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Who Gets to Decide a Child's Gender?

At What Age are Hormone Treatments an Option?

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Nicole, five, was born Nicholas. She wears ponytails and pink flip-flops, she loves dresses and dolls. A story, written by Julia Reischel for the *New Times Broward -*

Palm Beach, quotes Nicole's mother, Lauren Anderson: "As a toddler, she wouldn't let me snap her onesies together because she wanted to wear a "dwessi" like her sister" she said.

The Andersons love their child and they want to let Nicole express herself. At first, they tried telling Nicole that she could be a girl at home but needed to be "neutral" in public. After a while though, they gave up and friends and

acquaintances note that the introverted Nicholas has become the shining personality of Nicole.

But now the Andersons are faced with bringing Nicole into a bigger, harsher world. She starts public school in the fall. Maybe as a girl. Maybe as a boy.

The school system has not yet told the Andersons what gender they will assign to Nicole when the child enters a classroom for the first time.

Therein lies the problem: that the school has the power to decide. Americans battle constantly over how we as individuals and communities raise our children. We struggle over what we teach them in textbooks, what methods to teach, using single-sex classrooms or experiential learning.

Nicole, it seems to me, is just the sort of flashpoint child that our society roils itself over. Reischel's report quotes some experts and activists as saying that the Andersons should continue to be supportive of Nicole's feelings about her gender; and others (including some trans activists) who think that they should not be.

I doubt it will be long before the story of Nicole will wind up on talk radio and appear as an example in op-eds (like this one) about what is right or wrong with the United States. Nicole's situation is tricky because gender identity is not just about clothes or even just about mental identity and emotional affiliation. It is also about making a difficult medical decision for a child who has not yet fully developed emotionally.

Reischel notes that many children who express feelings of discomfort with their own gender grow up to be gay, not transgendered. Yet at some point in the not-so-distant future, the child and the parents will need to decide whether Nicole should take hormones to thwart masculine development and promote feminisation during puberty. The hormones can later be stopped or started, but that decision will have a significant impact on Nicole's life.

Whether Nicholas is a gay man (or a straight and effeminate one) or Nicole is transgender is something that the child will need to decide for his - herself in his - her own time.

But the prospect of hormone treatments (and the possibility of transitioning surgery) makes this a trickier issue than just being gay. There are people, especially those with supportive families, who bounce in and out of gayness without lasting consequences.

There are "Lesbians Until Graduation" and men who are married but still pick up sex with other men in dark clubs or darker alleys.

There are girls with strong crushes on other girls who grow up to be happy married women with rich female friendships, and there are girls who chase boys, and even marry them, who later blossom into lesbian-hood in their thirties, forties and later.

And then there are children like Nicholas - Nicole who may be transgender, who seem to be transgender, but who, even so, are children, with years of self-exploration to come. They should not have to make lasting choices about their identities now.

Not yet. Not at five. For that matter, not at thirteen or seventeen. Life is long, and we keep discovering as we go.

Children like Nicole/Nicholas are flashpoints, but they are not the problem. Society is the problem. Schools that decide on a gender are the problem.

Lauren Anderson said, "I don't want to take that child's soul and squash it. The school doesn't have a choice."

She's right. It shouldn't be the school's choice to make. We need to have room in our society, in our schools, our governments, our social institutions, for fluidity of every sort.

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