

A PARENT'S GUIDE:

When Kids Come Out

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About the Author

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**A moment parents may
never forget may be the
one when a child first
talks to them about being
gay, lesbian, bisexual, or
transgender.**

The articles in this booklet were written to help parents not feel alone as they consider what these conversations mean for them and their child. Some parents have found that this is the start of an experience that brings them and their families closer and strengthens them as they make room for differences within the family.

The background image shows the silhouettes of a person and a younger person, likely a parent and a teen, standing on either side of a large window. They are looking out at a cityscape at dusk or dawn, with a warm orange and yellow glow on the horizon. The scene is reflected in a polished surface in the foreground.

**What most parents want is
to keep a strong relationship
with their teen, to remain
a positive influence for
good mental, physical
and spiritual health. Yet
sometimes, conversations
with teens create distance
rather than connection.**

PART 1

What To Do When Your Child Comes Out

"I wish I could take it back and do it over!" parents say about the moment their teens told them they were gay, lesbian, transgender, or that the teens were worried about their sexual orientation, attractions, or gender identity. "Nothing prepared me for this!" they say. Other parents remember, "My first thought was that what I was hearing was somehow my fault, that I'd been a bad parent, and I just fell apart." Even parents who managed to say to their teen, "I still love you, it doesn't change anything," still sometimes have regrets and wish they could press the re-start button.

As a therapist who has listened to hundreds of family "coming out" stories, I've noticed that what happens during these conversations has a strong impact on feelings within the family. This first interaction between parent and teen (and each conversation that follows) either creates stronger bonds or difficult memories that parents and teens have to work through later.

Why Think About It Now?

Chances are you will have a teen in your family, your extended family, your neighborhood, or church community who will eventually come out to you. How you respond to this teen may make the difference in his or her decision to live a healthy life, or even to keep on living. Research suggests that teens who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning) feel the greatest positive or negative effects from their family's reaction to them. Negative reactions from family are associated with teens' increased risk for depression, alcohol use, substance abuse, and other dangerous behaviors including suicide attempts.

Preparing now for
a possible family
member's coming out
may **ALLOW YOU** to be a
POWERFULLY positive
influence in a young
person's life.



What Can I Say?

Some parents feel authentic simply saying, “Oh, OK, tell me more about it when you feel like it,” and moving on. If you’re reading this, chances are that’s not you. A young person’s coming out may make you feel as if the axis of the world has shifted and you are supposed to set it right somehow. One of the least helpful ways to respond is to assume that the teen has made a choice that rejects your values.

Most teens share their feelings about attractions and identity only after they have wrestled alone with issues for weeks, months, and often years. Most are keenly afraid that their parents will feel that family values have been rejected. Even if you are the wisest person you know, it is unlikely that you will know more about the challenges of what they have been experiencing than they do. It is also unlikely that you will understand what they are experiencing without a lot of listening. The most helpful thing a parent can do may be to set the stage for future conversations by being open to listening.

*These statements encourage further sharing ►
without assuming the teen is choosing to
reject family values. They also make it more
likely a parent will learn more about what
a teen is experiencing.*

“I’m so glad you’re sharing this with me.”

“Thank you for telling me this. I’ve been wondering how I could help you.”

“What you are telling me is important. Most important, however, is that I love you, and this doesn’t change my love for you.”

“I hope you will keep talking to me about this.”

“This changes things for me too, and it will give me a lot to think about, but it doesn’t change how I feel about you. I still love and cherish you. We’ll work through this together.”

“This is hard for me, but I’m willing to do hard things as your parent. I want to be here for you to help you.”

“If I have to choose between you and what other people think about you, I will always choose you.”

Breathe

PART 2

What now? Parent Self-Care

“When he told me he only had crushes on boys and that’s why he never dated, I started crying.”

“My son told me not to tell his father that he really feels like a girl. Did I let him play with girls too much?”

“I asked my daughter why her best friend identifies as lesbian, and she told me she thinks she may be one too. I’m sure she is not.”

When teens come out, the world shifts. Some parents respond with denial, wanting to diminish the news. Others feel anger and want to find out who is responsible. Some parents feel sadness, anticipating a loss of shared values, a loss of future. Denial, anger and sadness are all important aspects of grief processing, and for many parents, responding to a child’s coming out is a grief experience.

Most children talk with their parents only after years of trying to figure out what is really happening inside, and when they finally tell parents, those years are condensed into a moment that – to a parent – may feel like a dropped bomb.

After listening to hundreds of stories of parents responding to their children’s expressions of attraction and identity, I’ve seen how important it is for parents to take care of their own emotional health afterward.

Keep in mind:

1. Take a break to figure yourself out.

Denial, anger, and grief are expected. However, if your child feels overwhelmed by your denial, anger and grief, then healthy connecting may be more difficult. Many children “take on” their parents’ reactions and become more isolated. You may want to find another place and time to express and explore your genuine reactions. One mother told her child she loved him and needed some time to figure out her own feelings, and then she spent the afternoon at her sister’s home. Another father immediately called a counselor, reassuring his son that the counseling was intended to help the father provide healthy support for his son.

2. Remind yourself, “This is not a crisis.”

One mother described feeling completely numb. Because Christmas was only a few days away, she felt both the pressure of the family’s expectation and the heaviness of the news. She found that repeating aloud the words, “This is not a crisis” reminded her that their family would still survive despite the new information.

3. It’s normal to feel more upset, even though your child may seem happier.

While children often feel relief after sharing feelings with parents, your feelings may begin to resemble a roller-coaster. It may seem unfair that your child has just given you the burden to carry. Breathe through these feelings and recognize that this is normal.

4. Find safe people to share what you are feeling.

Your child may insist that you tell no one. And although it’s important to honor your child’s sense of privacy, it’s OK to let your child know that you need to talk with someone. Perhaps you and your child can agree on a trusted family member, friend, or counselor.

5. Limit your contact with others who are uninformed.

Sometimes well-meaning friends and family have advice that is not helpful, or that undermines your confidence in yourself and your child. It's OK to limit your contact with these people for a period of time. Plan what you will say. "We are working hard to support each other right now and I need to focus on that," may be helpful to repeat.

6. And finally, ask yourself the right question.

When you ask "Why me?", try switching to the question, "Why not me?" and see what strengths you find in yourself. Chances are you are being called to a deeper way of loving your child and yourself.





PART 3

Now That My Teen Has Come Out – What Do I Do?

“I’ve told my son that nothing changes, that I still love him, but I expect him to live the same standards as the rest of the family, and yet he seems more and more depressed. Why isn’t this working?”

“I don’t want my daughter’s ideas about being lesbian to influence the younger kids in the family, so I’ve told her not to talk about it at home.”

“I think if my son is going to wear makeup, he’s going to get made fun of at school. I can’t stop that.”

Some families consider that their main responsibility to a child that comes out is to continue teaching truths about sexuality and gender, making sure their teen does not misunderstand or ignore those teachings.

In my experience with hundreds of teens from good homes, these teens are already painfully aware of what their parents believe and hope for. Lectures and reminders generally result in disconnection that makes communication tense and difficult. Some teens even stop sharing when they know parent reminders are coming. Keeping the listening door open is the most important and helpful tool for keeping kids safe.

Because teens need a good relationship with parents in order to navigate the experiences of being a healthy teen, I recommend that parents:

1

Consider that your child may not be choosing to rebel against your teachings and beliefs as they learn new things about themselves and want to share them with you.

2

Recognize that your child knows where you stand with regard to teachings about sexuality and gender.

3

Learn to be open to hearing from your child what internalizing these ideas has been like (both recently and in the past).

4

Find out what your child's hopes and dreams for themselves are, and how they may be changing.

5

Show respect for your child, especially as your child's experiences are different from yours.

These five things will make a dramatic difference in your child's interest in re-opening a relationship with you.



**The most important thing is
that you – as a parent – remain
a steadfast connection with the
world of respectful and loving
relationship with your child.**

Children who do well – that is – avoid risky sex, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and suicidal behaviors – have parents who show respect for their children's sense of what is true about them.

For details about retrospective studies of families who demonstrate accepting and rejecting behaviors and the outcomes for teens, see <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>.

If you want help navigating how to support your teen while making sure they are safe and mentally healthy (especially if identifying as a gender or sexual minority goes against your beliefs), you may want to:

1

Meet with other parents who have found peace in this journey (see www.encircletogether.org/resources).

2

Meet with a therapist who can help you and your teen navigate issues of safety and mental health.

As you visit with other parents who have taken this journey, you will likely observe that the happiest parents with the healthiest children are those who say that this journey helped them learn how to love more deeply than they knew how before their child came out.



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