

Families Supporting an LGBTQ Child

For some birth, foster or adoptive parents, learning that a child is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning his or her sexual orientation or gender identity (“LGBTQ”) can be a very difficult juncture. For others, this information is welcomed and recognized as a sign of trust. How a parent responds to their LGBTQ child will have an enormous impact on the child’s healthy development and on the quality of the parent-child relationship.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Upon learning that your child is LGBTQ, you may feel a variety of emotions ranging from relief and acceptance to shock, denial, guilt and anger. It’s important to know that you are not alone in this experience. In fact, approximately one in every four families in this country has a family member who is LGBTQ. Many families struggle in isolation, unaware of community resources to help them. You owe it to your child and to yourself to find the resources, support and education you may need to move towards understanding and acceptance. One of the most valuable resources is Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). PFLAG offers a volunteer-based network of peer support chapters around the country (see www.pflag.org to find the chapter nearest you). Most important, reassure your child of your unconditional love.

SHOW APPRECIATION FOR THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE IT TAKES TO COME OUT.

If your child has come out to you, it’s likely that it took her or him a lot of strength and courage to make that disclosure. It’s now up to you to match this with your own courage, commitment, love and support. If you learned

that your child is LGBTQ from another source, avoid confronting your child, and instead model strength, courage and respect so that your child will feel more comfortable confiding in you. Do your best to embrace your child, their identity and their decision to be open or not with you.

EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF LGBTQ ISSUES.

Don’t rely on unfounded myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. Supportive literature specifically intended for parents of LGBTQ youth can help you develop a better understanding of these issues and a better relationship with your child. Such resources can be obtained through PFLAG, your local library or bookstore, or an LGBT community center (to locate the one nearest you, see the National Association of LGBT Community Centers at www.lgbtcenters.org).

UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR SUPPORT.

Be mindful that your reaction to your child’s sexual orientation or gender identity will have a major impact on your child’s life. LGBTQ children and youth who are rejected by their parents face a significantly higher

FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

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risk of depression, suicide and substance abuse compared with LGBTQ youth from accepting families. Once they understand the importance of their support, many parents of LGBTQ youth find that they eventually develop a stronger, closer relationship with their child.

DON'T TRY TO CHANGE YOUR CHILD'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER IDENTITY.

While young people may go through a process to come to understand what their sexual orientation or gender identity may be, it's important to understand that these traits are a part of each person's identity and can no more be changed for an LGBT person than they can for anyone else. Be suspicious of religious and other organizations that promote "freedom from homosexuality" through "conversion" or "reparative" therapy. Such assertions are based upon the misguided belief that there is something wrong with LGBTQ people. Leading professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the American Medical Association have issued warnings against such therapies and the harmful effects they have on those subjected to them. These organizations have long recognized that being lesbian or gay inherently poses no obstacle to leading a happy, healthy and productive life, and that the vast majority of lesbian and gay people function well in the full array of life activities and interpersonal relationships. Conversion therapies are regarded by mental health experts as ineffective, unethical and the cause of increased risk of depression, anxiety and self-destructive behaviors. Instead of trying to change your LGBTQ child, give him or her support.

STAND UP FOR YOUR CHILD IF HE OR SHE IS BEING PICKED ON OR HARASSED OUTSIDE YOUR HOME.

As a parent, you should protect your LGBTQ child from harm and harassment — in school, your neighborhood and in the community — just as you would for any child. This is particularly important if your daughter or son recently made the decision to come out at school or to friends. Research consistently shows that LGBTQ youth face far greater risks of harassment and violence from their peers than non-LGBTQ youth. Assure your child that you are on their side.

RECONCILE THIS NEW INFORMATION WITH YOUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS.

Learning that your child is LGBTQ can be especially challenging if you feel your faith or religion opposes

homosexuality. Understand that being LGBTQ does not impact a person's ability to be spiritual or religious any more than being heterosexual does. While some religious denominations continue to condemn homosexuality and gender variance, others publicly support gay rights and LGBTQ individuals. In fact, within many religious

communities there are support groups for LGBTQ members and their families, including Dignity for Catholics (www.dignityusa.org) and Affirmation for Mormons (www.affirmation.org).

– Youth in Care

You can seek supportive resources and counsel to help reconcile your religious beliefs with your commitment to your LGBTQ son or daughter.

The many other components of Getting Down to Basics offer additional support.

This tool kit includes additional handouts covering a variety of topics addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth and adults involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, such as *Foster Parents Caring for LGBTQ Youth*, *Basic Facts About Being LGBTQ*, *Caseworkers with LGBTQ Clients*, *Teaching LGBTQ Competence in Schools of Social Work*, *Working with Transgender Youth*, *Information for LGBTQ Youth in Care* and *LGBTQ Youth Resources*. To order free copies of the *Getting Down to Basics* tool kit, contact Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTeen (toll free) or 212-809-8585, or download it for free at www.lambdalegal.org or www.cwla.org.



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