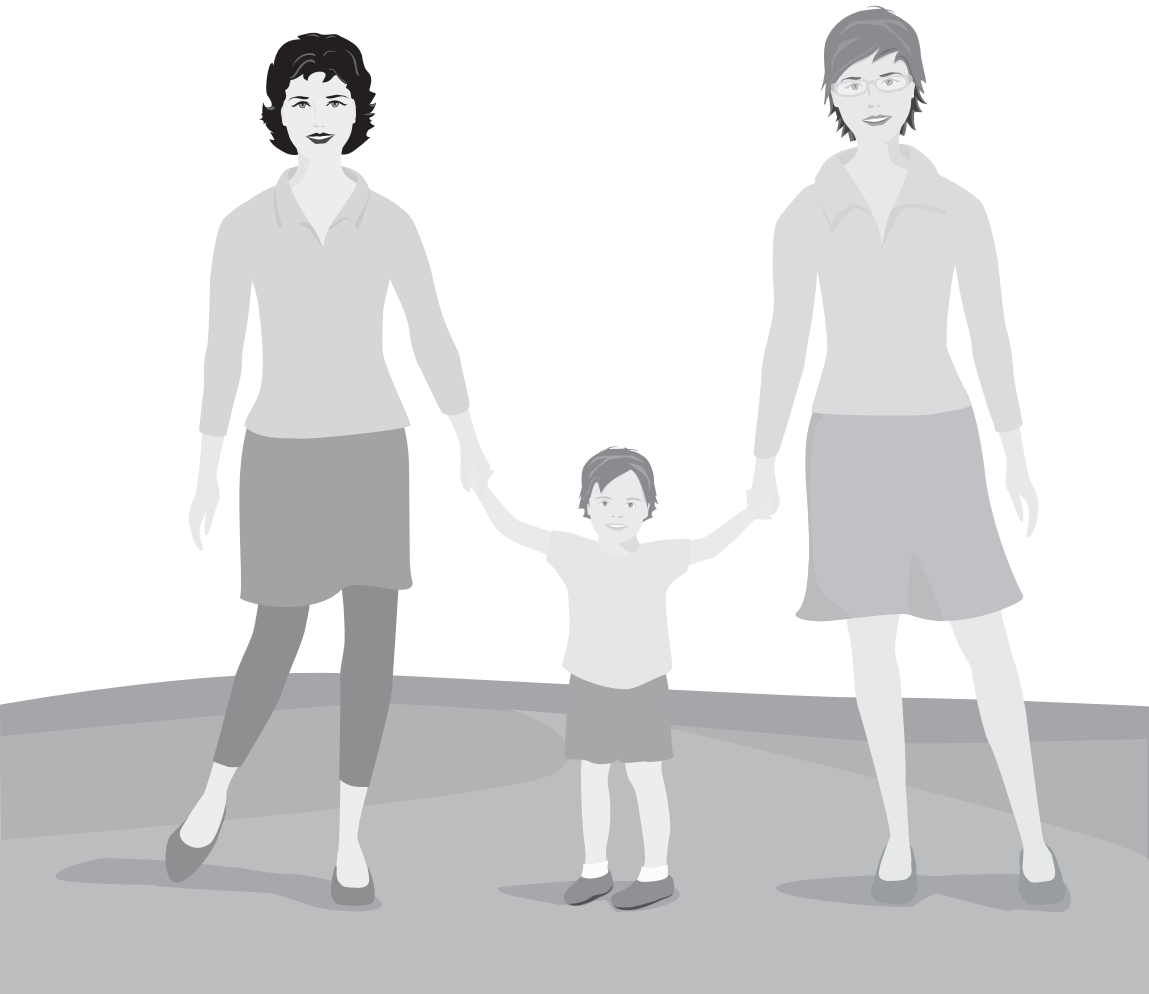


Tips for parents disclosing their sexual and gender diversity

"Keeping Families United"



This is an area that causes great concern for parents, no one wants to risk losing the respect and love of their children.

This booklet contains tips on how to tell children, plus contains several stories from lesbian mums, gay dads and parents transitioning from male to female who have already gone down the path of “coming out” to children and other loved ones.

Being true to ones’ self isn’t easy when so many people you love are affected. This booklet doesn’t pretend to have all of the answers, but it’s a start.

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Introduction:

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is predominantly a support group for parents seeking information to understand sexual or gender diversity. Especially, when loved ones “come out” as lesbian or gay or disclose they are bisexual or transgender.

But over the years with many people marrying and having children and then later deciding they can no longer live their lives as lies the dilemma has arisen as to how and when to explain to the children.

This is why this booklet has been initiated because so many parents are looking for assistance concerning the uncharted territory of “coming out” to loved ones and especially concerned about informing their children about their diverse sexuality. Unfortunately, reading information is difficult to access and PFLAG are receiving more and more calls for assistance with this dilemma.

And so, I thought the next best thing is to get others to tell their stories who have been down a similar path. This booklet is not a “how to.....guide” because all families have different combinations of personalities and temperaments.

It seems to me that it’s difficult enough coming to terms with sexual orientation, whether this is through final acceptance of self or slowly becoming aware of difference later in life. Once this is achieved then comes the greatest hurdle or concern for many of telling the children.

This booklet has only tips and suggestions, plus some personal stories about how others went through the process of disclosure to children regardless of age. You know your children and you must ultimately make the decision about what is right for you and them.

However, I would like to say a big “thank you” to those who have been happy to share their stories and struggles. Without them I would not have felt capable or confident enough to complete this project.

Parents Confusion and Fears:

I think part of the problem about talking about your sexual and diversity is many families don't discuss sexuality at all. Many parents fob off questions children and young people ask by telling them "they are too young to know about such things." So to discuss sexual diversity, even when it's your own can be way too intimidating. Many parents are concerned about their child/children losing their innocence or believe they aren't old enough to understand or accept what they're being told. Realistically, most young people get angry when they feel they have been either lied to, or "kept in the dark" about what is happening in the family.

Not only is there the problem of telling the partner which is difficult enough in itself but there is the issue of in-laws, parents and of course the children. No parent wants to hurt or confuse their children. And no parent wants to look bad in the eyes of their children regardless of their age. Parents always have an expectation or hope that their children will always look up to them.

When and How to tell:

Another concern is when to tell children, what is age appropriate and how much do you tell? So hopefully, this booklet will assist you with the decision of how and when to disclose and help you to feel more comfortable in the decisions you make surrounding this issue. My personal belief is that young children don't care about who or what you are as long as you love them and they feel safe with you.

Just keep in mind that sometimes parents under estimate their children, and because of their own insecurities, that so often come with sexual diversity feel their child or children won't cope. When you do disclose to your children always try to answer their questions as honestly and simply and age appropriate as possible and never evade questions. Children usually are very perceptive and know when they aren't being told the truth.

Keep in mind before you decide to inform your children about your diverse sexuality make sure that you have become comfortable with it yourself. Then you will feel comfortable about answering their questions. Truth and honesty can be great liberators.

Be Positive:

Another suggestion is to never apologise for being lesbian or gay. This is who and what you are. You haven't chosen to be lesbian or gay. Remember sexuality is like eye colour we have no choice.

The general consensus is also to tell them as you do others, in a positive manner, this way they are less likely to respond as negatively as they would if you are telling in an apologetic tone.

Generally, the news is best to come from you. You can tell them in a more loving manner. Children regardless of age don't want to learn the news from gossip or overhearing conversations. This only causes confusion and fear about what is happening to you and ultimately, what it means to them and/or how they will be affected by this news.

Plan how you tell them and be prepared for questions. Decide how and where you tell them, perhaps alone or with your husband/wife.

Introducing the Partner:

If, you have a same sex partner, be sensitive about how you introduce him/her to your children. Understand they may see this person as someone who has broken up the family, “changed” you or someone who has diverted your attention away from them.

Sometimes it’s a good idea to initially just mention the partner in conversation and later ease that person into your visits with the children and see how it goes. But don’t push this issue too hard until the children are comfortable. I am sure many would already be aware that many children feel guilt if they begin to like the person (your new partner) who they perceive as “breaking up the family” and often times the straight spouse doesn’t help this situation at all.

If possible discuss your concerns with others who have been in similar situations gay dads support groups can be helpful

Making the children feel secure:

Assure the children that your love for them will not change. Let them know that you will still be there for them as much as possible. Sometimes parents who are new on the gay scene forget that the children are suffering and missing not having you at home. So I would suggest make sure you have regular time with them. Make sure they understand you will always be their Mum/Dad and you will always be there for them. Keep in mind that realistically children need to be told that you love them regularly and you are not about to abandon them, just because you are now being honest about your sexual orientation.

Children are fearful of change and what will happen to them, they will experience grief, anger and false hope that perhaps Mum and Dad will reunite. There is also the problem for them coping with the straight parents grief and anger when dad has moved out and the general chaos that is involved with any marriage break down.

Most would be aware that children very often are frightened and become insecure due to the strong emotions shown during this time of marriage break downs. And so, parents need to work hard to make the children feel safe, secure and loved to minimise the long term negative effects of what’s happening.

Always be prepared for lots of questions:

Young children wonder what it means to them.

- Will you still love me?
- Have I done something wrong?
- Will you still live with us?
- What does lesbian/gay mean?

If children do not receive accurate information they put information together to make sense of what’s happening. They may think that you don’t love them, that it is their fault, that they will be gay etc. Reassure and explain at a level appropriate to their developmental stage- Simple!

Often when the child is young it can be explained in an uncomplicated manner. It can be as simple as "Daddy still loves him/her but now lives with a man instead of Mummy and the child." As long as the child knows they will see you regularly there is usually no long term trauma. You can still have fun with the child and be part of their life, take them for weekends and still be a proper parent to the child.

Don't underestimate young children. They are usually very adaptable and see things in a straight forward manner. Sometimes people fear the child will be damaged by the revelation of the one parent being gay. I believe small children handle the news better than many adults. How young children transition depends on how both parents handle the situation.

Older children

- Generally there is a lot of confusion, and they hear the "you're so gay" term in the playground, which they know is a "put down"
- Don't you like women?
- Will I be gay?

Older children can sometimes be more difficult because they have usually learnt that to be gay is bad and this can cause confusion because they love their parent but believe that to be gay is bad and their Mum/Dad isn't bad. It seems not uncommon that many young boys at puberty pass through a homophobic stage which can make it difficult for lesbian/gay parents. But still give them time and talk freely to them and they will begin to understand even if initially you get a bad reaction. Again either telling lies about the break up, or if they find out by over hearing conversations will only make them angry and not make the situation any better. And, if you have a partner they will soon realise anyway.

Others will be concerned that they may also be or become gay later in life. So they just need reassurance that just because you're gay it doesn't mean they will be gay. But they need to know that if by chance they feel they may be gay, you will be supportive and understanding.

Teenagers

- Why are you coming out now?
- How long have you known?
- Have you got a partner?
- What about Mum/Dad?
- How can you be gay?
- What makes a person gay?
- What do we tell our friends?
- Should we tell our friends?
- Why did you marry Mum/Dad?

For many children it's best to try and keep them in contact with all of the family members. It's important to impress on the children that you don't regret marrying Mum/Dad and having your children. But what is regretted is the pain that your "coming out" has caused.

Be aware that guilt for many parents can be overwhelming which can cause an overriding sense of responsibility to family.

How to maintain a relationship with your children:

- Be aware of what their day to day routine is, and discuss how their day has gone.
- Be sure to remember birthdays and special events and strive to be part of these days.
- Ring at regular times. This means they have something to look forward to and they can be there to receive the call. Be sure however, if you say that you will ring at a certain time, make sure you do. Otherwise, they will lose faith in you and never take you seriously. Make sure that the time you call is right for the child/children and if possible, the ex-partner.
- Discuss homework, sports, friends and whatever else they have been doing since last time you chatted.
- Ask what was the best thing? Ask what was the worst thing that has happened since you last spoke?
- Talk about what you are doing in a general sense, they may not want to know about the details of your new life at this present stage. That can come later when they feel more comfortable.
- Listen to them talk without necessarily trying to solve their problems. Sometimes they just want to be heard. This may apply especially to older children.
- Email, SMS and send cards or notes these are little bonuses that let them know you are thinking about them. And, something they can keep.
- Have photos of them in your new home and try, if possible to give them their own space when they visit, this will help them know they are a permanent part of your life.
- Ask what they would like to do when they are with you, but don't try to out do the ex partner with treats and entertainment. Otherwise everyone eventually loses.
- And be honest about the difficulties for everyone when marriages break down. And of course keep reassuring the children that they aren't to blame. (Me and My Kids)

Marriage breakdown always causes pain regardless of the reason:

It should always be remembered that pain is caused in any marriage breakdown regardless of the reason....it isn't not just painful because the new partner is same sex. This isn't another reason to blame homosexuality for marriage breakdowns. It is just as painful in heterosexual relationships when relationships break down because of another person involved.

Children the same as adults all suffer a form of bereavement because of the loss of the family unit as they knew it. Children rarely escape some form of trauma during a family break down or divorce. The problem for children of parents with sexual diversity is not only is the divorce but the sexual issues as well. And sadly, sexual orientation is something many

don't understand and so the children have the burden of secrets and shame unless we are able to successfully convey the message with pride.

Older children will ask:

- Didn't you know you were gay when you got married!
- Did you love Mum/Dad when you married her/him?
- How could you do this to us!
- How could you do this to Mum/Dad!
- Have you been cheating!

Children like the rest of society need to understand that sexual orientation is not negotiable and should not be hidden. Teenagers want parents to accept their choices and decisions and so this thinking should be seen as a "two way street" not just when it's convenient.

Pressures from society to conform to the heterosexual plan...love, marriage and children make this choice difficult for young people when it comes to the plan for their future. The easier choice to conform and go with the flow and do what 90% of people choose to do happens.

A lot of people when young choose to conform to the pressures of society, culture, religion and work place expectations, rather than accept, express and live their true orientation. To be gay and proud can take time. We are not normally brought up this way. Choosing an alternative lifestyle with a same sex partner over marriage and children takes courage and resilience, confidence, maturity and pride. A lot of people struggle with this.

Make yourself available to your children:

Parents need to be available to listen, calm their fears, explain their sexuality and to move along at a pace that is comfortable for the child. It isn't wise to pressure the child by putting them in situations where they aren't comfortable e.g. if there's a partner, don't push the child to meet him/her if they aren't ready.

Parents need to remember that it took them quite a while to come to terms with their sexuality and then to "come out" to family and friends. The child is the same. They need to think about what they've been told, come to terms with what it means to them, how it changes their life and how they'll deal with the changes.

Finally, let your child know your love for them hasn't change, be there for them, answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible and be patient.

Story One: Gay Dad

Age of children when told about my sexual diversity:

My eldest daughter worked out that I was gay by herself. Her mother, my wife, confirmed it. Y younger children 13 (boy) and 11 (girl) don't know.

How were they told; or have you decided not to tell them and why?

My eldest daughter worked it out for herself. At the time I was keen to tell her, but my wife was opposed. Once she worked it out, she asked my wife for confirmation. She acknowledged that "Yes, Dad's gay". The humorous moment arose when she then said "Does he know?" Once my wife told me that our daughter had worked it out, I was keen to speak to her about it. I tried, but she's never been receptive. She doesn't seem antagonistic, but doesn't really like to talk about it or have my friends mention anything gay.

On one occasion she became concerned her friends would find out and demanded that I dress conservatively when I'm around them (I'm not particularly flamboyant, but she's very sensitive). She asked me that I make sure that the younger children never find out and that I should be very careful leaving anything around that would suggest anything about my sexuality to them. This attitude seems to have faded a bit, but she still doesn't like to acknowledge that she has a gay dad.

As to telling the younger ones, I'd like to, but my wife is opposed. It is doubtful that our marriage will last much longer so it is an issue that will need to be confronted soon. I'm concerned, but believe that in the long run I need to be myself and the need to understand fully who I am.

Were they told straight away?

No, approximately 6 months passed between my being "outed" and my eldest daughter working it out for herself.

Main concerns about telling them

Rejection and confusion

They know gay people but I don't think they (the younger ones who don't know) really have any conception that someone as close to them as their father could possibly be gay.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation/partner/ex-wife?

As above my eldest just doesn't want to talk about the possibility that her Dad's gay. I'm hoping she'll grow out of this, but she's at a sensitive age and has her own problems with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. My (still) wife only uses telling the other children as a threat (our relationship is quite unsound at the moment). I don't believe it to be a threat, but at the moment have agreed that they shouldn't be told.

How did you get around these issues?

They haven't been resolved yet.

The benefits or pitfalls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

The benefits are that I feel more authentic and honest with them. The pitfalls are that the child who knows is not willing to acknowledge the concept very strongly, and verges on rejecting it.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

I'm not sure that I do a good job? I try to act as though it is just a normal part of life, but she is still not at all comfortable with the concept, so we don't discuss it much. I'd like to be able to provide further information here, but I just don't have the answers. This is still fraught territory for us.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

Good, but sexuality has little to do with it.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

This issue is still not resolved. However, my primary comment would be that I would tell children up front and honestly, rather than pretending my sexuality doesn't exist. That having been said, I'd have handled the whole coming out process differently, children are only one part of it, albeit a particularly important one.

Andrew

Story Two: Gay Dad

The age of children when told about your sexual diversity

21 and 18 years of age

How were they told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

A one on one discussion

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

So much better than I anticipated, especially my eldest son who said he already had thought I was gay! My younger lad was upset and stormed out of the house but returned later when he obviously had time to digest what I had told him.

Were they told straight away?

No, I came out to my wife first and we then discussed how/when I should tell the boys. That happened about 6 months later.

Main concerns about telling them?

Fear of rejection, that they may not want to know their Dad anymore.

How soon did you include your partner, if you had one?

I didn't have a partner when I came out to my sons.

How did you explain about your partner?

Eventually, when I had a partner I discussed with my boys that I had met someone special who was important to me and would they like to meet him. They both agreed and we arranged a BBQ so that could happen.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation/partner/ex-wife?

My ex-wife was difficult at first accepting that our marriage of 28 years was over, but with the help of counselling, lots of long heart to heart discussions with each other she acknowledged I was finally being true to myself, and that I would always be her best friend, and she mine. The boys stated that I was still their Dad and that they loved me.

How did you get around these issues?

I maintained contact and communicated openly. I also expressed my love and care for them at all times.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

The benefits I feel are the greater degree of tolerance and acceptance. I also feel that children become much more grounded / balanced and aware of the range of different people and situations there are within society.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

I am aware my youngest son was initially concerned about what his friends/ mates may say and think.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

By being open and honest, answering their question and most importantly telling them how much I loved them.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

Fantastic! I feel I have a much better relationship with them now because I am no longer living a lie. There is such a degree of honesty between us that wasn't there before.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

Nothing, I believe being upfront and honest with our kids, in fact with everyone it's the only way to be. Kids are more perceptive and savvy than we tend to give them credit. They don't appreciate bull shit.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

To "come out" to your kids is perhaps one of the most difficult things to do, but be strong, open and honest. I have never regretted anything I have done; I enjoy life now more than anything. It is such a relief to be true to yourself and acknowledge your true nature. My gay life is rewarding and worthwhile I have the support of my friends and family who are genuinely happy for me. At the end of the day you are still the same person you always were.

Colin

Story Three: Two Lesbian Mums

The age of children when told about your sexual diversity?

The children are only aged 6 years we have always been open to them when they ask a question. The first started asking about 3-4 years old.

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

They were told the truth, that there are different types of couples in the world and some families are made of two women, two men, single parents, grand parents etc. We told them in an everyday conversation when they asked us why they had two mums.

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

So far they have handled the situation with no problems.

Were they told straight away?

When they asked why they had two mums and not a dad we sat down and explained to them.

Main concerns about telling them?

Our main concern was they may not like what we had done.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

My partner and I had been together 6 years prior to having the children and both carried a set of twins each. So we have been a family their entire life.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

We believe the benefits are that the children have a more open mind to all things in society.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

The children to date have accepted our lifestyle.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

We were honest with the children and explained to them that they were much wanted children who completed our family as both my partner and myself loved each other very much and intend to spend the rest of our lives together.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

We have a great relationship with our children.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning this journey?

The most important this is to always be honest with your children as well as people who the children will interact with. That way the children will not get hurt if they become close to someone and the parents of that child shun our children because of our lifestyle.

Annette

Story Four: Gay Dad

The age of the children when told about your sexual diversity?

13, 17 and 19

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

My ex-wife told them when I finally left home.

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

They have always seemed basically OK about it, but don't talk about it with me. My ex tells me they suffer a bit and hope no one finds out.

Were they told straight away?

Yes, when I left.

Main concern about telling them?

I would probably not have had the courage at that point as I was very distressed. With two teenage boys I guess I was worried they might disown me.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

I left the marriage to be with my gay partner, but he has little/no contact with my family. My wife's major gripe is that he broke up the marriage, not that he is gay. My sons have met him very infrequently and are just OK about it. My daughter has never met him.

How did you explain about your partner?

I don't think I have ever explained. My wife probably put a bad spin on him so far as the children are concerned.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation / partner/ ex-wife?

She is my best friend. I see her and the children twice a week, but always at her place without my partner. We are used to it now, so it runs quite smoothly. We talk about him but I don't try to engineer more, I'm just happy to have some peace at last.

How did you get around the issues?

I haven't grappled with the issue of his acceptance into the family.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

I am happy they know. It is always better to be honest and let them adjust. We just don't talk about it.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

They are OK, so long as I don't embarrass them. They are happy I live apart, I think, for that reason.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

I have over the last 5 years since we separated, had a few talks with the boys only. They seem pretty nonchalant about it. It's like having a talk about the birds and the bees. They'd rather I didn't as they probably know more about it from the internet than I do.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

OK. Not overly good, but OK. Plenty of good will to work with over the coming years.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

Nothing, I could or would want to. Maybe I should have been the one to tell them, but my ex would have done it better than I would have.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

Give it lots of time and never abandon hope. Always leave the door open and don't burn bridges. They will come around in time.

Brian

Story Five: Lesbian Mum

The age of the children when told about your sexual diversity?

12 and 14 (age now 17 and 19) both male.

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

The marriage to their father was ending and I told them that I would be having a relationship with any other males and my next relationship would be with a woman.

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

The whole time was a fairly traumatic time because of the split and build up to it, this was just one more drama for them at the time. They were shocked and upset, they expressed that they were worried what their mates would say, but once they had told a couple of close friends and they didn't care they were fine and quite open about it. I am lucky that they had a strong friend base. If they had been kids who were less popular it may have been quite different.

Were they told straight away?

They were told at the time of my break up from their father and prior to starting a relationship with a woman.

Main concerns about telling them?

That they would be damaged for life emotionally and not be able to cope.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

A few months after the split from their Dad I met a woman.

How did you explain about your partner?

Just up front explained about who she was and when she would be visiting so that they could meet her and her children.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation / partner/ ex-wife ex husband?

There are no problems that wouldn't be common to any marriage break up situation and nothing specific related to my homosexuality.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

Honesty is the best policy, children pick up if you aren't being honest and this makes them feel unsafe and basically kids want to feel loved and safe.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

Once the concerns regarding what their peers would think were proved unfounded, they were fine. And the fact that there are so many pre "gayness" people in my life still that are accepting make the whole thing OK.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

Being prepared to discuss anything they wanted to discuss, being open to any negative stuff they had to unload about it and accepting their opinions and fears as valid and doing my best to make them feel supported by me, reassurance that I wasn't about to start

“snogging” some woman in front of the school at 3pm and basically life would continue as before.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

Very good.

What would you change if anything about how you handled the process of informing children?

Probably nothing, I did the best I could at the time and we’ve all come out of the other side pretty much OK.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

Be honest, open and positive and let the kids know that you love them. Let them know that you know there will be tough patches. But, you’ll do all you can to make the tough patches easier to get through.

Louise

Story Six: Lesbian Mum

The age of the children when told about your sexual diversity?

10 and 8 years old.

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

Driving in the car. A discussion came up about people's differences and how it is important to accept other for who and what they are. I had been struggling with how I would tell them and took this opportunity to weave it into a conversation that they were already having.

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

Never think you know your children well enough to judge their reactions. I have a son (10) and a daughter (8). Of the two I had major concerns about my son as he and I are very close and I was of the belief that he would struggle with the fact that I had someone else in my life, let alone another woman. On the other hand my daughter is a confident, life of the party type and I thought she would just take it on board without an issue.

WRONG!!! When I told the children my daughter was quite upset and wanted to know why I had to be a lesbian and straight out stated she didn't want me to be. However, she then asked if my partner and I would get married and from the back seat came the ten year old voice of reason. "No it isn't legal in Australia but you could go to Canada and the Netherlands. I think it's legal there. Mum is still Mum, you know. This doesn't changer her.

Were they told straight away?

No. Two years after I started my first lesbian relationship. Their father wanted me to wait until they were teenagers as he thought they would handle it better. I had no intention of waiting that long as my first same sex partner had a daughter who was in her teens when she was told and she was simply horrible to her mother, using it as a guilt trip whenever she wanted things to go her way. I wanted the kids to get to know my partner first but we separated before I told them the true nature of our relationship. Before my current partner moved in she wanted me to tell them and I felt the time was right so I did.

Main concerns about telling them?

That they would hate me and want to go and live with their father. I told them that later in a conversation and they were horrified that I would ever think that but it's an obvious concern. It isn't as though you're telling them you are really a brunette after all and it is likely to have a massive impact on them.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

The day after telling them I took her to collect them from school. I think we lasted about 5 minutes before the Spanish Inquisition began "So Michelle...Mum tells us you and her are going to be lesbians." My poor partner was trapped but she was great and just answered each question as it came.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation /partner/ ex husband?

We are slowly adapting to the new family balance. There are the usual new step family issues with people getting used to new things. I think this is basically common to all step

families not just the gay ones! We had a few discussions about things but as a whole the kids have been great. They like my partner and have accepted her on board really well. My daughter always tells her she loves her and gives her big hugs. My son isn't into hugs but he will always say "hi" and chats which is big for him.

My ex husband and I have an acrimonious relationship to start with so the news of my sexuality has had little impact. I told him that I had told the children about me and I was expecting some grief as it wasn't on his schedule but he said nothing. I advised him so he could provide support from his end as we share custody week about, but as far as I know there hasn't been any discussion between him and the kids in relations to this issue.

How did you get around these issues?

Talking when they wanted to.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

Benefits:

1. One area that really concerned me was that I was lying to my kids. I had to discipline my son for lying to his teacher and there I was a "big fat hairy liar" myself. I had real concerns that if I waited until they were in their teens that it would come back to bite me about lying to them all of the time. I needed to set an example for them to follow and now I can.

2. We can show affection in front of them. I was never particularly affectionate with their father and he doesn't have a partner at the moment, so I like that now I can show them in the little ways how to treat your partner well and that it's OK to hug and kiss. They are just little sponges; if you aren't showing them what to do and how to act then where will they learn?

3. Important for my partner as well that you are recognising the importance by sharing your relationship with your kids. When you share something special it is difficult to deny it around those you care for most in the world.

4. It is also good for little things also like their respecting your privacy more, developing acceptance of difference etc.

Pitfalls:

For me personally there has been none other than the residual guilt of making their life a bit more complicated by first leaving their father and now this as well. Everything has been more positive and I am really glad I did it when I did. The only pitfall is more from their angle....

Eight year olds have little idea of tact and she obviously told some people at school. This brought some teasing and big brother stepped in and told the other little girl off. The funniest part was the little girl reflected "Yeah, I guess I can't say much, my Mum can't drive!"

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

My son has been good. He has never said anything negative. He likes my partner and enjoys sharing time with her. Our relationship is as good as it always has been.

My daughter goes through phases but overall has been great. She loves my partner and they get along well. She has had a couple of times where she asked why we have to be lesbians and can't we just be friends but other than that she is generally very accepting.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

Talking but at their pace. I have never pushed the conversations but have certainly let them know I am there if they want to talk. I also have a great relationship with my Mum so she tends to have chats when she visits and they know they can talk to her as well.

We have had family meetings and made the communication more formal which is good and they are familiar with the concept now and will join in or take over!!! Again the topics are kept fairly broad as in "what is bothering them, what made them happy, what secret are we hiding (that was my daughter's) so if they need to talk the opportunity is for them to do so.

We do family things together which they enjoy and they can see that even though we may not fit the "white picket fence" 2.5 kids and a dog norm of society we are a family just the same.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

Excellent. They both drive me nuts every now and then but I think they call that motherhood! They are both achieving very well at school and in sport and enjoy their time with me and my partner.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

Nothing. I like the fact that I didn't force the conversation and that it simply flowed on from something they were already talking about.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

I don't think there is a set formula for the right time and way to tell your children. I looked in books, on forums, on the internet etc. and there were a thousand different thoughts on it. No family, children or partnership is exactly the same as yours. Everything is unique so you need to assess your own situation to make the final call.

Try not to make a huge deal of it because it can then make the kids think it is this earth shattering fact. Try and explain in nice basic terms and focus on the fact you love someone rather than the fact that you love someone of the same sex. All kids understand love so it is a nice place to start.

Let them know it's OK to talk about it and to have different feelings and stress that you are still Mum and nothing changes that. Let them know you are there or identify another family member or friend they might talk to and involve them in the process.

Give them time to process and check every now and then that everything is OK. Most importantly just be a family. Do things together, love, fight, hug and yell and laugh. When they see that things are OK then they have a solid foundation to manage whatever may happen in the future.

Karen

Story Seven: Lesbian Mum

The age of the children when told about your sexual diversity?

My daughter was 7-8 years old when we discussed the meaning of gay/lesbian

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

She is a cluey child who gradually became aware that we were in a relationship. We decided to tell her when she came home from school using the word "gay" (not in a derogatory way). We discussed what "gay" meant and also heterosexual etc and how to deal with situations where other children may pick on her and try and hurt her by name calling (this has not happened thus far).

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

She took it all in her stride.....and did not appear too confused as she had already been saying that my girlfriend and I loved each other as well as referring to her father and his girlfriend in the same context.

Where they told straight away?

No

Main concerns about telling them?

No real concerns, however we did have concerns as she goes to a catholic school and the possible fall out from that area, however there have been none. The school is aware of her family environs.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

My girlfriend and I were friends for quite some time prior to starting a relationship, so my daughter got to know her gradually, but treated our relationship as norm so it was not foreign to her.

How did you explain about your partner?

We moved in together and initially were very coy about our relationship and were careful around my daughter however she was about 5 years old. It was a gradual process.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and you orientation / partner/ ex husband?

We have encountered no real ongoing problems, everyone has accepted it quite well (that we know of). However, I was personally concerned about possible fallout re child custody issues, nil real issues up to date.

How did you get around these issues?

We both agreed to the Family Court child custody, consent order where we set up distinct rules and boundaries to follow.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

We have only found benefits and no pit falls in relation to my daughter's knowledge She is a very understanding and accepting child.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns?

Yes, she is very accepting; it is a normal part of her life.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news?

I have always tried to have an open, honest relationship with my daughter, I try to gauge her feelings, reactions and concerns and I make sure I talk with her.

How is your relationship with your children?

I have a great relationship with my daughter, I make sure to take time out each day to talk to her.

If anything what would you change about how you handled the process of informing children?

I would change nothing.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life.

Take it easy; become comfortable with your situation before you expect anyone else to accept it. Don't push it in people's faces and treat your relationship, life's choices no differently as if you were in a so called 'normal' relationship. Accept the fact that people can have their own views and if they display this in an openly negative fashion toward you, try not to take it to heart....It's their problem, not yours!

Michelle

For support – gaydadsbne@hotmail.com

Story Eight: Dad transitioning to Female

The age of the children when told about your sexual diversity.

My daughter was 15 years old

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

I wanted to be out in the open so I was entirely honest with my daughter. I arranged to meet my daughter in a private space. I was dressed as a woman but conservatively and reflecting my individual look.

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

Sullen, withdrawn and fearful about the issue at the beginning, but after honest and informative discussions, she accepted me totally.

Were they told straight away?

As soon as it was conclusive to me that I would live my life as a woman, my true self. As sure as I could be this was the best course of action.

Main concerns about telling them?

Rejection, lack of understanding, fear of the future and insecurities.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

I was single at the time.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation/partner/ ex-wife?

Yes, all of the above, it is understandable that such a major change will cause some problems, with honest and consistent open communication with an educated approach most issues can be solved in a very amiable way.

How did you get around these issues?

Open communication, love and empathy, a discussion about our values and what really matters in life.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

It was Gender diversity so an understanding of my daughter that gender is socially constructed was discussed. By honest and candid discussions my daughter became more trusting and open to discuss most issues.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

Over time maybe about 4 weeks of discussion and not embarrassing my daughter blending in without standing out too much after all I just wanted to be me that was not overtly feminine.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news? (very important)

I provided my daughter with information, medical and ethical issues. Open lines of communication without criticism. Once the fear was overcome my daughter accepted and even prefers the new one.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

Never easy with an 18 year old, however very good on a general scale.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

Nothing, I feel each case is an individual case and contingent on the situation. However honesty, patience and open educated discussions in a warm trusting environment with positive regard to both parties seem to be effective.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

Educate yourself with all aspects of your change. Informed decision making is paramount especially if it requires medical intervention (hormones) etc; all aspects of your life may be effective so pack your parachute well.

Kate

Story Nine: Dad transitioning to Female

The age of children when told about your sexual diversity?

14 year old male and 16 year old female

How they were told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

The children were told one night after my wife and I had been discussing my impending transition. It was not planned to tell them at this time however they were acutely aware that there were serious issues between my wife and I and it was better that this be discussed rather than they be left to worry.

How did they handle your disclosure to them?

They were confused but willing to discuss and ask questions. The main concern was that my wife and I would divorce.

Were they told straight away?

They were told about 4 months after I realised the inevitability of my transition.

Main concerns about telling them?

That they would reject me altogether.

How soon did you include the partner if you had one?

Although the topic of my being TS had been raised on a number of occasions over the previous 12 years it was not until we discussed in greater depth due to increased stress levels caused by my denial some 6 months prior to transitioning that this was thoroughly discussed.

How did you explain about your partner?

My wife actually told me that I needed to find out more about what I was feeling. I gave her some of the data I collected.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation/partner/ex-wife?

I have no ongoing problems with my children however I will qualify this below. My ex partner and I are still legally married and continue to share the family home in a very harmonious relationship. We however do not have a sexual relationship, rather we are best friends who support and encourage each other including in finding new partners. This has not been an easy process for either of us and required a great deal of work and very open discussion.

How did you get around these issues?

Open dialogue and compromise.

The benefits and pitfalls of children being aware of your sexual diversity?

I do not see any problems of children being aware of either gender or sexual diversity especially given that approximately 1 in 10 will themselves deviate from societies accepted sexual norm. For children to be made aware of our diversity may make it easier for them to confront their own variant sexuality or gender identity without having to repress these feelings and experiences the guilt and stress that this causes.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

My children have been very accepting and supportive of both my gender reassignment and that I now identify as a lesbian woman (see below).

How did you help your children come to terms with the news? (very important)

By open discussion, compromise and a great deal of patience. This process took a great deal of time and reassurance that although certain facets of our family life had indeed changed the underlying support, love and nurture would not be compromised.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

My relationship with my son (now 16) could only be described as better than it has ever been. With my daughter (now 18) our relationship is better described as one of great friendship rather than as a parent sibling relationship.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

I would have had more written material for them to read as well as being proactive in the discussion.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

That there are serious challenges ahead but if they can step back from their own self absorption for a bit and realise that there are others in their life who are more bewildered and hurt than they, with a great deal of understanding and compromise a good outcome can be achieved.

As this is a topic that I feel very strongly about and putting a huge amount of time and effort into in order to achieve a positive outcome I feel it appropriate to expand far more on the process that my own experience followed and to include excerpts from a study carried out in the USA on the factor in transitioning parents.

The research: GID is relatively uncommon with approximate incidence between 1 in 11,900 to 45,000 in males and 1 in 30,000 to 100,000 in females (American Psychiatric Assoc, in 1994; Van-Kesteren, Gooren and Megens, 1996; Weitze and Osburg, 1996) Between 43% and 60% of transsexual patients will choose non surgical solutions (Green and Blanchard, 2000; Kellor, Althof and Lothstein, 1982) Approximately 77-80% of diagnosed transsexuals who present to a gender identity clinic will ultimately undergo hormonal therapy and / or sexual reassignment surgery (Van-Kesteren, Gooren and Megens, 1996). Of genetic males who enter treatment, approx 50% are married or have been married and approx. 70% of these have had children. Genetic females with GID are typically less likely to enter marriages with males and are also less likely to have borne children.

This is unfortunately a paucity of research into the effects on children and adolescents of transsexual parents who undergo gender transition. In Tonya White and Randi Ettner's study titled "Disclosure, Risks and Protective Factors for Children Whose Parents....." In this study various Risk and Protective factors were identified, this data was based upon responses from 10 Therapists who had on average 14.2 years in treating trans gendered patients who totalled 4768. It was felt that non disclosure of impending transition to siblings was more harmful than disclosure. It was however recommended that parents of adolescent children should wait where possible until the teen has reached early adulthood before disclosing their impending transition. The transition itself was rated as placing the child at mild to moderate risk.

Risk factors in order of greatest risk:

- Abrupt separation from parent
- Spouse who is extremely opposed to the transition
- Personality disorders in the transitioning parent
- Parental conflict regarding this transition
- Personality disorder in the non transitioning parent

Protective factors in order of most protective:

- Child with close emotional ties to the non transitioning parent
- Co operation between parents regarding child rearing
- Extended family supportive of transitioning parent
- Child with close emotional ties with the transitioning parent
- On going contact with both parents.

There was an overall consensus between the therapists that factors within the parental relationship and family constellation had significantly more bearing on the outcome of the children than the transition itself such factors as abrupt separation and family/parental conflict and an inability of a family to work together were all considered to place the child at risk of adjustment difficulties. It should also be noted that it is not unusual for the adolescent sibling to side with the parent that they perceive to be the aggrieved party.

In summary:

Objectives: This study attempt to delineate the effects on children within different stages of development whose parent undergoes transition to the other sex.

Results: Children in the preschool age are rated as adapting best to the change both initially and in the long term. Adults were also able to adapt well, provided the level of conflict between the parents was low. Adolescents had the most difficulty adapting. The level of conflict between the parents had a direct correlation across all age groups.

Conclusion: Although the best outcome can be expected amongst the preschool and adult groups it is the level of conflict between the parents that has the greatest effect on a positive outcome or otherwise for the children.

My experience:

In the process of my transition, it must firstly be acknowledged that mine was particularly quick and therefore the effects on both myself and my family was particularly intense.

Like so many transsexual male to females once I had accepted the inevitability of the situation I became very self absorbed in the process and the obvious trials that I was experiencing. This in itself is only normal given the enormity of the situation however what this did achieve was to exclude those closest to me and therefore had a negative effect on their ability to both understand and accept the inevitable consequences of the transition.

Further to this I failed to understand the sense of loss that my life partner felt. The reality was she was grieving for her husband much in the same way as that of some one whose partner had died. Given that my wife was not only seeing her partner and soul mate of some 29 years had passed away but that in his place there was another person trying to assume the position of her husband, lent itself to a measure of hostility, such hostility was

picked up by the adolescent children especially my daughter. This manifested itself in total rejection and open hostility toward me.

Through the process it became very apparent that if I wanted to maintain a good relationship with my family I would need to be very proactive in my approach. To this end I gathered all the information I could on the subject (as scarce as it was) and openly discussed my concern with my then psychologist. In essence I put together an action plan that included some rather large alterations to how I dealt with the conflict. Without boring you with details I had to alter my behaviours toward my wife and children, as I was not coming from a position as husband/father anymore rather that of a protagonist who had caused upheaval and hurt. Essentially it was required that I mend the differences between my wife and myself and give a clear direction to the future and commitment to the family unit as an entity separate to the marriage. With regard to my daughter she needed the reassurance that we would remain as a family and compromising my position as an authority figure in her life for some time.

In conclusion: The most important factor I believe when dealing with children in either a "transition" or "coming out" situation is to first reach an agreement with ones' partner to show a united front and avoid conflict. It is also an imperative to reassure that the disruption in the children's life will have minimum effect. I am happy to say that the outcomes have exceeded expectations and that I now enjoy a closer relationship with my children than I previously.

Frances

Story Ten: Gay Dad

The age of your children when told about your sexual diversity?

Boys were 24 and 26, daughter was 22 years old

How were they told or (b) have you decided not to tell them and why?

I told the boys while we were having a beer at a bar in town. My wife told my daughter while in Canada – my daughter was working at Whistler and my wife joined her for a holiday.

How did they handle the disclosure?

My eldest son said “Gee Dad, that’s a surprise – do you want another beer?” Both boys were surprised but easily accepted it. The both have gay friends (both sexes) and do not have a problem with diversity of sexual orientation, although they are both quite straight.

My daughter was worried that this would mean I would leave her mother. She is very involved with her church and has some concern there – she started going to a Christian support group.

Were they told straight away?

Not sure what this question is asking. I was into saunas for many years but then fell in love – the affair lasted 12 months – then the break up of the affair (I was dumped – he did not want to break up a marriage) (bust not my sexuality) became a factor among others which led initially to a breakdown and severe depression. This affected the whole family. A week in retreat, away from the world had me re evaluating my life and direction and 2 weeks later, I came out progressively to friends and family.

Main concerns about telling them?

I did not really have any except for the daughter. I have always had a good loving relationship with them – the apron strings were slowly loosened over the years.

How soon did you include the partner, if you had one?

He faded into the background – they have never met him. He is not out, back living with his mother who expects him to get married (at 39?). I respect his decision to stay in the closet, even though I feel it is not the best thing for him. If he did come back, I would be happy to introduce him to the boys, not sure about the daughter. The boys have met some of my other new friends.

How did you explain about your partner?

Very abruptly and brutally. It was in the car driving back from the airport. I told her that I had fallen in love and it was with a bloke not a bird. She knew that the marriage had problems – we had been going to Relationships Australia for some time for counselling.

What were the ongoing problems with your children and your orientation partner/ex-wife?

With the children – no problem.

With the wife – immense problems with acceptance and a reluctance to let me go. We had a short separation and she came back pleading for another try. She still wants me with her but as a straight man.

How did you get around these issues?

We have not really resolved them. I was happy to be separated, she was not.

The benefits or pit falls of children being aware of sexual diversity?

I think most children these days know of sexual diversity – particularly if they have undergone tertiary education. All three had gay friends or knew gay people.

Were your children accepting? If not what were their concerns or issues?

The boys were very accepting. Their friends thought it a little weird but interesting – especially since they had seen how we got on together.

The daughter is still apprehensive as she finds it difficult to reconcile her Christian beliefs with a gay father who also has Christian beliefs.

How did you help your child come to terms with the news? (very important)

I made them aware that I was still the same father who loved them and nurtured them. They simply knew more about me than before.

How is your relationship presently with your children?

Very good, with them all although the daughter is still worried.

What would you change about how you handled the process of informing children, if anything?

Not sure – it certainly helped that they were all secure in their own sexuality and also were relatively adult.

What would you like others to know who are just beginning their new life?

“It is better to travel hopefully than arrive”

I became a different person, more outgoing and more comfortable to be with – less uptight and controlled. Don’t get me wrong I am so called straight acting and do not frighten anyone on the streets. The depression passed and I looked at life with more certainty.

The other thing is - there are many of us out there – we are not alone. Seek help! Get appropriate counselling, join GAMMA and get interests outside of the family – I took up bush walking again.

Peter

Conclusion:

Many thanks to everyone who assisted me with this PFLAG project by providing me with their stories. We all are painfully aware of the struggles that people/parents with sexual and gender diversity struggle with, often for many years before they take the step of informing family.

Most of the stories in this booklet tell of issues that arose when they disclosed to their children but these families have come through the other side with minimum long term problems.

Sometimes it is just as difficult for the person “coming out” once the disclosure has been made but at least you can now be honest with no more pretence.

Interestingly, I didn’t read the stories until I was retyping them into booklet form, but I noticed the theme with each story telling of the need for honesty and simplicity and patience when telling children. Initially, children may not like what they’re being told, but at least they know the truth.

So often parents try to keep secrets, but children are usually aware that something is wrong and because of the confusion, stress and friction in the home is very often why behavioural problems occur in young people.

I just hope that this booklet is helpful and you have minimum problems if and when you decide to inform the special people in your life. Just be aware that all families are individual and only you can know what is best, this booklet is just tips to help you along your way.

