

# For Parents, Families and Friends of LGBTQ People

## FIRST STEPS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

**PFLAG** LOS ANGELES  
PARENTS, FAMILIES & FRIENDS ALLIED WITH THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

*Do you have a child or family member who is LGBTQ? How can you support your loved ones and deal with your own feelings? Here are some answers to get you started.*

*Why do I feel all these emotions?* When a family member or friend comes out, it's natural to feel a lot of different things—surprise, shock, love, protectiveness, sadness, fear, anger and confusion to name a few. There is no right or wrong way to feel, and you don't need to be ashamed of any of your feelings. Coming to terms with the sexual orientation or gender identity of someone you love is a process. Give yourself time to collect information and explore your feelings. It's okay not to feel okay overnight.

*What about my dreams for my child?* Our dreams for our children often come from our own experiences and cultural images which are largely heterosexual. You may feel sad that you have lost the future you have envisioned for your child—and yourself. In the process of accepting themselves, LGBTQ people often feel grief as well. Many of them grew up with the same dreams you have. Remember, LGBTQ people can fall in love, marry, have children, and pursue successful careers. Your dreams may change, but perhaps not as much as you think.

*Why is my child gay or transgender?* Research suggests that there may be several contributing biological factors to sexual orientation and gender identity, including genes, birth order, and hormones released during pregnancy, but nothing is conclusive. What we do know is that homosexual and transgender persons appear in all cultures, in all religions, in all geographic areas and in all types of families. It isn't your fault. They are naturally occurring human variations.

*Isn't my child too young to be sure he or she is LGBTQ?* Recent studies have placed the average age a child knows that they are LGBTQ at 13. They also show that the average age of coming out is in the mid to late teens. Children don't need to have any sexual experience to understand whom they feel attraction toward. They don't choose to be gay, bisexual or transgender. Neither are they "recruited." It's something they recognize about themselves.

*How can I fix this?* Parents are problem solvers. It's natural to wonder whether there is anything you can do to help your child with this "problem." Neither sexual orientation nor gender identity is changeable. According to the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association, it is both futile and unethical to try to change a client's sexual orientation or gender identity. "Ex gay" ministries and "reparative therapy" are controversial, not recommended by mainstream professional organizations, and illegal for minors in California. They may change behavior, but they have never been shown by rigorous studies to change underlying sexual orientation. Some people have reported an increase in depression, suicidal thoughts, and self-destructive behavior following these treatments. Parents may encourage LGBTQ persons to date or even marry a person of the opposite sex in hopes of "curing" them. Think about whether your heterosexuality could be "cured" by dating a person of your own sex.

**Any attempt to change a child's sexual orientation or gender identity is experienced as rejection with very negative consequences.**

*What about HIV/AIDS?* Today everyone has to be informed about HIV/AIDS and how to protect themselves and their partners. It's not sexual orientation or gender identity that makes someone HIV positive, it's their behavior. Make sure your child knows how HIV is transmitted and how to practice safer sex. If you are not comfortable talking about these issues with your children (all of them!), find a medical practitioner who can give them reliable information.

*How do I reconcile my child's sexual orientation or gender identity with my religion?* Religious texts interpreted as condemning homosexuality and transgender identity may seem insurmountable, and parents may fear for their children's salvation. Interpretations of these ancient texts depend on a detailed understanding of the context and language in which these passages are written. Many Biblical scholars disagree about anti-gay readings of particular passages, and parents may find exploring these conclusions helpful. Many Christian denominations and branches of Judaism have taken official stands in support of LGBTQ persons including the Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative Branches of Judaism; the United Church of Christ, the Episcopalians, and the Metropolitan Community Church. Welcoming and affirming congregations and support groups can be found in most other denominations.

*How should I respond to my LGBTQ loved one?* DON'T reject them. LGBTQ children who feel rejected are eight times more likely to attempt suicide, six times more likely to report high levels of depression, three times more likely to use illegal drugs, and three times more likely to be at high risk for sexually transmitted diseases than their LGBTQ counterparts who feel supported.

*What kinds of behaviors are rejecting?* Physical punishment, name calling, excluding LGBTQ youth from family activities, blocking access to LGBTQ friends and resources, pressuring your child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine, telling your child that God will punish them, and telling them you are ashamed of them are all experienced as rejecting.

*What kinds of behaviors are supportive?* Talk to your child about their LGBTQ identity; express affection when they tell you about their LGBTQ identity; require that other family members respect your LGBTQ child's identity; connect your child with adult LGBTQ role models; welcome their LGBTQ friends; support their gender expression; advocate for your LGBTQ child when they experience discrimination. Attending a PFLAG meeting also shows support for your family member and can help you implement some of these suggestions in your particular situation.

*How do I tell friends and family?* First, learn the facts about sexual orientation and gender identity. Second, pick a friend or family member who has expressed support for LGBTQ persons or someone open minded whom you trust. This person will be an ally for you with others. Practice what you want to say, as you would for a job interview or speech. PFLAG meetings can help you prepare.

*Can my child have a happy life?* Yes, LGBTQ individuals have succeeded in all walks of life, from politics and entertainment to business, science and technology and everything in between. They are now able to legally marry their loved ones in the United States and many foreign countries, have children, and raise families. Your support is crucial to their success, and you will find that support brings you closer to your children than you ever thought possible.

*What are my next moves?* Utilize the resources listed on our website at [www.pflagLA.org](http://www.pflagLA.org). We recommend that you come to one of our PFLAG Los Angeles meetings or check at [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org) for a meeting near you. You will find a diverse group of parents, family members, and straight allies who have made the journey you are on. They will listen, share their own experiences, and support you. Your LGBTQ family members and friends are welcome to come with you as your family grows stronger and closer through understanding, acceptance, and celebration of each unique member.

*What if my child talks about harming themselves?* Take any talk of self-harm or suicide very seriously. More than 30% of LGB and 50% of transgender youth will make at least one suicide attempt before their 20th birthday. Contact a therapist familiar with LGBTQ issues immediately if your child talks about self-harm. Good sources for referrals are the Los Angeles LGBT Center. **The Trevor Project** has trained, experienced suicide counselors available 24/7 to talk with you or your child. Call 1-488-866-7386 (**1-866-4U TREVOR**).

Visit the PFLAG Los Angeles website for more resources and information: [www.pflagLA.org](http://www.pflagLA.org)

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See [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org) for the PFLAG National website

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