

When sons and daughters come out

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Say that again?

Parents react to hearing the news

Your son or daughter has just come out as gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB). The moment is now yours and it's filled with silence as you search for meaning in his or her words. You know you heard correctly, but you can't help asking... "What did you just say?"

A few other thoughts that may cross your mind...

- 1) Why are you telling me this?
- 2) Are you sure?
- 3) You're confused!
- 4) Are you involved with someone?
- 5) How long have you known?
- 6) How come you didn't tell us sooner?

- 7) What else don't I know?
- 8) What about AIDS? Are you ill?
- 9) What will people think?
- 10) How did this happen?
- 11) What did I do, or not do to cause this?
- 12) How will I tell my friends and other family members?
- 13) Who else knows?
- 14) How will we get through this?

You are not alone. Many parents have faced this situation and emerged with a new understanding of themselves and their child. Rest assured life is not over. In fact, a new chapter is just beginning.

As parents, we want the absolute best for our children. We want them to have every opportunity and we don't want them shouldering unnecessary burdens. Most of us enter this new reality fearing for their safety and well-being. We wonder how their orientation will affect their prospects for a successful career, marriage, children, and overall happiness. And we wonder, how did this happen? Did we make them this way?

Generally speaking, society believes that everyone is or should be heterosexual and because of this, people sometimes feel uncomfortable with anyone or anything that contradicts this assumption. This discomfort is called homophobia. It's homophobia that drives people to complain when they see two women sharing a romantic kiss, or two men holding hands. While we often celebrate the differences that make us unique, society tends to judge sexual minorities. Perhaps this is because we lack a common understanding of sexual orientation. Perhaps we fail to see that it has variations, just like any other human trait.

Canada has taken a progressive approach to equal rights for gay, lesbian and bisexual people and mainstream attitudes are changing. Today, they share in every legal right afforded to heterosexual individuals. Furthermore, there are many people who welcome their contributions because they are different, not in spite of it.

What does it mean to be gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB)?

Homosexuality is not an illness, defect, or a perversion. It is a normal and expected reality for 5 – 10% of the population. GLB people are not weaker or any less capable than anyone else.

Gay men and women

"Gay" is a term that describes same-sex attraction felt by both men and women, however some women prefer the term lesbian. The word "gay" first crossed the gender-sex threshold in England during the 16th century, when it was applied to male actors who were cast in female character roles. In the 19th century Europe, the term was associated with heterosexual promiscuity, however it did not cross into sexually diverse communities until much later. Under this meaning, "gay" projected an impression of perversity. In the early 20th century, Americans experiencing same-sex attractions began identifying as "gay", preferring it to the word "homosexual", a term primarily used by mental health professionals.

Lesbian women

Not all lesbian women identify as “gay”. Some feel it does not reflect the unique nature of a romantic relationship between two women. Others prefer it for its historical and cultural significance.

The word “lesbianism” first appeared in 1890, followed by the adjective “lesbian”, and then the noun in 1925. (*Oxford English Dictionary*) Prior to this, the word “sapphic” referred to homosexual relations between women. These words share a common source. Lesbos is an island in the North Aegean Sea. Its inhabitants are called Lesbians. Sappho was a famous Greek lyric poet who lived on Lesbos c. 600 B.C. Her writings were entrenched with erotic sensuality directed towards both men and women. Nineteenth century doctors borrowed the historical reference to identify women who form romantic relationships with other women.

Bisexual, pansexual and queer

Bisexual men and women do not require their sexual partner to be a specific gender. They can become involved with a man just as easily as a woman. This doesn’t mean they need relationships with both. Some believe that bisexual people are just confused. Bisexuality is a naturally occurring orientation and people who are truly bisexual are no more confused than anyone else.

People who are questioning their orientation will sometimes identify as bisexual, but this is temporary and driven by their need to find an identity that “fits”. Bisexual people often feel misunderstood. They can be mistaken for “straight” while with an opposite-sex partner and “gay” with a partner of the same-sex. As well, straight partners sometimes think there is an increased risk of infidelity with their bisexual mate – wrongly so! Bisexual people are not gay, lesbian nor straight and they are just as capable of experiencing monogamous relationships as anyone else.

The terms “pansexual” and “queer” are similar to “bisexual”, but they can also include individuals, (and their partners), who feel they do not fit the traditional definitions of male, female or heterosexual. As well, they may feel their sexual identity is in flux, changing over time. “Queer” is a term that is often used by youth, but may be considered derogatory. It should only be used in reference to people who claim it as their sexual orientation.

How does my child know for sure?

Remember your first crush? Perhaps it was a classmate or a teacher. How did you feel? Was there a strange warmth in your stomach whenever they walked by? Maybe your heart pounded or you stuttered whenever they were near. What about daydreams? Did you fantasize about that perfect first kiss?

The inward experience of a first crush is in no way different for someone who is gay, lesbian or bisexual and your son or daughter has probably experienced similar feelings. Attraction is instinctive, not logical or reasoned and we can be drawn to the physical, emotional, erotic, spiritual or romantic attributes of another person – or a combination of these aspects.

You may wonder about the affection your son once held for a particular girl, or the boy your daughter once idolized. These attractions may or may not have aligned with their orientation, only your child can tell you. However, it’s important to realize that from birth we are conditioned to uphold the traditional male-female coupling patterns of society. The message is delivered and reinforced in almost every aspect of our environment, (i.e. books, movies, television, music, arts, culture; and social interaction with peers, mentors and family members). Thus, it is no surprise that almost everyone who can live like the majority will most certainly try. As well, adolescence is a time of trying on identities to see what “fits”. Teens experiment with fashion,

make-up, interests, attitudes, and sometimes with their sexual expression. However, coming out as gay is not the same as dying your hair. If your son or daughter is ready to say the words, chances are they know who they are and they are choosing to be real. Not only is this healthier than living a lie, it is the only way they will feel normal and free.

How are we supposed to feel?

You've just found out and already people are pressuring you to accept this new reality. It hardly seems fair, especially if you can't understand how your child could be gay. Every parent processes the news in their own unique way, but most share a deep concern for their child's well being. Other thoughts and feelings will depend on your comfort and understanding of sexual diversity and the relationship you have with your child.

Learning your child has come out marks the beginning of an important transition as you let go of old expectations and acquire a new understanding. It is best to think of this period of growth as a journey. There is no - one book, one talk, one support person, or one enlightened moment that will resolve all your questions and concerns. Fears and misperceptions must be peeled like an onion – in layers, and now that you're on this path, new information and experiences will help you build a foundation of understanding. The journey can be difficult, but it is so worth it! Try to be patient with yourself and with others, especially when it seems that life is moving too quickly.

Many parents experience a sense of loss when their child comes out - and rightly so. Parents must shed certain aspects of how they see their child and his or her future life. Depending on how - and how much a parent sees their own identity and life goals intertwined with their son's or daughter's, processing this loss may be similar to dealing with grief.

Grieving is a very common reaction for parents, but it in no way indicates whether they can or will accept their child's sexual orientation. In fact, some parents outwardly accept while inwardly grieving their loss. If you are experiencing this emotional undertow, it may help to tell yourself that your child is striving to live an authentic life, one where they can share the best of who they are and experience true happiness. As for the sadness you feel, try to stay open and remember, this experience is transitional and therefore fluid. Your thoughts, beliefs and feelings are changing all the time. You are not standing still only to suffer another day. You are moving forward, growing as a person and as a parent.

What have I really lost?

Despite all that's changed, if you look closely, you might realize that not much has been lost. In hindsight, many parents will say they were just missing the information (or comfort) needed to rearrange the picture and see it a different way. Here are some commonly perceived losses...

- 1) [I'm not going to have grandchildren.](#) Having children does not guarantee grandchildren. It was always their choice to become a parent, or not. Today, many same-sex couples are beginning parenthood together in addition to the moms and dads who are raising children from a previous heterosexual relationship. Adoption, invitro fertilization and surrogacy provide same-sex couples with a variety of options.
- 2) [My grandchildren will not be brought up in a healthy family environment.](#) Studies show that gay, lesbian and bisexual parents actually tend to be more involved with their children than heterosexual parents. According to the Canadian Psychological Association, "the psychosocial research into lesbian and gay parenting

indicates that there are essentially no differences in the psychosocial development, gender identity or sexual orientation between the children of gay or lesbian parents and the children of heterosexual parents.” Please see the following link for more information:

<http://www.cpa.ca/cpsite/userfiles/Documents/old%20press%20releases/GayParenting-CPA.pdf>

- 3) [My child is no longer safe in the world.](#) While it’s true that gay, lesbian and bisexual people face a certain amount of bias and prejudice, none of us is ever completely safe in all situations. We learn to navigate the risks of everyday life by making thoughtful and informed choices and your son or daughter will learn to do the same. There will be times when your child should travel with friends in a group. They will have to be vigilant if they believe someone is stalking or harassing them. They should not ignore repeated phone calls where the caller hangs up. We all have a sense of how safety looks and feels. Encourage your child to be aware of their surroundings and listen to their instincts.
- 4) [I expected so much success for my child and now this.](#) Nothing has changed in fact, coming out suggests your child knows who they are – a trait we see in successful people, regardless of how you measure success. Canadian society has grown tremendously on equality issues. Your child can find employment opportunities in workplaces that respect diversity. He or she will meet people that welcome them because they can offer a different perspective. Socially, they will find friends – gay and straight who would not change them even if they could. Also, they can find happiness in a loving and committed relationship.

When parents are truly accepting, they instill unconditional trust, confidence and love in their child. In this way, trust is not a measure of small things, but whether the child can navigate the larger challenges in life. When a child accepts these unconditional gifts and more importantly feels deserving, they depend less on other people for support and rely more on their own self-worth.

Coming-out for Parents

Loss is not always logical or rational. We can “know” or believe a situation is unfolding as it should and still feel we have lost something along the way. Parents often experience grief in five general stages. It’s important to recognize that everyone is different and that the process is fluid. People can experience two or more stages at the same time and sometimes return to issues or feelings they thought were resolved.

Most parents emerge from the grieving process with a sense of how to move forward. However, it’s important recognize that grief can lead to depression. Please speak with your doctor if you feel you need assistance.

Five Stages of Grieving

1) Shock

- i. Shock can last anywhere from a few minutes to a few of weeks
- ii. You may think that your child has changed, but he or she is the same person they’ve always been. In fact, if your child has been acting out or using drugs or alcohol, you may notice a marked improvement in their disposition, particularly if they are receiving support at home
- iii. Although some parents suspect, hearing the words can still feel like a “jolt” to the senses

2) Denial

- i) Cry if it helps, there is no reason to feel guilty. It is better to express your emotions, but try not to look for emotional support from your child. Ask them questions, but don’t be surprised if they don’t have all the answers. If your child is an adolescent, he or she cannot draw from the same life experience

that you can. They may not even articulate how they know they're gay. It will help to develop your own network of supportive friends, loved ones and community service organizations

- ii) You may entertain ideas like, "perhaps they're just confused". If your child tells you he or she is gay, they most likely are. People tend to be fairly certain before coming out to family members
- iii) Can a psychologist help? Counseling can benefit anyone who is unable to cope with the reality of sexual diversity. This includes you, your child, your spouse or any member of your family. However, a psychologist cannot make your son or daughter heterosexual. Homosexuality is not considered a clinical disorder
- iv) It's okay if at first, you don't want to talk about it. Everyone needs to process life changing information. However, if you continue avoiding the subject, your child and family members may see your behaviour as uncaring. It may help to explain that you understand the need for discussion, but more importantly for now, you need time to process the news. Ask for their patience and assure them that you will let them know when you are ready to chat.
- v) Don't worry if you and your spouse are not together in your attitudes toward homosexuality. Try not to argue differing beliefs. The key to acceptance is education and you may both have a lot to learn. Try to respect individual challenges and support each other's growth. It may help to have access to informative reading materials at home. Each person will decide when they are ready for the next step. In time and with positive dialogue, most couples eventually share common ground.

3) Anger and Guilt

- i) Sometimes parents harbour anger and resentment after their child comes out and you could find yourself directing these emotions towards a number of people, including your child, his or her friends, your spouse, parents or other family members. You could even be angry with yourself. Anger is often a demonstration of fear and guilt, which could be the result of unanswered questions or concerns, like...
 - What did I do wrong?
 - Why didn't I see this coming?
 - What else am I going to find out?
 - How long did my child suffer before telling me?
 - How will others react?
 - I am not equipped to handle this
- ii) You may find yourself combing the details of your pregnancy, or your child's early years to find answers. This is unnecessarily hard on you and it could falsely suggest that your child's homosexuality was preventable, or is fixable. But in truth, you and your spouse have done nothing wrong. There is nothing that can or should be "fixed". Gay, lesbian and bisexual people have always and will always exist. It is completely natural and expected that a portion of the population will not be heterosexual.
- iii) Single parents can experience a greater sense of guilt if they believe their children have been disadvantaged. Single parents do not produce more gay or lesbian children than coupled parents.
- iv) Remind yourself that no one is to blame. Your child can and will have the life of their choosing. It will not unfold exactly as you thought, it will simply be different.

4) Making Decisions - Three Possible Routes:

Once you've had time to absorb the news and you feel secure that nothing is about to change, you can begin redefining your intuitive sense of who your child is and who they are becoming. Everything you've learned up to this point will be called into play as you add this new layer to the day-to-day interaction you have with your child. From here, the parent-child relationship usually takes one of the following paths:

- i) **Supportive**: When parents focus on the health and welfare of their child, smaller issues become relatively unimportant. This doesn't mean that parents have an easier time accepting, it just means they are somewhat structured in how they cope with new concerns. Such families have an excellent chance of nurturing healthy attitudes in all family members.

In young families, supportive parents set the tone for younger siblings. In older families, they can have a strong positive impact on members of the extended family. Individually, these parents are open to learning and they don't mind searching for information on their own. Supportive parents also support each other and do not face the added discourse of a judgmental partner.

- ii) **Resigned or Conditionally Supportive**: Parents who tolerate their child's homosexuality often think they are accepting because they remain on speaking terms and continue to support their child in other ways. These parents create uncomfortable conditions by imposing restrictions or using sarcasm to communicate their discomfort. Some parents won't allow their child's partner to visit, or they use insensitive humour to embarrass them. Adult children will spend as little time as possible with their parents. Adolescents will withhold important details about their life private. Children living in these homes are often afraid their parents will ask them to leave, or cut off any financial support for post-secondary education.

- iii) **Unsupportive or Judgmental**: Parents who are unsupportive make it hard for their children to transition to a healthy adult life and in time, will lose a vital connection that is important to their own well-being. Some of these parents also lose the respect of family members and friends. They withdraw into their own closet by avoiding social interaction with friends and family members.

5) Acceptance

A truly accepting parent would rather change society than change their child. Not all of us get this far, many remain supportive but privately wish their child could become heterosexual. Acceptance means not only accepting your child, but also yourself, as the parent of a gay or lesbian person. You probably won't share the news with everyone you know, (although some parents do), but you will no longer hide it. Your child's sexual orientation will not feel like a burden, you will recognize it as a gift, part of the unique package that makes them special.

What has life been like for my child?

It's difficult knowing that you're different, but not understanding why. A child can feel worried, scared, confused, and they may not know where to turn for answers. Understanding who they are can bring joy, relief, and peace of mind. Adolescents desperately want to know that they are normal!

The process of self-discovery is unique for everyone. People can go through a lengthy "questioning" or "curious" phase before fully understanding their sexual orientation. A person can be ready to accept who they are, but not

ready to deal with the potentially negative fallout. Living with a secret can cause anxiety leading to depression. Revealing this secret to supportive friends and family members can bring relief and peace of mind.

Some children are very young when they realize their difference – some as young as three, but most don't tie it to attraction or orientation until much later in life. These kids perceive certain aspects of communication and close relationships differently than their peers and when they recognize this difference, they begin to question it. Some will wonder if something is wrong with them. Children can certainly accept and even celebrate their difference, particularly if friends and family are supportive.

Adolescents who are struggling sometimes use drugs, alcohol, the internet, video games, television or others things to escape confusing thoughts and feelings. Realizing they are gay can empower them to take control of their life. In others, it may compound the fear, especially if teens anticipate an unfavorable reaction from friends or family members.

Youth sometimes think being gay, lesbian or bisexual will make it difficult for them to realize certain life goals. Marriage and career expectations may seem out of reach for a gay adolescent who's unaware of their opportunities. Youth may try to set aside their orientation and live as a straight person. They may think they can hide it, not just from the outside world but also from themselves. Accepting who they are and gaining the confidence to come out will determine their quality of life. After all, coming out is not a one-time event. It recurs with every new relationship, workplace environment or social contact. Having a healthy outlook will help them meet these challenges.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is completely normal

All living things (human beings, animals, plants, fish, etc.) appear in nature with a wide range of naturally occurring variations. Human beings vary in skin colour, hair colour, height, left or right-handedness, weight, intelligence, etc. Just as society would normally expect that some people have red hair, are left-handed, or have blue eyes, it is also expected that some people will be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Studies are finding that a person's sexual orientation is developed from any number of influences before, during and after birth. These influences, (whether genetic, hormonal, emotional, nutritional, environmental, etc.), act together during a person's growth and development to create, among other characteristics, sexual orientation and gender identity. We are all unique. There is no other person exactly like us.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is not a state of mind, (you cannot choose who you are attracted to); it is a state of being, (a real part of every person's make-up). Acting gay or engaging in homosexual behaviour cannot make a person gay. *Acting* is something we choose to do and we frequently change our choices to suit our immediate needs. A state of being is self-evident. It is part of us whether we accept it or not, and though we may temporarily ignore it, we can never escape it.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual does not completely define a person. It is just one part of the foundation that supports each person's individuality. There is a wonderful diversity that can be seen in all forms of human behaviour. Whether we are talking about sexual expression, race, ethnicity, or personality, the diversity of all forms of human expression ensures that no two people are exactly alike.

How did this happen?

No one knows for sure why some people are gay, but scientists have conducted considerable research to answer this question. Current evidence suggests sexual orientation is determined in the womb. The factors that come together may be strictly genetic, but they may also be influenced by random chance. Until there is a clear scientific explanation, people will continue to believe that it is a combination of both genetic and early childhood influences. We already know that many of our other natural tendencies, (special talents or abilities), develop this way.

Your well-being is important

Mom and Dad, how are you coping?

While parents react with similar concern, we all have our own way of coping. Some parents simply need time to adjust while others question everything they've ever believed about their child, their parenting ability, religion, society, morality, etc. It's the only way they can make sense of the news, but this process can create fear and doubt and subject the parent to possible depression.

If the situation feels hopeless and you're having difficulty coping, please contact your doctor and be very clear about how you feel. Parents can suffer from stress-induced illness after their child comes out. Some even considered and attempt suicide. Ask your doctor for help if you need assistance.

Call your local suicide prevention hotline if you can answer yes to any of these questions...

Do your thoughts seem to go where they want?

Do you experience mental images that you can't seem to escape?

Do you find yourself mentally transfixed, then jolted *awake* by disturbing thoughts or visions?

Have you actually formulated a plan for committing suicide, even if you don't think you'd use it?

Have you made a mental checklist of things you'd do before committing suicide?

Do suicidal thoughts give you a sense of relief?

Things you should know about suicide

1. [Suicide is not a choice](#). When pain or anguish become unbearable, our instincts naturally devise an escape that might push us down a path we would not consciously choose. When we cannot see realistic options, this path can lead us dangerously close to suicide.
2. [Prolonged depression will alter your brain chemistry](#), making it more difficult to overcome without help. Suicidal thoughts can persist even if a person is consciously choosing to avoid them.

There is a great deal of information online for parents of gay, lesbian and bisexual children, but reading is not the same as sharing your story with someone who has been there. Support groups, including PFLAG Canada chapter meetings can provide you with an opportunity to meet other parents affected by sexual diversity.

Canadian Suicide Prevention Canadian Hotline Directory: <http://www.suicideinfo.ca/csp/go.aspx?tabid=77>

Self-acceptance and well-being for my son or daughter

Your child's sexual orientation is a gift and like their intuition, creativity, and intellect, it is part of the foundation that makes them who they are. You cannot distinguish a single quality you cherish in your child that is separate from their natural instincts. It's important to love the whole person, not pick and choose the traits we like best. Your child needs to understand this about him or herself, as well.

People who accept themselves naturally have self-confidence, and they seem to find opportunities to further develop their self-worth. A strong sense of self-worth can help gay, lesbian and bisexual people meet the unique challenges they face. Without this inner constitution it can be hard to ignore the judgment or criticism they hear about gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Studies indicate that gay, lesbian and bisexual people have higher rates of substance abuse and depression than their straight counterparts. While drugs, alcohol and excessive gaming can be used to escape the pressure of daily life, it's important to recognize these behaviours before they become addictive and lead to other health issues.

Studies estimate 30% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified (LGBT) youth will attempt suicide at least once. Of the completed youth suicides, approximately one-third of the victims were dealing with issues of sexual and gender diversity. The numbers are grim, but it's important to realize that family support can significantly improve the outcome for gay youth who are struggling with their identity. Learn to recognize the signs of depression – they are slightly different in youth. If you think your child needs help, speak to your doctor. Do not assume the problem will fix itself.

Helpguide.org: Teen Depression - A Guide for Parents and Teachers:

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/depression.html

Coming-out & self-acceptance

You may wonder, "Why did he or she have to tell me?" Some parents would rather not know. People come-out for different reasons: they may need emotional support; perhaps they can no longer pretend; maybe they are in danger of physical harm. Most likely, your child just wants to be honest with you. It likely took them a long time to understand their sexual orientation and telling you is an outward acknowledgement of their inward reality. It is not something contrived or imagined, it is a very real part of who they are.

Coming-out is also an important part of self-acceptance. Everyone needs to share the relevant details of their life with close family members. It is hard to do that in earnest when people incorrectly assume you are straight. Your child does not wish to hurt you and you can be sure he or she has imagined your reaction in several different ways. Most people believe their parents will have difficulty accepting the news. Still, coming out indicates they are ready to move forward and they want you in their life. Here is a list of common concerns for people who are considering coming-out to their parents...

Youth:

- 1) How will they react? (anger, tears, hollering)
- 2) Will my parents stop loving me?
- 3) Will they think I'm abnormal? (sick, a freak, stupid?)

- 4) Will they think I'm confused? (too young to know, misguided, influenced by someone else?)
- 5) Will they throw me out of the house?
- 6) Will they withdraw their financial support? (How will I afford tuition, food, clothes, shelter?)
- 7) Will our home life become unbearable? (Will I have to leave to find peace?)

Adult Children:

- 1) Will I lose my relationship with my parents? (cease talking, visiting)
- 2) How will they treat my partner?
- 3) How will they judge me?
- 4) How will they speak about me with other family members? (brothers, sisters, grandparents, adult child's spouse or children)
- 5) Will they blame themselves? (people want to protect their parents)

Youth may delay coming out until they become financially independent. Older adults may try to shelter their parents or avoid telling them altogether. The fear of losing important relationships and hurting the people they love, can create a vast distance between parents and their gay, lesbian or bisexual children.

What if I only suspect my child is gay, lesbian or bisexual?

If you believe there is a chance your child could be gay, lesbian or bisexual and you are prepared to support them, you can make it easier for them to confide in you.

1. **Communicate your support indirectly.** Give positive feedback on a gay rights story in the newspaper, speak kindly of a GLB friend or co-worker and use inclusive language like "partner" instead of boyfriend or girlfriend. Try to observe their reaction but do not comment.
2. **Place generalized support information in a discreet, (but not hidden), location in your home.** Brochures can be obtained through PFLAG Canada and possibly your doctor or local sexual health clinic.
3. **Asking them outright is not always the best idea, particularly if your child is still an adolescent.** They may not be aware of it themselves, or perhaps they're just beginning to question their sexual orientation. "Asking", may force them to face something for which they are emotionally unprepared. You may cause them more harm than good. If you must ask, make sure your child knows that you would support them and that it's okay if they're not sure. If they strongly deny it, don't apologize for offending them rather, apologize for upsetting them and tell them there's nothing wrong with being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

What can I expect for my child's life?

We all stand a better chance of achieving our life goals when we accept who we are and surround ourselves with people who love and support us. When family members are unavailable or unwilling to maintain ties, friends sometimes fill the void as a person's "chosen family". Anyone who faces prejudice or discrimination is more vulnerable if they do not have a strong support network. For this reason, the Rainbow Community can be incredibly insular... people tend to look out for each other.

Your son or daughter has every right to expect they can live a life of their choosing, keeping in mind we all have unique abilities and expectations. Your child has an excellent chance of accomplishing anything they wish, especially if they surround themselves with people who accept who they are. Nothing is impossible.

Things you may hear

Knowing and understanding the language of sexual diversity will help clarify the information you hear and read. As you become more comfortable with this new vocabulary, you will absorb words that broaden your understanding of the vast community of people affected by sexual orientation and gender identity issues. Try to keep an open heart... and mind. There are many people in our world who are seeking acceptance.

Myths & Stereotypes

Open dialogue on sexual and gender diversity has long eluded western society... but that is now changing. In the absence of discussion, myths and assumptions take the place of truth.

Sexual orientation defines several important aspects of the human condition and people tend to fear what they cannot understand, especially when it concerns other people. Unfortunately, this means misconceptions can be widely held and difficult to eliminate. However, more people are engaging in healthy discussion on this subject unlike ever before. Myths and misconceptions are losing credibility. Still, you may hear the following:

1) I don't know any other lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-identified people.

You may not know of any who are "out", but you most certainly know someone who is "closeted" or hiding their sexual orientation from others.

2) You can tell a person is gay by how they act.

We communicate who we are through various means of self expression, mannerisms and gestures. Sexual identity influences how we relate to one another and the world around us. It is like a lens through which we project who we are. Sometimes aspects of a person's identity can be read – or detected through their expressions, though not always accurately. Gender expression, like sexual orientation, is a separate aspect of a sexual identity. People will demonstrate any mix of masculine, feminine or androgynous mannerisms which may or may not reflect their sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is considered an invisible trait. You really don't know if a person is gay unless they tell you.

3) Gay and bisexual men are more likely to abuse children.

This is simply false and a fair bit of research has been conducted on the subject to debunk this theory. A 1998 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association notes one study that indicates 90% of pedophiles are men, 98% of which are heterosexual. Studies published in Pediatrics and Archives of Sexual Behaviour indicate lesbian pedophiles are virtually non-existent and together, gay and lesbian pedophiles represent less than 1% of the offending population. People who target children are usually not interested in loving and emotional relationships. Their behaviour is considered a paraphilia, a psychosexual disorder characterized by arousal to certain objects.

4) Gay men want to become women, and lesbians want to become men.

Some people are born with male bodies but consider themselves female, others are born with female bodies but consider themselves male. These are issues of gender identity and possibly intersexuality, but

not homosexuality. Most gay, lesbian and bisexual people are happy with their bodies. They have no interest in modifying them with hormones or surgery.

5) **Being lesbian, gay, or bisexual is wrong!**

The medical community dismissed the idea that homosexuality was a mental disorder in 1973. Both the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) consider same-sex attractions perfectly normal. Several countries have now legalized same-sex marriage or civil unions. It is becoming more common place to accept that not everyone is heterosexual.

6) **It is against God's will to become sexually involved with members of your own sex.**

There are many opinions about homosexuality among the various faith communities however, most agree that intolerance and hatred are wrong. Certain faith communities, and certain congregations are more accepting than others. If you cannot find support where you currently worship, consider your options. The PFLAG Canada website also lists a number of resources for people who are struggling with faith and worship issues.

7) **Homosexuality is the result of either early problems in the brain, or certain parenting styles.**

Nobody knows with absolute certainty why some people are gay and others are not. Most researchers believe that it cannot be pinned to one single factor. It is likely the result of a combination of social, psychological and biological influences. Recent literature points to genetics. Research has shown that our sexual orientation is “pre-wired” before birth. Most researchers and health care professionals regard homosexuality as a natural variation of the human condition, not a lifestyle choice.

8) **Gay people can't take jokes about their sexual orientation.**

People who have not been exposed to jokes and insensitive remarks might not realize the powerful impact such comments can have on a person who is questioning their sexual orientation. Furthermore, repeated exposure to such remarks will erode that person’s self-esteem.

9) **Why do gays and lesbians have to flaunt their sexuality?**

What is flaunting? Straight people often place a photo of their partner in their workspace, they comfortably kiss hello or goodbye, they hold hands when they go for a walk and they wear matching rings to symbolize their union. Is this flaunting?

In western society, everyone has the right to respectfully demonstrate affection in public. No one is exempt and no one is less deserving because of his or her minority status. Unfortunately, sexual minorities often find it difficult to comfortably express affection.

A woman drops her purse at the grocery store and her same-sex partner picks it up. She smiles and says, thank-you. What if instead she says, thank-you, dear? Is she flaunting her sexuality? She knows that several people might turn and give them an uncomfortable stare. Some might heckle or harass them as they leave the store. The term, “heterosexual privilege” is used to describe behaviour that cannot be comfortably duplicated in public by same-sex couples.

Some people believe people flaunt their sexuality during Gay Pride events. There are many reasons why people participate in Pride. Here are just a few:

- i) It is an opportunity for them and their families to safely participate in community events. Many live in secrecy to protect their safety, job, living arrangements and dignity.

- ii) They wish to commemorate times when they or other gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-identified people have faced persecution.
- iii) It is an opportunity to relax and not hide the more subtle aspects of how they interact with their partner or close friends, and to feel normal and accepted within their community.
- iv) Many straight family members participate to show support for their gay, lesbian and bisexual loved ones.

11) Why do gays want to bring their issues into the school system? I don't want my kids exposed to this, even as an extension of the sex-ed program.

Few parents know the facts about sexual orientation and gender identity and their beliefs and attitudes were formed during childhood, at a time when these subjects were not taught or discussed. Relatively few parents have access to diversity training that includes sexual and gender diversity. Most of the recent information they've acquired has come through the media.

In Canada, most students will receive some education on sexual diversity, but their ideas will be formed from a mix of pop-culture, family and peer influences. They are exposed to a limited amount of factual information.

Homophobic and transphobic bullying is a serious issue in Canadian schools and in these environments, gay and trans-identified youth run a high-risk of depression, substance abuse and suicide. It is a difficult way to enter one's adult years. Furthermore, where bullying persists, the learning environment is compromised and all students suffer.

A study conducted in 2001 estimated that in Canada, the human and social implications of homophobia cost our national economy 8 billion dollars per year. According to a Massachusetts school study, 27% of students will eventually encounter sexual and gender diversity within themselves or their own immediate family. The fact is, most heterosexual people will experience a significant relationship with a family member who is not heterosexual. It is easier to form healthy relationships when prejudice is not a factor. One way or another, we all feel the implications of prejudice. The issue belongs to us all, not just the minority group standing on the front line.

12) Bisexual people don't know what they want. They will partner with anyone who is willing to have sex with them.

Sexual orientation has nothing to do with libido, promiscuity or a person's commitment to be monogamous. Bisexual people are not confused and their orientation does not compel them to partner with both genders at once. They can genuinely fall in love with either a man or a woman – a person's biological sex does not exclude them as potential partner.

Bisexual people sometimes face discrimination from gay and lesbian people who do not understand them. Many believe that sexual orientation and gender identity exists as opposites only, (gay/straight, male/female). This simply isn't true. Sexual orientation, as with all human traits, exists on a continuum of possibilities. It is just as natural to be bisexual as it is to be gay or straight.

13) AIDS is a gay disease.

When HIV became known in the 1980's, condoms were used mainly to prevent pregnancy. Today in developed countries, complacency regarding HIV and condom use are major issues challenging efforts to stop the disease.

The existence of HIV/AIDS was announced with limited understanding and many people underestimated how easily the disease could be transmitted. Gay men had no reason to prevent pregnancy and so condom use was limited. Furthermore, men (gay and straight) are more inclined to pass the disease to their partner, making gay men particularly vulnerable. As more men became victims, HIV/AIDS was mischaracterized as a “gay disease”, further diminishing the importance of prevention within the heterosexual population.

HIV/AIDS is a concern for every human being - no one can claim immunity. It is everyone’s responsibility to take precautions to stop the spread of disease.

14) *In a same-sex relationship, one person assumes the male role and the other one plays the female.*

Sexual orientation does not determine a person’s gender role. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people partner for the same reasons as heterosexual couples: love, sexual attraction, companionship and common goals or ideals. Two masculine men can make excellent life-partners, so can two feminine women. Gender role often is an issue for someone who is struggling with his or her gender-identity. However, it’s important to recognize that transgender people can also be gay, lesbian, bisexual or straight.

Words That Hurt

Words that disparage gay, lesbian or bisexual people will now hold greater meaning for you. You are more likely to detect nuances in comments or jokes and it will soon become apparent that gay, lesbian and bisexual persons are not the only victims of homophobia. Parents, family members and friends also feel the sting and embarrassment of homophobic prejudice.

You cannot control what other people say however, understanding where the words come from may help reduce the impact. It is hard for people to hold beliefs that exceed their understanding. Recognizing that most people are simply undereducated on the subject may help. You will meet people who will think having a gay, lesbian or bisexual child is the neatest thing! Your child is your creation – your gift to the world. Believe in the good they can offer and you will see it shining through.

Support

Support is important for everyone. We all need a safe place where we can share our concerns. It is not the same as acquiring new information. Information feeds our minds and sustains us intellectually. While it provides us with certain tools for coping, we are still alone in our quest. “Support” connects us to other people, which is an inherent human need.

Living as a “closeted parent” is an isolating experience. You may find yourself avoiding friends or social settings that typically require you to talk about family. Support helps to heal this disconnect and re-opens important channels that sustain our emotional well-being. If friends and family members cannot provide you with this vital link, find others who can. There are people who are willing to listen, who understand. You just have to reach out and find them.

While we all need support, we can also give it. Members of your family will require a certain amount of consideration and understanding and of course, your son or daughter will benefit from knowing the family will continue to thrive.

Hope

As adults – and as parents, we are generally accustomed to feeling secure in our ability to handle most situations. New experiences are rarely foreign. Most of us have either observed or imagined just about everything that could possibly happen. It's one of the ways we mentally prepare for life's eventualities. Still, many of us are caught off-guard when our child comes out and we are suddenly thrown into a world where nothing makes sense. It can be frightening and worse, we may fail to see that hope is all around.

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual will not limit your child's choices or potential. They are still writing their story and only they can decide where their path will lead. You have an important role to play. Your love and support will make it easier for them to rise above the challenges that society presents. Let him or her share who they are as a gay, lesbian or bisexual person. You may have much to learn and perhaps they won't mind teaching you. Your child has not changed. He or she is the same person you brought into the world. You now have an opportunity to get to know them as they know themselves. Your support and courage are gifts they will never forget.

Remember you are not alone. Countless parents have survived this situation and emerged with an even better relationship with their child. There are many resources available online or through your local chapter of PFLAG Canada.

You may wish to speak with a PFLAG Canada contact or attend a monthly chapter meeting. It is helpful to hear how other families have managed. You can find meeting times and locations on our website at www.pflagcanada.ca.

Trust in yourself! You will find the strength and courage to move forward. You have already demonstrated that much by reading to the end of this document. Well done and good luck!

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