

My 16 year old son is becoming a woman

Abigail Pope

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After learning to walk and talk, the next thing Jamie Cooper learnt in life was that he was different. But explaining to his mum Susan that her beloved son was actually a girl trapped in a boy's body was the hardest thing he's ever done....



I was only five years old and standing in the kitchen with Mum when I asked, "What do you think my hair would look like if we were to let it grow as long as a girl's?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "Little boys don't have long hair like that". She shook her head, smiled to her-self and carried on washing up.

I'd always been a feminine boy, so she was used to me coming out with questions like that. But back then, she didn't think anything of it. When I started school, most of my friends were girls and at playtimes I always wanted to play the female role in games. I knew I was different, but I was too young to understand why.

As time went on, the feeling of alienation increased. But at last I began to realise why I felt like a girl, but looked like a boy. I couldn't see a way out, though, and I started to hate myself for not conforming - beating out my frustrations by arguing and fighting.

One day, when I was about 11, I'd forgotten to lock the bathroom door and Mum walked in to find me with hair removal cream all over my legs. "Jamie, what are you doing?" she asked. "You shouldn't be doing that, boys are supposed to have body hair." But having smooth skin was one of the few ways I could tally the way I felt on the inside with how looked on the outside.

It wasn't until one afternoon when I got home from school and turned on the TV that I realised there was hope for me. A talk show was on, and I watched in awe as beautiful women stepped on to the stage and declared that they used to be men. I was only 11 years old, but as I listened to them talking about



hormone treatment and surgery I knew I was the same as them - I'd been born a girl in a male body. I decided then and there that I would do whatever it took to one day become a woman.

But by not telling Mum how I felt, I was lying to her everyday. Being an only child and never having known my dad, Mum and I had closed ranks and were extremely close. Now I was too scared to tell her in case she hated me or didn't believe me.

Just a few days after seeing the talk show, I plucked up the courage to write her a two-page letter explaining everything as well as I could, before slipping it under her pillow.



First thing the next morning she came into my room with tear-stained cheeks. "Those things you wrote, it was just your hormones talking," she began. But we cried together and then talked it all over again until she realised I was telling the truth.

That same day Mum took me to see our GP, who referred me to a gender specialist. It was obviously difficult for Mum and, as we walked home in silence I tried to hold back the tears, convinced that I'd ruined our relationship. Then she turned to me, wrapped me in her arms like she used to and said, "Don't worry sweetheart. Whatever happens you'll always be my Jamie and I'll always love you."

The specialist said I had to be 16 before starting the anti-testosterone injections to reduce my masculinity, and 18 before I could consider surgery. For the next few years, hope was the only thing that kept me going. In my teens I was jealous of other people my age whose lives were carefree, the boys filling out, the girls developing breasts. They all knew who they were and had bodies to go with it. Then there was me - I absolutely hated my body.

At 15, I started travelling from our house in Selly Oak, Birmingham, to the Portman Clinic in London, which specialises in gender-identity cases in the under-18s. They put me through various psychological tests and gave me counselling to prepare me for my hormone treatment. I decided that the first day I'd dress as a girl would be my 16th birthday, in August last year. My cousin Tamara took me to all her favourite shops, even into the female changing rooms, and we splashed out on make-up and clothes.



As soon as my birthday arrived, I had my first anti-testosterone injection. It hurt a little bit, but I was so excited I didn't care. It was going to take a couple of weeks to start working, but just knowing it was inside my body made me feel more in sync with the real me.

For the day itself, my friend Angela put braid extensions in my hair and gave my nails a French manicure. Wearing a short denim skirt and pretty white top, I could barely drag myself away from the mirror. For the first time in my life I liked what I saw. Over the next few days I visited all my friends and saw some of the local kids who used to tease me. "Jamie? Is that you? Wow! You actually look better as a girl," one said. Just months before he'd been calling me 'poof' and 'bender'.



I'll continue to have anti-testosterone injections every four weeks until I'm 17, then I'll take oestrogen tablets to make my breasts grow, raise the pitch of my voice and make my figure more feminine. Because of the NHS waiting lists, I'll have to wait until I'm 21 before I can have surgery. They'll use the skin and tissue from my penis and testicles to form a vagina. I won't have periods because I don't have ovaries or a womb, but I might be able to have my own biological baby one day if I have some sperm frozen before the operation and come to an arrangement with a surrogate mother and a donated egg.

Soon my body will match the person I am, and I have my mum to thank for that. Without her love and support I don't know how I'd have got through the past few years - I'll never be able to thank her enough.

"I was grieving for the son I lost, but now I had a daughter to think about" says Susan, 45. When the nurse laid my newborn son on my chest and our eyes met, I knew the love I felt was unconditional. I had tried unsuccessfully for a baby for 10 years with my ex-husband and was keen to have a child. Then I met Jamie's father, but when I broke the news that I was pregnant he walked out on me.

There was no doubt Jamie would become the centre of my world. He was a beautiful baby, but by the age of four he was throwing temper tantrums far worse than other kids his age. I saw a child psychologist, but he said his behaviour was normal in only children and told me not to worry.

When Jamie was about seven, I caught him dressing up in my clothes. He said he was pretending to be his favourite teacher; and I thought nothing more of it. Lots of kids liked to

dress up, and Jamie didn't have a strong male role model so I ignored it. By the age of 10 he'd become highly disruptive, arguing with me, other kids, the rest of the family -anyone that was in his way.

He was expelled from high school at 11 for fighting, and I started blaming myself for failing as a mother. But not long afterwards the truth came out and I realised why he'd been fighting me one minute, needing me the next. When I read Jamie's letter, tears started rolling down my cheeks. The words unhappy and girl trapped in a boy's body jumped off the page and I tried to convince myself he was overreacting, that it was just a phase.

Talking to him the next morning, I had to admit he was right, and I could hardly bear to look at him. Over the next few weeks, as we saw specialists and doctors, our relationship became very strained. I'd assured, Jamie I'd always be there for him, and I meant it, but it wasn't something I could accept overnight.

Gradually I became less disturbed by the idea of Jamie becoming a woman. When I'd been out in public with Jamie, people had often called out 'poof' and 'faggot' and I'd felt so sorry for him. I worried that the abuse would be worse when he started dressing as a woman. But, once he did start wearing skirts and dresses, people actually took less notice as he'd always looked very effeminate anyway.

On his 16th birthday he wore a little denim skirt and long hair and he looked beautiful. Since then I've referred to Jamie as 'she' - as she's wanted to be for years. It does make me sad to think she might never have children, but it might be possible so I'm not giving up hope of becoming a granny.

I can't really put into words how difficult the past few years have been. Some of our friends and family no longer speak to us because they can't accept Jamie, but most have been incredibly supportive.

As time goes on it's becoming easier to accept that I haven't lost my only son, but gained a beautiful, intelligent daughter who I'm proud to call my best friend.

As told to Abigail Pope