

Rural Families

Concerns relating
to many families
in regional and rural areas with
Sexually and Gender Diverse Sons and Daughters



An initiative of PFLAG Brisbane Inc.
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Introduction:

This booklet is written with the intention of providing support and information to regional and rural parents who have sons and daughters who have disclosed they may be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (LGBTI).

Furthermore, none of the information has been taken from research papers but from personal experience and the many conversations I have had with families over the last several years, both from the city and the country. Since, I have been working in the LGBTIQ community and organising Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG+) which is predominantly a peer support group for parents.

It's important for you to be aware that you aren't the only family in the town with a sexual or gender diverse child.

Some parents may prefer to keep this information quiet for a variety of reasons. While other families just won't be told by their child.

Anecdotally, one in five families has a LGBTIQ loved one whether they realise it or not. This is regardless of demographics, religion, culture, race, class or social standing in the community.

Unfortunately, many families are still devastated at such news, not knowing where to turn to seek help or support.

Fortunately, times are changing for many and instead of seeking support for themselves, now seek support for their children. And, I sincerely hope this will become the norm for those in regional and rural areas.

Hopefully, this booklet will be informative, letting families know they aren't alone and there are services available to help with any problems or concerns that may arise.

We must always keep in mind that sexual and gender diversity is not a choice or preference. In many countries persecution and discrimination are the norm.

Additionally, Many parents also believe a good religious upbringing and the teaching that homosexuality is wrong, is enough to keep children on the heterosexual path.

However, over the years I have met many young people from Catholic, Jehovah Witness, Baptist, Assembly of God and Christian Outreach churches etc who are extremely fearful about telling families because they believe they will be ostracised. Furthermore, I have had many young people tell me about their contemplating suicide or they have attempted and failed.

The distress young many young people experience because they can't change and so struggle silently within themselves fearing the wrath and judgment of family and friends when told.

Often young people pull away from the church and family knowing they have done their best to be heterosexual. Many people are unaware that the vast majority regardless of age, experience their own homophobia and transphobia which can cause low self esteem, mental health issues, substance abuse, dangerous behavior and suicidal ideation.

These young people love their families and parents need to understand that informing family is the hardest thing they will ever have to do in their lives. They know at best parents will be disappointed and at worst, will totally abandon them causing them to be homeless.

Rural youth – leaving home

Most rural youth leave home early not telling family why and then lead a life of untruths fearful of what family will think, back on the farm or property should they find out.

I once met a family from regional Victoria, whose son was living in London. Their son was always writing letters telling the Mum about different people from their home town, he'd met at the clubs who were gay but just hadn't "come out" to family. The freedom of being in another city allows them to be themselves without fearing family scorn or disapproval.

I also had a mother come to see me, voicing her concern about her son, who at the time was unhappily living in Melbourne and wanting to return home to work on the property in outback Queensland. But, she kept stalling him because she was fearful that if the locals realised he was gay he would either be ostracized or bashed.

She was especially concerned because during the previous year a group of young local gay males decided that if they all "came out" together, there would be safety in numbers. But what happened was the ostracism became unbearable and they all committed suicide over a few months because of the hopelessness and depression that ensued.

Amazingly, some of the parents thought "this was for the best". We need to keep in mind homosexuality is not a degenerative disease, they aren't deviants. Sexual and gender diversity is not a choice or attention seeking behaviour. We didn't choose to be straight and neither did they.

Being sexually or gender diverse, for many means losing friends and loved ones through lack of understanding. They risk being bullied and beaten up. Plus, they are often ostracised and discriminated against. And, this is why parental support is so important. Regardless of what happens away from home, knowing you have parental support can make a huge difference to their outlook on life which is so important.

Depression, substance abuse and risky behaviours

As parents we don't understand how difficult it is for young people to inform family of their sexual and gender diversity. For many, they have worked through most of their difficult issues before actually "come out" to family. Youth who do disclose their sexual orientation are very brave to do so while still living in the country, but during this initial period family members may not be so sure it was a good idea.

Depression, high risk sports, alcohol and drug abuse are some down sides of our lesbian and gay youth. The depression occurs due to their low self esteem and fear of telling family with possible negative consequences.

Alcohol and drug abuse, is due to the ability of both to temporarily dull the pain and anguish they carry inside themselves. These are consequences can't be overstated and again can increase the possibility of suicidal thoughts when feeling low.

Some engage in high risk sports or activities with the intention of proving to themselves and society that they really are "men not mice" and they are just as manly as their sibling brothers or other male family members. This I believe is because many believe the stereotyping and jokes which of course we know are not true.

Others seem to be the perfect child, attaining good marks at school and doing their best to stay out of trouble hoping to keep negative attention to a minimum.

Suicide

Suicide is highest amongst gay males aged between 15 and 24 years. The period they're most vulnerable is just before they tell family, assuming they will be rejected or just after because they were rejected.

Often times, young people see suicide as a preferable option. And, for those living in regional and rural areas of Australia where the suicide rate is the highest in the world, diverse sexual and gender diversity is considered one of the main causes.

But the action of suicide shows the desperation and feelings of hopelessness these young people carry. Society, regardless of whether we live in the country or city has a lot to answer for when so many young people feel their diversity is so dreadful that they feel death is the only way out.

Magnified concerns for parents but what about the young people?

When our children first disclose many parents go into self preservation mode and many are only concerned about how they will be seen or judged. Most will do anything to keep it a secret and worry about how they will be seen by the community. They worry about what neighbours and community think. Many feel they'll be judged as bad parents or feel people will talk about them behind their backs.

So often parents forget about how their child is feeling and how they're coping. Some believe the child has brought this on themselves and blame them for the "tragedy" or trouble this is causing the family. But parents need to understand that if they feel bad, they should see it through their child's eyes.

It seems that after talking to parents from both metropolitan and rural areas the problems are the same, but often magnified for those in the country because of their personal perception of this diverse community. Then when their child discloses it's all too much.

Besides the problems of shame, blame, guilt, shock, anger and fear that many parents experience, it seems that these feelings are often more overwhelming or exaggerated for those living in the country.

Many who live in rural and regional areas also live a very traditional and structured lifestyle, which doesn't always account for something out of left field i.e. a gay child.

I don't suggest for one minute that when your child "comes out", you broadcast the news on local radio, but do try to be supportive. Get information from educational sites on the internet; call the places of referral at the back of this booklet for information and this will hasten your understanding and education about what is happening with your child.

Additionally, I have noticed young people who have supportive parents are very appreciative and loyal towards their parents, sometimes more than their heterosexual siblings.

Be Accepting and Understanding

Parents regardless of geography, struggle with similar issues. Many families, regardless of where they live believe the myths, stereotyping and entrenched misinformation that surrounds sexual and gender diversity.

It can be very confronting for parents when “their” child announces they are one of “those” people. We all need to realise our child is still the same person today that we loved yesterday, totally unaware of the secret he/she was carrying

Many parents are also under the misapprehension that they can scare their children into being straight by announcing, “No son of mine will be gay!”. Others when they hear about another family’s gay son state “we always thought there was something wrong with him”. Many fathers are also quick to talk about “bashing” it out of him.

These comments will not make the young person straight. All it will do is make them leave home early. These outdated beliefs only cause depression and resentment towards family and contemplation or actual attempt at suicide because of their feelings of lack of worth.

Do and Don’ts

Do support them if they are being bullied at school. You can and should demand your child be safe and receive a good education. It’s their right and as parents we should ensure it continues.

Do be happy that at least they are now being honest with you. This is much better long term for their mental health. Even though short term it may be difficult, long term it’s better. I have noticed those who don’t tell until well into adult hood or in later life, often suffer depression and experience self esteem issues.

The “keeping of secrets” can be emotionally draining for them. And, you really don’t want the relationship between parent and child to be based on lies.

- Do believe them and don’t tell them it’s only a phase. Young people never tell parents unless they’re sure.
- Don’t believe “city folk” are more OK than those in rural and regional areas.
- Don’t believe sexually and gender diverse people are only in the city.
- Don’t make your child toughen up to encourage or make himself straight – it won’t work and you will only be disappointed **again**.
- Don’t ostracise them from the family. This will cause depression which can lead to suicide. Suicide is extremely high in rural areas; you don’t want your child to be a statistic.
- Don’t make love conditional – if you loved your child before they told you, you should still love them after they told you. We should not only love our straight children.
- Don’t be ashamed of your child. They have done nothing wrong and couldn’t choose anyway.
- You should also know that as a parent you have done nothing wrong either. You could have been the worst or best parent, it makes no difference.
- Don’t believe the Mardi Gras is typical of what your son or daughter will become.

- Don't fear they will become deviants or paedophiles. Stereotypical child molesters are predominantly heterosexual men, usually married or with a female partner with children.
- Don't assume that straight males are not safe around your son.
- Don't assume your son or daughter just hasn't found the right heterosexual partner.
- Don't assume that your child will become promiscuous. They still carry the family values and morals you taught and encouraged.

Scientists still find sexual orientation a mystery. There are no proven theories as to why people are homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual.

“Coming out” in Rural and Regional Areas

Keep in mind, it can be especially difficult for young ones and their families, when sexual or gender diversity is disclosed. But please, don't turn your back on your child.

People can be quick to judge; but your son/daughter's safety and wellbeing is more important than the opinions of outsiders.

Seek supporting or supportive agencies in the closest town. Perhaps change schools if necessary if your child is being bullied. If you feel they need to leave the town for safety reasons, find somewhere or someone, who can help in another area, until permanent arrangements can be made.

As a parent always be aware that if your child is still at school you have the right to demand that your child is respected and kept safe while receiving an education.

Every child regardless of race, sexual or gender diversity or religion is entitled to a safe environment while receiving an education. If the child is being physically abused outside of school, parents have every right to complain to the police. If satisfactory outcomes aren't forthcoming from appropriate government department, keep going until you get someone who listen and acts. No excuse for continued bullying should be accepted.

Whatever you decide, always make sure your child knows you are not abandoning them, you love them and want to keep them safe.

What many families don't understand is that young people experience their own self loathing about being gay or lesbian. They know their family will be upset and probably angry, so just imagine how you would feel if you (a) hated yourself and (b) felt your family will hate you when they know the truth but (c) you feel compelled to tell because this is you and you need to be honest with them.

I know of families who have literally abandoned their child because they were fearful they would be judged badly by the local community. Imagine yourself in that position, abandoned because of something you don't want to be, have no control over, are being bullied by outsiders for and now the family that should be protecting you does the same. What message does that send? And, how as a parent can we justify these actions?

I have met young people who have been literally thrown out of home and left to fend for themselves on the streets. One young man I met didn't own a pair of shoes for three years.

Many are forced to sleep on park benches indefinitely, often times prostituting themselves to survive.

It isn't uncommon for the majority, who are abandoned by family, to sleep on friends' couches for months often moving from one friend to another, where ever there is space.

I am constantly amazed and appalled at the number of horror stories I am told by young people. As parents we don't always understand things our children do but they should know that our love isn't conditional.

When children first "come out" to family it isn't surprising to be confused and constantly have what you've been told constantly on your mind. However, give yourself time and be patient. Keep your son or daughter close to you if not physically at least emotionally and given time you will realise that sexual or gender diversity is only a small part of any person.

Recognise and remind yourself of their positive qualities. Understand your child is the same person you loved the day before they disclosed to you but now, they can be honest and there are no more hidden truths.

Give yourself time, let your child know you are struggling but also let them know you love them and you will all get through this period as a stronger family unit and your child will love more and appreciate your strength of understanding and acceptance.

Parent stories

Number One

My son came out whilst in Cairns 2 years ago. Luckily I had a couple of gay friends to ask questions of but unfortunately they could not understand it from a Mother's point of view. I really needed another parent to talk to and lean on for a while. My son ended up moving to Brisbane (now in Sydney) and is still trying to find where he belongs. My fears are always of older men using or exploiting him as he is only 19 now although I worried a lot more at 17 as he was going to gay clubs underage.

I grew up in a small town that is still homophobic. I know of two gay friends who moved to the city as they could not stay home. I wish there was a place where regional kids could stay when they moved to the city.

Tania - North Queensland

Number Two

How did we feel when our son let us know by mail that he is homosexual? Stunned, amazed, unbelieving: He is such a "normal" very caring person, apparently happy, loved by so many. He probably has more really committed friends than most people (of both sexes young and old).

My first thought was "Well it can't be a bad thing. He is so good – honest, caring and reliable. You could trust him with your life". With his letter he had sent us some books and basic information about homosexuality, and said he'd fly up to see us when we'd read it. We rang him at once and said "Come as soon as you can, we love you. We want to know more about this, but we love you. We are thankful for all that you are and all that you have always been, to us and to others. We just need to know more of this from you."

When he came we talked and talked. He said one thing that really gripped my heart. He said "For all of these years I have been praying every day to be like everyone else". That is the agony of the homosexual in much of our society; he or she is an outcast, derided, attacked verbally or physically, condemned by "good" people. Why?; because they are BORN different. No one in his right mind, in our society would WANT to be gay!

We became very aware of how he has suffered all of these years, trying to appear what people call "normal", hearing "good" people attacking and condemning and making jokes about people like him. No wonder he had to hide it, as so many do. He said he felt he now had to be honest and live his life as he is – he could not go on living a lie.

We know this is necessary. I was very concerned that he might face a lot of rejection. To be honest, I really dreaded this. Why should this wonderful caring young man have to face this?

Of course I have always wondered what some of our friends would think. I know some are very anti gay and feel that a gay lifestyle is a blatant sin. (We and our son have always been very involved church people). We realise that so many people honestly don't know much at all about homosexuality.

I did not at first say we have a gay son, but I did on a number of occasions protest at the condemnation of homosexuals and it was interesting to see how people stopped and considered, sometimes startled at the protest.

Since then we have shared with some of our friends and have found them to be very supportive indeed. Now I feel it is time to share with some who will need a lot more convincing! But it has to come. I am not sure what is ahead but we love our son too dearly and hope and pray for his happiness and fulfillment.

I wish I was wiser and more able to do something to change the way society reacts to gays. I feel for the young. When you're young you especially need acceptance and it's excruciating to be labeled a reject in society.

Number Three

I am the mother of seven children. When asked what sex my children are I state 3 girls, 3 boys and my gay one. My son came out in the middle of year 12. We lived in a small country town where everyone knew everyone else's business.

My son had lived in the town since his preschool years. He always displayed slightly different behaviour to his three older siblings. He was not sporty, he loved animals, never played outside much and always preferred indoors. As he got older he attracted many female friends but not many males, just one or two close friends. His multiple friendships with girls flourished and it was always in the back of my mind as to why none of these relationships blossomed into romance.

The previous year was an emotionally tumultuous time for the whole family as I was struggling with divorce and he with his gender identity.

Not knowing what the problem was, overtime it erupted into an explosive situation where my son left home and became an independent person in his own right. He lived alone and continued at school until the middle of his senior year.

It was one Friday night in August that my son and I had a heart to heart and he "came out". We talked about how he felt and what he thought was ahead of him. He cried bucket loads of tears and I cuddled heaps and reassured him that all would be OK.

His biggest fear was the repercussions for his 2 sisters and baby brother who still lived at home and went to the local primary school. He stated emphatically that he didn't want the whole town to know. So the family kept the news to themselves until he left high school and moved to the Gold Coast.

I have always been a shoulder to cry on. Other family members have reacted in different ways. Initially, his natural father did not accept the situation, but has now realized that no matter what he is still his son. His fathers' wife is not as accepting and is hesitant in letting him and his partner stay under her roof. His two older brothers found it difficult at first but are now extremely accepting and supportive . His older sister accepted the situation immediately. Her husband is German who states that gay life in Germany is much more prevalent there than here. His two younger sisters have grown up with the fact that their brother is gay and are proud of him. Finally, his youngest brother has no idea what the fuss is about and just counts his brother's partner as another brother.

My son will always be my son. I love him no matter what. I will always be there for him just as I am for my other children. Life goes on, the more acceptance and acknowledgement in the world the better. Young LGBT people are vital and a valuable part of our society and are always someone's son or daughter, someone's brother or sister.

Sandra - Southern Regional Queensland

Number Four

Our son is the eldest of 7 and we've known that he is gay since he was 22. He told me that he'd known he was different since he was 8.

I think small country towns are very backward in some of their thinking. I feel we are very lucky that our son chose to live in Brisbane as I think there are a lot more people who are accepting of gay people. He has a lot of straight friends as well as gay friends and they seem to support each other equally.

In our town which only consists of less than 100 people I know of one man (our neighbour aged around 60) who won't let his wife watch any TV programs that have gay people on them. There is another lady (aged early 40's) who still think they choose to be gay. I find a lot of the people very narrow minded and I must admit I

feel sorry for any of their kids if they ever came out as gay. Needless to say we have told no one about our son in our town. Not because we are ashamed but because of their inability to understand.

As a family I don't think our life has changed dramatically but I still remember the phone call when his friend phoned to tell us, because our son was too nervous but wanted us to know. I cried for a while because I thought there would be no grandchildren (even though we have 6 other children) and I was and am fearful that he may be bashed.

I told Greg my husband and was very nervous about his reaction, but he didn't bat an eyelid. He said he wasn't surprised and that now a lot of things seemed to fit. I rang my sisters and had a good cry and they were great. One of the younger sons found it hard to deal with but the other siblings were fine about the whole issue.

I used to worry that I/we accepted the news too easily and that one day we might crack, but this has never happened. Our son has no qualms about talking to us about his relationships which makes me happy. I just don't want him to be old and lonely.

I know our story sounds too good to be true, but it really wasn't such a big deal to us. I know that when the kids saw how Greg reacted they thought "if Dad's OK we are as well."

Some of our son's friends have told him that he is so lucky that he wasn't kicked out. That never crossed our minds. One of our son's friends is 30 and still hasn't told family. I think this is very sad.

Greg and Maree -Central Western Queensland

Conclusion

I hope this booklet has been helpful. It by no means has all of the answers, but please understand you are not alone, even if that's how you may initially feel. Just do your best to be supportive. Ask questions, listen to your child, don't judge and never give up. And, most important remember your child has had enough faith in you to believe you will still love them and support them after their disclosure. Because telling you, the parents was the hardest thing your child may ever have to do, because to them your opinion and reactions matter more to them than anyone.