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TREATING TRANSGENDER KIDS:
Doctors want to help // but the
research behind social
transition // puberty blockers //
hormones // needs to catch up

BY LINDA KESLAR //
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER HAPAK

In many ways, Avery Jackson seems like a typical nine-year-old girl. Spunky and confident, she likes reading, gymnastics, playing with friends, and all things pink, purple or sparkly. Yet Avery was born biologically male. "At the age of four, she told us, 'You think I'm a boy, but I'm a girl on the inside,'" says her mother, Debi Jackson.

As a preschooler, Avery had preferred playing with dolls and dressing up with the girls in her class. That kind of cross-gender play is common for young children. But Avery didn't grow out of it, and when Debi tried to discourage Avery's behavior, it became obvious she wasn't confused or playing make-believe. "She wanted to wear a dress all the time at home, sleep in nightgowns, go out on weekends dressed as a girl—she called it 'me' time," says Jackson.

Within a year of telling her mother, Avery began to grow angry and depressed, and to show an aversion to her male sexual anatomy. The Jacksons took Avery to a pediatrician, to a child psychologist and eventually to a local gender therapist. The therapist helped them understand that their young child probably was transgender—that the gender she identified with was at odds with her biological sex. And while being transgender is no longer considered a psychological disorder, Avery's growing distress over the mismatch between the body she had been born with and the gender she considered hers led the specialist to diagnose her condition as gender dysphoria.

"We didn't know anything about what that was," says Jackson, but she and her husband began to read what little they could find about the condition. They decided to follow the therapist's advice—to let Avery live publicly as a girl, exploring her perceived gender identity before she reached puberty. Since then, Avery and her family have appeared across news media, advocating for transgender awareness.

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