

Sexual and Gender Diversity is not a Choice

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG+) is a 100% voluntary peer support group. PFLAG+'s primary goal is to support families struggling to understand a loved one's sexual or gender diversity.

We hope that the information provided will help parents understand the dilemma their son or daughter is struggling with regarding their diversity. The intensity of emotions and fears, we as parents experience are universal. However, the intensity can greatly vary, depending on age, education, exposure to LGBTIQ people cultural background or religious beliefs.

PFLAG+ understands that all families have different value systems, morals and beliefs that are unique to each family unit. PFLAG+ resources are intended as a guide to reassure families they are not alone with their feelings and emotions when a loved one informs them about such an important part of their life.

This is a time when parents may feel isolated, believing they have no one to talk to about such an issue. Parents often feel that they are the only ones with this problem. However, statistically one in five families, regardless of race, religion or culture have a family member who is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender whether they know it or not.

When sons and daughters initially disclose their diversity to family:

Many parents when first told that their son or daughter is LGBTIQ, experience a variety of feelings including:

- Shock - not believing what they're hearing. This can be a time for tears and confusion.
- disappointment - which can cause depression for some parents

- blame – wondering if they themselves are being punished for a past sin
- anger – how dare they do this to us, we've been good parents
- abhorrence – not understanding what is natural for one person isn't natural for another
- confusion - saying things they will regret later
- guilt - believing they were bad parents and should have been able to stop this from happening
- Concern - about telling friends and other family members because they fear their child will be judged negatively.
- Blame - parents blame each other, sometimes blaming the mother for being too soft and not providing enough discipline. Or fathers are blamed for being absent or too strict. Sometimes parents blame themselves for not recognizing and stopping it from happening

Most parents look for reasons as to why their child is sexually or genders diverse? But the reality is that it doesn't matter if we were the best parent or the worst parent, we could not have prevented this from happening and neither can our sons and daughters. Like eye colour we can't choose.

Research shows that there is no proven theory as to why we are born heterosexual and there is no proven theory as to why people are born with diversity. Scientists believe sexual and gender diversity is not a mental illness as was once believed. It is now considered a natural variation, the same as heterosexuality. The main problem is people just don't understand.

Many know when they disclose to family, they will be disappointing parents. Unfortunately, for some they experience greater fears of being beaten, thrown out of the family and sometimes worse, depending on their race and religion. Who would choose to live this life or take such risks? For many of our sons and daughters it is too difficult to pretend they are as we would like (that is; to be heterosexual) and so have to be honest, even though they know they are risking much.

For many parents it's difficult to understand what is happening to their child and they go through a grieving period. This is very real because some parents feel as if their child has died and they now have a stranger standing in front of them.

Others grieve the loss of the expectation of their child following the traditional path of marrying and having children as we did and this can be very difficult for everyone. However, today they can still marry and have children.

Realistically, we need to realize that our son or daughter hasn't changed. He or she is still the same person. It's just that they are just being honest about themselves with something we don't necessarily understand.

For many young people there is the knowledge that culture and family honour are at risk. Sometimes it takes strength to defend your son or daughter through this period of initial disclosure and keeping them safe, but that is what parents should do. Parental love should never be conditional.

Many young people suffer depression and consider suicide because of the difficulty in keeping their diversity a secret, or fear the consequences when telling family. For others suicide and depression occurs because they have been rejected by family or their because of their own self loathing.

When our children "come out" they don't lose their morals, they don't become deviants and they don't lose their family values. They aren't people to be feared or shunned and shouldn't be degraded or ridiculed.

Some parents wish their child could suppress their diversity to save face with relatives and neighbours or for personal religious convictions. But is this fair? Parents should try to put themselves in their child's shoes and consider if they could suppress their natural desires. Could we do it? I don't think so, because it isn't natural to us and it would seem abhorrent.

Heterosexuality is not natural for everyone and suppressing a natural instinct is much easier said than done and can be very destructive long term.

Many people believe there is more diversity today than 50 years ago which isn't true. Sexual and gender diversity has been around since time began. It is just now, with education and more people being honest with themselves, that more people are being honest.

A very common issue for many in society is that they have preconceived ideas and when their loved one discloses their true self, it can really challenge their values and their outdated beliefs which can be very confronting.

How Fathers Deal with having a LGBTIQ child.

There are no rules. All fathers react differently. Some are supportive others may cry, feel huge disappointment or be abusive and violent. Others pretend the issue of homosexuality has not arisen. Fathers usually have different problems to mothers.

Some feel:

- their ego has been bruised
- less of a man
- the need to blame others
- people will judge them personally
- shame
- they have failed as a positive role model for their child

We all need acceptance:

Our sons and daughters need acceptance just like our heterosexual children and parents need to be aware that if we want to keep our children's love and respect, we need to respect them totally.

As parents we should aim to get as much information as possible to help us understand the issues our children are dealing with. It isn't always easy when our child tells us he/she is sexually or gender diverse. Regardless of our personal struggle, it's important our

children know that we still love and care for them and together we will succeed.

To understand we need to talk our child and ask questions which will help us understand as parents and encourage honesty with our son/daughter:

Some helpful questions:

- How long have you known?
- Have you told friends?
- Have you had anyone turn against you since “coming out”?
- Do you have a partner? If so; for how long?
- When can I meet him/her?
- What was your main concern about telling us?
- Has “coming out” been as difficult as you imagined?
- What do you want me to know about your sexual orientation?
- How can I best support you?
- Is it ok for me to tell family and friends?
- Would you like to help tell family and friends?
- Do you feel happier for being honest and telling us?
- How do you see your future life as a lesbian/gay person?
- What do you see as difficulties; if any?
- What are your fears and concerns?
- Is your life happy?

When talking to your child be patient and give them time to finish each question.

Don't expect to have every question answered in the first conversation

Understand there may be some embarrassment to all parties involved so try to be sensitive.

Explain to your child that you don't understand but you want to.

Don't make negative comments. Listen to what they have to say. As a parent you may be feeling negative or apprehensive for them but this shouldn't be passed on to them, if possible. It won't help and it may only make your son/daughter hesitant about speaking to you again about this topic.

Be aware that young people are initially very sensitive to judgment and rejection and so may be very sensitive.

Finally, a hug and letting your child know your love is unconditional will go a long way towards keeping a strong bond with him/her and the family united.

On a personal note:

As a parent of a gay male, I understand it can take a while to come to true acceptance and understanding, but the love for our children should not be conditional. I have found by accepting our gay son, he is more loyal and appreciative of us, his parents, than his heterosexual brother, who rightfully takes for granted our love and support for him in his life.

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