

I was born a boy

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Rachel Taylor, 17, from Leamington Spa, lives and dresses as a girl. But she was actually born a boy

Yesterday, a girl I knew from school walked into the games shop where I work. My heart was in my mouth as she came over 'Excuse me, Rachel,' she said, peering at my name tag, 'can you help me?' I was thrilled she didn't recognise me. Because, when we were at school, she knew me as Richard.

"I always knew I was different. I've two sisters (now 15 and 21) and I always preferred playing with their toys. I thought it might be a phase, but by the age of 11, I realised I actually felt like a girl even though I was a boy and I was terrified.

"As I hit my teens I started to search the internet for people like me, and found a website explaining a condition called gender dysphoria - or transsexualism - when the part of the brain responsible for gender identity doesn't match the sex of a person's body Discovering what was 'wrong' with me, and that there were other people like me out there, made me feel almost happy But I was still way too scared to tell anyone."

LIVING A LIE

"Puberty made me feel even worse. I hated the changes to my body, like growing facial hair, and I was starting to fancy boys. I wondered if I was gay, but I could only imagine snagging a boy if I was a girl.

"I was 14 and very depressed. I spent hours locked in my room. Apart from my gender confusion, I was being bullied at school for not fitting in and I'd started secretly wearing my sisters' clothes. I had no real friends and couldn't talk about it to my family.

"I finally told Mum when I was 15, so I could stop living a lie. I wrote her a letter and, shaking with fear, watched as she read it. She broke down in tears. 'You hid it so well,' she cried. 'I love you and we'll see the doctor together.

"She told my sisters two weeks later. My older sister has never mention it to me (although now she calls me Rachel), and my younger sister and I have never got on, so we just ignore each other now. But just knowing my secret was out made me feel so much happier on its own. Finally, I could start being my real self.

"After months of waiting, I finally got to see a specialist doctor last November He prescribed me hormone pills to stop me growing facial hair and help me develop small breasts. And it's not just my body I feel free to act like a girl, think like a girl and cry like a girl.

KISS AND MAKE-UP

"Now I'm doing a Real Life Test, which means I live as Rachel 24 hours a day for two years. The test will prove to the specialists that I really need to become a girl. Then I can have a gender reassignment - or a sex change - operation. It's a scary thought, but it will only make me outwardly the person I've always been inside.

"I've had three dates since I started living as Rachel, both with boys I met on the net. I went to the pictures with the first one and missed half the film because we were snogging so much! On the second date I told him the story of who I really was. He was quite calm but said he didn't think we could carry on the relationship, I agreed, then cried my eyes out afterwards. I've met another lad since but haven't told him yet. It's not an easy thing to tell someone 'I used to be a boy', but after living a lie for so long, telling the truth is important to me.

GIRL'S WORLD

"I love being a girl. I'm happy and more confident. I shop in TopShop for clothes I've always wanted to wear, the shop assistants don't bat an eyelid. I've even had lads wink at me in the street! It's great to actually be the person I should have been born"