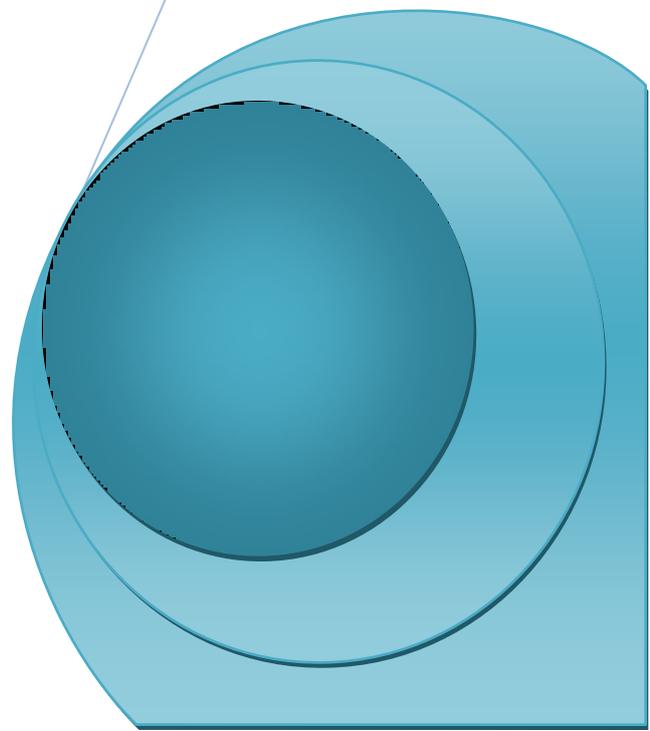


Family Ties

**A Guide for Parents who
have Lesbian, Gay, or
Bisexual Children**



Foreword

Young people who are gay or lesbian or bisexual are increasingly confiding in their parents. As new equality legislation and signs of changing attitudes in Northern Ireland have given confidence to young people in this situation, organisations such as Cara-Friend and The Rainbow Project have encountered more young people who are struggling with their sexual identity. Groups such as Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI) are helping to empower these young people. Usually these young people want to confide in their parents, but fear the possible reactions.

LGBT organisations are also contacted by parents and carers who think their child might be gay or lesbian, or by those whose child has already 'come out'. Some parents react with shock, some with concern, and others with acceptance. But a common feeling is not knowing how best to handle the situation, and how best to support their child. Practical information for parents and carers in Northern Ireland has not, so far, been widely available. We hope that this booklet will help parents in this situation find some of their answers.

Every parent's experiences and reactions will be different when their child 'comes out'. The primary aim of this booklet is to look at some of the most common questions and concerns raised by the parents of gay and lesbian young people who have already made contact with the organisations mentioned above.

We hope you will find this booklet useful. We also hope you find it helpful to realise there is a positive side to the news that your child might be gay or lesbian. It is vital to remember that your child is still your child regardless of their sexual orientation. If your child has told you that they are gay or lesbian, this is a sign of enormous trust – your response should recognise this. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are very aware of the potential for a negative response, and the possibility of a hostile response. They often fear their parents will condemn them or be disappointed in them. Increasingly, families of young gay, lesbian and bisexual people are learning to accept the identity of the young person, allowing for loving, committed family relationships to be maintained and strengthened.

We hope that you will join these families, and that this booklet will help you to realise that your child still needs to love and be loved – especially by their parents.

Steve Williamson, Co-ordinator

Cara-Friend

Mirjam Bader, Manager

The Rainbow Project

Introduction

For any parent, hearing their child say the words ‘Mum, Dad – I’m gay’ may not be easy. Parents may be upset or worried; they may feel guilty or ashamed. These reactions are understandable. Northern Ireland is changing, with advanced equality legislation now in place. But society will take longer to change, and sometimes attitudes in Northern Ireland remain intolerant of people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Parents may have fears about what will happen to their child. They might have heard, or believe, some of the myths about sexual orientation. They might have concerns about the reaction of others, in the family and outside, and there is no doubt that young gay, lesbian and bisexual people may have a difficult time. Schools are often still reluctant to acknowledge that they have gay and lesbian students. There is still an unacceptable level of open prejudice from religious and political bodies. There is still a higher rate of suicide among young people who identify as gay or lesbian; there are mental health issues resulting from the stress and lack of affirmation experienced by many gay and lesbian young people. But there are also signs of a hopeful future for these young people. There are dedicated organisations that can and do help the gay and lesbian community.

Cara-Friend, The Rainbow Project, and Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI) all advocate for these young people. The new equality laws ensure fair treatment in the workplace and in public life. And attitudes are slowly changing.

Yet one group of people central to the lives of young gay, lesbian and bisexual people who have so far been largely overlooked are their parents. This booklet is a result of the need for parents to have easy access to advice and support. Representatives of LGBT organisations like Cara-Friend, The Rainbow Project, GLYNI and others from the Education and Health professions have contributed, giving their opinions, thoughts and experiences. More importantly, parents of LGBT young people have contributed to the booklet, providing some helpful insights and personal stories.

We intend that through this booklet parents, carers, families, friends, general practitioners, teachers, and social care staff will find factual information during what can be, but need not be, a difficult time.

We hope you find this booklet useful, and thought provoking.

Liam Larmour, Project Co-ordinator

Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland



www.glyni.org.uk

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My son or daughter has 'come out'

Every parent's experiences are different when their child 'comes out' to them. How they deal with it varies as well, however it is important to remember that your son or daughter has not changed. It is not how you brought up your child that has made them gay. It is just simply part of who they are.

The worst thing you can do is to pretend that nothing has happened, or tell them it is just 'a phase'. It is a big decision for your son or daughter to tell you and it means that they have placed their trust in you as their parent.

To say "it's just a phase" diminishes the significance of this; it is a decision that they have been thinking about for quite a while, and have probably lost a lot of sleep over. How would you like to be on the receiving end of a dismissive response at such a vulnerable time?

Not all parents have this initial response however; in fact there are lots of parents who are very positive and supportive when their son or daughter 'comes out' to them. Can you be one of these?

Not a choice

It cannot be repeated often enough that sexual orientation is not chosen, that instead it is a combination of emotional, psychological and behavioural characteristics which develop as a person grows and matures from childhood into adulthood.

As with all children, sexual awareness evolves as the body develops. At this point, it is very important to make a distinction between a same-sex physical experience, which many people have, and a lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation.

The first is a purely physical encounter without any emotional involvement; the second is a complete way of relating to others and involves very deep emotional experiences.

Early difference

It is however at this early stage of sexual awareness that a lesbian or gay child first becomes aware of how their feelings differ from their peers, although they may not yet be aware of what these feelings mean, and so can be very confused. Your son or daughter may deny their sexual orientation, even to themselves, especially if they feel your reaction will be a negative one.

The shOut Report (2003) has shown that same-sex attracted young people have probably been consciously aware of these feelings since the age of 11 or 12. It is generally described as a period of uneasiness, of feeling apart from their peers in a way they cannot quite understand.

Stress and Identification

The internal conflict and feeling of fear, isolation, or guilt which they may build up inside is often very stressful. Regretfully society still currently focuses on the assumption that only heterosexuality is the accepted norm, and although progress on equality legislation has been made, much still has to be done to progress societal attitudes.

As the young person's physical development speeds up, it becomes clear to them that this difference is one of sexual orientation. Your child may be overtaken by fear and loneliness.

It is important for young people to have role models to learn from as they grow up; there are often few lesbian, gay or bi role-models for your son or daughter to learn from in terms of healthy personal development unless they seek out like-minded peers or celebrities on TV. Yet it is important to realise that not all lesbian or gay people necessarily identify with the lesbian and gay people portrayed on television, even though this image has improved in recent years. Attempts are now made by producers and playwrights to depict more accurate lifestyle characters and programmes for the quite sizeable lesbian and gay audiences.

Rejection and Ridicule

Gay and lesbian young people fear rejection by their parents, and possibly by anyone else they might turn to for guidance. They fear scorn or even aggression from their friends and classmates, some of whom may be repeating the sort of "queer" jokes that abound in school playgrounds, and regretfully even amongst some older people that may include their parents, siblings, relatives, teachers or youth workers.

They fear they might give themselves away with a look, a glance, or even an untimely remark. They may experience great difficulty in meeting other lesbian/gay people, and in isolated circumstances can feel that "they are the only gay in the village" to quote a phrase we have often heard.

In short, lesbian and gay young people can feel a certain sense of fear and hesitation when confiding in parents, just as parents may feel fear and hesitation when faced with the knowledge of their daughter's or son's orientation. And too often the young person feels they must cope with the situation alone. It is not uncommon for a young lesbian/gay person to spend all of their teenage years summoning up enough courage to talk to their parents.

Can you imagine spending six or seven years stressing over a decision like that?

Parents' reaction

For parents, totally unprepared for this development in their child, the general reaction is one of shock, bewilderment and fear. Some blame themselves, some reject the child, some want to help but do not know how to cope. Many, in spite of themselves, feel alienated from their own child. Even where love maintains the bond, this does not lessen the shock and confusion parents may feel.

Parents can cope best by talking about their fears, frustration, anger and grief in a safe environment where they will not be judged. They need to know that their feelings will be understood. Many parents initially feel shock, and for some, devastation. Isolation, resentment and hopelessness are not uncommon feelings at this time. Some may even feel a sense of loss about not having grandchildren. After this shock has worn away, parents may start worrying about issues such as the prejudice their child may face, or their health and well-being.

These are genuine concerns. But no matter what concerns a parent may have, this is a time in their child's life when the child needs their parents more than ever. A supportive network of parents going through the same feelings, or those who have already faced these issues, can allow parents to hear and see others who are managing to cope, or those who have accepted that their son or daughter is gay, lesbian or bisexual. Parents new to this situation can be enabled to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and share their feelings and fears.

The most important thing to do is to continue to show your love and support for your child. Even if you do not understand what they are going through, remember how much courage it took for your child to tell you a very intimate fact about their life.

Is ignorance an excuse?

Little information exists for the parents of a lesbian or gay child. Very rarely, if at all, does the subject of homosexuality get talked about in the home, or socially other than in a "sensationalist media" sense. If it is talked about it will usually be discussed in a very biased way based upon limited knowledge and distorted truths.

The ideas that you could have around these issues may simply be those which you first learned in the playground, in an atmosphere of prejudice, fear and ridicule towards homosexuality.

Even parents who consider themselves to be understanding on these issues do not expect to encounter them in their own family. Do not feel guilty. These prejudices, misunderstandings and misconceptions, are prevalent in our society. They are not ideas that you as a parent, family or friend of a lesbian/gay person decided to have. However you do have the ability to learn and to change the attitudes you hold, for the benefit of both you and your child.

What about religion?

If parents hold certain religious beliefs, one of the difficulties they may experience is in reconciling these beliefs with the lesbian/gay orientation of their daughter or son. It is not possible in this booklet to reach for, or to offer, a solution that would be acceptable. However, a few pointers can be given.

A very great deal of work is being done by clergy of all denominations and religions to bring a more tolerant attitude towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The laws of most religions are now thousands of years old and we must remember that laws are given to specific cultures in specific historical eras. These may or may not have been valid for that culture and era, but we must be prepared to accept change, especially when trying to apply laws to vastly different cultures, separated in time by thousands of years from the original intended recipients of those laws.

We should always be prepared to see the spirit of the teachings and try to hold true to that in guiding our own lives, rather than clinging to literal interpretations of scripture which we like to judge others with. We are all God's children and many lesbian/gay people are committed believers. These lesbian and gay Christians are often wonderful examples of the central truth of the teachings, manifesting the tolerance, compassion, forgiveness and acceptance which Christ taught. They are often involved in loving committed relationships which are moral and life-affirming.

It cannot be denied however that many of those we look to for guidance in religion do not have scripture reading eyes, and they may indeed huff and puff about lesbian and gay issues, quoting this or that prophet or this or that law. It can be useful to remind these people of the words of Christ himself:

"Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22: 34-40

For people holding religious beliefs other than Christianity the situation is not much different. There may always be a majority of people in every major world faith who choose to shout and condemn others based upon their own literal readings of ancient texts. However, there will also always be those who understand the true spirit and central teachings of the founders of their faiths, and who can bring a more informed, loving and accepting religious viewpoint to lesbian and gay issues.

A simple Internet search will usually be sufficient to put you in contact with those elements of whichever faith you belong to, who can share true religious fellowship with you in an atmosphere fully supportive of lesbian and gay believers.

Choices and Phases

Some parents often ask if their child 'chose' to be gay or lesbian or bisexual. It must be emphasised that a lesbian/gay orientation is not chosen, it is natural to the person. Did you choose to be 'straight' or heterosexual?

In view of the many difficulties with which lesbian women and gay men have to cope, and the hostility that they will probably face, even from those who know and love them, it must surely be obvious that nobody would go out of their way to 'choose' a way of life that will not be accepted. People do not 'choose' to be heterosexual. It is simply part of them. It is exactly the same for lesbian women and gay men.

Similarly, parents often ask, "Where did I go wrong?" or "Is it just a phase?" although these are only questions which come up if being lesbian or gay is thought to be a "problem". They have not gone wrong. There is nothing that they have done, or failed to do, that made their child lesbian/gay. Their children simply are who they are. That's all. There is no blame to be laid at anyone's door.

It is commonly thought that a weak or absent father and a strong, dominant mother will produce a gay son -this is clearly untrue. If it were true, it would mean that the Second World War, when millions of men were absent from home for considerable periods, would have resulted in a huge increase of lesbian women and gay men amongst the children who were born and grew up at that time: this did not occur. What these and other theories are really saying, without having the courage to say it outright, is that the parent is to blame for having a lesbian/gay child.

The truth is that it is easier for parents to seek faults in themselves than to face the fact that there is a side to their child that they never knew about. This search for a cause inside yourself is a punishment you are inflicting upon yourself. It will help neither you nor your child. To keep searching for faults in the way you raised your child will just complicate matters. Moreover, it devalues your child's maturity to determine their own identity. Basically, you are disempowering them from being their own person.

What can I do to help my child feel better?

Your son or daughter will have thought long and hard before telling you about themselves. They probably did not expect you to have a positive reaction.

Close family relationships can be a great source of strength in a time of crisis, for everyone involved. Recognise that there is no "right" or correct way for parents to react in this situation.

Yet as in all family situations, however you would have reacted until now, your child will need a signal that you still love him or her, no matter what. Whether this is done in words or deeds, it is the start of getting things right.

It's good to talk

Some parents will say they have come to terms with their child's sexual orientation and that they accept this fact of their child's life, even while feeling deeply upset inside.

Do not deny your emotions. It is better to tell your child that this was a shock you were totally unprepared for, that you still love him or her and nothing has changed that, but that you still need time to let the shock run its course and to get support.

Get in touch with a parents' organisation with the aim of not only getting information and support, but to express your feelings. Parents feel shock, hurt and guilt as much as anyone else. It is okay to feel this way.

Talking to someone outside the family, who understands your feelings, will greatly reduce the burden you feel, and lessen the risk of confrontation in the family.

A mother always knows

Sometimes parents will recognise that their child is lesbian/gay even before their child has had the courage to approach them. What lesbian/gay children often say is that, for them, the easiest way for the subject to be brought up would be if their mother or father were to say something like the following:

"I know you're gay or lesbian, and I want you to know I am okay with that. You're still my child, and I will always love you. I am here for you if you need to talk".

Whatever words you use, it is important for your son or daughter to know they are still loved and accepted. We all seek validation from our parents for things we do or say. We all want to be loved. At a time when your child needs you most, to reassure them of this makes it easier for them to talk to you.

The family, we are frequently told, is the very fabric of our society. We may be personally involved with lesbian and gay people in our families, at work or in our social lives. In any of these settings, lesbians and gay men need our understanding, our support, our respect and our love. This comes from knowledge and experience. Discrimination comes from ignorance.

What about sex?

Finally, and very importantly, parents' fears about sex must be faced. The one very positive step parents can take, and should take, is to ensure that their children, whether lesbian/gay or heterosexual, have a full knowledge of this subject and are aware that in all sexual intercourse involving vaginal, oral or anal contact "safer sex" must be practised. This means using a condom or dental dam. It should be a priority to make information available for them. Make sure that you are fully aware around these issues.

It is widely accepted in Northern Ireland that the promotion of sexual health is often ignored in schools, and that sexual education is largely ignored. There is a predominant "faith" ethos in schools and in Boards of Governors, with many teachers feeling afraid to teach Relationships and Sexual Education in an impartial, informative and helpful manner.

Needless to say, where it is taught, the issues affecting lesbian and gay students are most often completely ignored. There are places to get this information, and young people have the right under United Nations charter to seek, receive and impart factual information around these areas. Imagine how they might feel if you showed your support by making representations to their school.

What about partners?

If your son or daughter brings their partner home for acceptance and hospitality, they should be given the same welcome that would be extended to the partner of any other member of the family.

This stage may take some time to reach, and love and respect are the means by which it will happen, but it is necessary to recognise the need to overcome prejudice in the interests of all, and particularly in order for you to continue to give the warm welcome which is every child's right, and which, if you freely give, will be given to you in return.

From a parent's eyes

"My daughter told me quite recently that she likes other women. She's been engaged for a few years now to a great guy. They've been dating since their late teens, and are now both in their early twenties. I think I always knew, even when she was a lot younger. I don't know how, but I guess you could say mothers always know about their sons, and fathers always know about their daughters. Her mum is devastated, but she'll be fine. She's our only daughter, and we'll support her no matter what. Her fiancé has taken the break-up quite well; he seems to understand and is a lot closer to her now. Apparently he's known for a while, so he's okay about it all and is a great comfort to our daughter in telling her friends.

Yes we'll miss the thought of grandchildren, and my wife was looking forward to the wedding and the white dress etc. But our daughter is happy, she's at ease and she's closer to us now than ever. She has asked her now ex-fiancé to be her 'best man' at her civil partnership if she ever meets the right woman. So her mum is planning that now, though she's not quite sure if she'll need a dress or a trouser suit! The main thing is, she's our daughter and we love her. Simple as that!"

David, whose daughter Elizabeth 'came out' to him aged 21

Some other parents' stories

"When my daughter came to me and told me she wanted to go to G.L.Y.N.I, I asked what it was. Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland, she said nervously. What is she on about? I thought. My 16 year old daughter should not be talking about going to such meetings.

I had a very violent reaction and I did things I have never forgiven myself for doing. But I could not understand this. I did not understand how my only daughter could be gay. She could not like girls, she had a boyfriend. She had had a few boyfriends so why did she think she was gay. Automatically I realised it was probably attention seeking. She probably wants more attention from me and therefore her saying she is gay will make me be more attentive to her.

She had just been to Pink concert a few weeks before the announcement, where she simulated lesbian sex with a blow up doll. So I stopped her listening to music that I thought may have influenced her attitude. Musicians like Pink, Marilyn Manson and Eminem. Also I stopped her going online as I thought that the G.L.Y.N.I website was also influencing her.

Over the years we never talked about the conversation. As far as I knew she never had girlfriends and completed her 'A' levels at school. She will go off to university and get a nice boyfriend and that will be the end of that.

She completed first year and had got a part time job. I was so proud she had become so independent, but the only problem was that she had stopped coming home at weekends and I barely saw her from one month to the next. This continued into her second year and even when she took a year out she did not visit us and when she did she spent most of her time in her room online talking to her friends in Belfast. I felt as if I was losing my daughter.

One day I rang her on her mobile and we had the normal chat about what shifts we were both working over the next few days, when I mentioned about her going back to university. She announced she had been thinking about not going to finish her course and to start a new course on youth work. I felt annoyed, not because she wanted to change course, but that she had not told me sooner. I explained that as long as she was happy I was happy.

All of a sudden my daughter, who had locked her life in Belfast away from me, started telling me all the wonderful things she had done in the last three years. About girlfriends, groups she was in, clubs she went to and the amazing friends she had had. I felt like I was going to cry. I had not realised that my daughter had such an amazing life in Belfast and that she is not as lonely and bored in Belfast as I had worried. I felt relief and happiness. I felt I had my daughter back again and I realised I had almost lost her, just because she felt she could not talk to me.

My advice is to anyone in the situation where you worry what everyone will think, why this has happened, or before you blame yourself, you must realise that this is a hard time for your children also and if you are not careful you may lose them completely. You need to talk to them, try and get to grips with it and advise them that you love them no matter what and that you are there to talk to.

"

Kate, whose daughter Claire 'came out' to her aged 20

“Every parent wishes for their son or daughter to grow up like them e.g.: meet someone of the opposite sex, get engaged, marry and eventually have children.

Occasionally a child will begin to show signs of acting oddly around someone of the opposite sex. They also try to hide these signals from friends in school, family or workmates. But sometimes these signals are hard to hide and the more they try the easier it is for others to pick up on.

Our son is gay. We aren't afraid to say it. We are afraid for him though that others will abuse him verbally and or physically. We are a normal couple, with sons and daughters and we never thought about someone else's sexual orientation. Live and let live was how we thought, and still do.

Our son became part of a very large youth group, with people ranging from as young as 10 to 25 years of age. They put on shows in various places and we were very proud of the way our son was growing into manhood, learning to work with and helping others. I began to notice some odd behavioural patterns by him, not that he noticed. At least one very good-looking girl I believe was taking an interest in him. He seemed to be interested in her, but not in a way most guys take interests in girls e.g. flirting with her etc. But then, that was part of him hiding his true feelings from everyone around him.

During his 21st birthday party this girl and our son were chatting when the girl let slip something which caught my attention and the word 'gay' was used. I noticed our son 'hushing' her up with his finger over his lips.

I thought nothing more of it. As time went on I began to notice he was changing his style of clothing. My suspicions became aroused more each day then. One night I said to my wife that I thought our son was gay. She said I was nuts and thinking too much. As time went on I began pointing out more and more signs to her and she then also began to get vibes that he was gay, but she didn't want to know.

One night her nerves got the better of her and she asked him outright was he gay. He denied it, then left the house quickly and texted her admitting it.

I knew he was but my wife went into a fit of tears. I then thought, "Is it not the man that supposed to cry if it's his son?" "Why is she crying?"

A few days went past and our son seemed happier and more relieved. He seemed to be finally himself. We said nothing to him, we carried on life as normal and I think my wife just mentioned in passing something like..."thanks for telling the truth, you should've known you could've", or something like that. Life has carried on as usual, we laugh, we chat, and we go about our daily affairs.

So, to any parent out there reading this...Give him or her a big hug when he or she 'comes out'. It has taken some guts for them to do so. Remember, they will be the targets of abuse from others; please don't be their first abuser!

Guess what? He's still our son and we are proud of him!"

Billy, whose son Liam 'came out' to him aged 23

“When I think back to how I feel when our son told me he was a gay man I suppose I felt relief. He had never been so serious about what he wanted to tell me, that I felt sure he was going to say he had cancer or something as serious as that.

Then I felt enormously sad and concerned for his future. I worried about how his career would be affected. I worried about his mental health, in coping with how other people would react. I just worried all the time.

Now I don't think about the 'gay' thing very often. The friends my son brings to the house we have always found to be decent, likeable lads. I don't think about the relationship side of his life no more than I think of my married son's personal relationships with his wife. It's private – it's not my business.

My son seems reasonably happy and he has good and reliable friends so I content myself with that.”

Claire, whose son Brian 'came out' to her aged 24

“If your child has the courage to tell you he or she is gay they are giving you the credit of being adult enough to accept them as they are and treating them as the adult they obviously are.

I understand the feeling of loss you may feel, but think of the benefits of having a closer relationship with your son or daughter.

This wonderful child who you have watched grow up into adulthood is still the same person now and always would be, so what has changed? Give them respect to meet friends and credit them with the intelligence to make the right decision when choosing a partner.

Remember, they do not have a problem; it is the problem of those who cannot accept this young person for who they are. Most importantly, just be there for them and love them for who they are.”

Carol, whose son Michael 'came out' to her aged 19

“When our daughter came out to us recently, I didn’t know how to react. I had never thought of her as being old enough to know what she wanted out of a relationship. She is only 15. But even at 15, would I have reacted any differently if she had told me she’d met a boy at school that she fancied? Honestly, I’d have to say I probably would have. I just wasn’t prepared when she told me it was a girl. She had been on a high for weeks now, and we’d noticed a change in her, becoming more confident and mature, and enjoying school for a change. She never felt like she fitted in, and it was a constant struggle to motivate her to go, but these last few weeks she was away before we even had the chance to say good-bye.

So when she told me why, I don’t know how to approach it. Her older sister seems fine with it. She started dating her boyfriend at 15, and we didn’t bat an eyelid. So why is this so different? Why did my little girl feel that she had to sit us down and tell us she is lesbian? Am I such a bad father that I appear to be homophobic to my own daughter? She told me quite bluntly that she thought I was, based on things I have said. Yet she still had the courage and bravery to sit me down and tell me who she was, and in her words, it wasn’t my choice and I had to get used to it.

It’s not easy for any parent to be put in their place by their own child, but I can tell you, if she hadn’t had that sense of confidence in her own identity, I’d probably have treated her like an immature teenager going through a phase. And now that I think about the things I have said in the past about gay men and lesbian women, I realise the damage I may have done.

My advice to anyone out there reading this, mother or father, your child is your child. Love them, respect them, do what’s right by them. Don’t listen to the homophobic people in society telling you otherwise. Let them do what’s right for them, concern yourself with your own family, and remember who you are. You’re a parent, you’re their parent. If you’re not sure how to handle it, ask them for support. They understand more than you give them credit for, at any age. After all, they’ve had to deal with more than we have. My daughter is surer of herself, more than I ever had to be at 15, and ever have to be now. You’re not in it alone; you’re in it with them. And there is support out there, don’t be afraid to ask for help.

Peter, whose daughter Jo ‘came out’ to him aged 15

Conclusion

For a parent, their son or daughter coming out as gay can be extremely difficult. Some feel devastated, disappointed and even scared for their children. Many parents can feel that their child's sexuality is just a phase. The reality is not the case. The chances are your child will have agonised over whether to "come out" or talk to you about their sexuality for months or sometimes even years.

Some parents can also feel that their child can be "cured" of homosexuality or homosexuality is a "choice". In fact, homosexuality is neither a choice nor a disease, there is no choice factor; it just is. Some people's favourite colour may be blue, they can't explain why, it just is. Some people also believe they are in love, they can't explain why, they just are. There is no explanation for this, it just is the way it is; it cannot be changed no matter what you wish to believe.

Some parents can believe that they have made their child this way, the child has either been exposed to too little femininity or too much masculinity. Nobody knows why people are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Assuming that you made your child gay is wrong; you have not made your son or daughter this way.

For long periods of time, many parents cannot come to terms with their child's sexual orientation and sometimes can never come to terms with it. Some parents have described fears of helplessness and resentment and sometimes can even be embarrassed or ashamed. Worrying about what neighbours and family as well as friends think, can add to the sense of isolation some parents feel because they do not know how others will react to this news; they can feel like they almost have nobody to turn to.

We must realise that as well as it having being hard for parents to come to terms with their child's sexuality, that the child may also be finding it extremely difficult to come to terms with who they are. Ignoring the issue, condemning it or coming up with an excuse for why they are not heterosexual can have an adverse effect on both the child and the family.

We realise that coming to terms with what can sometimes feel like a "bombshell" is not going to happen over-night and will probably take some time, either days, weeks, months or years. So if you can't discuss these emotions straight away, you needn't worry or feel bad. However you may have to rebuild your relationship with your child which can be a slow process, but no matter how long it takes, you will get there in the end. You should understand that this is a great ordeal for your child but your son or daughter must also realise that it can be difficult for you as well.

Written by members of

Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI)

"Finding out that your child is gay needn't be the end of the world – it can be a new beginning."

~ Nigel Cooper

Terms

Heterosexual:

People whose sexual and romantic feelings are for the opposite sex.

Straight:

Another word for heterosexual.

Homosexual:

People whose sexual and romantic feelings are for the same sex. Those who feel this way often identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Gay:

People whose sexual and romantic feelings are for the same sex. Depending on the country you are in this can mean men or women, although it tends to be used mainly for men.

Lesbian:

Women whose sexual and romantic feelings are for women.

Bisexual or Bi:

Those whose sexual and romantic feelings are for both men and women.

Transgender:

Those whose gender identity or behaviour falls outside the usual expectations of their gender. This includes people who feel that their anatomical gender is at odds with their inner sense of being 'male' or 'female'. Some transgender people feel bi-gendered or 'neither-gendered', challenging the idea that there can only be two genders.

Transsexual:

People who are born anatomically male or female but have a profound identification with the opposite gender. Not all transsexual people see themselves as being transgendered.

Transvestite - a man or woman who gets sexual or emotional pleasure from wearing clothing associated with the opposite sex.

Intersex:

A biological condition where a person is born with physical characteristics and / or sex chromosomes that are not exclusively male or female. An earlier term for intersex was 'hermaphrodite'.

LGBT:

Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans

Sexual Orientation:

The direction of sexual and romantic attractions. Some people's sexual orientation is mainly towards people of the opposite sex; for others it is mainly towards people of the same sex, and for some it is towards either sex.

Sexuality:

The physical expression of your sexual orientation.

Gender:

The way a person is seen as 'male' or 'female'.

Gender Identity:

A person's internal feeling of being female, male, both or neither.

Homophobia:

Individual or social ignorance or fear of gay and / or lesbian people. Homophobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence and hatred.

Biphobia:

Individual or social ignorance or fear of bisexual people. Biphobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence or hatred.

Transphobia:

Individual or social ignorance or fear of trans people. Transphobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and act of violence or hatred.

Coming Out:

This can mean something different to everyone. It has to do with developing an awareness that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans – which often leads to a desire to be more open with others about sexual orientation or gender identity. People can be 'out' in some parts of their lives but not others. Some people choose to come out and others don't.

Heterosexism - a set of assumptions and practices that promote heterosexuality as the only valid and natural form of sexuality. Heterosexism rewards those who are heterosexual and penalises those who are not.

Additional resources for parents

These and other terms can be found on a variety of websites. Additional resources, such as stories, myths and facts, frequently asked questions and information and advice for parents can be found on sites such as:

www.fflag.org.uk,

www.outproud.org,

www.gayfamilysupport.com

www.lgbtyouth.org

www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

www.channel4.com/health/microsites/0-9/4health/sex/lgb_effects.html

Frequently Asked Questions

Parents Usually Want to Know:

Q. Why did he or she have to tell us?

A. Many parents think that they would be happier if they didn't know. What you must realize, however, is that if you did not know, you would never really know your child. A large part of his or her life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole human being.

The fact that your son or daughter told you is a sign of his or her love and need for your support and understanding. After all, who should know if not you? No other minority is asked to hide from their own parents what makes them "different"!

Q. Why did he or she do this to us?

A. Many parents feel bitter resentment at the fact of their child's sexual orientation. This feeling is based on the assumption that being homosexual is a matter of choice and that this was a conscious decision, perhaps even made to hurt them. In fact, homosexuals do not choose their sexual orientation. They simply are what they are: homosexuality is their true nature.

The only choice most lesbians and gays have is whether to be honest about who they are or hide it. Hiding it imposes a tremendous burden. It means living a lie, day in and day out. What parent would want a child to have to live that way?

Q. What did we do wrong?

A. Most parents feel guilt when they first find out. Psychology and psychiatry have told us for years that the way the child turns out is the parent's "fault." In fact, no parent has that much power over a child. Homosexuals are found in all types of families with all types of backgrounds. No one knows as yet what "causes" any kind of sexuality, but it is widely accepted today that a child's sexual orientation is set at a very early age, if not at birth.

Q. Will he or she be ostracized, have trouble finding or keeping a job, or even be physically attacked?

A. We must answer: "Yes, unfortunately, these things are possible." It depends on where he or she decides to live, what kind of job he or she wants, how he or she decides to act. But we must also say that attitudes toward homosexuals have been changing for the better and are more positive in many places. Also, there are a growing number of groups (including who are working for such a change, and who are ready to help those who have difficulties).

Q. Will he or she be lonely in his old age if he does not have a family of his own?

A. Maybe. But we must remember that this is very often true of all of us. Spouses die, marriages break up, children often live far away, and many young couples do not have children at all. Many of us have to adjust to loneliness when we are old. On the plus side, many lesbians and gay men develop long-lasting relationships, and the gay community is warmly supportive of its members. As it is becoming easier to "come out" -- that is, acknowledge their sexual orientation to themselves and others -- many homosexuals will have a chance to live as part of a community all their lives.

Challenge Homophobic Language

Language is important. The terms gay, queer and faggot are the most commonly used and yet least challenged forms of abuse in places where young people are. Gay is used to mean anything that is bad, rubbish, worthless, without value. If young people are hearing this message repeatedly and unchallenged by others, how are they going to feel about their own sexuality or that of their parents if they so happen to be lesbian, gay or bisexual? The messages that we receive about gay, lesbian and bisexual people are overwhelmingly negative, including the message that it is an acceptable – or at the very least, unchallenged – form of discrimination. Challenging homophobic hate begins by challenging people's negative attitudes and the language they use.

From young people:

Challenge the behaviour.

Use of the word 'gay' to describe a person, event or object that young people don't like, or is in their minds dysfunctional, is homophobic and needs to be challenged. The use of other words such as 'queer' or 'faggot' – even if used in normal discourse or banter – are homophobic and need to be challenged.

Make it clear that you don't agree with homophobic behaviour.

Timing is crucial. If in a rush, make it clear that it is not acceptable to use this language: "The use of the word _____ is not acceptable".

Or, "I feel uncomfortable with jokes like that / that kind of labelling."

Punish it.

If children and young people repeatedly use homophobic language, you may want to consider imposing sanctions in line with punishments you have for other poor behaviour.

When you have more time **enable young people to recognise why the terms they are using are offensive** (i.e. they are using these terms to describe something as bad, rubbish, worthless, without value – as if being gay means the same thing).

Check that young people know what the words mean and where they come from.

Ask questions like:

"What do you mean by that?"

"What are you intending to achieve by using the word gay?"

"What do you mean by gay?"

"Would use 'black', 'cripple', 'fenian / hun' in the same way?" "Why / Why not?"

"We have made it very clear that we respect everybody's human rights so using language in that way which implies that there is something wrong with gay people or being gay is unacceptable."

"What you said is homophobic. Why do you feel that it is acceptable to insult gay people?"

"How would feel if people treated you differently to other people in a negative way?"

When dealing with such remarks from young people you may well have your own sexual orientation questioned:

“Are you a lesbian?”

“Are you gay?”

If you are and wish to affirm this, consider first if you have the support necessary to make such an affirmation positive. If you have, then do so.

If you are not lesbian or gay or you are and you do not wish to share that information it is better to respond with, “Would it matter if I were?” as it keeps the dialogue open and allows for positive discussion of the issues. “No, I’m not” closes the dialogue and is often heard (mistakenly) by someone with homophobic views as tacitly supporting their homophobia.

If young people use religious reasons to back their motive for using homophobic language it is important to reiterate that, whilst they have the right to their faith, it is their responsibility to ensure that they do not impose on other’s rights to their beliefs, feelings and to safety and equality. Include in your discussion that homophobia is a hate crime. Therefore, homophobic bullying is against the law. Explain that when they begin working that using homophobic language could get them dismissed from their work or sued for discrimination.

From Friends or Relatives:

“The use of the word ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ in that way is homophobic.”

“I feel uncomfortable with jokes like that / that kind of labelling.”

“As far as I’m concerned we are all entitled to more respect than that.”

From Colleagues at work:

“We have procedures to protect us all from that kind of behaviour.”

“Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I’m shocked to hear views like that expressed here where we are all expected to support equal opportunities. I disagree with your view.”

From your Managers at work:

“I expected you would be a leader in the promotion of equal opportunities in this school. Please don’t assume I feel comfortable with what you said or seem to believe. I feel very disappointed when I hear you smear an oppressed group like that.”

“If someone said something like that about me I would have expected you to stand up for me. I feel it is part of your job as a manager/supervisor.”

From Staff you manage:

“We have a policy against the use of those views – it is called equal opportunities and we are all accountable for upholding it. You are in danger of being disciplined if you don’t stop using expressions of that kind.”

“Have you ever attended a course or seminar on LGBT issues at work? Maybe we should look into it. You don’t seem to know much about the effects of homophobia on people with whom you work, or anyone else for that matter.”

Useful contacts

The Rainbow Project (Belfast)

2-8 Commercial Court, Belfast, BT1 2NB

(028) 9031 9030

www.rainbow-project.org

Counselling, support, information, advocacy, youth project, groupwork & workshops.

The Rainbow Project (Foyle) (The LADZ Project)

12a Queen Street, Derry, BT48 7EG

(028) 7128 3030

www.rainbow-project.org

Counselling, support, information, advocacy, youth project, groupwork & workshops.

Cara-Friend - Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI)

Cathedral Buildings, 64 Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2GT

www.glyni.org.uk

Youth group for lesbian, gay & bisexual people aged 16-25 years.

Cara-Friend - Office

Cathedral Buildings, 64 Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2GT

(028) 9089 0202 (Mon to Fri from 10am – 5.30pm)

www.cara-friend.org.uk

Cara-Friend - Gay Helpline

Cathedral Buildings, 64 Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2GT

(028) 9032 2023 (Mon, Tues & Wed from 7:30pm - 10pm)

www.gayhelplinebelfast.org.uk

Northern Ireland helpline for lesbian, gay & bisexual people. Befriending service available.

Cara-Friend - Lesbian Line

Cathedral Buildings, 64 Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2GT

(028) 9023 8668 (every Thursday from 7:30pm - 10pm)

www.lesbianlinebelfast.org.uk

Helpline service for lesbian & bisexual women in N. Ireland . Befriending service available.

Parents Advice Centre

Franklin House, 12 Brunswick St, Belfast, BT2 7GE

Tel: 028 9023 8800 Fax: 028 9031 2475

www.pachelp.org

Causeway LGBT Group

07913 493296 or 07910 980314

www.causewaylgbt.co.uk

Information, support and advice for the LGBT community in Coleraine/Portrush/Portstewart.

Limavady LGBT Group

Email: reid65@hotmail.com (Contact person: Mervyn Reid)

Support/social group for the LGBT community in the Limavady Area.

Newry Rainbow Community (NRC)

www.gaynewry.com

Information, befriending, support and advice for the LGBT community in the Newry area.

Strabane LGBT Group

Email: stephen.birkett@btinternet.com

Support/social group for the LGBT community in Strabane.

Traveller & Gay (T&G)

Tel: 02890 438265

Email: travellerandgay@aol.com

Support service for the gay travelling community in N. Ireland

Guys & Guys

c/o The Family Planning Association 3rd Floor, Ascot House, 24-31 Shaftesbury Square,
Belfast BT2 7DB

Tel: 0845 122 86 87

www.fpa.org.uk

A social/support group for gay and bisexual men who have learning disabilities.

Out & About

c/o Youth Action 14 College square North, Belfast, BT1 6AS

(028) 9024 0551

<http://www.youthaction.org/outandabout/>

The Gender Equality Unit of Youth Action Northern Ireland that aim to provide a voice for young women from a variety of backgrounds and social groups.

ShOut Project

c/o YouthNet 5th Floor, Premier Business Centre, 20 Adelaide Street, Belfast , BT2 8DN

(028) 9033 1880

<http://www.youthnetni.org.uk/>

ShOut's vision of the future is of an inclusive society where all young people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, are valued and play a full role as active citizens

ChildLine

Queens House, 14 Queen Street, Belfast , BT1 6ED

0870 336 2947

<http://www.childline.org.uk/>

*ChildLine is the free helpline for children and young people in the UK. Children and young people can call us on **0800 1111** to talk about any problem - our counsellors are always here to help you sort it out.*

Equality Commission

Shaftsbury Square, Belfast , BT2

(028) 9089 0890

<http://www.equalityni.org/>

Our mission: To advance equality, promote equality of opportunity, encourage good relations and challenge discrimination through promotion, advice and enforcement.

Human Rights Commission

Temple Court, 39 North Street, Belfast, BT1 1NA

(028) 9024 3987

<http://www.nihrc.org/>

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission works vigorously and independently to ensure that the human rights of everyone in Northern Ireland are fully and firmly protected in law, policy and practice.

Law Centre (NI)

124 Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2GY

(028) 9024 4401

<http://www.lawcentreni.org/>

Promoting social justice through legal advice, representation, policy, training and publications

Children's Law Centre

Philips House, 123-137 York Street, Belfast, BT15 1AB

(028) 9024 5704

<http://www.childrenslawcentre.org/>

Freephone Advice Line for children and young people: 08088085678

Eastern Health & Social Services Board

Social Services Directorate

12-22 Linenhall St, Belfast, BT2 8BS

Tel: 9032 1313

Fax: 028 9055 3620

www.ehssb.n-i.nhs.uk

Southern Investing for Health Partnership

<http://www.southernifh.com/>

Samaritans

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

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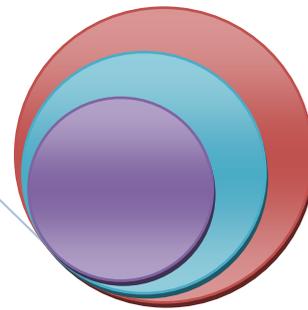
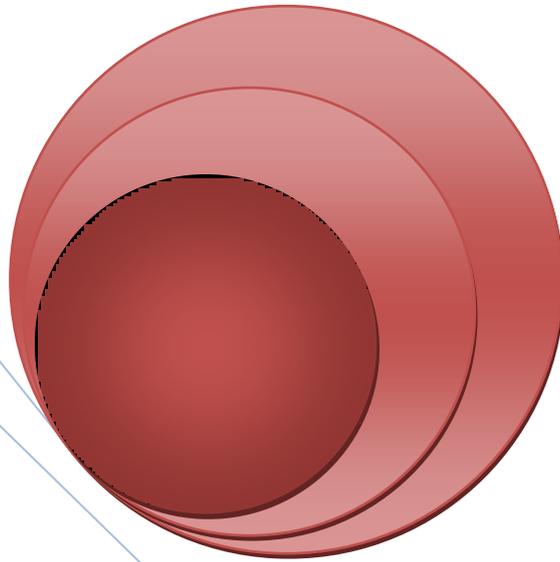
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About the Authors

The Rainbow Project is a gay and bisexual men's health organisation that provides: professional counselling by qualified gay counsellors, a listening ear service, support groups, a youth project, training, advocacy, help if you have experienced a homophobic hate crime, and information on issues relevant to gay and bisexual men.

Cara-Friend is a voluntary organisation, providing support, counselling and befriending, as well as information and a social-space for the LGBT community. All of the services provided are completely confidential. We offer social support in helping people come to terms with their sexual orientation. Our three main services are the Gay Helpline, Lesbian Line and Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland.



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The Rainbow Project
2-8 Commercial Court
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Charity No. XR17450



CARA-FRIEND.ORG.UK

Cara-Friend
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