

Families Supporting an LGBTQ Child

For some birth, foster or adoptive parents, learning that a child is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) can be a very difficult juncture. For others, this information is welcomed and recognized as a sign of trust. How a parent responds to their LGBTQ child will have an enormous impact on the child's development and on the quality of the parent-child relationship.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Upon learning that your child is LGBTQ, you may feel a variety of emotions ranging from relief and acceptance to shock, denial, guilt and anger. It's important to know that you are not alone in this experience. In fact, approximately one in every four families in this country has a family member who is LGBTQ. Many families struggle in isolation, unaware of community resources to help them. You owe it to your child and to yourself to find the resources, support and education you may need to move toward understanding and acceptance. One of the most valuable resources is Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. PFLAG offers a volunteer-based network of peer support chapters around the country (see www.pflag.org to find the chapter nearest you). Most importantly, reassure your child of your unconditional love.

SHOW APPRECIATION FOR THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE IT TAKES TO COME OUT.

If your child has come out to you, it's likely that it took her or him a lot of strength and courage to make that disclosure. It's now up to you to match this with your own courage, commitment, love and support. Your expression of your love and acceptance is extremely important for your child's well-being. A study by the Family Acceptance Project™ "establishes a clear link between specific parental and caregiver rejecting behaviors and negative health problems in lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults."¹ These health problems include

attempted suicide, high levels of depression, illegal drug use and engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse.² A later study by the Family Acceptance Project™ found that "family acceptance in adolescence is associated with young adult positive health outcomes (self-esteem, social support, and general health) and is protective for negative health outcomes (depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and attempts)."³ If you learned that your child is LGBTQ from another source, avoid confronting your child, and instead model strength, courage and respect so that your child will feel more comfortable confiding in you. Do your best to embrace your child, his or her identity and his or her decision to be open or not with you.

EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF LGBTQ ISSUES.

Don't rely on unfounded myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. Supportive literature specifically intended for parents of LGBTQ youth can help you develop a better understanding of these issues and a better relationship with your child. Such resources can be obtained through PFLAG, your local library or bookstore, an LGBT community center (to locate the one nearest you, see the National Association of LGBT Community Centers at www.lgbtcenters.org), or the Family Acceptance Project™ (<http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>).

FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

A CWLA/Lambda Legal
Joint Initiative



1 Caitlin Ryan, David Huebner, Rafael M. Diaz & Jorge Sanchez, *Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults*, 123 *Pediatrics* 346, 346 (2009).

2 *See id.* at 349-350.

3 Caitlin Ryan, Stephen T. Russell, David Huebner, Rafael Diaz & Jorge Sanchez, *Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults*, 23 *J. Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 205, 210 (2010).

UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR SUPPORT.

Be mindful that your reaction to your child's sexual orientation or gender identity will have a major impact on his or her life. LGBTQ children and youth who are rejected by their parents face a significantly higher risk of depression, suicide and substance abuse compared with LGBTQ youth from accepting families. Once they understand the importance of their support, many parents of LGBTQ youth find that they eventually develop a stronger, closer relationship with their child.

DON'T TRY TO CHANGE YOUR CHILD'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER IDENTITY.

While young people may go through a process to come to understand what their sexual orientation or gender identity may be, it's important to understand that these traits are a part of each person's identity and can no more be changed for an LGBT person than they can for anyone else. Be suspicious of religious and other organizations that promote "freedom from homosexuality" through conversion or reparative therapy. Such assertions are based upon the misguided belief that there is something wrong with LGBTQ people. Leading professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association have issued warnings against such therapies and the harmful effects they have on those subjected to them.⁴

These organizations have long recognized that being lesbian or gay inherently poses no obstacle to leading a happy, healthy and productive life, and that the vast majority of lesbian and gay people function well in the full array of life activities and interpersonal relationships. Conversion therapies are regarded

⁴ The American Psychiatric Association states: "Psychotherapeutic modalities to convert or 'repair' homosexuality are based on developmental theories whose scientific validity is questionable. Furthermore, anecdotal reports of 'cures' are counterbalanced by anecdotal claims of psychological harm... APA recommends that ethical practitioners refrain from attempts to change individuals' sexual orientation[.]" (Am. Psychiatric Ass'n, APA Document Reference No. 200001, *Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies)* (2000)).

The American Psychological Association affirms, stating: "Treatments that are based on assumptions that homosexuality or same-sex sexual attractions are, a priori, a mental disorder or psychopathology or based on inaccurate stereotypes regarding LGB people are to be avoided because they run counter to empirical data and because reports of harm suggest that such treatments can reinforce restricting stereotypes, increase internalized stigma, and limit a client's development." (Am. Psychological Assoc., Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009) at 86-87, available at www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf).

The American Medical Association also agrees, stating: "Our AMA... opposes the use of 'reparative' or 'conversion' therapy that is based upon the assumption that homosexuality per se is a mental disorder or based upon the a priori assumption that the patient should change his/her homosexual orientation." Am. Med. Ass'n, AMA Policies on GLBT Issues, Patient-Centered Policy H-160.991, Health Care Needs of the Homosexual Population (2005), available at www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/about-ama/our-people/member-groups-sections/glb-advocacy-committee/ama-policy-regarding-sexual-orientation.page.

by mental health experts as ineffective, unethical and the cause of increased risk of depression, anxiety and self-destructive behaviors. Instead of trying to change your LGBTQ child, give him or her support.

STAND UP FOR YOUR CHILD IF HE OR SHE IS BEING PICKED ON OR HARASSED OUTSIDE YOUR HOME.

As a parent, you should protect your LGBTQ child from harm and harassment—in school, your neighborhood and in the community—just as you would for any child. This is particularly important if your daughter or son recently made the decision to come out at school or to friends. Research consistently shows that LGBTQ youth face far greater risks of harassment and violence from their peers than non-LGBTQ youth. Assure your child that you are on his or her side.

RECONCILE THIS NEW INFORMATION WITH YOUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS.

Learning that your child is LGBTQ can be especially challenging if you feel your faith or religion opposes homosexuality. Understand that being LGBTQ does not impact a person's ability to be spiritual or religious any more than being heterosexual does. While some religious denominations continue to condemn homosexuality and gender variance, others publicly support gay rights and LGBTQ individuals. In fact,

“ My dream is to live in a family that will accept me and where I can just be a kid. ”
—Youth in Care

within many religious communities there are support groups for LGBTQ members and their families, including Dignity for Catholics (www.dignityusa.org) and Affirmation for Mormons (www.affirmation.org). You can seek supportive resources and counsel to help reconcile your religious beliefs with your commitment to your LGBTQ child.



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