Parenting LGBQ Children

Chapter 1 - Changes and Concerns

• Risks for Your Child
• The Stages of Coming Out
• Parent Actions That Help
• Parent Actions That Hurt
Most parents aren’t sure how to react when their child comes out — simply because this isn’t a focus until it touches their lives. Even parents who have close LGBTQ acquaintances or family members may find it difficult when their own child is involved. This is a powerful change in the family picture.

There are also two sides to this story of change. A child coming out to family members is emotionally vulnerable. Those who receive the news are often upset and overwhelmed. There will probably be missteps on both sides as they navigate this new territory.

This parent guide focuses on important information parents need to know to help choose the best path for your family.

**The good news:** Staying connected, building communication, and working through change as a family can result in deeper relationships and better health for your child. While the challenges can be hard, many parents find they develop deeper, more honest, and more genuine relationships with their children as they work together through the changes they face.
YOU CAN BE YOUR CHILD’S ANCHOR, THEIR SAFE PLACE. DON’T EVER DROP YOUR END OF THE ROPE.”

~Dr. Phil
“THIS MOMENT OF COMING OUT TO PARENTS IS A CROSSROADS IN THE LIFE OF AN LGBTQ PERSON AND THE PARENT RESPONSE IS A MAJOR PREDICTOR FOR THE CHILD’S FUTURE DRUG USE, HOMELESSNESS AND SUICIDE ATTEMPTS”

~Dr. Caitlin Ryan
Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University
Risks for Your Child

Although it may be hard for you to support your child as they come out, it’s important to know the risks to your child’s health and safety if you don’t. LGBTQ children who are rejected or cut off from family support are more likely to experience physical and mental health problems.¹

**Suicide**

- In the US, suicide is the number one cause of death among gay and lesbian youth,² compared to the 3rd cause of death for US teens,³ and the 10th cause of death in the general population.⁴
- Gay and lesbian individuals are 2 to 6 times more likely to commit suicide than heterosexuals.²
- LGBTQ youth rejected by family are 8 times as likely to attempt suicide.¹
- A survey of 6000 transgender adults revealed that 45% of 18-24 year olds attempted suicide, compared to 4.6% of overall U.S. population.⁵

**Violence and Bullying**

- In a 2015 survey, compared to heterosexual students, LGB high school students are more likely to report:⁶
  - being forced to have sex (18% vs. 5%)
  - experiencing sexual dating violence (23% vs. 9%)
  - experiencing physical dating violence (18% vs. 8%)
They also are 2-3 times more likely to be bullied:
- at school: 34% vs. 19%
- online: 28% vs. 14%

More than 10% reported having missed school because of safety concerns.6

**Drug and Substance Abuse**

- LGB students were up to 3.4 times more likely than other students to report using several illegal drugs.1
- 20 to 30 percent of LGBTQ people abuse substances, compared to about 9 percent of the general population.7
- Twenty-five percent of LGBTQ people abuse alcohol, compared to 5 to 10 percent of the general population.7
- LGBTQ people smoke tobacco up to 200 percent more than their heterosexual and non-transgender peers.7

Parents can lower ALL these risks. Continue reading to learn more about what they are experiencing and how your reactions can help or hurt.

*(A note about the term queer, used in this document. Queer is used as an umbrella term for those whose sexual orientation is not strictly heterosexual, and the term has been reclaimed by many LGBTQ+ people to describe themselves. For those who identify as queer, the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual are perceived to be too limiting and/or requiring them to label themselves.)*
The Stages of Coming out

You may have just learned that your child is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other non-heterosexual identity. However, your child has probably been on this journey for months or years. This can be a long process for them and knowing the stages they’ve been through are a first step to understanding their journey.

Stage 1 – Self Discovery as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Queer

Becoming aware of same-sex attraction or bisexual attraction often causes emotional conflict. This may include worry about being non-heterosexual, confusion, anxiety, and denial of feelings. This internal conflict often leads to attempts to behave as heterosexual (i.e. “passing”). Sometimes individuals attempt to “overcome” their sexuality or gender identity, particularly if they fear being condemned by their faith. LGBTQ people are usually “in the closet” at this stage, which refers to keeping their identity to themselves. However, many seek out information online or through reading or from friends.

This stage may be deeply, privately maintained until the individual is more independent as is seen in the large number of LGBTQ individuals who come out during college and young adulthood.

Stage 2 – Disclosure to Others
Disclosure is an ongoing process. The first step in this stage is sharing one’s self-identity with a close friend or family member. Often this is a peer or close friend, and parents are not always the first to know. Disclosure may extend to more people over time. Rejection may cause a return to Stage 1, in which sexual orientation or gender identity is kept private. However, a positive response from others can lead to higher self-esteem, greater self-acceptance, and most importantly, continues communication and openness.

In particular, the way parents respond when children come out may deeply shape the rest of their lives. Disclosure may extend to more people over time and the process can vary widely for individuals.

**Stage 3 – Socialization with Other Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Queer People**

As an LGBTQ individual begins to find and connect with others who also identify as LGBTQ, feelings of isolation and estrangement diminish. A positive sense of self is strengthened by validation, education, support and acceptance by a community of others who have shared experiences. Positive LGBTQ role models are particularly important during this stage.

**Stage 4 – Positive Self-Identification**

The hallmark of this stage is feeling good about oneself, seeking positive relationships, and experiencing a sense of peace and fulfillment. At this point, an LGBTQ person begins to realize that same-sex attraction and relationships are a normal and healthy expression of human love. LGBTQ individuals find living in their personal identity feels honest and true.
Stage 5 – *Integration and Acceptance*

This stage involves an openness and non-defensiveness about sexual orientation or personal identity. Integration of this aspect of a person’s identity may manifest itself in different ways. Some may choose to openly proclaim their sexuality to others as a way of ending the invisibility of being LGBTQ. Others may be quietly open, not announcing yet not hiding their sexual orientation and being available to support others. Affirming relationships, family, friends, and communities of faith greatly impact an individual’s ability to be fully integrated and self-accepting.

Stage 6 – *A Lifelong Journey*

Coming out as LGBTQ does not happen just once. It is a lifelong process of discovering, accepting, and sharing one’s sexual orientation or identity with others. In our society, we usually assume that everyone is heterosexual and lives in their birth gender. LGBTQ people must continually decide under what circumstances and to whom they will disclose their sexual orientation or personal identity. Coming out is an important step in self-acceptance and in fostering emotional, physical, and spiritual health. For LGBTQ people, coming out helps end the pain of secrecy and isolation.

(Adapted from *The Stages of Coming Out*, by Richard Niolon, Ph.D.)

(Adapted from *The Stages of Coming Out*, by Richard Niolon, Ph.D.)
“SOMEBODY, YOUR FATHER OR MINE, SHOULD HAVE TOLD US THAT NOT MANY PEOPLE HAVE EVER DIED OF LOVE. BUT MULTITUDES HAVE PERISHED, AND ARE PERISHING EVERY HOUR—AND IN THE ODDEST PLACES!—FOR THE LACK OF IT.”

~Author James Baldwin
Parent Actions that help

Many parents do not realize what an important role their comments, attitudes, and actions play in reducing risks for their LGBTQ child. They are struggling with their own emotions.

The good news: You can steer your child in a positive direction. What you choose to do (or not do) with and for your child can make a big difference for them right now and in their future.

Will you always love me?
This is the key question for LGBTQ youth, whether they ask it directly or not. This question is far more important that the words “I'm gay” or “I’m LGBTQ.” It is essential you express affection when your child comes out to you and that you continue to do so. Show your child that they are loved, even if you are struggling to accept their assertion. Warmth, respect, and displays of physical and emotional affection are more important now than ever. Don’t ever hesitate to say, “I love you.”

Keep Talking – and Listening

Your child may think that your silence on this topic means that you are angry with them. Parents who talk with and listen to their teen in a way that invites an open discussion about sexual orientation can help their teen feel loved and supported. It is important to let them talk and for you to
sometimes raise the topic. This gives them permission to do so as well. Discuss news items, characters on TV or films, or a friend you know to open up discussion.

Even if it feels uncomfortable, keep up a flow of communication so your child feels comfortable continuing to talk to you. This includes talking with your child about their LGBTQ identity and experiences even when you are uncomfortable. Listening is as important as what you say. Ask how you can help and what your child needs. You don’t need to have all the answers, you just need to be there for them.

**Make Sure Your Child Feels Affirmed and Supported**

When your child discusses their sexual orientation, you may be tempted to try to figure things out by asking questions or suggesting alternative ideas and explanations. Instead, as one therapist for families with transgender kids says, “When your kid says they are gay, just go with it.” What does this look like?

A few of the actions that demonstrate your support and affirmation are:

- Listen in a way that invites open discussion. Be curious but not prying.
- Continue to include them in family activities.
- Help your child find support organizations and attend with them if appropriate.
- Take time to come to terms with your own feelings and reactions, so you can respond calmly and use respectful language.
- Try to get to know their friends and/or romantic partners.
Relationship is Paramount

When a child is comes out, parents have a cascade of emotions to deal with, but that takes time. Try to hold emotions in check, focus on your relationship, express love and affection, and let them know you are trying to understand. It’s important to know your actions and words can support your child even as you struggle. Your child’s perception of your acceptance or rejection has a huge impact.

Although it is vital for parents to sort through feelings and learn about what it means to be LGBTQ, your child should not be the source of reassurance or information. As best you can, accept what your child tells you without asking why, when, what, and how, as these questions can feel like an interrogation. To the best of your ability, offer responses that do not include demanding explanations, asking for reasons, voicing doubts, or expressing sadness, worry, or fear.

The good news? Kids can tell if parents are trying, even when parents struggle or make mistakes. Kids often rate parents more supportive than parents rate themselves. There are no negative effects to listening and giving hugs and trying to keep communication open. You will be adjusting to changes for a long time, but gestures of love, support, openness, and reassurance are supportive to your child. Your effort to build and sustain the relationship is key.

Stand Up for Your Child

You may hear negative comments made about your child or LGBTQ individuals in general.

- Speak up with a different point of view and be aware your child is probably listening. Your words are a
• powerful witness to your support. Even if you are unsure, skeptical, or upset, a simple statement such as, “I don’t disagree” or “I don’t know about that” when responding to negative comments or stereotypes will let your child know that you are on their side.
• Make it known that you will not accept discrimination, teasing, or insults to your child. (e.g. “I don’t think that’s OK to say” or “that’s not funny” or that’s insulting”.)
• Defend your child and advocate for them, even amid your own process of coming to acceptance about this (e.g. “They’re figuring it out, I’m supporting them, and I hope you will too.”).
• Insist that family members treat your child with respect, (e.g. “I know you don’t understand, but please don’t criticize/tease/deny/etc…”).

Help Your Child Envision and Believe They Can Be a Happy LGBTQ Adult

Your acceptance and optimism help your child envision a positive future and counteracts the hopelessness and sense of isolation that contribute to suicide and destructive behaviors. In families that are very accepting, almost all LGBTQ youth believe they will have good lives (92%) and most want to become a parent (69%). Your acceptance and optimism helps them envision a positive future and counteracts the hopelessness and sense of isolation that contribute to suicide and destructive behaviors. Helping your child build a positive view of their future can be a strong support.

Doing this is not difficult. As with any child, it is important to encourage your child by helping them build on natural strengths, foster hope and optimism, avoid risky behaviors, and practice self-care both physically and emotionally.11 Help
them find activities, sports, clubs, or service work that can provide balance and variety as they learn skills. Ask about their dreams, what they would like to be, what their hopes are for education, work, and their adulthood or future. Building a mental picture of a positive future can help counterbalance current struggles.

“RESEARCH\textsuperscript{1,2,3} INDICATES LGBTQ TEENS EXPERIENCE BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES WHEN THEIR PARENTS SUPPORT THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN POSITIVE AND AFFIRMING WAYS. COMPARED TO TEENS WHO DO NOT FEEL VALUED BY THEIR PARENTS, LGBTQ YOUTH WHO FEEL VALUED BY THEIR PARENTS ARE LESS LIKELY TO:

EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION
ATTEMPT SUICIDE
USE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL
BECOME INFECTED WITH SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

~ Center for Disease Control and Prevention
FOR MORE:

- For more on the value of expressing love to your child, read “15 Reasons to Tell Your Child ‘I Love You.’” (http://www.becomingminimalist.com/15-reasons-to-say-i-love-you-to-your-child/)
- The Centers for Disease Control publication offers an excellent online resource in “Parents’ Influence on the Health of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Teens: What Parents and Families Should Know.”
- A list of more “Behaviors That Help” is located in Dr. Ryan’s booklet, “Supportive families, healthy children: Helping families with lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender children.” (http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/).
Parent Actions that hurt

Hearing your child is LGBTQ can be an emotional shock and both you and your child are vulnerable to strong emotions.

Parent comments, attitudes, and actions play a large role in how things turn out for their LGBTQ child. Parent behaviors such as shaming or shunning are negative in any context. However, many parents don’t realize that even protective efforts can be felt as rejection or abuse by their LGBTQ child. Subtle actions, attitudes, words, or choices that communicate rejection to LGBTQ youth have been shown to be linked to both health and mental health problems:

Abusive behaviors can include a variety of behavior that emotional harms another person:

- Aggression can include verbally belittling, dominating or insulting someone, criticism, arguing, controlling, or aligning against a family member.
- Lack of affection, such as the absence of verbal expressions of love, physical affection, encouragement, or time spent together.
- Neglect can include ignoring or not paying attention to someone, so that a person is not comfortable around some family members.
- Violence is considered physical harm and sexual abuse.
It goes without saying that these actions are harmful. When they are aimed at the sexual orientation of your child, they can be even more damaging. No matter what your reactions are, do not take them out on your child. What you choose to do (or not do) with and for your child can make a big difference.

Important things to avoid

Rejecting Your Child’s Word That They are LGBTQ

“It’s just a phase.”

“FAMILY BEHAVIORS THAT TRY TO CHANGE, PREVENT, DENY OR MINIMIZE THEIR CHILD’S LGBTQ+ IDENTITY HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THEIR CHILD’S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AND CONTRIBUTE TO DEPRESSION, SUICIDE, ILLEGAL DRUG USE AND OTHER SERIOUS HEALTH RISKS.”

~ Family Acceptance Project, lgbtqfamilyacceptance.org
Disbelief or denying your child’s identity is highly negative. Youth do not casually claim to be LGBTQ as it can bring hard challenges and even stigma. You may need time to adjust to it, but don’t deny or minimize your child’s disclosure. They trusted and loved you enough to be honest.

**Hitting or physically hurting your child**

“You deserved that!”

“The parental use of physical force is always risky...Damage to the parent/child relationship can be done if basic trust in safety with the parent is lost.”

**Insults or name-calling**

“You’re disgusting!”

Insulting is classified under emotional abuse. By definition, emotional abuse refers to any act by an adult that results in injuring a child’s emotional health. When you yell at your child or throw insults at them, you are chipping away bits from their self-esteem. Insults come in many forms. Some of them include:

- Name calling: “Are you stupid?”
- Shame: “You embarrass me...you are such a disappointment.”
- Comparisons: “I wish you were more like your sister.”
- Teasing in public: “Oh he sucks at studies, he’s bottom of his class.”
- Rejection: “Shut up and get out of my face.”
- Extreme or negative criticisms: “You are a worthless embarrassment. Why can’t you make me proud in even one thing?”
Excluding your child from family activities

“Not this time...”

Ostracizing someone does not just reduce feelings of belonging, it can lower self-esteem, a sense of control, and a “sense of having a meaningful existence.” Ignoring, ostracizing, or marginalizing your child may inflict serious emotional pain and increase the risk of self-harming behaviors and despair.

Blaming your child when discrimination or bullying occur

“If you weren’t gay, they wouldn’t have...”

Even if you believe it to be true, do not point to your child’s sexual orientation as a reason that bad things happen to them, such as teasing, harassment, or loss of friendships.1

“The other side of listening is not blaming your child...If your child is being bullied, he is the victim, so trying to find a reason for why he’s ‘bringing it on himself’ really isn’t helpful.”15 Showing sympathy and taking your child’s side is an important show of support.

Using Religion Against Them

“It’s a sin.”

It is deeply wounding to tell your child that he or she will be a disappointment to God or your religious community, particularly if your family is connected to a faith community. This will likely create self-hate or self-doubt within your child, but it will not create positive change. Please see https://strongfamilyalliance.org/hopeful-voices/faith-based-organizations/ to locate groups from many faiths and denominations that provide supportive information.
About Strong Family Alliance

Strong Family Alliance is a non-profit organization with a simple mission – to save lives and preserve families by supporting parents of children coming out. Our website gives parents accurate information, insights on this challenging time for them and their child, ways to keep their child safe and healthy, and encouragement to lead with love and solve problems over time.

REFERENCES:


Chapter 4- Coming Out as the Parent: How Parents Can Become Allies and Advocates

- Speaking Up: Independent Actions as an Ally
- Going Public: Steps to Coordinate with Your Child
- Working with a Counselor: Sharing in Private
Coming out as a parent can be gradual or sudden. As your child becomes more open, it’s important that you become more open, keeping pace to provide encouragement and emotional help. Parent support begins with being an ally, a safe person to trust, but each additional step you take strengthens your child’s awareness that you are with them on their journey.

As you take actions to be more supportive, it’s important to remember this is not your story—it’s your child’s story. Take care to not “out” your child beyond their wishes. To help with this, we have organized suggestions in increasingly public steps. These steps help chart a path from actions that protect your child’s privacy to public actions as your child becomes more public.
“THERE IS A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE/TOLERANCE AND INVITATION/ENCOURAGEMENT/SUPPORT. …SO I CAN BE A VOICE THAT HELPS ASSURE THE LATTER BECOMES THE NORM AND NOT THE EXCEPTION.”

~ Mother of a transgender son
Speaking Up: Independent Actions as an Ally

**Definition:** Ways parents or allies can speak and act that let their community and their child know that they hold an inclusive view of LGBTQ+ people.

**Why:** This is showing support, whether you have an LGBTQ+ loved one or not, whether your child is publicly out or not. These actions help any LGBTQ+ person know it’s safe to talk to you.

**Timing:** Any time

**Actions you can take:**

**Be a Non-Participant**
- Refuse to participate in subtle or overt LGBTQ+ disparagement.
- Do not use negative language, tease, or make disrespectful jokes.
- Walk away from disparaging conversations.

**Express an Inclusive Attitude**
- Make proactive efforts to discuss LGBTQ+ people and ideas.
• Avoid silence. Silence makes LGBTQ+ topics seem taboo.
• Find opportunities to talk about LGBTQ+ people or issues in positive ways.
• Talk about LGBTQ+ individuals you know and what you admire about them (co-workers, friends, relatives, etc.).
• Discuss news stories or current events around LGBTQ+ issues (same-sex marriage, bathroom bills, discrimination, health issues, news, etc.).
• Comment on celebrities, politicians, or advocates who are or who support LGBTQ+ and why that matters.

Outreach
• Establish relationships with LGBTQ+ people in your community.
• Encourage LGBTQ+ youth that you encounter through sports, friendships, school, etc. Be friendly and normal to these youth as you would to any others.
• Extend invitations to shared activities such as inviting an LGBTQ+ neighbor to dinner or a movie or asking someone to join a league or group activity (sports, music, gardening, cooking, etc.).

Take a Stand
• Confront others’ negative word/actions.
• Object to derogatory comments or jokes (“That’s a hurtful comment”, “That’s not funny”).
• Correct your child (or siblings, or relatives) for negative comments.
• Criticize negative examples of such behavior in movies, TV, news stories, etc.
• Be a public advocate.
• Donate to organizations that promote LGBTQ+ rights.
• Participate in demonstrations in your area.

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• Vote for inclusive office holders.
• Encourage your church, temple, or mosque to support LGBTQ+ members.

**Come Out as a Parent Anonymously**

• Learn all you can.
• Get factual information, resources and suggestions from supportive websites such as StrongFamilyAlliance.org or PFLAG.org/transgender.
• Read about others’ stories of being a parent of an LGBTQ+ person (e.g., “Family Stories” at StrongFamilyAlliance.org).
• For an informative and encouraging article about transgender youth and their families, visit “How Parents Can Best Support a Transgender Child: Research Study” (YouTube: Where Parents Talk TV).
• Share your own story in a private, confidential way.
• Add your story anonymously online at “Family Stories” on StrongFamilyAlliance.org.
• Find confidential, private support.
• Work with an affirming knowledgeable therapist.
• Talk with supportive, accepting clergy.
• Join a support group such as PFLAG.org.
A SIMPLE, PERSONAL ACTION WE INVITE YOU TO TAKE IS TO SHARE YOUR STORY ANONYMOUSLY AT FAMILY STORIES ON WWW.STRONGFAMILYALLIANCE.ORG.

THIS HAS SEVERAL BENEFITS:

- IT’S PRIVATE - YOU CAN SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE ANONYMously.
- IT HELPS YOU PRACTICE TELLING YOUR STORY - SOMETIMES READING OUR OWN STORIES GIVES US INSIGHT AND PRACTICE TELLING OUR STORY THAT CAN BE HELPFUL AS WE EVENTUALLY TALK WITH OTHERS.
- IT BECOMES A RESOURCE FOR OTHERS - PARENTS VISITING OUR PAGES CAN FIND STORIES FROM PARENTS IN SIMILARLY SIZED TOWNS, GEOGRAPHY, OR FAMILY SITUATIONS. YOU CAN BE A HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO OTHERS.
- WHEREVER YOU ARE IN YOUR STORY, IT CAN HELP OTHERS - HEARING STORIES FROM MANY PERSPECTIVES IS HELPFUL TO OTHERS FINDING THEIR WAY.
Going Public: Steps to Coordinate with Your Child

Remember:

- It’s not your story to tell—you will not feel the scrutiny, your child will.
- Keep pace with your child—their comfort level is most important.
- Get permission—ask if you can talk to a particular person (even your sibling or best friend).
- Judge your audience—they may break confidence or gossip.

Definition: The timing of telling friends, family, or anyone that your child identifies as transgender and/or LGBTQ+. This is complex and must be based on your child’s decisions of who knows and when.

Why: Keeping pace with your child is a way to support your child, find support yourself, and become an advocate.

Timing: Depends on your child’s comfort level. Becoming completely open could happen quickly, or it may take years, or it may never occur. You must take cues from your child about whom to tell and when.

Child Is Only Out to You: Protect Privacy

- Caution: Do not “out” your child.
• However emotional you are, respect your child’s privacy. Take time to find your balance and gather helpful information.
• Be an ally.
  • See the independent actions above and pursue all you can.
• Educate yourself.
  • This is support for you as well and there are many options (e.g., PFLAG.org, StrongFamilyAlliance.org/resources).
• Find a confidential and supportive space.
  • Join a support group such as PFLAG.org or one of the many affirming faith-based resources.
  • Online groups can be especially helpful, such as those from the TransFamilies.org which hosts events in both English and Spanish.
  • Work with an affirming therapist.
  • Talk with accepting clergy.
• Tell your story anonymously
  • Post your anonymous story under Family Stories at StrongFamilyAlliance.org.

**Child Told a Trusted Few: Assist and Ask Permission**

• Keep pace.
• Don’t ask your child to stretch and don’t hold them back.
• If asked, be willing to help tell others.
• Help your child tell someone else if your child wants your help. You may be part of the conversation, or you may be sent as a messenger.
• Ask permission if you want to tell someone.
• For someone your child knows well, such as a relative or close friend, it’s essential your child agrees. It’s their relationship too.
• Ask how you can help.

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• Sometimes they want help and other times not. It’s important to ask, so they stay in control.
• Keep the conversation flowing.
• Ask normal questions about life, school, work, and friends. Don’t make everything about being LGBTQ+.
• Keep your worries to yourself.
• Find a trusted resource to talk with but don’t lay your fears on your child.

Child Is Out to Some Family or Friends: Acknowledging and Educating Others

• Be a welcoming home.
• Invite their friends to your home. Make an effort to know ALL their friends, but particularly those close to your child.
• Find your comfort zone.
• Practice talking about this change until you have the words comfortably down.
• Ask your child how to handle questions.
• Find out how they answer and parallel them.
• Be a buffer if needed.
• Keep your balance if someone else such as a relative is emotional or critical. Don’t let them grill your child.
• Discuss possible gossip.
• Help your child be realistic that others may talk. Take your cue from your child.
• Get your statements and answers down pat.
• Find positive, affirming ways to answer if someone asks or implies something. You are an ally—act like it.

Child Is Progressively Open: Create Normalcy and Ease

• Grow with your child.
• Be more open as your child is more open. Talk easily about this and many other topics around school, activities, sports, etc.
• Be ready for dating and relationships.
  • Try to apply consistent guidelines about dating. Curfews, activities, and boundaries can still be appropriate.
  • There may be open affection. Try to think “if they were a co-ed couple would this bother me?”
• Make your home a destination.
• You can become a friend to others whose families may be rejecting or on the same journey.

Speaking Up: Both You and Your Child Are Out

• Use all of the actions described above.
• Take a public stand.
• Join one of the many support and advocacy groups you can find listed on StrongFamilyAlliance.org.
• Advocate
  • Actively advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Be a public voice when possible.
• Help other families and youth.
  • Support or help your school start a GSA Club.
  • Recommend GLSEN.org resources to teachers and school counselors.
  • Be available to parents with a child coming out as a support. Help them find resources and information.
People are often hesitant to see a counselor, or therapist, particularly if this is the first time to reach out. Below are some common questions and answers about counseling.

**Definition:** Share thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns about being the parent of an LGBTQ+ child either anonymously (e.g., online) or with a therapist who is bound by confidentiality.

**Why:** It can be helpful to discuss experiences with others to who may offer support, information, and insight.

**Timing:** Any time.

**Why therapy?**

Therapy can help when you’ve tried everything and still notice that stress, change, difficulties, or feelings...

...are unmanageable

...are not getting better with time

...are getting in the way of your roles and duties in life (e.g., at work, as a parent, or with everyday activities)

In other words, therapy is a way to find relief when things are beyond your ability to cope, not resolving despite time and effort, and creating impairment in your life.

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Also, therapy is appropriate in times of growth, exploration, confusion, and adjustment to new ideas and identities, even when things are good!

Parents of kids who have come out as LGBTQ+ may find that they move through each of these experiences and need a place to bring all the pieces together.

**How can it help?**

Therapy can be many things and is tailored to what you want. It can be a place to get unstuck, find new understanding of yourself and others, process painful memories or feelings, learn new skills and tools, and get inspired to make exciting changes in yourself or your relationships. Specifically for parents of kids who identify as LGBTQ+, therapy is a private place to air reactions of fear, doubt, or confusion and ask questions.

**Isn't it just talking with someone?**

Even the good listeners in your life are not able to listen with nonjudgment, focusing only on your best interests. Most friends and family members struggle to hear difficult feelings such as anger, sadness, or shame without trying to solve problems or minimize feelings. Therapists join with your struggle and help in a way that is effective, respectful, and confidential.

**What's the difference between counseling and therapy?**

These words are essentially interchangeable.
How do I find a therapist?

1. Get several names of local therapists to research. Some ways to do this:
   - Ask your doctor for recommendations.
   - If you have a health insurance plan, call the customer service number on your card and ask for help finding a list of “in-network mental health providers.”
   - Search the Psychology Today Therapist Finder for your zip code, your concern, or your insurance plan. (Not all therapists choose to be listed here, but many do.)
   - Use online resources such as betterhelp.com or where you can set criteria and preview therapists.
   - Since the events around COVID, even local therapists may offer online sessions
   - Find out more about the therapists. Some questions to ask or research:
     - Are they accepting new clients?
     - Are they inclusive and experienced with LGBTQ+ clients and concerns?
     - What are the fees? Do they accept insurance?
     - Do they provide individual therapy? Couples? Family? Child therapy?

(Note: Letters such as PhD, LPC, LMFT, and LCSW represent the type of training and licensure the therapist obtained, but these letters will not determine who feels like a good match or who will work most effectively with you.)

Are there two or three questions I could ask to make sure they are inclusive and competent to work with concerns related to my LGBTQ+ child and our family?

Your goal is to find a counselor who is knowledgeable and affirming, which is very different from friendly and accepting. You could ask if a therapist specializes or has

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experience working with LGBTQ+ concerns. Be wary of any therapist who claims to “fix” or “cure” being gay or transgender, as this will not be a good fit. Other good indicators are whether paperwork or other written material on their website reflect sexual and gender diversity/ For example, the website mentions “transgender “or “LGBTQ” in a description of services on their website, has inclusive choices for gender on intake paperwork, provides links to inclusive resources, etc.

Why would I go just for me?

You cannot change others’ reactions, choices, or experiences, but you can work to understand and even change your own. You are worthy of good self-care, and therapy is part of that. If it is difficult to justify something only for yourself, remind yourself that as you benefit, most likely your loved ones will benefit indirectly as well. Although self-care is reason enough, improving mental wellness in order to improve parenting may motivate some parents to seek therapy.

Should I go even if my spouse won't?

Therapy is a personal and individual decision. You can benefit even if your partner does not attend.

Should I consider counseling for my child?

Yes. If you think that your child is struggling, offering or encouraging individual therapy could be a good idea. Family therapy can also be a way to strengthen relationships and communication with your child. Offer, invite, and encourage therapy if you feel it is the right step; however, forcing therapy on an adolescent who is not willing or ready can cause strain and stress.

How do I find the right therapist and make sure they'll work well with my child?
The process is the same as described previously, with one addition: listen to your child regarding whether they feel comfortable with the therapist. Some kids need a few sessions to feel comfortable and establish rapport with the therapist. Other kids and teens begin to balk at therapy after several sessions, when topics may get more difficult or personal. These issues are normal and something to bring up with the therapist, so they can monitor rapport and engagement. However, regardless of whether the child enjoys the process of therapy, a relationship with the therapist in which they feel respected, understood, and heard by the therapist is of the utmost importance. Consider giving your child the ability to look at a few websites and decide who they will see. This reinforces their sense of independence and choice.

**Should we try family therapy?**

Yes, if you notice that the way your family handles problems, conflicts, and changes is not working well. A family therapist does not focus on the problems of one person, but rather focuses on the way family members interact as a group.

**When would I use group therapy or individual therapy?**

Both can provide a sense of relief that you are not alone. Group therapy can be a powerful way to understand yourself through relationships with and the support of others. It has many of the same benefits as individual therapy and is often less expensive. In some cases, individual therapy may be needed before group therapy if working toward feeling stable or functioning in daily life activities are primary goals.

**We don't have insurance coverage. Where can we get help?**

Community mental health agencies often have a “sliding scale” fee structure that allows for paying what is affordable to you, based on your income. Support groups can also be a lower cost option.
How long does counseling go on?

This depends on you, the therapist, and the goals you set together. Terminating therapy is best approached as a joint decision between client and therapist, but clients can decide to discontinue therapy at any time. However, a question to ask a therapist in the first session or two is how long they anticipate the work will last. Some therapists work within a short-term therapy model, others allow for ongoing, start-and-stop work, and others form treatment plans that estimate the number of sessions needed.

How much will it cost?

If you are not using health insurance, “private pay” rates for 50–60-minute sessions can range widely, anywhere from $80 to $175 or higher, in some cases. Group therapy sessions usually range from $20 to $50 per meeting.

Can I choose what I ask for help on?

Yes! You are in charge of what concerns and goals you bring to therapy. A therapist may recommend exploring other things, but your primary concerns should drive therapy goals.

I live in a small town. Is there any way I can get help online or remotely?

Telehealth or telemedicine, e-therapy, or online therapy as it is sometimes called, has become increasingly common. Including search terms such as “online therapy” or “teletherapy” will reveal a list of therapy providers that provide this service.

I'm a Christian. Can I find a Christian counselor?

Yes. Some counselors indicate online or in other materials that they focus in that area. This designation usually means
the counselor is a Christian—not that they are qualified to give theological answers.

It’s important to make sure they are able to help you support your LGBTQ+ child and are not condemning. A direct question before making an appointment might be “Are they affirming/accepting/supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals?”

**If I'm a Christian, can I see a non-Christian counselor?**

Of course. Counselors help clients address emotional or mental needs of many types: concerns, decisions, emotional struggles, relationship problems, etc. For parents of an LGBTQ+ child, there are many concerns separate from religious questions where a counselor can assist. If your faith is not accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, a non-religious counselor may be the best option and provide additional insights. They may also be more able to address concerns around your child’s safety, friends, activities, and social interests.

**When would I see a pastor versus a counselor?**

This is partly a personal preference. If you are close to a pastor and trust them to be supportive of your LGBTQ+ child, they may be a good resource. (Pastors who are not supportive would hopefully point you to other alternatives.) Often people prefer to see a counselor rather than a pastor for more privacy. It can be hard to interact with a pastor socially or in services when you are in active counseling with them. Sometimes people find that seeing both is a better answer than either/or. That allows them to work on theology and faith issues with the pastor and personal struggles with the counselor.
If I can't find or afford a therapist, what can I do? (Journaling? Reading? etc.?)

Many therapists offer sliding scale rates, and some agencies offer therapy for free or at a reduced cost. Additionally, local or online support groups can be a place to interact with others who have similar experiences. Journaling and reading self-help books or online resources can be helpful in the meantime. You can find additional books in our resources list on StrongFamilyAlliance.org.
Parenting LGBQ Children

Chapter 5- Moving Forward

• Tough Questions
• Issues of Faith
• Valuable Resources
• How to Have a More Meaningful Holiday
In this last chapter, we’ll answer some of the most difficult questions parents often ask and provide links to other more common questions as well.

Among the tough questions families often wrestle with, issues of faith are often the most difficult. We offer some suggestions in this edition.

Finally, you’ll find information on other resources like tips for college students, civil rights and laws, AIDS, education programs and links to an extensive list of support groups for many religions/denominations. You may not need all this now, but you may find it useful over time.

For more information, visit www.strongfamilyalliance.org
I’M 5 YEARS INTO PARENTING AN LGBTQ CHILD, BUT I CONTINUE TO LEARN. THE ISSUES CHANGE OVER TIME (SAFETY, BULLYING, HEALTH, DATING, COLLEGE, ROOMMATES, PARTNERS, ETC.) BUT I FIND I GET BETTER AT IT. WHAT WAS HARD AT FIRST HAS BECOME SO MUCH EASIER. AND FINDING GOOD RESOURCES IS SUCH A GIFT.”

~Father of a gay son
Tough Questions

Below are some of the hard questions parents often ask and answers that can be helpful. There are many other sources for frequently asked questions but here we focus on questions often not answered elsewhere.

Why is suicide emphasized so much as a risk?

Because suicide is the highest risk of death for LGBTQ individuals.

Because most teen suicides are impulsive with little or no planning and 70% occur in the victim's homes.³

As a cause of death, suicide is:

• 10th leading cause of death in the US¹
• 3rd leading cause of death among US teens²
• 1st cause of death among gay and lesbian youth.³
• The suicide attempts among transgender persons ranges from 32% to 50% across the countries. (SOURCE: National Library of Medicine, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5178031/)

SPEAK also provides warning signs to look for:³

• Giving away prized possessions
• Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
• Change in eating habits and sleep patterns
• Extreme personality changes
• Aggressive, destructive, or defiant behavior
- Neglect of personal appearance or hygiene
- Increase in alcohol or drug consumption
- Talking, writing or drawing about their own death
- Withdrawing from family or friends

**Who are we now? As parents? As a family?**

Although it may feel everything has changed, in most ways you are the same family you have been. The child who comes out to you is the same person you loved moments before. Daily decisions and activities may change gradually but try to take time, keep normal routines as much as possible, allow things to settle into new patterns gradually, and focus on communication and affection.

Let us offer some reassurance. On our parent stories page you can search on transgender stories. One of the last questions we ask is: Knowing what you know today, would you want your child to “stay in the closet”? Why?

In story after story the answer is “No”. The reasons may vary, but the general answers are because their child is happier and their family stronger for having weathered this change together. We hope you find this true as well.

**What about my dreams and expectations?**

You’ve probably imagined possible futures for your child that seem out of reach now. The death of dreams and shattered expectations may be hard to bear, but try to focus on the bigger picture. Parents hope many things for a child: good health, a happy life, close friends, a good education, a job, a loving partner, a way to serve in the world, and many more.

All of these can still be dreams, though the details of how
they occur may differ. Dream big for your child – maybe dream bigger than ever before. They need your hopeful view and encouragement.

**Will my child have a lonely, miserable life?**

You might be worrying that this means no marriage partnership, no children, and no happiness. Despite your own fears, it’s important to help your child dream a positive future. For LGBTQ individuals, hopelessness can breed self-destructive behaviors and despair can breed suicidal thoughts.

To help counteract this risk, one of the most important things a parent can do is hold a hopeful view of the future and share that with their child. And the truth is, many, many LGBTQ people lead productive, connected lives with loving partners and families.

Sometimes a minor shift in your own dream can help and basic dreams still hold:

- The dream of a great spouse for your child is at heart the hope for a good partner, one who loves and supports your child.

- Loneliness is greatly counterbalanced by strong family connections — which you can help sustain.

Check out It Gets Better, either the book or website. Both are full of encouraging stories that can help you build a positive vision of the future. Your child can also find encouragement there as well.
I want to tell my closest friend/relative. Should I?

It may feel strange not telling a close friend. You may really need to talk with someone about what you are feeling. Your needs are important, but you have to carefully choose where you find support and find a safe place to talk. Very few people come out to their parent and the world in the same day. It’s a gradual process over time, and you have to be patient and let that unfold.

Consider these points:

• When you tell someone, you are “outing” your child. Consider whether your child will be exposed to comments, opinions, scrutiny, gossip.

• If it’s a relative or someone the child knows well, your child has a relationship with them as well. It’s even more important for your child to be comfortable with them knowing.

• You may wonder if people notice differences, but many may not know or notice changes in your family.

Finally, remember this is not your story to tell. It’s your child’s story. It is imperative to let the child decide when he or she is ready to come out and to whom. You must be your child’s protector by doing what your child needs in terms of openness or privacy. Your story is your own experience, but your role as a parent involves supporting your child in the degree of openness comfortable for them.

Will I have grandchildren?
Many parents long for grandchildren and you may think an LGBTQ child means you won’t have grandchildren. This will
be your child’s choice, just as it would be in any relationship. They may conceive, adopt, foster, or choose not to parent. Don’t assume the outcome. Let time play out the situation, just as it would in any partner relationship.

**How do I decide when to tell people?**

It differs depending on the situation. But as a rule, you let your child decide who knows what and when. Don’t “out” them to someone unless your child says that it is OK with them.

**What is the “second closet?”**

The term “in the closet” refers to the choice that LGBTQ individuals make to keep their LGBTQ identity to themselves. Family members are said to be in the “second closet” when they are keeping the child’s identity private from others in the family or community. The second closet can be either a positive or a negative situation and it’s vital those trusted by the child understand the difference.

It is positive if the child is deciding who knows and when, and those trusted are abiding by the child’s desire for privacy or openness. You are supporting their preference and allowing them to control their experience.

It is negative if the child is ready to be more open and the family resists. This makes the child the “family secret”. For the child, this can feel like rejection, rebuff the trust the child showed through their honesty, and instill a sense that their family is ashamed.

It can be difficult to find the right step in each situation but asking your child and going slowly are key.
How do I deal with my child dating someone whose parents don’t know their child is LGBTQ?

As a rule, each child’s decision to come out must be their own. If the other young person is not out to their family, they may not be ready, or it may not be safe for them at home. You are not obligated to tell others that your child is LGBTQ+, or that their child is. You can encourage the child to tell their parents when they are ready and offer to help in any way you can with that step, but to tell the parents without the child’s permission could damage multiple relationships.

If you encounter criticism from the other parent later (why didn’t you tell me?), you may be faced with a tough conversation. Be as honest as you can about your reasoning and up front about any difficulty you may have felt around the choice to remain silent. It may be helpful to share that although in many cases your policy is to inform other parents when things arise with their child, sharing about a child’s identity before they are ready can be hurtful to the child.

Even after explaining that protecting the child’s privacy is ultimately a choice to protect the child, the other parent may not understand. The choice to prioritize a child’s wishes, privacy, and potentially their safety over harmony with that child’s parent is not an easy position to take, but ultimately this is what we recommend.

Do I have to tell my church or house of worship?

No, but telling depends on the church. There are accepting faith communities of all religions. (See Faith-Based Organizations at www.StrongFamilyAlliance.org.) However, if your family is closely connected to a faith community, rejection by that community can be damaging, particularly if
the child feels judged. If you anticipate judgmental reactions, it may no longer be a good place for your family. Consider finding a more accepting faith community. If you decide to stay and your child is wounded by the church, the risk is that your child may eventually come to question or even reject his or her faith entirely.

**Why did my child tell me?**

You may almost wish you didn’t know. The good news is children decide to tell their parents for good reasons. They may long to remove hidden barriers and to be accepted for who they are. Many wish to be honest with their family and may feel they have lived a lie with the people they cherish most. Their openness is an act of courage and shows deep trust in you. Try to honor them for honoring you with the truth.

**Should I encourage my child to hide their sexual orientation or identity to keep them safe?**

Coming out is a very personal decision, but recent research shows it is better for them to come out when they are ready rather than hide when they are wanting to be more open. A 2015 study (Coming Out At School and Well-being in Young Adulthood) found hiding their identity did not keep them safe and had other negative consequences. Key findings were:

- LGBT students experienced school victimization regardless of whether they attempted to conceal their identity or openly disclosed their LGBT identity. Thus hiding was not successful, on average, in protecting LGBT students from school victimization and bullying.

- LGBT young adults who tried to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity at school reported more
• victimization and ultimately, higher levels of depression than LGBT students who came out or were open about their LGBT identity at school. Feeling that they had to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity was associated with depression among LGBT young adults.

• Being out about one’s LGBT identity at school has strong associations with self-esteem and life satisfaction and with low levels of depression in young adulthood.

Most important is your child’s decision. Second is your efforts to support them.

Why do other teens shame or shun my child?
This can be complex. Unfortunately, it can be a frequent experience in schools. There may be many reasons, but some common ones are:

• **Peer pressure** – Teens long for a sense of belonging, which may come with feeling “the same as” their friends. They may avoid someone they learn is LGBTQ simply because he or she is different.

• **Fear of association** – “They’ll think I’m gay/trans/etc. too.” Because of the anti-LGBTQ messages in our society, peers may worry will make assumptions about them.

• **Condemnation by their families or church** – they may be reflecting what they have heard or been taught. Kids often voice the values and beliefs of their parents, and when parents make statements against the gay community, their kids may too.

• **Projection** — sometimes people who are LGBTQ (and are uncomfortable with this) deny their own feelings
and accuse others of having those very feelings. It can be a way of avoiding suspicion and diverting attention to others.

- **Deflection** — gossiping about someone who is LBGTQ to test other people’s reactions. This allows kids to preview what might happen if they were to come out.

- **Otherness** — emphasizing the “difference” factor. Unfortunately, it is human nature to confirm an idea of ourselves as “good” or “right” by calling out someone else as “bad” or “wrong.” Adolescents especially are looking for belonging and or feeling “in.”

- **Prurience** — Focus on sexual activity rather than the person. Adolescents, who are often preoccupied with sex, may be especially prone to ignore the whole person and focus solely on their sexuality.

church, consider reading some of the books in our Resources list at [www.strongfamilyalliance.org](http://www.strongfamilyalliance.org) or reaching out to another church.
Issues of Faith

For many people who are a part of a religion or faith, there may be a conflict between some beliefs...

- Homosexuality is a sin
- Opposition to gay marriage
- LGBTQ+ people should not be ordained or work in a church
- Two genders, “male” and “female,” were created by God

AND your belief that...

- My child is a good person
- My child is a beloved child of God
- My faith’s writings emphasize love and service above all
- My child identifies and expresses themself as God created them

We have suggestions that can help.

**Hit the pause button**

You don’t have to decide right now how to reconcile every question. Most religions reject the notion that children are a parent’s property and have strong teachings on the importance of family cohesion. Focus on keeping the family intact and allow time to work through faith struggles.

**Lead with love**

This is the same child you have loved and cherished for years. Keep leading with love as it may help you carve out
space to resolve other issues over time. Most religions emphasize parent roles and almost universally maintain that the most important parental obligation is the obligation to love one’s children.

**Keep being the best parent you possibly can**

Prioritize staying close to your child to maintain the safety, support, and interaction so essential as they grow to adulthood. They still need parenting, encouragement, love and safety at home.

**Resist being swayed by judgment**

If you feel judgment from others about your child, or you struggle with your own judgment about what it means to be LGBTQ+, put your relationship with your child first. Maintain communication and affection that is so important for a family relationship.

**Represent your faith**

Remember your daily example is a living demonstration of your faith for your child. Focusing on the overarching beliefs of their faith such as love, kindness, healing, and devotion to God helps many who struggle with individual negative scriptures.

**Find support**

You may be wondering how or whether to talk about this with others who share your religion. Find a supportive person to help you decide if it is safe for you and your child to discuss it. If you have concerns about your own church, consider
reading some of the books in our Resources list at www.StrongFamilyAlliance.org or reaching out to another church.

**Protect privacy**

Depending on your relationship with your church, its leaders, or the community you may feel like you are keeping a secret. This may be necessary to protect your child from unwanted scrutiny and judgement.

**Seek positive resources in your denomination**

Almost every denomination or religion has supportive groups for LGBTQ people and often provides new ways to think about these changes in the family. If you have doubts or your church is condemning, please visit our Faith Based Organizations page at www.strongfamilyalliance.org to find references for your denomination.

**Use prayer**

Many people learn over time that their relationship with God can take many forms. Parents of LGBTQ children often pray their way through parenting. Finding a one-on-one faith interaction can guide their daily actions better than written rules in their faith.

**Help your child keep their faith**

Perhaps the most important point: youth raised in a faith often have deep spiritual longings for faith connections. Staying in a condemning church may drive your child away from faith entirely. Finding a spiritual home that accepts the entire family may be the single greatest gift of faith, witness, and guidance you can provide.
Valuable Resources

Most parents learn as they go along, and each family’s path is unique. However, many resources are available and it’s helpful to know how to find them. From research reports to health information to support groups we encourage you to use these widely available tools to answer questions. Below are some key ones found on www.StrongFamilyAlliance.org that provide links to many more safe and reputable resources.

Support & Advocacy

Here you’ll find a listing of key organizations providing education and information by and for LGBTQ people, their families, and their allies. There are sections for:

- Key support and advocacy groups
- Research sources
- Education and school support and materials
- Tips for college bound students
- Civil rights and Laws
- Major religions

Faith-Based Organizations

In almost every faith group, there are resources for support. Our list includes:

- Christian (22 Denominations)
- Non-denominational
- Buddhist
• Hindu
• Islam
• Judaism
• Ecumenical

Books
Titles include parenting, the coming out experience, LGB resources, transgender resources, as well as Christian and Jewish writers.

Resources
Find recent blogs, video, news and articles and a parent forum where you can post issues or questions for other parents to answer.
How to Have a More Meaningful Holiday
by Janet Gattis Duke
(From Strong Family Alliance Blog)

Each holiday dinner, we encourage our gay child to bring along any LGBTQ+ friends that might not have a place to go. For nearly twenty years there have always been guests. Young people alone at Thanksgiving or Christmas or July 4. Once we had five visitors, always it’s one or two. Some come once, a few come several times.

There is food, of course, but we also have games and puzzles and serial football to watch. A few I have met before, but most are strangers to me. It surprised me to realize some were near strangers to my daughter as well—a friend of a friend—but they were alone, so she invited. Some are pierced and tattooed. Some are in polos and slacks. Some reserved, others outgoing, but most relax as the day passes.

We don’t ask why they are separated from their family, why they are alone. Rather we have the interesting conversations that can happen with someone you just meet. We talk about movies, current events, school, hobbies. I remember laughing conversations about learning to drive, their best Halloween costume, beloved pets, and their worst camping experiences.
Often life challenges come up. They talk about car break downs, struggles to finish college while working, apartment robberies, or credit card nightmares. As our visitors have gotten older conversations include job hunting, worries about conflicts with bosses or co-workers, money management, and dreams of owning a house. We are sometimes asked for advice. My husband might help diagnose a car problem. We might talk about budgeting or what percent of income should go to housing.

I enjoy these days and the many young men and women I’ve met. But I also hurt for them and their families. Those parents who are missing in action. The siblings who aren’t close because a gay child has been cast out. They should be the ones laughing at the humorous stories, learning small details about the everyday lives of their child. The parents should be hearing about struggles in work or school, helping with problems, comforting if the child has been robbed or attacked. But they are missing in action.

I am struck each time at the loss on both sides, the break in family support and family connection. It is so harmful to everyone.

I remember one woman turning to me as I walked her to the door after a fun, sunny afternoon of food and companionship. She turned and spoke in a slightly choked voice, saying thank you, then, “I haven’t been in a family home since my parents kicked me out when I was 14. It was really good to be here.”

She was 24. Ten years. A decade.

What her parents have missed. They don’t know this poised, eloquent, caring woman who volunteers with the animal shelter and works for an architect. They don’t know her hopes
and dreams, her struggles and successes. They don’t know their child’s life. Because they are missing in her life.

This holiday season bring your LGBTQ+ loved ones home, bring their friends as well, start building new memories around family and holidays. It’s never too soon—and it’s never too late—to remember that family is forever.

SOURCES:


REFERENCES


WE HEAR REPEATEDLY FROM PARENTS THAT WORKING THROUGH THE CHANGES OF A CHILD COMING OUT CAN BE HARD BUT RESULTS IN DEEPER, CLOSER RELATIONSHIPS.

WITH OUR VERY BEST WISHES, WE HOPE THAT IS TRUE FOR YOUR FAMILY AS WELL.

About the authors

Janet Gattis Duke, Founder, Strong Family Alliance
Janet's lesbian daughter came out over two decades ago. Strong Family Alliance is her effort to provide others the information, guidance and resources she longed for to keep her child safe and her family strong. She also serves on the board of the Reconciling Ministries Network working for full inclusion of LGBTQ+ in all aspects of the United Methodist Church, and on the board of the Parents Reconciling Network, supporting parents of LGBTQ+ children.

Janet spent 35 years with IBM where her work with international teams gave her a deep appreciation of racial, cultural, and social diversity. Retiring from IBM, she worked 10 years for the non-profit Service Dogs Inc. Retiring from that (she has a problem retiring), she now focuses on LGBTQ+ family issues and enjoys hiking, time in the mountains, and working to certify her Labrador as a therapy dog.
Shailagh Clarke, Ph.D.

Shailagh Clarke, Ph.D. is the first board member of Strong Family Alliance. As a licensed psychologist in private practice, Shailagh has seen first-hand the struggle families experience when a child comes out. Her vision is that the Strong Family web site will be a resource that will help preserve these families.

She obtained her master’s degree and Ph.D. from the University of North Texas and bachelor’s degree in Plan II and Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin.

Shailagh lives in Lakeway, Texas with her partner and three children. After spending most of her life avoiding sports, she now enjoys playing tennis regularly.

Jennifer Gamewell, M.Ed, LPC, CCST, CPDPE

Jennifer (pronouns she/her/hers) obtained her bachelor’s degree from The University of Texas, Austin and spent twenty years as a school counselor, primarily working within the middle school environment. During her time as a school counselor, she attended Texas A&M University earning a Master’s Degree in Educational Psychology, which enabled her to start her own private practice in 2017, Gamewell Innovative Counseling, LLC.

Jennifer is highly experienced in assisting families, young adults, adolescents, and children with developmental, behavioral, social, and emotional issues. She provides gender affirming therapy for individuals who may be transgender, nonbinary, or at any point along the gender spectrum. Her professional specialization involves working with individuals who are questioning, exploring, accepting, clarifying, or adapting to their identity.
Parenting LGBQ Children

Chapter 3- Challenges Ahead

- Telling Others
- Relationships and Dating
- Myths That Stigmatize Transgender People
- Meeting Your Child’s Significant Other
Millions of parents have come to terms with this change in their family and many develop deeper, closer relationships with their children. Like many highly emotional transitions, a positive outcome is often determined by your attitude and actions. Start here to learn about some common challenges and how you can navigate this change in your family.

According to a 2013 Pew Research Center survey of LGBTQ adults 18+, the median age when LGBTQ adults first thought they were “something other than heterosexual” was twelve, and they “first came out to a close friend or family member” at the median age of twenty. However, ages of coming out are trending younger. In 1991 the average age of coming out was 25. By 2010 the average age was 16. About 54% “all or most of the important people in their life” know they are LGBT.

As this data shows, not all youth come out to their families. If your child has come out to you it is a meaningful effort on their part to connect with you. Consider that your child coming out to you shows:

- a desire to be honest and open with you.
- trust in you as a parent and safe confidante.
- a wish to have a closer relationship.

You and your child may be out of step on this journey. LGBTQ youth have probably been considering their identity for years. You may be on a steep learning curve. We hope this section can provide some fundamental background and strategies to help keep your relationship with your LGBTQ child strong.
OUR DAUGHTER ESPECIALLY HAS OPENED MY EYES TO A LOT OF THINKING ABOUT LIFE IN DIFFERENT TERMS AND DIFFERENT WAYS AND I THINK THAT’S REALLY POSITIVE, BEING ABLE TO LEARN FROM HER. I WOULDN’T HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY. I’M JUST THRILLED. I FEEL LIKE IT’S A PRIVILEGE AND A PLEASURE THAT I WOULD NEVER HAVE ANTICIPATED WHEN WE HAD OUR CHILDREN.”

~ Anonymous, mother of a lesbian daughter
“WHAT’S BEEN MOST DIFFICULT IS THE REACTION OF MY FAMILY MEMBERS. NO ONE ON MY SIDE OF THE FAMILY KNOWS BECAUSE OUR SON HAS CHOSEN NOT TO TELL THEM. HE TOLD MY HUSBAND’S FAMILY, BUT THEY’RE NOT SUPPORTIVE.”

~ Anonymous Mother from Parent Stories

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Telling others

Six Ways You Can Help Your Child Tell or Not Tell Others

Prioritize your child’s needs and preferences regarding who and when to tell.

This story is your child’s story; your child gets to decide who to tell. They may be eager to be open, or they may be uncomfortable being discussed among family and friends. Let them take the lead or ask their permission.

The “big reveal” may not be necessary.

Always share in the way most helpful to your child. People may figure it out on their own and a gradual realization may be best for them. Months or years can go by without a clear statement about your child’s LGBTQ identity while in the meantime, normal relationships are preserved. Many people are unconscious of the social stigma they express toward LGBTQ youth. When this becomes personal, through someone they care about, they can often find their own path to acceptance over time.

If they want to be open at school, home, work, or in the family, support them all you can.

Watching your LGBTQ loved one begin to live out their identity publicly may leave you feeling anxious. You may fear for their safety or worry about the discrimination or bullying that can occur. These realities are part of why acceptance and support at home are so important. Transgender people
need a safe place—where they can talk and be heard, where they can express concerns and find encouragement, where they can be safe and find support. This is their journey, but supportive parents are a huge and valuable defense against hardships they may face. Moreover, the confidence and coping skills you help them build will serve them throughout their life.

**They may ask you to tell someone. Help if you can.**

If your child asks you to tell someone, be as helpful as you can. They may want someone to know (another parent, for example) but be nervous to tell that person. You can offer guidance to your child regarding the range of responses you anticipate, if they ask. Or, you can accompany your child as they initiate the conversation. You can accompany your child as they initiate the conversation, or you can take the lead if that is what the child wants. Be sure you understand the role they want you to play and what they want to share (or keep private).

**They may ask you not to tell others. Respect their wishes.**

The child is the one who will feel scrutiny, field questions, or sense the family gossip. If they need privacy, let them set the pace. Coming out is their process, so the decision to tell others is theirs, not yours. This can be difficult if it means keeping a “secret” from close friends or other family members. However, the loving choice is to respect your child’s needs.
I was so confused and afraid when she started dating in high school. I was terrified she’d have a bad relationship or get used or settle for someone just because they were gay. Thank heavens we had older kids, so we tried to use the same rules, but it was still hard. It was years before I realized all those things happen to every kid: bad relationships, breakups, manipulative friends. I just tried to be there for her, whatever happened. But some of it was bad.”

~ Anonymous, mother of a lesbian daughter
Trust your instincts — and your child’s.

If you sense an acquaintance or family member may be hostile or hurtful, be mindful of this. Relatives, friends and neighbors, school chums and others all have a relationship with your child already. Again, let your child’s preference lead, and help them if they ask. Try not to push them or hold them back. Be open to their reservations about certain people but honor your child’s judgment.

Relationships and Dating

A challenging area for many parents is navigating their child’s dating and romantic relationships. Every family has values and rules, and it’s important to realize these do not necessarily change when their child comes out. Parents sometimes think they should handle things differently for an LGBTQ child, but that is not always true. Two ideas to keep in mind:

• How would you normally handle friendships, dating, or activities?
• How have you handled them with other children at home?
Play by the usual family rules.

As much as possible, take the LGBTQ aspect out of the decisions you make. It can be helpful to ask yourself questions like, “If my daughter were dating a boy, how would I handle this?” Or, “If my son were dating a girl, how would I handle this?” This can help ground you in the usual way your family addresses dating. This means curfews, acceptable places to go, permissions required, and responsibility can be consistent for everyone.

For non-romantic relationships, handle those similarly as well. Your child may have come out to some friends and not others. That is their choice. Allow normal school and social activities, friendships, and teams. If your child has a special interest like music, sports, academics, or animals, help them pursue it. These can help keep balance and perspective in your child’s life.

Let the LGBTQ individual set the boundaries.

Due to social or activity restrictions, some LGBTQ youth may not come out to their group or school. They may want to avoid conflicts about sleepovers, club activity, sports teams, campouts/retreats, etc. They prefer to keep their identity private, often until a relationship or some situation arises where they feel it’s important to be open. Let them set the pace. Be ready to back them when they want to be more open. By the same token, support them in coming out to people, joining activities that appeal to them, and expressing themselves as they choose, even if it feels scary to you.

Don’t assume every relationship is romantic or sexual.

Like everyone else, LGBTQ youth have friends that range
from mere acquaintances to friendships to crushes. Be sure to leave room for a wide mix of relationships for your child, and don’t assume every friendship is romantic. Avoid assumptions and just ask your child about friendships as you usually would. This is part of keeping communication open and helps keep their romantic interests from being an unspoken secret in the family.

**Be prepared for heartache.**

A common fear for parents is the loneliness their child may face in the struggle to find a loving partner. While this may be a risk, their process is the same as any young person. Finding a good partner or relationship is a challenge for everyone. Your child will be attracted to others who may or may not feel the same. He or she may face rejection, breakups, or heartache. There will be dates of whom you approve and others you dread. You may feel regret when a relationship ends for your child because you liked that person, or relief because you didn’t care for them at all. These are all normal events in young lives and are no different for LGBTQ lives. As a parent, you can be an advisor, an advocate, a comfort in loss, and an encourager in need — but you can’t keep these normal events from occurring. Let them find their path. Your best role is to be a safe, supportive resource as they work their way through life.

**Help them find their community of people.**

If possible, help your child find safe groups where they can meet or connect with other LGBTQ youth. Isolation leads to loneliness and despair. See our Resources list at www.StrongFamilyAlliance.org for possibilities and support your child in joining or participating in accepting groups. Find

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a trusted LGBTQ adult that your family can get to know as a positive role model. Remember this is a community issue, not just a personal one. Such connections should not all be LGBTQ focused. For instance, if you are active in a church that is not accepting of LGBTQ people, it’s important to find a faith community that is and involve your family there. The same is true of sport teams, schools, clubs, or community activities. Finding connections where your child is accepted can also provide a supportive adult community for you. If you are active in a church that is not accepting of LGBTQ+ people, it’s important to consider finding a faith community that is and involving your family there.

"I didn’t realize how many lies I had believed about LGBT people until my son came out. This fine young man who was a leader in his school and a champion for so many causes. When you know someone, love and respect someone who is gay, the scales fall from your eyes.”

~Anonymous, Father of a gay son

Welcome your child’s friends.

It can be very comforting to know and meet your child’s friends. Providing a place for popcorn and movies or other get together activities is a great way to do so. You could host a club meeting, organize a team barbecue, or serve as a
school supporter for any club or activity your child enjoys. Even something as simple as providing refreshments at a school event gives you a chance to put names to faces and get to know his/her friends better.

An unexpected thing can sometimes occur: you become a trusted adult. If your child’s friend is not out to their own family, you may find they feel attached to you. An accepting adult may be new and hopeful to them. Be accepting but let them find their own path with their family. If they have not come out to their family, it may not be safe for them, and coming out must always be the individual’s choice.

Myths That Stigmatize LGBTQ People

Negative ideas about LGBTQ individuals are often rooted in myths, stereotypes, and misinformation. Consider how the myths below may have shaped your own views.

Myth 1: Homosexuality is a choice.

*Reality: Sexual orientation is caused by factors such as genetics and the biology of brain development.*

Parenting, peer pressure, and religious struggles are not causes of homosexuality or heterosexuality. Homosexuality is no more a choice or decision than being straight. Asking a
gay person, “When did you decide to be gay?” is similar to asking a heterosexual person, “When did you decide to be heterosexual?”

Scientific data indicate that sexual orientation (homosexuality or heterosexuality, i.e. gay or straight) is biologically based. While there is more to learn, studies suggest that what leads to a person being gay or straight lies within our genetics (i.e. DNA), epigenetics (i.e. how factors affect our genes), and what occurs in the developing brain before birth.

**Myth 2: Homosexuality can be “cured.”**

*Reality: Therapy cannot change sexual orientation, and “reparative” therapy can be harmful.*

Therapies that claim to change lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons into heterosexuals (e.g. “conversion” and “reparative” therapy) have been discredited. A task force within the American Psychological Association that reviewed years of research on therapeutic efforts determined that it is highly unlikely sexual orientation can be changed. In addition, the leading mental health and counseling organizations recommend against the use of conversion or reparative therapies (see below).

Exodus International, the largest North American reparative therapy organization, shut down in 2013 after 37 years of failure. At the press conference announcing this closure, the president, Alan Chambers, apologized for “...years of undue judgment by the organization and the Christian Church as a whole...We’ve been imprisoned in a worldview that’s neither honoring toward our fellow human beings, nor biblical...From a Judeo-Christian perspective, gay, straight, or otherwise, we’re all prodigal sons and daughters. Exodus International is
the prodigal’s older brother, trying to impose its will on God’s promises, and make judgments on who’s worthy of His Kingdom.”

These organizations that recommend **against** the use of conversion therapy and reparative therapy include:

**Medical Groups:**

- American Medical Association
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Psychiatric Association
- American College of Physicians
- Pan American Health Organization
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (PAHO): Regional Office of the World Health Organization

**Counseling Organizations:**

- American Psychological Association
- American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry
- American Counseling Association
- American Psychoanalytic Association
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
- American School Counselor Association
- American School Health Association
- National Association of Social Workers

**Myth 3: The parents did something wrong.**

**Reality: Nothing you did caused your child to be gay. However, the way you respond will have a huge impact on your child’s well-being.**

Self-blame is often the initial response of parents who learn that their child is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This is not true. A
child’s sexual orientation is not learned from anyone, including parents. Just as a parent cannot cause a child to be heterosexual, or straight, a parent cannot cause a child to be gay. (See Myth #1.)

However, parent responses after a child comes out can contribute to the way life turns out for that child, now and into adulthood. You have the chance to protect your child from homelessness, depression, and suicide, as well as high-risk, self-destructive behaviors that result in drug use and sexually-transmitted disease. How? See “Behaviors that Help.”

**Myth 4: My child might turn other children gay, either in the family or community.**

*Reality: Sexual orientation is not learned from peers.*

Although children and adolescents may imitate or influence each other, sexual orientation is not something that is learned from peers. Others might come out to your child, not because they are “recruited,” but because they recognize a common bond.

**Myth 5: An LGBTQ person is a danger to children.**

*Reality: LGBTQ people are no more likely to molest children than anyone else.*

This slur is untrue. LGBTQ people have the same protective instincts for children as heterosexuals. Sexual attraction to children is not homosexuality but Pedophilia, a psychiatric disorder.

This claim is often pointed at gay men in particular but research shows gay men are no more likely than straight men
to sexually abuse children.\textsuperscript{7} In fact, the Child Molestation Research & Prevention Institute notes that 90\% of child molesters target children in their network of family and friends, and the majority are men married to women.\textsuperscript{7} A review of research by Dr. Gary Herek found no evidence that gay men molest children at higher rates than heterosexual men.\textsuperscript{8}

A major promoter of this myth, discredited psychologist Paul Cameron, is the most ubiquitous purveyor of anti-gay junk science. Though his claims have been debunked repeatedly and very publicly, Cameron’s work is still widely relied upon by anti-gay organizations.\textsuperscript{7}

**Myth 6: The Bible condemns homosexuality.**

**Reality:** *The Bible is most concerned about proper treatment of others and opposes cruelty, exploitation, and abuse among all people—heterosexual and homosexual alike.*

Jesus was silent on the subject of homosexuality. His ministry was one of welcome and acceptance, not condemnation. In addition, many Christians hold the Great Commandment in Mt. 22:36-40 as their overarching guide: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

There are only seven verses out of more than 31,000 that are used to support the assertion that the Bible condemns homosexuality. When taken in their historical contexts, and in tracing translations to the original text, the modern interpretation of an anti-homosexuality content is not supported. The word ‘homosexual’ does not occur in the
Bible; no text or manuscript, Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, or Aramaic, contains such a word.\textsuperscript{10} 
(For a detailed discussion of the seven passages commonly used as “proof,” please see the book \textit{UnClobber} by Colby Martin.)

\textbf{Myth 7: Homosexuality is abnormal.}

\textit{Reality: LGBTQ individuals are as mentally healthy as anyone else.}

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, and American Academy of Pediatrics issued this joint statement: 
\textit{“Homosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and is not changeable. Gender differences are normal expressions of human relationships.”}

At that time, homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the official list of mental disorders and is no longer considered a mental illness.

LGBTQ individuals are as mentally healthy as anyone else. However, it is true that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against LGBTQ individuals create a hostile and stressful social environment that cause mental health problems\textsuperscript{9} as well as raise the likelihood of suicide attempts and other self-harming behaviors.

\textbf{Myth 8: Marriage is between a man and a woman.}

\textit{Reality: LGBTQ relationships can be as monogamous, strong and valid as heterosexual relationships.}
Marriage between same-sex partners is legal in the United States and in an increasing number of countries worldwide. Mutual love and respect, not the gender of the marriage partners, are what make unions strong and valid. Fidelity in committed same-sex relationships can be as welcomed and blessed by families, communities, and the church as a heterosexual marriage.

Myth 9: If we allow LGBTQ marriage, anyone wanting to be married can have any meaningful relationship defined as marriage.

**Reality:** *Marriage will always be between two consenting adults.*

This is the “slippery slope” argument. By definition, marriage must be between two consenting adults. This prevents marrying a child, marrying a pet, and other extreme examples used in comparison to same-sex marriage. None of these cases include two adults who give consent.

Myth 10: Homosexual “practice” is a sin.

**Reality:** *Sexuality is a normal expression of human connection in any loving relationship, gay or straight.*

Another view is that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is morally neutral. And yet, regarding LGBTQ people, an unfair distinction is often made: “It’s okay to be gay. Just don’t act gay or have sexual relations.” This is an unreasonable and unjust demand which is not made of heterosexuals.
It is dissonant and wounding to require LGBTQ people to separate the truth of who they are from the truth they live. The concept of a committed relationship, whatever the sexual identity of the partners, should be equally respected. Some LGBTQ people may choose to be celibate, just as some heterosexual people may. However, that is a choice, in some cases even a calling, and not something to be imposed on a person.

Myth 11: Opposing homosexuality is “Christian.”

**Reality:** As followers of Jesus and recipients of God’s grace, Christians believe their primary role as disciples is to love God and extend God’s love to others.

Many Christians have a long-cherished tradition of tolerance and honoring a variety of beliefs, expressions of faith, and biblical interpretations. Using God and faith to empower fear, discomfort, or narrow-mindedness is never Christian. People of good faith can—and do—embrace LGBTQ people as beloved children of God.

An increasing number of pastors are changing their views as they know and understand more and see the children in their congregation come to them fearing they will be cut off from their church homes.

Myth 12: Accepting homosexuals will ruin the church.

**Reality:** Many faith communities experience revitalization when they welcome LGBTQ members.

Churches that are condemning or rejecting of LGBTQ Christians are losing members. These losses include LGBTQ family members who feel they must keep silent about their
loved one and hide from judgment in their church. Unable to be open about their family, afraid of wounding their family member, and dreading the condemnation in their church, many families begin a withdrawal from church life that often becomes complete. Alternately, they may turn to an accepting congregation. Accepting churches draw new seekers as well because those churches are seen as being able to “walk the talk.” Churches can make a positive choice to put the Golden Rule in action, lead with kindness and acceptance, and focus on a more accurate and profound understanding of the Bible.

Meeting your LGBTQ+ child’s significant other (From Strong Family Alliance Blog)

If your child recently came out as LGBTQ+, the idea of them dating might make you pretty uncomfortable. And if the very idea makes you feel nervous and awkward, then actually meeting your child’s significant other is probably not something you’re prepared to do. It’s not always easy, so we want to share some strategies and ideas that may help you navigate the process. Hopefully, you’ll be pleasantly surprised at the outcome.
Get everyone on the same page.

First things first. In these situations, open communication is always key. Err on the side of OVER communicating. Talk to your child about their expectations and be specific. Hugs or handshakes? What does your child call their significant other? (i.e. boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, etc.) That should be the term you use in introductions.

How does your child feel about this encounter? Talk to them about how you’re feeling and it’s okay to say you’re feeling nervous, that you’re worried about saying the wrong things, etc. If you’re married, how does your spouse feel about it? If you can get all these feelings and expectations out in the open before you meet, chances for success are much higher.

Don’t call their significant other their “friend.”

A lot of parents make the mistake of referring to their child’s partner as their “friend.” This happens to non-LGBTQ+ people as well and is a reflection of general parental discomfort at the idea of their “baby” being an adult. While perfectly understandable, it’s even more important not to do it for your LGBTQ+ child because it sends the message that you either don’t approve or don’t take their relationship seriously. Use the term your child uses and practice saying it if you have to. **Remember, your child wants you to meet their partner because your approval and love is incredibly important to them.**

The fact that they’re willing to have this potentially awkward experience means that they value your presence and participation in their life. Try not to take that for granted. So many LGBTQ+ people are estranged from their families and this type of situation is simply impossible. As hard as this might be for you, the fact that it can happen at all is a blessing.
Be aware of needed pronouns.

Ask your child what pronouns to use and try to use them. If you make a mistake, just quickly correct with a simple “I’m sorry” and go on. Don’t make a big deal of a miss. Research shows LGBTQ+ individuals appreciate when someone tries to use the correct pronouns, even if mistakes are made. If they use certain pronouns, it can be courteous to name your own. (Hi, I’m Kate and my pronouns are she/her.)

Put yourself in their shoes.

Do you remember introducing a special someone to your family? How did it go? Were you nervous? What kinds of things did your parent or parents do/say that helped things go well (or make things super awkward)? Did those embarrassing photos from childhood make you laugh or make you want to crawl under the rug?

Let your experience guide you with your own child. LGBTQ+ people have the same kinds of hopes, desires, and challenges in their relationships as straight people, so chances are the things your parents did that made you cringe when they met your partner will also make your child uncomfortable. The same kind, welcoming words that made you feel accepted and loved will also make your child feel accepted and loved.

Your child’s sexual orientation or gender identity doesn’t change who they are. They’re still the same child you’ve always loved.
Don’t expect it to be perfect.

No matter how prepared you feel, odds are high that awkward moments will still happen and that’s totally fine. This is a learning process. If you feel like the whole experience was a bust, you can always try again. This isn’t your only chance. Make sure to check in with your child afterwards and ask how they think it went, how their partner felt, etc. Check in with yourself and your spouse.

The following questions can help everyone reflect and think about future encounters:

- What went well?
- What happened that felt uncomfortable or awkward?
- What could be improved for next time?
- Express appreciation that you had a chance to meet.

We hope these ideas will help things go more smoothly when you meet your child’s significant other. Remember, someday you may meet the one that becomes a life partner, and practice now can help build awareness you’ll need in the future.

REFERENCES:


Parenting LGBQ Children

Chapter 2- Finding Your Balance

• The Journey for Parents
• Managing Emotions
• Tips for Supporting Your Child
When a child comes out, parents often find themselves sorting through their own complex emotions. They may not know what to expect or how to deal with the feelings, or they may find their balance is upset again and again.

These are common experiences and knowing what to expect and how to keep helping your child can be a relief. That’s what we address in this chapter.

Few organizations focus on the struggle parents face in navigating these changes in the family, but ours does. We hope you’ll visit www.strongfamilyalliance.org often.
“SUDDENLY I FEEL LIKE I DON’T KNOW MY CHILD ANYMORE.”

~Carolyn from Texas, Mother of a lesbian daughter
I HAVE TO SAY THAT WE SHOULDN’T AT ANY STAGE GIVE UP OR JUDGE OUR SONS OR DAUGHTERS. I’D SAY, TAKE IT ONE STEP AT A TIME ALL ALONG THE WAY.”

~Jim, Edinburgh, Scotland, Father of a gay son
The Journey for Parents

It can be a shock to learn a child is LGBTQ, and there are definite stages most parents experience. The stages below do not always happen in order, or just once, and some may not occur at all. Some stages pass quickly, others slowly. These stages represent the struggle to accept an enormous change in your family.

Many life events can trigger old feelings. For instance, if your child begins to date, moves away to college, encounters bullying or a hurtful comment, you may feel as if you have gone backwards to one of the earlier stages. This is common. Allow yourself to work through those feelings and regain your balance.

Stage 1 – Denial

Initial denial or disbelief is common. Although many of us might wonder if our child is gay even before they tell us, usually we suppress and deny this possibility out of fear of what the truth might do to our family.

Even after a child comes out, parents may hope that this is a phase, a rebellion, or an experiment. However, when a child takes the important step of telling a parent he or she is gay, it is important to take them at their word. This is difficult, because it means truly facing what being gay means for the child and for you.

Stage 2 – Grief

Grief is sadness about a loss. We may grieve the loss of the child we “knew” and their hoped-for future. We mourn the disappearance of the life we envisioned for them. It takes
time to grieve the death of the dreams for our child that center around heterosexual life events. For example, a father may wonder if he will ever walk his daughter down the aisle at her wedding.

As with many changes, over time new dreams are built and new hopes arise. Some hopes may transfer, such as changing the hope for a good wife/husband to hope for a good partner/spouse. But the fundamental hopes and dreams can endure, such as love and happiness, career success, or starting a family.

**Stage 3 – Blame/Guilt**

Many parents feel the need to determine a reason why, which leads to guilt or blame. We blame ourselves, wondering if we did something wrong. We blame our children for “changing” and for forcing us to readjust our vision. We might even blame their partners and other gay or transgender people, incorrectly believing that our child was drawn into this life through the influence of others. Research shows being gay or transgender is not anyone’s fault. These are not illnesses, diseases, or choices. They are normal variants of human sexuality and gender identity that arise as the result of complex interactions of biological, genetic, and hormonal factors.

**Stage 4 – Fear**

We fear what we do not understand and for most parents there are many unknowns when it comes to what it means to be LGBTQ. We fear reactions from others and telling what may feel like a difficult truth. We fear being judged and losing our friends, family, and faith community. We fear the hatred, violence, and discrimination our children may encounter and endure. All of these are realistic possibilities for both parent and child, which makes it even more important to support each other and navigate the changes together.
Sometimes, fear may be justified. If you sense a friend or family member will be hostile, you can choose to protect your child by remaining silent about their LGBTQ identity. This is not necessarily a bad thing so long as it feels supportive to your child. Your child should determine who knows and when to tell, for they will bear the result.

If your child is open, it is important to keep pace and show support. When a family is not open about their child’s identity it is sometimes referred to as being in the “Second Closet.” This can be a good thing if the child needs privacy, but it can be a very bad thing if the child views it as the silence of shame.

Stage 5 – Anger

We may feel angry at...

- Ourselves for not recognizing the truth sooner.
- Society or governments for allowing or promoting discrimination.
- God for “allowing” our precious loved ones to be gay, because their lives may be more difficult.
- “Why me?” and “Why my child?” are common feelings.
- Our religious community for rejecting or condemning LGBTQ people and their families.
- Our child for causing upheaval in our family.
- Other family members when feelings intensify either for or against the LGBTQ child.

It’s important to deal with your own anger and not direct it toward your child. Information can help combat anger, and educating yourself is a good first step, but this is your work to do. Don’t expect your child to explain everything to you. There are several books in our resources list that may be helpful to understand your experience. Talking with trusted family or friends or seeking counseling are also good options to help deal with anger.
It may help to recall that your child has honored you by trying to be truthful and honest. Deciding not to hide anymore and a longing to live more honestly and authentically are strong motivations for many transgender individuals. Try to honor them by managing your emotions as you grow your understanding.

**Stage 6 – Self-Realization**

With this stage comes the realization that it is we, not our child, who must change. How?

- Redraw our family picture to include this new reality
- Support our child and the family they have or will create
- Surround ourselves with other loving parents and friends
- Find a nurturing faith community
- Learn all we can and help others as well

Family members may not come to this understanding at the same pace, but as each person accepts and supports the LGBTQ child, the child will gain an increased sense of safety and community.

**Stage 7 – Acceptance**

Quite simply, this means loving your LGBTQ child, not in spite of who they are, but just as they are.

Your acceptance of your LGBTQ child creates a safe space where they can build a good life and become their best self. They still need things parents can so powerfully provide such as love, encouragement, understanding, and a hopeful view of the future. In addition, many parents find their child is happier, more resilient, and more open and connected with them as family acceptance grows.

You may become a resource for other families by helping them find support. It is also often helpful to read stories from
parents and families who have shared your experience. You can read stories from other parents on our “Family Stories” page on StrongFamilyAlliance.org. When you are ready, consider sharing your story as well.

IT’S POSSIBLE THAT YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN WORKING ON THEIR IDENTITY - WHETHER TO COME OUT, WHO TO TELL, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THEIR LIFE - FOR YEARS. A 2013 SURVEY OF LGBTQ ADULTS FOUND A LAG OF 8-9 YEARS BETWEEN WHEN INDIVIDUALS FIRST THOUGHT THEY WERE LGBTQ AND WHEN THEY TOLD SOMEONE.¹
Managing Emotions

Different Roles: Parent and Child

There are two parts to re-balancing family relationships with this powerful change in the family picture:

- **The Parent’s Role** — finding your own path, keeping your balance, and helping all the children involved, which may include siblings.
- **The Child’s Role** — learning how to live positively with the challenges of their newly shared identity.

However off-balance you may feel when your child comes out, it’s important to avoid laying your fears and worries on your child. Healthy parenting suggestions include:

Avoid “Venting” to Your Child

It’s **essential** that your child not become a lightning rod for the many emotions you may feel. Concerns about the future can be heightened now and it’s important not to use your child as a place to work through your emotions. The section has valuable insights into the parent experience and suggestions below offer alternative ways to handle your feelings.

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A Desire to be honest, to quit lying to people they love, is a strong motivation for many LGBTQ youth.
Find Personal Support

- Join a support group such as PFLAG.org. Local chapters in many areas provide support for families and individuals. Many parents and families have been in your situation, and their experiences and insight can be a tremendous resource.
- Confide in someone you trust, such as a close friend, or a supportive sibling, about what you’re going through. Make sure this person is a positive and encouraging resource.
- Consider counseling. Sometimes the best resource is at arm’s length. A therapist is outside the situation and can provide perspective. Contact your state or local mental health agency for help finding a counselor if you don’t know where to start or check out online resources such as www.goodtherapy.org, www.betterhelp.com or the Therapist Finder at psychologytoday.com. Be sure to ask about their experience with LGBTQ issues.
- Write in a journal. Writing helps you express your feelings, organize your thoughts, and will become a record of your progress over time.
- Practice self-care. Exercise and good health habits are important for your whole family. Be a role model.

Get Informed

Learn all you can about your child’s new identity and the challenges they face. Focus on positive resources and accurate information. Our Resources page at www.strongfamilyalliance.org has pointers.

- Knowledge reduces fear and worry.
- Learning all you can helps you navigate situations and make decisions with more confidence and compassion.
- Online resources include websites for parents and numerous books (see our Resources list at https://strongfamilyalliance.org/).

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Listen, Listen, Listen

You need to know what your child is facing. If they can come to you first, they are safer. It may be difficult at first but keeping communication open — primarily through listening — strengthens your understanding and relationship.

Practice WAIT — Why Am I Talking.

Consider using questions or phrases that encourage them to talk:

- Tell me more about that.
- How did that make you feel?
- What was that like?
- Can you tell me more?
- Summarize what they said to show you are listening. “I hear you saying…”

Help the Family Keep its Balance

- Maintain the ordinary. Keep routines going for school, teams, or extracurricular activities.
- Find opportunities for family participation. Activities you can do with all or part of the family help maintain relationships and normalcy. This can be as simple as movies, athletic events, outings, or service projects.

Support Siblings

- Sibling reactions vary greatly. If they need support or education, help them find it.
- If your child is ready for siblings to know, don’t forget to talk with your other children about this change and how they feel about it or how it affects them.
- Brothers or sisters are sometimes the first to know but not always. If it’s news to them they may have many of the emotions you experience and need to work through those.
• Siblings may be embarrassed, or fear others will think they are LGBTQ because their brother or sister is.
• It’s important they understand the risks their sibling faces and why family support is essential.
• Share StrongFamilyAlliance.org with them if it’s age appropriate — it’s a good starting point if they are struggling.

Help Your Child Connect

• Help your child find positive connections with other LGBTQ youth. Isolation leads to feelings of depression and shame. Possible resources:
• School Clubs – many schools have GSA clubs (Gay Straight Alliance/Genders and Sexualities Alliance) that work with a sponsoring teacher and parents to plan events, service projects, and support meetings.
• Online resources from groups such as PFLAG.org (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), GLSEN.org (focused on LGBTQ issues in K-12) and many others.
• Look for local drop-in or meetup programs. Some communities have church or organization-sponsored after school or social hour resources.
• Find a support group. Organizations such as PFLAG.org hold meetings for both parents and youth.

Work on the Environment in Your Family and Home

• Learn more about prejudice and discrimination based on such differences as race, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and religion.
• Monitor your beliefs about LGBTQ people and how they influence your son or daughter.
• Be a positive role model for your son or daughter on respectful treatment of LGBTQ individuals in your community: teachers, coaches/athletes, neighbors, co-workers and public figures.
• Assume that LGBTQ people are in a group even if they have not identified themselves. This can include parties, meetings, teams, classrooms, or any gathering.
• Stand up for all LGBTQ people – If you hear a painful joke or derogatory comment, push back. If your child hears you, it’s a powerful affirmation. If not, tell them about it anyway. It can mean a lot to know you stand up for them. Examples might be:
  • I don’t think that’s funny.
  • That comment could hurt someone.
  • That’s a hateful thing to say.
  • My child is LGBTQ

Tips for Supporting Your Child

Be open. Be supportive. Be informed.

“OUR DAUGHTER ESPECIALLY HAS OPENED MY EYES TO A LOT OF THINKING ABOUT LIFE IN DIFFERENT TERMS AND DIFFERENT WAYS AND I THINK THAT’S REALLY POSITIVE, BEING ABLE TO LEARN FROM HER. I WOULDN’T HAVE IT HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY. I’M JUST THRILLED. I FEEL LIKE IT’S A PRIVILEGE AND A PLEASURE THAT I WOULD NEVER HAVE ANTICIPATED WHEN WE HAD OUR CHILDREN.”

~Anonymous, Mother of a lesbian daughter
Appreciate when a young person comes out to you.

Coming out is scary. Your LGBTQ child has probably tested you with a series of trials over time—listening to your comments, watching how you respond to topics, jokes, or slurs. Based on your previous responses, he or she decided you can be trusted. There may still be fear of rejection, ridicule, and abuse, but they are hoping the parent they love and depend on can be counted on again. When someone comes out to you, your primary task is to respect their courage and honesty, thank them for trusting you, and continue caring for them.

Respect confidentiality.

When someone shares their sexual orientation with you, you have received a confidence which must be respected. Breaching this trust can be emotionally and physically damaging. Be guided by the wishes of the person who confided in you. Coming out is a gradual process and the
timing of who knows and when should be controlled by the person coming out.

*Examine your own biases.*

Male and female roles are strongly defined in our culture: boy or girl, pink or blue, transformers or dolls, players or cheerleaders, and many other messages constantly define male/female roles. Despite modern trends, most of us are products of a gender rigid society. You can’t be free of that just by deciding to be — it takes an intentional effort to break free of assumptions. Try to inform yourself, read, seek reliable, factual resources, and talk with your loved one about their experience and point of view. It’s a gift you give yourself and your child.

“*I THINK BEING GAY IS A BLESSING, AND IT’S SOMETHING I AM THANKFUL FOR EVERY SINGLE DAY.*”

~ Mother of a transgender daughter

*Learn where to seek help.*

Familiarize yourself with the supportive referral agencies and counselors in your denomination and area. LGBTQ helplines and support groups can connect you with experienced people and organizations. There are many websites and online resources listed in our resources section at *www.StrongFamilyAlliance.org*
Maintain a balanced perspective.

Sexuality and gender identity make up a small but truly important part of every person’s identity. Your LGBTQ child is still the same person you have known and loved for years. That person is still there and cares enough about you to be deeply honest about themselves.

They have trusted you with the most personal and risky information they can share, and they are hoping you will still love them. It’s urgently important to do so. However big this difference may seem to you, the larger person, the child you love, is still there. Don’t let this smaller part overshadow that.

Understand the meaning of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are not the same thing. Sexual orientation is about attraction to another person. This describes romantic, emotional, or sexual feelings toward others. People do not choose to be heterosexual or homosexual, they simply are. This is about attraction to another person.

Gender identity is about self-perception, a person’s inner sense of being male or female, a separate issue with unique complexities. This is an awareness of who they are, rather than who they are attracted to, and is a separate issue with unique complexities.

Be supportive.

Help connect the young person to LGBTQ resources, support groups, and alliances. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth feel alone, afraid, and ashamed because
of religious, societal, and familial pressures to be heterosexual. You can assist by listening with care to their feelings and concerns, offering a supportive and non-judgmental presence, and remembering they are equally valuable to the world.

**Anticipate some confusion.**

LGBTQ youth receive so many messages that their orientation or gender identity is sinful, they may be confused or even attempt to deny their sexuality. While many youths are aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity even before early adolescence, this awareness takes years to fully integrate. Often, they are in the middle of adolescence when their self-image is rapidly changing. You can help by:

“**I DID A LOT OF GRIEVING OVER THE LOSS OF THE IMAGE I HAD OF MY ONLY SON IN MY MIND AND HEART. I HAD TO DEAL WITH THE LOSS OF MY PREVIOUS PERCEPTION OF OUR RELATIONSHIP AND THE LOSS OF MY EXPECTATIONS OF THE FUTURE...EVENTUALLY I FOUND FRIENDS, RELATIVES AND COLLEAGUES I FELT SAFE TO TALK WITH ABOUT THIS CHANGE IN OUR LIVES. I ALSO CHOSE TO GET SOME THERAPY TO HELP MYSELF PROCESS MY FEELINGS AND TO BE THE BEST PARENT I COULD BE TO OUR DAUGHTER.**

~ Mother of a transgender daughter

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• Affirming to them that their feelings are as normal, natural, and moral as heterosexual attraction.
• Allowing them to wonder about themselves and try on different ideas. This is typical of the teen years when most people struggle with questions of who we are and how we fit in the world. This is no different for LGBTQ youth. Listening to their thoughts builds communication and can provide insight.
• Remembering that no one can be talked into or out of the gender they identify with, even if it is not the one assigned at birth.

Help, but do not force.

If you are heterosexual and comfortable, you may not fully understand what it means to be different in ways LGBTQ individuals experience. We often urge young people into behavior, clothing or experiences that are familiar to us. We also urge them toward things we would do or use because those are comfortable to us and well known. The best clues for how to help will come from your loved one. Don’t force him or her into your frame of reference to make it easier for you to understand. Remember, teen years are often a time for experiments in appearance, activities, and interests. Be open and patient.

Challenge homophobia.

Speak up whenever you hear anti-gay jokes or disparaging language and always function as if there is an LGBTQ youth in your midst (even if you don’t think there is). Your words and example will send the message that offensive remarks will not be tolerated, and that you are affirming of LGBTQ people and their families. You will also signal to LGBTQ youth that you are a safe person with whom to talk. Don’t perpetuate injustice
and ignorance by remaining silent. Defend others’ dignity.