. Maybe a teen wants to be called by a new name or referred to by the opposite pronoun; he or she needs acceptance and support.

### Finding the Right Words

From as early as age 3, Shawn was different, says his mom, Kim Pearson. Most little girls, she notes, don't refuse to wear a dress—but Shawn did. When his preschool teacher called his eyelashes pretty, he went home and cut them off. Only girls were called pretty—and that was the last thing Shawn wanted to be.

As Shawn, who now lives in Arizona, grew up, he continued to favor boys' clothing and hairstyles. At age 13, he began to identify as a lesbian. Shawn's parents thought that after he came out, he would feel more comfortable with who he was. Instead, Shawn, whose body was becoming more female as he moved through puberty, grew increasingly depressed, introverted, and self-conscious.

Shawn and his mom had been going to a therapist to discuss his depression and introversion. It was at one of those sessions, as they discussed body image, that Shawn opened up about the fact that he did not identify as a girl and never would. "Once I told my mom I was transgender," he says, "it made everything easier. It was like a huge weight had been lifted off of my shoulders." In turn, Shawn's mom says, she'll never forget the first time she heard him explain his gender identity: "I walked into our appointment with our therapist at 2:30 p.m. with a daughter. And I walked out at 3:30 p.m. with a son."

Some parents are devastated to learn that a child is transgender, but Pearson was relieved. "Now that I understood what was going on," she says, "I could help him." She immediately submitted the paperwork for Shawn to legally change his name. Next she met with the high school principal so they could plan for Shawn's enrollment with his new name and new gender. Then she sent out a letter to family



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and friends, explaining that Shawn was transgender. She told everyone his new name and requested that people use only male pronouns to refer to him.

Shawn told his friends about the changes he was making through his MySpace page. But he told his closest friends in person. "My two best friends were, like, 'Duh,'" he says. "They were not shocked at all."

### Changing Gender

Coming out is just one step transgender people may take. When they begin to live fully as the gender with which they identify, they are *transitioning*. Many, but not all, transgender people take sex hormones—biological males take estrogen, and biological females take testosterone—so that their bodies will conform to their gender identity. Some have surgery to create breasts (if they are MTF) or remove them (if they are FTM). Still others have sexual-reassignment surgery so their genitalia will match their gender identity. Once the transition is complete, transgender people often begin to refer to themselves as transsexual.

Until recently, most doctors would not give adolescents the hormones they needed to start transitioning until they turned 18. Doctors were hesitant to start earlier because teenagers are still developing gender identity and sexual orientation, and only a small number of gender-variant teens actually go on to be transgender. Recently, however, some doctors have begun giving teens who have already gone through puberty the hormones that will allow them to transition.

A small number of doctors also have begun giving gender-variant children medication to suppress the hormones that create the secondary sexual characteristics that develop at puberty. In girls, these include breasts, a female body shape, and the growth of body and pubic hair. In boys, they include a deepening voice, the growth of facial, body, and pubic hair, and the development of an Adam's apple. Delaying puberty gives these teens more time to determine whether they truly are transgender. If they decide they aren't, they can stop taking the medication, and their secondary sexual characteristics will begin to develop. If they realize they are indeed transgender, they are in a better position to start transitioning.

### School Safety

Of course, teens going through this process need support. Student-run gay-straight alliances (GSAs) help educate high school students about transgender issues. Some GSAs hold an annual Transgender Day of Remembrance in November, which memorializes those killed because of anti-transgender hatred or prejudice. Programs can also teach students about the problems transgender students face on a daily basis.

The biggest difficulties involve school areas that are segregated by gender, such as bathrooms. Carolyn Laub, executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, knows of students who experience medical problems because they avoid going to the bathroom all day or who skip school because they don't feel comfortable using the bathroom that corresponds with their birth sex. To overcome this problem, says Laub, some schools give transgender or gender-variant students a key to a single-stall bathroom, let them use the bathroom in the nurse's office, or allow them to use the bathroom that corresponds with the gender identity they express at school.

Transgender youths also face problems changing clothing for gym class. Shawn's school avoided the

## TERMS TO KNOW

**gender:** This word refers to the ways a culture believes women and men should think and behave—in other words, what people think of as being boy-like or girl-like, masculine or feminine.

**gender expression:** the way a person presents himself or herself socially through clothing, hairstyles, toys, and other preferences

**gender identity:** the gender—male or female—with which a person most closely identifies internally

**gender variant:** girls and boys whose gender expression doesn't conform to society's expectations for their biological sex, such as tomboys

**sex:** Pertains to the biological differences between women and men. Women have two X chromosomes. Men have one X and one Y chromosome. A person's sex is determined by whether he or she is born with a penis or a vagina.

**sexual orientation:** The direction of a person's emotional and sexual attraction. A person's sexual orientation is typically described as heterosexual, homosexual (lesbian or gay), or bisexual. Some transgender people are heterosexual; others are homosexual.

**transgender:** a person whose gender identity differs from his or her biological sex

**transsexual:** a person who has transitioned from one sex to the other

issue by having him sign up for an online bowling class that qualifies as physical education for some students with disabilities. In contrast, says Laub, San Francisco schools are required to give students access to a private bathroom or changing facility. "It is not an acceptable solution to have transgender students exempt from taking PE," says Laub. "Doing that sends a message that physical health is not as important for transgender youth as it is for others."

School uniforms, class pictures that require each sex to dress a certain way, and other gender-specific customs also present challenges for transgender youths. In the past, most students didn't feel they could challenge these school norms. That has begun to change. In 2005, the Clay County school board in

Jacksonville, Fla., amended its policies after Kelli Davis, a Fleming Island High School senior, sued the school; administrators had removed her photo from the yearbook because she wore a tuxedo. In May 2007, students at Roosevelt High School in Fresno, Calif., voted Johnny Vera prom queen, making him the first transgender student in the country to become prom royalty.

### In Search of Understanding

Acceptance is critical. Shawn's family has supported him in every way possible. Some transgender teens are not as fortunate: They are rejected by their parents and thrown out of the house, or they run away. Others have been

sent to psychiatrists who claim they can "fix" children with this "problem." Still others live among family members who never truly accept them.

Many transgender youths are—or fear being—ostracized by other teens. In fact, a national school survey found that 55 percent of transgender youths reported being physically harassed at school because of their gender expression. As a result, some students tell only administrators their true biological gender. Others don't tell anyone at all. Still others change schools, either to escape harassment or to start over in a place where no one knows their biological sex.

It's important for teens to understand that there is nothing wrong with transgender boys and girls. "These youth are expressing themselves in a way that feels natural to them," says Schreier. "They



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—Herb Schreier, psychiatrist, Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland, Oakland, Calif.

don't have any kind of disorder." Furthermore, he says, no treatment can make people who feel they were born in the wrong body comfortable with the bodies they have. "Twenty-five years ago we psychiatrists were trying to change these kids," he says. That approach didn't work. Furthermore, Schreier adds, new studies "suggest that trying to change someone's gender identity may, in fact, be harmful."

Friends and classmates of transgender teens sometimes feel betrayed or angry when they learn that the person they have known as a boy or a girl was actually born the opposite sex. However, says Schreier, it's

important for teens to see that transgender teens are not trying to deceive anyone. Those who feel betrayed, he says, should realize that the person has been successful at being male or female because that is the gender the person truly believes he or she is.

### Shawn's Journey

Back to Shawn: About a year ago, he started taking testosterone. As a result, his voice has become deeper, and his face has started to look more masculine. He has decided that, as he transitions, it is best for him to take classes online. He'd like to return to high school for his senior year, though. What the future holds for Shawn as he lives his life as a man remains to be seen. Right now, he says, "I'm definitely happier. Everything is fitting better." **CH2**

#### ■ for more info

##### Gay-Straight Alliance Network

[www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)

Youth-led organization that empowers youths fighting homophobia and transphobia

##### PFLAG: Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

Support for those who love transgender people

##### TransProud

[www.transproud.org](http://www.transproud.org)

Resources on transgender for teens and teachers



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