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**Transgender youths get more support, thanks to laws, awareness**

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* ELLEN HUET (San Francisco Chronicle)

When Catherine Lee used to take her young child to the grocery store, other shoppers would often comment, "Oh, what a nice son you have, helping you pack the groceries."

She would sometimes just let it pass. But other times, she would correct them: "Oh, no, this is my daughter, Kimberly."

Her child, now 16-year-old Ashton Zaine Lee, came out as transgender to his parents about two years ago, and Lee had to learn quickly that "this is it -- this is my new reality."

Lee, 46, is part of a growing group of parents navigating -- sometimes at crash-course speed -- the complexities of raising a transgender child.

More transgender people are coming out as teens and as children, a sea change that doctors and therapists say could be caused by increasing awareness among parents and advancements in medical options for transgender children. And as their ranks grow, so does the push for laws like AB1266, signed recently by California Gov. Jerry Brown, to allow transgender youth to use school facilities and join groups associated with their gender identity.

Ashton lobbied hard for AB1266 and delivered thousands of support signatures to Brown's office this month. He has a solid build and looks at home in a suit and male clothing -- so much so that using the girls' bathroom at school caused more problems than using the boys' would have.

The new law has drawn ire from parents worried that it could be abused by students who pretend to be transgender in order to catch a peep at the opposite gender in bathrooms or open showers.

But much of the fear is based on misinformation, said Wendy Hill, the legislative aide to state Assemblyman Tom Ammiano, D-San Francisco, who introduced the bill.

"We have people calling up saying, 'I don't want my daughter to see a penis in the girls' bathroom,' " Hill said. "Let's think logistically. There's no way your daughter would see a penis or a vagina in a bathroom. They have stalls."

And public schools almost never have students shower at school anymore and haven't for decades, due to the costs of the water and the staff needed to keep them running and clean, Hill said.

Several school districts for years have had policies that accommodate transgender students without incident or abuse. Being a transgender student is "very scary," Hill said, and not the sort of experience taken lightly.

Ashton was using a staff bathroom before the bill was passed, and some transgender kids prefer to use a separate bathroom. But for many others, access to the right bathroom -- and sports teams, cabins at camp, other sex-separated groups -- can make all the difference in feeling accepted at school.

Most children who show gender-variant behavior at a young age won't end up living as a different gender. In studies, only about 15 percent of children who were brought into gender clinics before puberty eventually identify as transgender.

Many of the other 85 percent are gay, said Diane Ehrensaft, a child psychologist who helps lead the Child and Adolescent Gender Center at the University of California-San Francisco. Often, they or their parents had confused gender identity with sexual identity.

But studies also show that patients who continue to identify as transgender past puberty are much likelier to live the rest of their lives that way, Ehrensaft said.

Transgender or gender-variant children now have the option of using hormone blockers to stave off unwanted puberty and its accompanying body changes. The blockers can also buy time for children who aren't yet sure of their gender identity -- a comfort for parents who worry that children might be too young to fully grasp such a life-altering decision.

Lee and Ashton still disagree on the nuances of his gender identity. He feels he's a man, while Lee's motherly eye sees some ways that he'll always be female. She wishes he didn't have to pick one gender identity or the other, and knows that it could change in the future. But one thing is for sure.

"I don't think Ashton will ever say he was wrong, that he's not a man," she said.

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