

Supporting parents and families of same-sex attracted and transgender young people

“Having a gay son opened the door to a whole new world that I was ignorant about, and having been privy to it, I can’t imagine my life without it. I have never before experienced such a sense of community. I am warmly welcomed in it and I absolutely love being part of it. This privilege has added a richness, depth and spirit to the tapestry of my life. I am touched and awed by the inspirational courage, raw honesty and generosity of spirit that I have witnessed.” Teresa

How can I support my child or loved one?

One of the ways to support your child or loved one is by educating yourself as much as possible about sexuality and gender identity. There are lots of really good books and information about to help you with this.

Young people know that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are marginalised in society. Many children learn negative words for GLBT people, often before they reach the kindergarten playground. They may assume that all the people they know are heterosexual; and they may have no idea that some of the respected adults around them are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

As a result, many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people feel profoundly isolated. ‘Surely I am the only person like this’ is a common sentiment. Unfortunately, some GLBT young people are viciously harassed and abused.

Whether or not they are labelled by others, these young people often:

- Fear being discovered and expect rejection
- Guard their feelings carefully in order to be accepted (or merely to survive)
- Have few opportunities to openly date, flirt or engage in sexual experimentation like other teenagers, or they may experiment in an unsafe way
- Lack accurate information about their feelings and experiences.

Risk of depression and suicide

The vast majority of GLBT young people are not depressed or suicidal. However, Australian research has identified that same sex attracted young people may be up to six times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population.¹ It is not a young person’s sexual or gender identity that causes them to feel depressed or suicidal.

What does impact negatively on their well-being is the experience of growing up ‘different’ in a society that often rejects difference, and that expects everyone to be heterosexual.

Education about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people is an important step towards supporting young people and preventing depression and suicide. Young GLBT people need the following kinds of support, to develop good self-esteem and skills to deal with what can sometimes be a hostile environment:

- Supportive opportunities to socialise with one another
- Resources that specifically address their concerns
- Sensitive, non-judgemental support as they come to understand themselves.

“Getting [my son’s] homosexuality out in the open was a tremendous relief for both of us and our relationship has deepened to a very intimate level. Our communication is now very open and honest.” Teresa

“Both my husband and I were pretty devastated; I know I was frightened for our son and for us. All the negatives came to the fore – discrimination, violence, male prostitution, religion frowning on it, friends might reject us, etc.” Lesley

FAQ - Common questions asked by families

Why did they have to tell me?

Some families feel they would be happier not knowing. They start to recall the time before they knew as ‘problem free’, remembering an ideal situation rather than the reality. Sometimes people try to deny what is happening by rejecting what they hear, by shutting down; or by not registering the impact of what they are being told.

Parents and families may feel resentment towards their child or loved one’s sexuality or gender identity. This feeling is sometimes based on the belief that to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender was a conscious decision. In fact, the main decision most gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have to make is not whether to be GLBT, but whether to be honest about who they are. Hiding imposes a tremendous burden. A large part of their life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole person. It’s important to recognise the fact that your child told you as a sign of their love for you, and their need for your support and understanding.

What did we do wrong?

Parents and family members sometimes experience feelings of guilt when they first find out. However, there is no evidence that different parenting styles or family situations have any influence on the development of sexual orientation or gender identity. What families can provide is an environment in which young people can understand themselves and strive to reach their full potential. Blaming yourself rests on the assumption that there is something wrong with your child’s sexuality or gender identity.

Why am I uncomfortable with my child or loved one’s sexuality/gender identity?

Our culture sends us messages about many things, including sexuality and gender identity. The negative messages and myths we have learned are very strong and not easy to dismiss. Homophobia and transphobia are strong parts of our culture, and are similar to many other forms of discrimination and prejudice. As long as they exist in our society, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and their families may have very

legitimate fears and concerns. Developing a better understanding of your child or loved one, and becoming more familiar with the issues, will help reduce your discomfort, as well as reducing the impact of any discrimination they may face.

Could a counsellor or therapist help?

A counsellor or therapist trained in this area may provide support for you and your family while you are coming to terms with your child or loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity. You may want to talk about your own feelings and how to work through them; or to get help to enable you and your child or loved one to communicate clearly through this period.

Consulting a counsellor or therapist in the hope of changing your child or loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity has little value. Homosexuality is not a sickness or illness, and so is not something to be 'cured'. Young people who have acknowledged their same sex attraction can experience feelings of depression and fear, and may need help with self-acceptance.

Should we tell the family, neighbours, and friends?

Just as 'coming out' can be difficult for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person, it can be equally hard for parents and families. Sometimes parents and family members worry about other people finding out. It can be difficult when questions such as 'Has he got a girlfriend?' or 'When is she going to get married?' are asked. This is a reflection of our society's assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural sexuality. It is a good idea to discuss with your child or loved one what can be said, and to whom. It is their life you are discussing and it is respectful for them to be involved in any decision.

Parents and families have found that their fears are often far worse than the reality. Some do not tell their extended family for a long time, only to have them respond, 'we knew that quite a while ago'. It is often easier to make the decision about who, how and when you tell once you understand more about sexual orientation. There are lots of books and information available that may be helpful to you.

We have accepted the situation, but why must they flaunt it?

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people who reveal their sexuality are sometimes accused of 'flaunting their identity'. 'Flaunting it' has many different interpretations. Heterosexual couples can be seen as 'flaunting it' every day, in public spaces, in the media, in the images that surround us all the time. If you feel that affectionate behaviour should be a private thing for some, then maybe this should apply to everyone. All people have the right to express their sexuality providing it doesn't impinge on the rights of others.

On the other hand, many gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people censor their own behaviour because they fear negative public reactions, and you might share those fears. But it is worth considering that some things never change until people challenge them, and that the decision to 'come out' publicly is generally a great relief for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person.

1. Sue Dyson et al, Don't Ask Don't Tell: Hidden in the Crowd. Documenting the Links Between Sexuality and Suicidal Behaviours Among Young People. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Australia, 2003.

This material is reproduced from *Making Sense: Information for parents, families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people (2003)* by Liz Alexander. Making Sense has acknowledged the adaptation and reproduction of material from *Some One You Love: Information for Parents, Friends and Family of Young Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual People*, produced by the 'Here for Life' Youth Sexuality Project Team (Graham Brown, Pia Coates and Melissa Gillett), a joint project of the Gay and Lesbian Counselling service (WA) and the WA AIDS Council. Making Sense has also acknowledged PFLAG Victoria, parents and young people for their contributions to the publication.