

'I am a boy' insists child born a girl cont: A few weeks ago, she said a substitute teacher used his former name "in front of the whole class." The couple cite several examples of children arguing with their son over whether he's a boy or girl. One day back in October after school, they say a group of third-graders waiting outside for parents and bus drivers to pick them up formed a circle around their son and kept insisting he was a girl. They understand the kids are probably confused since many of them knew their son as a girl in kindergarten and first grade at the same school. But they have little tolerance for adults' reactions. "The kids are kids. I look to adults to set the tone," the child's mother said. "That's not OK if you disrespect my child ... How do we expect the kids to change when adults don't? I'm not telling people to accept it, but respect it." She said the school turned down her offer to have an Arizona woman who runs a non-profit, educational agency focused on transgender issues talk to staff. She and her husband are working with a local American Civil Liberties Union official in hopes of convincing the Volusia County school system to add gender identity to the district's bullying and harassment policies. The policies already list sexual orientation, but the parents say that has nothing to do with gender identity. **DEFINING TRANSGENDER** Transgender doesn't always equal homosexuality or bisexuality, experts say. They say transgender covers a broad spectrum of gender identity and sexual expression. Included in that bell curve can be extremely masculine women who like sports, car engines and hunting, and very effeminate men enthralled with ballet, crocheting and cooking who both still desire the opposite sex. "Transgender is basically someone who feels they are the opposite sex," DeLand psychologist Don Sanz said. "It doesn't have to do with sexual orientation. It's just who they feel they are." "It could be a man physically who feels female and is attracted to women." The therapist the Deltona child has been seeing said she can't discuss him. Sanz has never met the child, but he has had other transgender patients, and he's skeptical of anyone drawing conclusions at such a young age. "I couldn't call a 7-year-old transgender," Sanz said. "I'd be really reluctant to lay a label on a 7-year-old." A 22-year-old who was an Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University student until last year disagrees with Sanz's conclusion. The former ERAU student is male biologically, but said he's always felt female. "It's not uncommon to know as early as age 3," said the man, who didn't want to be named because he's afraid it could cost him his job in the Orlando area. "I never felt comfortable with the body I was born with." When he was little, his older sister and her friends would dress him up in girl's clothes and put makeup on him. "It made me feel who I was supposed to be," he said. "It's not a psychological condition. We're not sexual deviants"

He calls his male physical characteristics a birth defect. In the next few years he'd like to have a sex-change operation, which he refers to as sexual reassignment surgery. He's already on hormone therapy, and he's been living as a woman the past few months. "It feels more natural than ever before," he said. "I felt I was cross-dressing as a man." He wishes he could have made the full transition in grade school. Within the next few years, the Deltona child's parents will have to decide whether they want to try puberty blockers, drugs that suspend development. Eventually they'll have to decide if they want to pursue hormone therapy and surgery. "I don't want him to have a period," his mother said. **BATTLE BREWING** For now, they're focused on him being more comfortable in school. The 7-year-old's principal, teacher and various other school officials who come in contact with him were all informed of the situation last summer, school district spokeswoman Nancy Wait said. Wait said steps were taken to help the child with his transition, such as allowing him to use a one-person bathroom. Similar adjustments have been made in the past for other transgender children in the district, she said. But there are no plans to change any harassment or bullying policies, Wait said. "The school system believes the way it's written is based on federal regulations and state statutes, and it covers all our students," said Wait, the only school official who agreed to comment on the situation. "We reviewed the policies of districts that have incorporated gender identity into their language, all of which were in their bullying policies," she said. "Upon review, we believe gender identity does not need to be spelled out in Volusia's bullying policy because our policy prohibits the bullying or harassment of any student, regardless of the reason." She noted kids do face consequences already for bullying, and can even be expelled. "We have 62,000 students, and a very low number we're aware of are transgender," Wait said. "We're dealing with it on an individual basis. That seems to be working." Some people who've dealt with transgender issues in schools say that case by case approach invites trouble. Staff and students need specific gender identity education and policies, they argue. "It leaves a loophole if you don't have a policy," said Stratton Pollitzer, deputy director of Equality Florida, a statewide education and advocacy organization dedicated to eliminating discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation, race, gender identity and class. "There needs to be a little bite behind a parent's complaint in school policy," agreed George Griffin, president of the ACLU's Volusia/Flagler chapter. Griffin complimented Volusia County for being one of 18 school districts in Florida that have sexual orientation written into their policies. But he'd like to see them join the 14 that also include gender identity.

Pollitzer said a lot of the policies were adopted after a state law passed in 2008 required schools to protect gay and transgender kids from bullying. Without both specific training and policies, teachers won't know what to look for or how to react to harassment, said Pollitzer, who lives in Miami. "Transgender kids are the most likely to be attacked physically," Pollitzer said. That's the worst fear of the 7-year-old's parents. They say their son won't tell them when something happens at school, so they feel they have to get involved. **TOUGH DECISIONS** "I'm not trying to pound my chest or change laws," the boy's father said. "I just want my kids to be OK." Switching schools could give their child a new start, but they don't want to try that. "I don't want to teach my kids to run," his mother said. "And everyone likes him at his school. He has a lot of relationships there." If private conversations don't achieve the results they're looking for, they'll have to decide if they're willing to lose their cloak of anonymity and go before the School Board. That's an option they're strongly considering. "My fear is they're just going to push it under the rug," his mother said. Ultimately, they say they just want their child to be happy. A few years ago, they thought their son was introverted. Now they think he was probably confused and depressed. "He never really played girl games," his dad said. "He was always the father in make believe." Two years ago, he wanted a boy's bathing suit with no top. At restaurants, he always wanted to use the men's restroom. It took a few years to put the pieces together and accept what was happening. Doctors did discover a few things out of the ordinary, including very high testosterone levels and a chromosome that detached and reattached upside down. But the child's parents said physicians concluded neither of those things could make a girl want to be a boy. "Trust me, it was hard for me saying 'him,'" the father said. "I'm as traditional as they come. I was hoping it was just a phase. In the

back of my head, I thought 'maybe this is just a tomboy.' But he'd be so unhappy as a girl." They saw the pained look on the child's face when he glimpsed the feminine name he used to go by on his report card. They know he can't stand looking at an old picture in their house taken when he still had long hair. "Whatever I feel doesn't matter," his mother said. "All that matters is he's happy." The parents hope eventually everyone can see past their child's gender identity to get a closer look at the things that make him special. "He has the biggest heart. He's so caring," his mother said. "He seems more mature than his age," his father said. "He's very empathetic to pain. He's so loving." They hope the day comes soon when he can blend in with other kids, and the only things they'll want to talk to him about are sports, video games and astronauts.