

Chapter 8

Jessica's Journey: Perspectives From a Mother and Transgender Daughter

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ABSTRACT

This personal story chapter describes the journey undertaken by a transgender youth as she discovers her true gender identity. Told by a mother and daughter team, each individual shares her feelings and experiences from the time J is a toddler until the present, including preschool experiences, travel abroad anecdotes, school and social encounters, and family reactions and adjustments to J's transition and on-going transformation. The chapter addresses the social, emotional, physical, academic, and economic factors that many transgender youth and adults face on a daily basis and suggests ways that schools and society can ease this complex process for individuals who are LGBTQ+.

INTRODUCTION

Note: For the sake of clarity and with Jessica's approval, Susan's story uses male pronouns and the name "J" to refer to the time period before J's name and pronoun changed during her transition period. Likewise, the pronouns "they," "their," or "them" are sometimes used to replace feminine or masculine pronouns.

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SUSAN'S STORY

"It's a boy!" proclaimed the perky nurse on the phone, providing the results of my recent amniocentesis. "No way! Really?" I replied. My family was comprised of mostly girls and women and, as the middle of three girls, I felt unprepared to rear a young son as a 41-year-old single mother. Nonetheless, I was ecstatic at the news and excited about fulfilling my lifelong dream of becoming a mother. As I suspected then, and fully realize now that I am the mother of three children, no job is as fulfilling, demanding, frustrating, all consuming, critically important, or ultimately rewarding as parenthood.

My beautiful "son", "J" arrived two weeks late; at well over nine pounds and almost 22 inches long, he was a large and healthy baby with the body parts that clearly identified him as male. J towered over the other babies in the nursery, and his cry was lusty, loud, and very low. One of the nurses carried J around the maternity floor to show off my healthy, handsome "son." I had never felt prouder or more elated.

J was an affectionate, alert, healthy baby who filled my every waking hour with joy. Although he was a bit late at walking and talking, he showed no major developmental disorders or clearly discernible patterns of gender dysphoria. With his keen interest in books and learning, J learned the alphabet at a very young age and, at age two, began reading fluently; he was even able to read Spanish books, chapter books, restaurant menus, and the New York Times before the age of three. I never suspected that my intellectually precocious young son was really my daughter.

The First Piece of the Puzzle

A troubling and memorable incident occurred when J was two that, I later learned, became an important piece of J's transgender puzzle. As I walked into the bathroom where J was standing beside the toilet, I noticed that J's penis was severely bruised and deep purple in color. When I asked him what happened, J replied that he had slammed the toilet lid down upon it. He added, matter-of-factly, "I don't want it." Disturbed, I promptly phoned the pediatrician for an appointment. When we met, I explained to this physician what had happened. Our doctor noted the incident in J's medical records and suggested that we watch J for further irregular or disturbing behaviors, never mentioning gender spectrum variance or gender identity disorder. Gender identity disorder is now termed *gender dysphoria*, observed with significant distress with the gender of an individual assigned at birth (Brill & Kenney, 2016). The possibility that J might be transgender never occurred to me. Very little was known about gender dysphoria or the transgender condition twenty years ago and so, at that time, I had no reason for concern and, apparently, neither did our pediatrician.

Simply Unique or Gender Non-Conforming?

When J was three, he and I traveled together on my sabbatical leave to England where J entered a preschool in the Lake District town of Ambleside. At his preschool, J impressed the teachers with his early reading skills and sharp intelligence. J has always exhibited a love of learning, and his curiosity about vocabulary was in full evidence from an early age. To my amusement, J named his so-called study of toys "Quanzfernationology" and re-named himself J.Z. Kerenza. He enjoyed entertaining guests with English tea parties and served the tea and biscuits at our small flat with great fanfare. Although J did prefer the company of girls as playmates as opposed to the company of boys, no obvious signs of gender dysphoria emerged at this time.

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