

OUR DAUGHTERS AND SONS:

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR
PARENTS OF LESBIAN, GAY,
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
YOUTH AND ADULTS

A large, stylized graphic of a rainbow flag is positioned at the bottom of the page. The flag is composed of several overlapping, semi-transparent shapes in shades of blue, creating a layered effect. The top edge of the flag features a series of sharp, triangular points, resembling a sunburst or a stylized rainbow. The overall design is modern and abstract.

PFLAG
www.pflag.org



Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

is the nation's foremost family-based organization committed to the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons. Founded in 1973 by mothers and fathers, PFLAG has grown to be a

national non-profit organization with over 200,000 members and supporters and over 250 affiliates in the United States. This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced and serviced by the PFLAG National office, located in Washington, D.C., the national Board of Directors and the Regional Directors Council. PFLAG is a nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

Our Vision. We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Only with respect, dignity and equality for all will we reach our full potential as human beings, individually and collectively. PFLAG welcomes the participation and support of all who share in, and hope to realize this vision.

Our Mission. PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, their families and friends through: support, to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

About this booklet:

Our Daughters & Sons: Questions and Answers for Parents of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth and Adults is copyrighted, but readers are welcome to copy it in whole or in part, with proper accreditation to PFLAG.

To order this publication, to receive a complete listing of PFLAG publications, or for information about a PFLAG chapter in your area, visit our website at www.pflag.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Thank you to the **Williams Institute**, <http://www2.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/home.html>, for doing the important work of measuring progress and challenges in the LGBT community. And a big thank you to **Dr. Caitlyn Ryan** and the researchers at the Family Acceptance Project, <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>, for quantifying what family acceptance looks like. Most of all, thank you to the parents, families and friends who have showed us all how to react and respond with love for over 35 years.

DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS BOOKLET:

Bisexual: An individual who is emotionally, romantically, physically, and/or spiritually attracted to men and women. Bisexuals do not need to have had equal sexual experience with both men and women; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all to identify as bisexual. Sometimes stated as bi.

Coming Out: For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, it is the process of self-acceptance that continues throughout one's life. People establish a lesbian, gay, bi or transgender identity first to themselves and then may reveal it to others. Coming out can also apply to the family and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth or adults. There are many different degrees of being out: some may be out to friends only, some may be out publicly, and some lesbian, gay, bi,

and transgender people may be out only to themselves. It's important to remember and respect that not everyone is in the same place when it comes to being out. "Coming out" in the context of this publication means letting others know that you have a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender loved one.

Gay: The adjective used to describe people whose enduring emotional, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attractions are to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, lesbian is often a preferred term for women. Avoid identifying gay people as "homosexuals" – see homosexual.

Gender expression: A person's way of showing their gender identity to others through means such as dress and/or manner.

Gender identity: One’s internal, personal sense of being a man, a woman, or gender non-conforming. For transgender and gender non-conforming people, their birth-assigned sex and their own internal sense of gender identity do not match.

Gender non-conforming: A person who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society.

LGBT: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender which refers to these individuals collectively. It is sometimes stated as GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). Occasionally, the acronym is stated as LGBTQA to include allies – straight and supportive individuals. The acronym sometimes includes Q for queer or questioning.

Homosexual: An outdated clinical term considered derogatory and offensive by many gay people. Replace it with “gay” or “lesbian” to refer to people who are attracted to individuals of the same sex.

Lesbian: A woman whose enduring emotional, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction is to other women. Avoid identifying lesbians as homosexuals, which is often seen as a derogatory term.

Queer: Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for gay, queer currently is used by some LGBTs — particularly among younger people — to describe themselves and/or their community. Some value the term for its defiance, some like it because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and others find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Many within the LGBT community continue to dislike the term and find it offensive. This word should be avoided unless quoting someone who self-identifies that way.

Sexual Orientation: Permanent emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. Straight individuals experience these feelings primarily for people of the opposite sex. Gay or lesbian individuals experience these feelings primarily for people of the same sex. Bi individuals experience these feelings for people of both sexes.

Transgender: A term describing the state of a person’s gender identity which does not necessarily match his/her assigned sex at birth. Other words commonly used are female to male (FTM), male to female (MTF), and genderqueer. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity.

MY CHILD IS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND/OR TRANSGENDER. NOW WHAT?

“Desperate, devastated and dysfunctional would be the most accurate descriptors of us as parents following the announcement from our 28 year old son that he, in fact, was gay ... As parents we felt alone, terribly alone.”

~Mother of a gay son

Many parents aren't prepared for the words, "Mom, Dad. I'm gay." Others aren't prepared to find out indirectly, whether from a social networking site, a school counselor, or a neighbor, that their child

may be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). If you're like some parents, your first reaction is "How will I ever handle this?" For

others, the reaction may sound more like, "Now that I know, what I can do to support my child?"

Whatever your reaction PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends

of Lesbians and Gays) is here to provide the information you need to understand your reaction to this news, to understand your child's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and to respond

in a way that is supportive. Our members are parents, families and friends of LGBT people -- and LGBT people

themselves -- in every state in the country, representing a wide variety of political, religious, and cultural perspectives. We have been through much of what you are now feeling.

If you're like some parents, your first reaction is "How will I ever handle this?"

Recent studies have placed the average age of coming out within the mid- to late-teens, with some youth coming out even earlier. According to research conducted by Dr. Caitlin Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project, the average age a child knows that they are LGB is 13. While there are still people who wait until they are adults to come out, the trend is towards coming out at younger and younger ages. For the purposes of this booklet we will reference “youth” and “your child”, but we recognize that people come out at different ages. The information in this booklet is relevant whether your loved one is 10 or 100.

Now that you know (or even think) your child is LGBT there are three things to remember:

- **Every reaction is different and valid.** There is no one reaction to finding out your child is LGBT. There is no right reaction or wrong reaction. Your response is important, but you should feel no shame no matter how you initially feel. Some people feel fear for their loved one’s safety, some experience guilt over how this could have happened, sadness that they did not know without

being told, or anger that their child did not tell them sooner. Others may feel happy that their child opened up to them, relief that now they know what has been bothering their child, or joy that their child now knows who they really are. These are all normal reactions.

- **This is a process.** Addressing your reaction, responding to your child, learning about LGBT issues, sharing this information with your family and friends, all of these things take time. Know that it is okay to not be okay overnight. Take the time you need to explore your feelings. If you choose, you can emerge from this period with a stronger, closer relationship with your child than you have ever had before.
- **You are not alone.** There are more than 250 PFLAG chapters in every state in the country full of people just like you. According to the Williams Institute, an LGBT research think tank, there are more than eight million self-identified LGB people in the US and they all have families. According to the same study, there are approximately

700,000 transgender people in the US. Other research shows that 7 in 10 people in the U.S. personally know someone who is LGBT. In other words, although it may not appear so, there are LGBT people everywhere, and there are families

and allies who are supportive everywhere. You are not alone in this process. Even though you might feel isolated or nervous, talking to people who have gone through what you're experiencing right now does help. There are books to read, telephone

helplines to call, websites to visit, and people to meet who, by sharing their own experiences, can help you move forward. PFLAG can

connect you with the information and support services you need.

You are on a journey.

Like every journey, this one will have its ups and down, but know that many families before you have taken this same path and have arrived in a place they feel is better than where they started – closer to their children, closer to their families, and closer to an entire community that they never knew existed.

PFLAG can connect you with the information and support services you need.

I THOUGHT I KNEW MY CHILD

“For me, it was my son saying to me, ‘Dad, I’m the same person I was before.’ Now it’s been six months, and I realize even more that really, nothing has changed in his life. It was my perception of him that changed.”

~ Father of a gay son

We think we know and understand our children from the day they are born, so much so that many of us are convinced we even know what’s going on inside their heads. So when a child announces “I’m gay,” and we hadn’t a clue – or we knew but denied it to ourselves – it can make us feel like we don’t know who our child is or who they have become.

Your child coming out doesn’t have to mean the end of your dreams for your child – just a change in what they look like.

Every parent has a dream, a vision of who their child will be, should be, can be. It’s a dream that is born of a person’s own history, of what they wanted for themselves growing up, and especially of the culture around them. Despite the fact that there are countless LGBT people in the world,

most people’s visions for their child’s future are grounded in a straight relationship. The disorientation you may feel is a natural part of a grieving process. You have lost something – the dream you may

have envisioned for your child. You also have lost the illusion that you know and understand your child’s innermost thoughts and feelings.

But your child coming out doesn’t have to mean the end of your dreams for your child – just a change in what they look like. You can still have a close, loving relationship with him or her. In fact, your relationship may be even stronger now, because you know more about

him or her than you did before.

Keep these two things in mind:

- **Your child is the same person they were before you knew.**
Your child is the same person he or she was yesterday. What has changed is your perception of that child, the image you may have had of him or her, and the understanding you thought you had of their inner world. That feeling of loss can be difficult, but that perception can be replaced with a new and clearer understanding of your child and new dreams for your child.

- **This is not a phase.** It is important to acknowledge your child's identity because being LGBT is not a phase. While some people may experiment, someone who has reached the point of telling a parent that he or she is LGBT is usually not going through a phase. Generally, he or she has given long and hard thought to understanding and acknowledging his or her sexual orientation or gender identity.

Again, this is a journey, and part of the journey is getting to know your child at a deeper level.

WHY IS MY CHILD GAY?

“The night my daughter came out I spent hours on the internet researching. I needed to know what I had done to make her this way, but between researching and crying and crying some more I realized that I hadn’t done anything. This is just who she is.”

~Mother of a lesbian daughter

There are a number of ways to answer these questions. Some of the most important ones are here:

- **It is not your “fault”.** Nothing you or anyone else did made your child LGBT. LGBT people come from all types of families – from very religious to atheist families, conservative to liberal families, families of every ethnicity and every economic background. Some have dominant mothers, others have dominant fathers. Some LGBT people are only children, while others are youngest, middle, and oldest children. They come from families with siblings who are gay and families with siblings who are not gay. They come from one-parent households, two-parent households, and households with stepparents. They live in every kind of community, large and small. There is no valid, peer-reviewed research that shows that any nurture factors contribute to a child’s sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Is it my genes?** Many parents wonder if there is a genetic or biological basis to sexual orientation or gender identity. There is research that points in several directions from genes, to birth order, to hormones during pregnancy, but nothing is conclusive.
- **Sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be changed.** Every major medical and psychiatric association agrees that attempting to change one’s sexual orientation or gender identity does not work and may be harmful.

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND?

“When my son came out I was devastated, but the look of fear and worry on his face kept me from expressing how worried I was. I told him I loved him and that we would be in this together. As the weeks went by I found that my sadness and worry began to disappear every time I said I love you no matter what.”

~Mother of a gay son

Remember, no matter how difficult (or even how easy) this is for you, it probably was extremely difficult for your child to come out or be outed to you. They are worried about losing your love. They are worried about your reaction and response. They may even be worried about losing their family and their home. Sadly, in too many cases, all of these things have happened and continue to happen to LGBT people around the world. Your response to your child will have a huge impact on both your child’s well-being and your relationship with your child moving forward. Remember

Positive, supportive responses lead to healthier children.

that while you often can’t help how you first react to the news, you can determine how you will respond as you move forward.

- As mentioned earlier, Dr. Caitlyn Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project conducted research which followed

families going through the coming-out process. The conclusions reached from this study

highlights the powerful role parents play in their LGBT child’s health: **Positive, supportive responses lead to healthier children.** Certain

response behaviors reduce your child's risk for both physical and mental health problems. These include talking with your child about his or her LGBT identity, expressing your unconditional love for your child, supporting your child's LGBT identity even though you may feel uncomfortable, connecting your child with an LGBT adult role model, and supporting your child's gender expression.

- **Negative responses can cause long-term damage.** To most people, it is clear that hitting your child, name-calling, or kicking them out of the house would have a negative impact on their physical and mental health. But there are other behaviors some parents may initially see as helpful when, in reality, they have negative effects on children. These behaviors include blocking access to LGBT friends, events or resources, telling your child that God

will punish them if they are LGBT, making your child keep their LGBT identity a secret and not let them talk about it, and pressuring your child to be more or less masculine or feminine. Dr. Ryan's research demonstrates that behaviors like these increase a child's risk for depression and illegal drug use among other serious negative physical and mental health outcomes.

The most important thing you can do when your child comes out or is outed to you is express your unconditional love, talk to them, and listen to what they have to say. Try to express your fear, worry, angry or any other feelings of distress away from your child. Remember, it is never too late to respond with love and support. Some parents come to a place of support and understanding early, and for others it takes time. The important thing is that you are working towards understanding.

HOW DO I MOVE FORWARD FROM HERE?

“It’s really important to talk about it, to know that you’re not alone, that there are other people who have had this experience and are dealing with it in a positive way. And the benefit is that you establish a good relationship with your child. Parents want to parent. They don’t, generally speaking, want to be isolated from their kid.”

~Mother of a lesbian daughter

When your child first comes out, it can feel like you will never think about anything else. His or her LGBT identity will consume your thoughts forever.

But as the newness of this revelation passes, you will begin to think about other things and start to move

forward. You have taken the first step in dealing with this news – reading this booklet. There are other things you can do to help address this issue and the feelings you have:

- **Go to a PFLAG chapter meeting.** There are more than 250 PFLAG chapters across

the country. PFLAG chapters provide peer support for families, friends, and allies of the LGBT community as well as

support for LGBT people themselves. At a PFLAG meeting you will meet people who have stories like yours. They may have gone through

what you are going through and they are ready to talk to you about it and to listen. You can contact a PFLAG chapter by e-mail or phone if you are not yet comfortable going to a meeting. Find your nearest PFLAG chapter by visiting www.pflag.org/find.

You have taken the first step in dealing with this news – reading this booklet.

- **Read Other PFLAG Publications.** PFLAG has additional resources on specific issues related to your child coming out including Faith in Our Families, which addresses reconciling your child's sexual orientation or gender identity with your faith, and Welcoming Our Trans Family and Friends, a guide for parents and friends of transgender or gender non-conforming youth or adults. You can download these booklets as well as booklets on safe schools, reaching out to straight allies, and many other topics, at www.pflag.org/publications.
- **Research.** There is a tremendous amount of information about coming out, the LGBT community, parents with LGBT youth and adult children, and anything else you might want to know. Take the time to do some research. Check out the resources section of the PFLAG National website, www.pflag.org/support, to find a list of LGBT and ally organizations that support, educate and advocate for the LGBT community.

WHAT'S NEXT?

“Each and every time we tell our truth, we’re creating a world where the sense that there is shame in being LGBT – or having a child or loved one who is – becomes less pervasive.”

~Father of a lesbian daughter

Often parents will say that in their experience the most important thing to remember is the unconditional

love you have for your child.

Many share that this processes of reacting and responding to their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity brought them

closer to their child and closer to their family. As time moves forward and you become more comfortable with this revelation, you may come to a point where you can begin to come out loud and proud as the parent of an LGBT child to

the parents and LGBT people in a PFLAG chapter, to your family, to your friends, neighbors, and

eventually even to strangers.

Many people cannot imagine ever getting to that place when they first learn of the child’s sexual orientation or

gender identity, but as many PFLAG parents can tell you, they eventually got to a place where this feels possible. Be patient with yourself and patient with your child and remember - you always have a home in PFLAG.

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This publication and all PFLAG National publications are available for download at www.pflag.org. Visit our website or call (202) 467-8180 for more information.



1828 L Street NW
Suite 660
Washington, D.C. 20036

Voice: (202) 467-8180
Fax: (202) 467-8194

info@pflag.org
www.pflag.org