

Transgender child, parents sort through new reality

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It was early still, not much past 6 a.m., and James Kaplan was already dressed for the first day of third grade. The night before, his mom, Sara, pulled out the iron and he helped press the wrinkles out of his light blue polo. “My first time ironing,” he said. For the past month, he’d been pushing his parents to let him wear a suit to school. James, whose ninth birthday was a couple of months away, thought it was a sharp look.

But after some back and forth, they’d settled on the polo, khaki cargo shorts and the dark blue chambray tie that Sara was now fitting over his head. Charley, James’ 4-year-old brother, still in his pajamas, pointed at him. “Handsome, James. Handsome.” James collapsed on the couch, staring through the windows at the brightening September sky.

“How you feelin’?” James’ dad, Ben, called from the kitchen. “Nervous,” James said. “But excited.”

He wasn’t just thinking about his first day of third grade. He was thinking about the beginning of his first full school year as James.

Some eight months before, James had told his parents his “inner person was a boy.” The round-cheeked 8-year-old they’d always thought was their daughter was actually their son. It was something he’d been trying to tell them — something he’d been trying to understand for himself — for more than a year.

Sara and Ben considered themselves progressive, but they didn't know the first thing about raising a transgender child. In the days that followed, they would talk to family, to friends and to their couples therapist. They would take James shopping for "boy clothes" and to get a "boy haircut."

They had to get to know their first-born all over again. They loved him as they always had, but there was this sense that maybe they didn't really know him. And, if they were being honest, he was different — lighter and smiling and more open.

Ben took James into the bathroom, put some pomade in his hands and started running them through his son's curly brown hair. "I always liked getting a new class," Ben said. "It's like a fresh start."

James nodded, then smoothed out bits of hair Ben had missed. "And for me, it's a very fresh start," he said.

Sara poked her head in. "Look — makeup!"

"You never wear makeup," James said.

"I'm celebrating," she said. "We're gonna have a good day."

The way she said it, it sounded as if she'd practiced saying it a thousand times that morning. *We're gonna have a good day.*

James, 9, navigates adolescence as a transgender boy with the help of his friends, family and community. Leah Millis, *The Chronicle*

In May 2014, a Time magazine cover proclaimed, "The Transgender Tipping Point," calling the issue of gender identity "America's next civil rights frontier." One of the subjects of its story was an 11-year-old transgender boy, Mac Davis, who said he'd known his true gender since he was 3.

Today, as politicians fight over which bathroom transgender people are legally allowed to use, health care professionals find themselves having to develop what is essentially a new field for a growing number of transgender children.

This is a difficult task because, while there is considerable evidence that transgender adolescents, when given the space to transition early, go on to have health outcomes similar to nontransgender peers, there's little empirical data to help guide the way for very young transgender children.

Still, in recent years, there's been a significant shift in the field. Increasingly, health care professionals are letting children lead the way.

This is the uncertain world James has entered, a world Sara and Ben spend every day trying to navigate. Even as they support him, they worry about his future. That's why they requested The Chronicle not use their children's real names in telling this story, hoping to protect their privacy as they grow older. But it is a story they want told.



James is big for his age. He almost always wears cargo shorts and a Warriors T-shirt. He loves baby dolls. (It took him a while to realize that he could still play with them, even if he is a boy.) He also really likes Pokémon and is in a band called CatDogs. He wants to be a singer when he grows up. Maybe not a super famous one, but one people listen to. He loves Taylor Swift. Last summer, he got some blond highlights in his brown hair, which made him feel good, even if it took forever and cost a little too much.

James goes about his days like many 8-year-old boys. He lines up for class before the first bell, does homework when he gets home, plays video games as long as his parents will let him and argues about bed time. His parents talk a lot about the Berkeley “bubble” he lives in, one made possible by a comfortable life in one of America’s most liberal cities. They’re trying hard to keep him in that bubble — keep him safe — while carefully deflating it, bit by bit.

It’s easy to see a few of the early signs when you go looking for them, little crumbs James had dropped and hoped his parents might follow back before he was ever called James. But Sara and Ben didn’t know to look. So when he told them he wanted a “boy” haircut in first grade, they took him to the barber and had his hair cut a little shorter and that was that.

When he told his dad he felt “like a boy sometimes,” Ben would play along. “Sometimes, I have girl feelings, too.” When James said he had a big secret: “Well, we all have secrets, buddy.”

“We just didn’t think anything of it,” Sara said. “In hindsight, I can see that I wasn’t really seeing him.”



A self-portrait drawn by James hangs on the kitchen wall in Berkeley. Before he came out to his parents, he used to say that he was half boy, half girl and half gorilla. He described his emotions inside feeling like a “wild gorilla.” Leah Millis, The Chronicle

That went on for a year — an entire year, James would say, spent feeling like “a piece of me was missing.” Eventually, though, the day came when hints weren’t enough. Sara remembered the date: Feb. 18, 2016. She’d driven to James’ school at 2 p.m., as she always does, to pick him up. Rose, one of James’ best friends, ran up to her to tell her they’d been fighting.

“Why?” Sara asked.

“Well,” Rose explained, James’ “inner-person is a boy.”

James had told Rose his secret during recess, while they played on the swings, forcing themselves higher and higher into the sky. Rose wasn’t happy about the news. Girls, she told James, were scientifically proven to be better than boys. James didn’t like that. Soon, he was

in tears, trying to make sense of everything with his teacher, Jennifer Adcock, while the other students were off in art class.

“It was this sense of, ‘I know this is true, I need this to be true, and I need my friends and people in my life to accept it,’” Adcock said. “There was a lot of concern he wasn’t going to be accepted.”

As Sara made her way through the school to where James and his teacher sat, a blurry image of her child was coming into focus. “I think his friend’s words just woke me up to look at him.”

There are family videos of a tiny James with thick black hair and eyes barely open. Sara and Ben had met a couple of years before James was born — Ben got a job waiting tables at the cafe where Sara worked. She was his manager, but that hadn’t stopped them from flirting.

The family lives in a small one-bedroom apartment in downtown Berkeley. Ben designs and creates jewelry for a local gallery and Sara manages their building to help cover the rent. Charley and James share a bedroom with bunk beds; Ben and Sara’s bed takes up nearly half of the living room. They’re insured through Medi-Cal, which means Sara has had to spend hours on the phone, getting the right exemptions and exceptions so James can go to the Child and Adolescent Gender Center at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital, a leader in treating transgender children, where physicians monitor his march toward puberty.

In the year before James came out, Sara and Ben had been working on their relationship in couples counseling, doing what they could to find the holes and sew them up. But still, at the end of the day, when Ben, Sara, James and Charley clean up the train routes Charley’s built through the middle of the living room and sit down to read together, they’re all smiling.



James, 8, loses a negotiation while talking to his parents Ben (left) and Sara Kaplan in the evening at home in Berkeley. Ben and Sara's bed is in the living room as the family lives in a one-bedroom apartment in the building that Sara manages. Lacking personal space, the couple have few places to retreat to to unwind and process the constant barrage of new information that comes with having a transgender child. Leah Millis, *The Chronicle*

It was that same living room where, the evening after James came out at school, Sara and Ben sat him down on the couch to talk. When James sits on the couch, he sinks into it. His legs don't quite touch the floor, a reminder of just how young he is. But he was sure, he told them. He is a boy. He'd been trying to tell them for a while.

After James and Charley were in bed, Sara and Ben whispered back and forth. *How'd we miss this? Is it a phase?* They turned in on themselves, thinking about all they'd done or hadn't done as parents. Sara thought maybe she'd done "a really bad job of selling womanhood as being a good thing." Ben worried whether people would think this was all just "another crazy episode in the lives of Ben and Sara." Before she went to bed, Sara speed-read a book about transgender children, trying to learn everything she could.

In the days that followed, they would learn much more. A dizzying, disturbing collection of facts and figures confronted them. "Once you read the statistics," Sara said, to not support your child "is actually maybe child abuse."

Last year, the National Center for Transgender Equality conducted a survey of more than 27,000 transgender adults in all 50 states, the largest study of its kind. Among its findings: Of the respondents who were out in school, 54 percent said they were verbally harassed, 24 percent said they were physically attacked, 13 percent said they were sexually assaulted, and 17 percent said the violence was so extreme they left school.

Nearly a third of the respondents reported living in poverty (double the portion of the general population) and only 16 percent of those surveyed owned a home (compared with 63 percent of the general population). Forty percent of the respondents reported attempting suicide at least once — nine times the national rate.

“If they have the fortitude to tell you what they’re experiencing, then, as a parent, I think it’s your obligation to support them,” Ben said.



Nine-year-old James puts on a cool guy persona while trying on a new blazer during a shopping trip to Target in Berkeley. James vividly recalls the first time he went shopping with his mother in the boys’ section of the store, an experience he had dreamed about before he came out. Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Even as they worked to understand what it would mean to parent a transgender child, Ben and Sara began to try. They emptied James’ closet of his pink clothes. They gave away his pink bike. One night at the dinner table, they handed him a list of the top 100 boys’ names of

2015 to look through. Sara took him shopping at Target, where he wanted superhero everything. James still talks about the first time he got to walk through the boys' department like you might expect him to talk about a trip to Disneyland.

Sara took James to get his hair cut again, shorter this time. As she watched him in the swivel chair, his brown curls falling away, she felt overwhelmed. She started to cry, but caught herself and ducked into the bathroom.

"We didn't have an option other than support this, even though it was so uncomfortable," she said. When she came back, her eyes were red and swollen. The hairdresser noticed, but James never did. He smiled the whole time.

Once the stray hairs were brushed away, Sara sent a photo to Ben. "It just made it real. Really real," Ben said. "I spent so much time raising my daughter, and so many hours combing her hair."

There were other things Sara was busy doing that James didn't notice. Buying books about gender, setting up appointments with therapists, looking for support programs that might help her build some sort of safety net around James. She and Ben did all this while trying to cope themselves, sorting through the end of one thing and the beginning of another.

"It was really, really wild to feel so disconnected from a child you are so connected to," Sara said. "Welcoming him and getting to know him and mourning the loss at the same time — I don't know any other experience like it."

Charley, James' little brother, has blond hair that twists and reaches every which way. He's lithe and springy, and he loves a dance party, even one without music.

Lately, Charley has been calling himself transgender, too. It's hard to know whether it's just talk — something he's saying to be more like his brother, or a deeper truth. For the time being, his parents are just letting Charley be, giving him space to explore. For Halloween, Charley went as Shimmer, a genie with long pink hair who dresses in all purple.



After coming out as a girl, Olivia Kaplan, 4, formerly known as Charley, gets her bangs trimmed by Bobby Jean Larraaga while mother Sara watches nervously. Olivia (whose name has also been changed for privacy) James' sibling, had been describing herself as trans for much of the past year since her brother came out as a transgender boy. Sara and Ben decided to brush it off at first to see if she was just saying that to copy James. But it became apparent over time that it was very real to Olivia. Always a feminine child, at the beginning of the year she finally shouted at her parents that she is a girl. They cautiously allowed her to begin the transition. As of June, Olivia is still happily presenting as a girl. Sara and Ben plan on doing for her what they've done for James: Be supportive, allowing them to be themselves whomever they turn out to be later in life. Leah Millis, The Chronicle

The days and months since James came out have been full of stressful moments, big and small. Sara's found herself worrying about whether James would know how to act in the men's restroom, and whether people might catch on if he didn't. There have been difficult conversations with family members, and curious glances from other parents, from tenants in their apartment building, from the Chinese food delivery person. They've dealt with him being bullied on the playground.

Then there are the things far out of their control. The election of Donald Trump has thrown some crucial aspects of their life into question, such as health care and restroom access. For example, if Obamacare and the connected subsidies were to vanish, Sara and the children

would no longer qualify for Medi-Cal. There's also a sense, since November, that the world they've been trying to shield James from is even harder and less accepting than they realized.

"It's hard to manage your stress levels," Ben said. "I just want to feel like I'm not sinking."

"I know on a fundamental level, I'm a good person, and I feel like I have to defend my reality against hatred and bigotry and ignorance."

Ben's always been a private person. He speaks slowly, intentionally, weighing each word, wanting to get it all just right. Sara is different. She's shared her life online for the past few years, using social media as a way to connect with people. She's shared James' story, too, though masking his identity to protect him. She's also become an advocate for transgender rights, a role she's come to see as an integral part of being his parent.

She's planned LGBT support days at his school and attended rallies on his behalf. As the case of Gavin Grimm, a transgender boy who was fighting to use the bathroom in Virginia, wound its way to the U.S. Supreme Court and the Trump administration lifted bathroom protection guidelines, she and James found themselves on the steps of San Francisco City Hall addressing hundreds of people at a rally supporting transgender youth. James, in a bow tie and brand-new suit jacket, stood to her side as she read a speech he'd written but was too nervous to deliver.

"The whole reason I'm standing up here is because our new president is being rude to people of many different kinds and yesterday he took away bathroom privileges for transgender people and I think that's just wrong," James had written. His speech called President Trump a "bully." Later, he'd say, he was surprised when the crowd laughed at that line. He was serious. "I just want to help as much as possible."

In late August, a few weeks before school was set to start, Sara and Ben sat in a conference room at the Berkeley school James attends. They were there to meet with his second- and third-grade teachers, the principal and the school district's director of student services to write up a "Gender Support Plan." It would address questions such as what pronoun should be used to address James. Which restroom would he use? What happens if he's teased?

When James came out in the middle of second grade, Ben and Sara didn't know about these sorts of plans, about the things parents could do to try to smooth the way for their child. Now, as he entered third grade, they were ready.

There was a nervous energy in the room. As the adults filtered in, they made small talk and wore the sort of unconvincing smiles that are meant to comfort, but never really do. Then, Ben got started.

“We want you to know James’ identity as a transgender boy.” He read from a script prepared by the advocacy and support group Gender Spectrum, filling in James’ name as he went. One section read: *Why am I scared? ... transgender kids in particular (face) higher rates of suicide, victimization from violence, drop out, HIV, homelessness, drug use. Also lower achievement levels, lower expectations about college attendance or for happiness as an adult.*

As he read, Ben threaded some personal comments into the script. “We feel really fortunate to be at this school,” he said at one point. “The transition was really smooth. There was a lot of support.”

From there, the conversation got more specific. They made sure James’ name and gender were updated in the district’s computer systems. Sara talked about the bullying he’d encountered the year before; some kids had called him “it.” He got anxious on the school bus, so she wondered if they could have a teacher sit near him when they went on field trips. She asked for more training for school staff: A cafeteria worker had stopped James from using the boys’ restroom last year.

“He’s such a sensitive kid,” Sara said. “Regardless of the gender stuff.”



For the most part, the school officials didn’t talk, instead they nodded and followed along. Finally, James’ second-grade teacher — the person who’d learned his secret before even his mom — finally spoke. “We should be working toward encouraging him to feel sturdy and

steady, 'cause he is. You know? He is.”

This time, Sara and Ben nodded.

On an early afternoon, James had twisted himself upside down on the couch. He was talking fast and chewing gum. “There’s so much I have to think about,” he said. “Well, not yet. But that I will have to think about. Hormones. Surgeries. Even though if I take the hormones I won’t need the top surgery. I don’t need to think about them till I’m 14.”

Puberty is one of the scariest things in the world to James. He talks about it a lot, and worries sometimes whether his armpits smell because he thinks that might be a sign it’s all starting. Puberty, he knows, is when his body won’t really be his anymore.

For now, the Oakland office of UCSF’s Child and Adolescent Gender Clinic is monitoring James for the first signs of puberty. They do this through blood work and by keeping an eye out for breast development. Once the doctor determines that puberty has begun, they’ll give him and his parents the option of his going on a hormone blocker — essentially freezing his development in place. Its effects are fully reversible.



If he goes on blockers, James can stay on them until he reaches an age when puberty can’t be avoided. If he’s still certain about his gender then, he’ll start cross-hormone therapy. Daily doses of testosterone will give him a puberty in line with his gender. His voice will deepen,

he'll grow body hair, his face will harden. Any surgical interventions, should he decide to pursue them, wouldn't happen until much later.

Sometimes when Sara and Ben discuss those possibilities, or when they're sitting with James at the doctor's office, there's a noticeable tension. Sara feels confident about moving forward. If anything, she's more worried about James starting hormone therapy too late. Ben isn't always as sure. He'll follow the doctor out into the hallway to ask more questions. He can't shake all the times James had talked with him about motherhood and what a full transition would mean for that dream.



Certainty about anything involving James' treatment is hard to come by, at least as far as clinical guidelines go, given how few studies have been done to help guide the way. Even now, Sara will catch herself checking in with James, making sure he hasn't changed his mind, making sure he knows he can.

Each time, his answer is "No." Each time, Sara says, "He looks at me like I've grown three heads."

If anything seems certain, though, it's this: In the years before they called him James, their child had been what his parents called "blocked up." He was constipated. He had trouble getting words out, stuttering until he gave up. After he transitioned, he became more focused, brighter in general, happier, less anxious.

"I used to be really sad," James said. Something, that piece of him, was missing. "Now, I'm just wide open and that piece is here."

The day before James was set to start third grade, he and Sara walked through his school's fluorescent-lit hallways. With her hand on his back, they kept an eye out for the boys' bathroom as they walked toward his new classroom.

"I'm nervous," James said. "I'm nervous, too," Sara told him. He looked up at her, eyes just a little bit wider than usual. "You are?"

When they reached the classroom, James' new teacher introduced herself with a bow. "Come on in. This is gonna be your home for the rest of the year." She told James he could take a look around the classroom. "Any questions?"

James shook his head. "I didn't really eat and I'm nervous. So ..."

"You're nervous 'cause it's a new teacher?"

"Yeah."

"Well that's normal and usual and perfectly fine, and I hope you're going to feel comfortable as you get to know me to say whatever you need to say."

James didn't say much. The teacher tried to fill the silence, telling him he'd get to pick his seat for the first few days, explaining how each student would have a private journal where they'd write things to her. Finally, she looked straight at him. "It's really important to me," she said, "that everybody feels safe."



The next morning, his blue tie around his neck, James headed for the front door of the apartment.

“All right,” Ben said. “Give me a hug. Have a good day, man.”

A few minutes later, Sara and James were in the car on the way to school. In the rearview mirror, she looked at him sitting in the backseat.

“What?” he asked.

“Third grade, huh?”

As she drove, they talked about who he’d hang out with. He didn’t have many friends who are boys, he said, because they only talk Power Rangers and Transformers. He knew for sure, though, that one of his best friends would be in his class. He was going to sit next to her. Sara parked and they walked into the school yard.

James’ new teacher spotted him. “Nice tie!” she shouted. He smiled.

“You OK?” Sara asked.

“Yeah. Just nervous.”

She gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek before he lined up with his class. Then a minute later, he and the rest of the kids were gone. For a while, the parents just stood around. That's when Sara caught the tail end of a conversation happening not far from her. One mom was explaining to another why she might not recognize James from the year before.

"Ohhh," the mom said, as it dawned on her.

Sara walked over. "He transitioned last February," she explained. "Asked for boy hair, boy clothes."

"He's happy?"

"He's happy."

"That's good. So long as he's happy."

Sara started talking fast, like she was reading from a script, offering up resources, things that might help explain their situation. "This is really real for him," she said as she finished. "So it's really real for us."

The first day of third grade did not "turn out so good," James would say later.

It went sideways almost immediately, actually. James had saved the seat next to him, waiting for his best friend to show up. She never did. When he got home that day, he was in tears.

Sara looked into the situation, and it seemed clear to her that the girl's parents had asked for a different classroom assignment, at least in part because James had come out as transgender. "Tell me how this kid is in another classroom and it doesn't have anything to do with my child," Sara said to the principal on the second day of school. He couldn't say anything.

For the next few weeks. James would come home crying and go to class the same way. He held on tight to Sara even after the morning bell rang. Part of it, she knew, had to do with the fact that James hadn't come out as transgender to his new class, the way he had in second grade. Some of his classmates knew, but not all of them.

Sara tried to be patient, to walk an impossible line between being too demanding and speaking up for James. Finally, she traded emails — pointed, direct emails — with his teacher, asking her help to create a comfortable moment for James to tell the class. It took nearly six weeks, but eventually James' teacher pulled him aside and they came up with a plan.

One day, the whole class walked to a bulletin board that James had helped put together with an LGBT student group at school. They sat down and started talking about gender. A lot of the discussion, James would say later, wound up being about hair length. "Like if you should

have long hair, short hair,” he said.

Finally, though, he just told them. *Well, I’m transgender.* “I was pretty darn confident,” he said. None of his classmates seemed to care. After a while, they left the bulletin board and the day went on as usual.

That night, the anxiety that had been keeping him up late, making him creep out into the living room after bedtime to talk to his parents, seemed to clear up. Something heavy, deep down, had been knocked loose.

“I don’t feel like I’m keeping a secret.” he said.



James, 9, (center) laughs with friends after smashing his face into his cake during his ninth birthday party Dec. 1, 2016. Friends, all 8 years old, (clockwise from lower left): Sonali, Sarah Marsh, Serene Kimball, Simone Zabarsky, Clara, Juna French, Audrey Malker and Holly Davis. James counted down the days until his birthday, which he and his mother decided to use the theme of "1 year old" to celebrate his first full year living as his true self. Leah Millis, The Chronicle

On the first day of December, a little before 5 p.m., James sat waiting, fidgeting. It was his ninth birthday, and the apartment was done up in rainbow everything. James had been planning this birthday for months, ever since he and Sara had come up with an idea: What if they treated his ninth birthday like his first birthday?

Finally, the guests started to arrive. Fourteen tiny bodies — James and every girl in his class at school — filling the small apartment. They decorated onesies for dolls, played pin the pacifier on the baby. Then they each took turns telling stories about James.

Most of the stories started off the same: *Do you remember the time we were on the teeter-totter and...* “That’s because I’m very good at bouncing and people are very good at bouncing me,” James explained. One story went something like: ***Do you remember the time we were on the teeter-totter and you bounced so high that your pants fell off?** James remembered. “I was wearing girl underwear. That was the most embarrassing part.”

Near the end of the night, each of the kids got a miniature cake covered in rainbow sprinkles. Ben turned off the lights and lit a single candle, shaped like the No. 1, on James’ cake and carried it toward him. The tiny orange flame floated in the dark as everyone sang together.

Happy birthday, dear James. Happy birthday to you.

James took a deep breath and blew the flame out.