

Rural Families

Concerns relating
to families in regional and rural areas with
lesbian daughters and gay sons

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 (LGBT).

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 7-10 years, both from the city and the country. Since, I have been working in the gay community and organising Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) a peer support group for parents.

It's important for you to be aware that you aren't the only person in the town with a gay son or daughter. Perhaps others are presently unaware they also have a lesbian daughter or gay son, while others may just be just keeping it a secret.

One in five families has a gay family member 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 devastated at such news, not knowing where to turn to seek help or have the son or daughter "cured" or "straightened out".

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

Homosexual orientation is not easier or chosen

Lesbians and gays are everywhere. Homosexuality isn't a modern western phenomenon as some would have us believe. In countries with the Moslem culture homosexuality exists and many, if discovered, are publicly hung as in Iran or jailed in Malaysia.

This would have to be a prime example of sexuality certainly not being a choice. I can not imagine the fear that young gays and lesbians live with in such countries.

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

I can assure you, I have met many young people from Catholic, Jehovah Witness, Baptist, Assembly of God and Christian Outreach churches etc who are gay or lesbian and extremely fearful about telling their families. Sadly, many believe they will be ostracized from the family. Many tell of contemplating suicide or of having attempted and failed.

The sad part for these young people is that they can't change their sexual orientation but continually struggle silently within themselves about being gay or lesbian while fearing the judgment of family and friends. Often these young people pull away from the church and family knowing they have done their best to be heterosexual, but just can't continue with this lie feeling family will reject them when found out.

These young people love their families and parents need to understand that informing the 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, totally abandon them causing them to be homeless.

Rural youth - leaving home

So often rural youth leave home as soon as they can, not telling family they're homosexual 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 allowed them to be themselves without fearing family scorn or disapproval. This is not uncommon and why many believe gays and lesbians are a "city problem".

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

too much 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. Being gay or lesbian is neither contagious or an illness. They are just homosexual. Sexual orientation is not a choice. We didn't choose to be straight and they certainly didn't choose to be gay.

Being gay or lesbian is difficult, they often lose friends and loved ones through lack of understanding. They risk being bullied and beaten up. Plus, they are often ostracised and discriminated against.

Depression - Alcohol and Drugs

As parents we don't understand how difficult it is for young people to inform family of their diverse sexual orientation. And, for many they have worked through most of the difficult issues before they 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.

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 these young people carry inside themselves. These are consequences that can't be overstated and again can increase the possibility of suicidal thoughts when feeling low.

Some gay males 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 gay youth believe the stereotyping that to be a gay male you must be effeminate, which of course we know is not true.

Others seem to be the perfect child, attaining good marks at school and doing his/her best to stay out of trouble hoping to keep 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 orientation 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 sexual orientation 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 "come out" most 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 how they will be seen by the community. They worry about what neighbours and community will think of them. 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 son/daughter is feeling and how they're coping. Some believe the son/daughter 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 the gay community. Then when their child says "Mum, Dad I'm gay/lesbian" it's all too much.

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

I, myself, have a gay son and I suspected he was gay from an early age. He came out to me at 18 years of age in year 12. However, my response was not as I had hoped it would be and later felt I had behaved badly. I realised during this difficult time, there is a big difference between believing you have a gay child and knowing that you do. So it isn't surprising to me that when parents have no idea, it can come as a huge shock and they struggle with a huge range of emotions.

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.

Extra Information to Assist with Understanding

The booklet "Sexuality is not a Choice" which is included in the information pack should be helpful to assist with gaining extra information and understanding about the issues and emotions you, as parents may be experiencing which may also be affecting your child. The CD will also be helpful, listening to other parents recount their struggles regarding their loved ones sexual diversity.

Be Accepting and Understanding

Parents regardless of geography, struggle with similar issue of having LGBT sons and daughters. Many families, regardless of where they live believe the myths, stereotyping and entrenched misinformation that surrounds sexual 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 regarding lesbian and gay children

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

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

This is due to the "keeping of secrets" that 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 about having gay children than those in rural and regional areas.

Don't believe that gays are only in the city.

Don't believe that your son will automatically contract HIV/AIDS just because he is gay.

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 him/her from the family. This will cause depression which can lead to suicide. Suicide for gay youth 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 he/she told you they were gay, you should still love them after they told you. We should not only love our straight children.

Don't be ashamed of your child. He/she has done nothing wrong and they certainly didn't choose to be homosexual. 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 that the Mardi Gras is typical of what your son or daughter will become.

Don't fear that he will become a deviant or paedophile. Stereotypical child molesters are predominantly heterosexual men, usually married or with a female partner with children.

Don't be concerned that your son will want to wear dresses or become a woman. Many are extremely masculine and work in all professions and trades. Realistically, the effeminate gay males are in the minority. If your son is not effeminate now, chances are he won't become effeminate just because he has "come out".

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 person.

Don't assume that your child will become promiscuous just because he/she is gay. He/she still carries the family values and morals you taught and encouraged.

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

"Coming out" in Rural and Regional Areas

I understand that it can be especially difficult for young ones and their families, when sexual diversity is disclosed. But please, don't turn your back on your child.

I know that 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 the need that he/she needs to leave the town for safety reasons, find somewhere or someone who can help in another area and take them there until permanent arrangements can be made.

Parents need to be aware that if the youth is still at school they have the right to demand the school keep their child safe. Every child regardless of race, sexual orientation 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 the appropriate government department further action should be taken to department supervisors. No excuse for continued bullying should be accepted.

But whatever you decide, make sure your child knows you are not abandoning him/her, that you love him/her and want to keep him/her safe. Young LGBT can put up with most things as long as they know that you love and support them and are working for their benefit.

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 son/daughter because they were fearful they would be judged badly by the local community. Imagine yourself in this 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 to the gay youth? How can parents 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 gay men and lesbians. 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 just think about their sexual orientation and nothing else, but 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 orientation 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.

I am doing a lot of reading on the whole subject to become more informed.

Marion - North Queensland

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 pre school 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

Books to Read that may assist understanding.

Lesbian and gay issues

My child is gay - How parents react when they hear the news:
Author Bryce McDougall - publishers Allen & Unwin

As Nature Made Him - the boy who was raised as a girl: author John Colapinto, Harper Collins Publishers - this is an excellent book for those who still believe in the nature vs nurture theory.

Now that you Know, A Parents Guide to Understand their Gay and Lesbian Children: authors Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward, publisher Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace and Co. San Diego, New York, and London.

Invisible Families: author Terry Stewart, publisher Tandem Press (New Zealand author)

Transgender issues

Transsexuals - Candid Answers to Private Questions: author Gerald Ramsey, publisher The Crossing Press, Freedom CA 95019

Transgenders and Intersexuals, Everything you wanted to know but couldn't think of the questions: author Lois May, publisher Fast Lane, East Street, www.eaststreet.com.au

He's my Daughter, A Mother's Journey to Accept: author Lynda Langley, Indra Publishing.
Bisexual Issues

Bisexuality

Dual Attraction, Understanding Bisexuality: Martin Weinberg Colin Williams, Douglas Pryor, publishers Oxford Uni Press, New York, Oxford.

Christian Perspective

Is the Homosexual My Neighbour? A positive Christian response, Authors Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Published by Harper Collins

Movies to watch

Some of Us - A love story comparing the lives of a gay son and his straight father. Very funny, but a little sad, starring Jack Thompson and Russell Crowe.

Mambo Italiano - a comedy about two Italian families where the son in the first family accepts his sexuality and the parents struggle towards acceptance. Meanwhile the second family and the son deny the truth.

Boys on the Side - Funny, but sad story about three women dealing with their lives and relationships. Whoopy Goldberg plays a lesbian.

Referrals:

Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association (GLWA) telephone counseling - provide support and information ph. 1800-184-527 website www.glwa.org.au

Mens Sexual Health Line - for those with questions about HIV, Hepatitis C, Sexuality Issues ph. 1800-155-141

Open Doors - Counseling for youth questioning their sexuality ph. 3257-7660 www.opendoors.net.au

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) call Brisbane ph. 3017-1739, www.pflagbrisbane.org.au for regional contacts, email pflagbris@hotmail.com

Ethnic Communities Council - HIV, Hepatitis C and sexual health programs ph. 3844-9166 www.eccq.com.au

Queensland Gender Clinic - ph./fax 3355-6163

Queensland Police Service (QPS) please contact the local police station to contact closest police liaison officer for assistance or to report an incident.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders support (ph. 3017-1777 Brisbane) or (Cairns 4035-6491)

St. Lukes Positive Directions - supports those with HIV ph. 1300-785-853

Bisexual Network - ph. 1800-653-223, www.members.optusnet.com.au/-ausbinet/

Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC) - ph. 30171777
for extra assistance to access regional support and information.