

## ***OUR DAUGHTERS AND SONS***

### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PARENTS OF GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL PEOPLE**

You've just found out your daughter is a lesbian, or your son is gay, or bisexual.

If you're like many parents, your first reaction is "how will I ever handle this?" There's not much yet in our society to prepare parents for the words, "Mom, Dad. I'm gay."

We hope the following information can help you understand your child's sexuality and its meaning to you and your continued relationship with him or her. PFLAG's members are parents, families and friends of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. We probably have been through much of what you're feeling. We understand.

The first thing we can tell you, with absolute certainty, is that you're not alone. According to some statistics, one in every ten people in this country and around the world is gay. Approximately one in four families, therefore, has an immediate family member who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and most families have at least one gay, lesbian or bisexual member in their extended family circle.

That means that there are plenty of people out there you can talk to. We can tell you from experience that talking about it really helps. There are books to read, hotlines to call, and people to meet, who can help you move forward by sharing their own experiences. PFLAG can provide you with the information and support services you need.

The second thing we can tell you is that, if you want to, you will emerge from this period with a stronger, closer relationship with your child than you have ever had before. That's been the case for all of us. But the path to that point is often not easy. Some parents were able to take the news in stride. But many of us went through something very like a grieving process with all the accompanying shock, denial, anger, guilt, and sense of loss. So if those are the feelings you're dealing with, they're understandable given our society's attitudes towards gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals.

Don't condemn yourself for the emotions you feel. But, since you love your child, you owe it to him or her--and to yourself--to move toward acceptance, understanding, and support. While it may feel as if you have lost your child, you haven't. Your child is the same person he or she was yesterday. The only thing you have lost is your own image of that child and the understanding you thought you had. That loss can be very difficult, but that image can, happily, be replaced with a new and more real understanding of your child.

If your child is young, coming to an understanding with him or her may be crucial. Gay and lesbian youth who are shut out by their parents have a comparatively high incidence of suicide and drug and alcohol abuse. Some teens protect themselves by putting as much distance between themselves and their parents as possible.

If your son or daughter 'came out' to you voluntarily, you're probably more than halfway there already. Your child's decision to be open with you about something our society discourages took a tremendous amount of courage. And it shows an equally tremendous amount of love, trust, and commitment to the relationship with you.

Now it's up to you to match your child's courage, commitment, trust, and love, with your own.

#### **DEFINITIONS USED:**

***Heterosexual, or straight***, refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for the opposite gender.

***Homosexual or gay***, refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for the same gender.

***Homophobia*** refers to society's misunderstanding, ignorance or fear of gay, lesbian or bisexual people.

***Lesbian*** refers to women who are homosexual.

***Bisexual*** or bi refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are for both genders.

***The word gay*** is used to include homosexuals and bisexuals, male and female.

## **Is my child different now?**

We think we know and understand our children from the day of their birth. We're convinced that we know what's going on inside their heads.

So when a child comes home with as major a revelation as "I'm gay," and we hadn't a clue--or when we knew but denied it to ourselves--the reaction is shock and disorientation. Shock that our child is not as we'd expected, and disorientation that we didn't know.

From the moment a child is born, you have a dream, a vision of what this child will be, should be, can be. It's a dream that's born of your own history, of what you wanted for yourself growing up, and especially of the culture around you. Despite the fact that a significant portion of the population is gay, American society still prepares us only with heterosexual dreams for our children.

The shock and disorientation you feel is a natural part of a type of grieving process. You have lost something; your dream for this child. You also have lost the illusion that you can read your child's mind.

Of course, when you stop to think about it, this is true for all children, straight or gay. They're always surprising us. They don't marry who we might pick for them, they don't take the job we would have chosen, they don't live where we'd like them to live. In our society, though, we're better prepared to deal with those circumstances than with our child's non-traditional sexual orientation.

Keep reminding yourself that your child hasn't changed. Your child is the same as he or she was before you learned this about him or her. It's your dream, your expectations, your vision that may have to change if you are to really know and understand your child.

## **Why did he or she have to tell us?**

Some parents feel they would have been happier not knowing. They start to recall the time before they knew as problem-free--forgetting the inexplicable and disturbing distance they often felt from their child during that time.

Sometimes we try to deny what is happening--by rejecting what we're hearing ("It's just a phase; you'll get over it"); by shutting down ("If you choose that lifestyle, I don't want to hear about it"); or by not registering the impact of what we're being told ("That's nice, dear, and what do you want for dinner?"). These are all natural reactions.

If you did not know about your child's sexuality however, you would never really know your child. A large part of his or her life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole person.

If it is important to accept and understand your child's sexuality because homosexuality is not a phase. While people may experiment for some time with their sexuality, someone who has reached the point of telling a parent that he or she is gay is not usually a person who is going through a phase. Generally he or she has given long and hard thought to understanding and acknowledging his or her sexual orientation.

So if you're wondering, "Is she sure?" the answer is almost certainly yes. Telling a parent that you think you're gay involves overcoming too many negative stereotypes and taking too much risk for anyone to take that step lightly or prematurely.

The fact that your son or daughter told you is a sign of his or her love and need for your support and understanding. It took a lot of courage. And it shows a very strong desire for an open, honest relationship with you; a relationship in which you can love your child for who he or she is, rather than for who you want him or her to be.

## **Why didn't he or she tell us before?**

One difficult realization for you may be the recognition that your child has probably been thinking this through for months, even years, and is only now telling you. It's easy to take this as a lack of trust, lack of love, or a reflection on your parenting. And it's painful to realize that you don't know your child as well as you thought you did, and that you have been excluded from a part of his or her life.

To some extent, this is true in all parenting relationships, whether the child is gay or straight. There's a necessary separation between parent and child as the child moves toward adulthood. Your child will reach conclusions you wouldn't have reached, and will do it without consulting you.

But, in this case, it's particularly hard because the conclusion your child has reached is so important and, in many cases, so unexpected and because you may have been shut out of his or her thinking for a long period of time.

Gay and lesbian people may hold back from their parents as long as possible, because it has taken them a long time to figure out what they're feeling themselves. In other words, gay, lesbian and bisexual children often recognize at an early age that they feel "different," but it may take years before they can put a name to it.

Because we still live in a society that misunderstands or is fearful of gay people, it takes time for them to acknowledge their sexuality to themselves. Gay people themselves have often internalized self-hate or insecurity about their sexual identity. It may take time for someone to think through and work up the courage to tell a parent. Even if you feel your relationship with your child was such that they should have known they could tell you anything, everything in our culture's treatment of homosexuality says, "don't ask, don't tell."

So, even as you may grieve for not having been able to help him or her through that period, or even if you believe that the outcome would have been different if you'd been involved earlier, understand that your child probably could not have told you any sooner. Most importantly, doing so now is an invitation to a more open and honest relationship.

## **Why is my child gay?**

Parents often ask this question for a number of reasons they may be grieving over losing an image of their child, they feel they did something wrong, they feel that someone "led" their child into homosexuality, or they wonder if there is a biological cause of homosexuality.

Some parents react with chock, denial and anger to the news that their child is gay. One response is to wonder "How could she do this to me?" This is not a rational reaction, but it is a human response to pain. We liken this reaction to a grieving process: here, you are grieving over losing an image of your child. As you work through your feelings, you may discover that the only thing that your child has "done" to you is, to trust that your relationship could grow as a result of you knowing the truth about him or her.

You may feel that your child has been led into homosexuality by someone else. It is a popular homophobic assertion that homosexuals "recruit." The truth is that no one "made" your child gay or lesbian. He or she has most likely known he or she was "different" for a very long time--no person or group of people "converted" your child.

Other parents feel that their parenting is the cause of their child's sexual identity. For year, psychology and psychiatry have bandied about theories that homosexuality is caused by parental personality types--the dominant female, the weak male--or by the absence of the of the same-sex role models. Those theories are no longer accepted within psychiatry and psychology, and part of PFLAG's work is to help erase these misconceptions from popular culture. Gay people come from "model" families, those with dominant or submissive mothers, weak or strong fathers. Gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are only children and they're youngest, middle and oldest children. They come from families with siblings who are gay and families with siblings who are not gay.

Many parents wonder if there is a genetic or biological basis to homosexuality. While there are some studies on homosexuality and genetics, there are no conclusive studies to date on the "cause of homosexuality."

Remember that gay, lesbian and bisexual people exist in every walk of life; religion, nationality and racial background. Therefore, all gay people like straight people, are very different, and have come into their sexual identity in very different ways.

## **Why am I uncomfortable with his or her sexuality?**

The ambivalence you may feel is a product of our culture. Homophobia is too pervasive in our society to be banished easily from our consciousness. As long as homophobia exists in our society, any gay person and any parent of a gay or lesbian child has some very real and legitimate fears and concerns.

Many parents may confront another source of guilt. Parents who see themselves as "liberal," who believe they have put sexual prejudice behind them--even those who have gay friends--are sometimes stunned to recognize that they are uncomfortable when it's

their kid who's gay. These parents not only have to grapple with deep-rooted fears of homosexuality, but also have the added burden of thinking they shouldn't feel the way they do.

It helps to concentrate on real concerns, what your child needs most from you now. Try not to focus on the guilt: It's baseless, and it accomplishes nothing for yourself or for your child.

## **Should we consult a psychiatrist or psychologist?**

Consulting a therapist in the hopes of changing your child's sexual orientation is pointless. Homosexuality is not a disease to be "cured." In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of abnormalities. Homosexuality is a natural way of being.

Because homosexuality is not "chosen," you cannot "change your child's mind." The American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association have taken the official position that it would be unethical to even try to change the sexual orientation of a gay person.

But there are situations in which consulting people experienced with family issues and homosexuality can be helpful. You may want to talk to someone about your own feelings and how to work through them. You may feel that you and your child need help communicating clearly through this period. Or you may recognize that your child is unhappy and needs help with self-acceptance. Once again, gay people often have trouble accepting themselves and their sexual identity. In this circumstance self-rejection could be a dangerous emotional state. In all of these cases, you have a number of options and resources. PFLAG members, either individually or in meetings, can provide you with the information, space and resources you may need to build a stronger relationship with your gay child.

A therapist can also provide the confidentiality and, to a degree, the anonymity that you may feel you need at first. PFLAG members may be able to suggest a therapist that has helped their families.

There are many options for help, information and advice. We encourage you to explore your options and to use the resources best suited for you and your family. Please refer to the resource section in the back of this handout for suggestions.

## **Will he or she be ostracized, have trouble finding or keeping a job, or even be physically attacked?**

All of these things are possible. It depends on where your son, or daughter lives, what kind of job he or she takes, how he or she acts. But attitudes toward homosexuality have begun to change, and are now changing relatively quickly. There are many places where your child can live and work relatively free of discrimination.

Unfortunately, societal change is always slow--just look at how long it took this country to get voting rights for women. Progress is often also accompanied by backlash. Until still more individuals and more organizations become advocates for gay rights, until homophobia is eradicated in our society, your child does face some significant challenges.

## **How do I reconcile this with my religion?**

For some parents, this may be the most difficult issue to face. For others, it a non-issue.

It is true that some religious continue to condemn homosexuality. Even within these religions, however, there are generally respected leaders who believe that their church's position of condemnation is unconscionable.

Many mainstream American religions have now taken official stands in support of gay rights. Some have gone further. The Methodist Church, for example, has developed a network of reconciling congregations welcoming homosexuals. The United Church of Christ since 1991 has had a denominational policy stating that sexual orientation should not be a bar to ordination. In the Episcopal Church, the denomination's legislative body has declared that gay people have a full and equal claim with all other people upon the church. In their 1994 draft of new pastoral guidelines, the US Episcopal bishops wrote, "As it can be for heterosexual persons, the experience of steadfast love can be for homosexual persons an experience of God."

You will still hear people quote the Bible in defense of their prejudice against gay people. But there are other Biblical scholars, who dispute any anti-gay interpretations of Biblical texts.

The resource list at the back of this handout cites references that can help you learn more about changing religious attitudes toward homosexuality. PFLAG can help refer you to information and listings specific to your own religion.

## **What about HIV/AIDS?**

While at first AIDS spread fastest among gay and bisexual men, and drug users who shared needles, all people and communities now face the threat of AIDS.

Therefore, every parent needs to be concerned about AIDS--whether your child is gay or straight. You should make sure your child understands how AIDS is transmitted and how to protect him or herself.

With teenagers becoming sexually active at younger ages, and with AIDS still spreading, no parent can afford to ignore the danger, or assume his or her child is safe.

If your child is already HIV-positive or has AIDS, he or she now needs your support more than ever. You should know that you are not alone. There are numerous local and national organizations that can help you with medical, psychological and physical care. PFLAG has organized a Family AIDS Support Network to put you in touch with parents and families in similar situations, and resources specific to your needs. At this point, your relationship with your child can become even closer but your family will have to learn to adjust to the physical and emotional circumstances of your child's changing health.

## **Are there special legal concerns for my child?**

A number of laws regulating sexual behavior are still on the books in some states, some dating back to the last century. According to these laws, some or all homosexual behavior is illegal along with many widespread heterosexual behaviors.

Many states have repealed these laws; others have not. While enforcement is usually rare: among individuals, anti-gay and sodomy laws are often used against gay, lesbian and bisexual people in custody disputes, legal actions, and attempts to discriminate against gay men, bisexuals and lesbians.

There is hope, however. Many cities, towns and states have worked not just to decriminalize homosexual behavior, but to recognize homosexuality as natural. These jurisdictions have taken measures to assure non-discrimination.

You can get more information on individual state and local laws concerning homosexuality from the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. Their address is listed among the resources provided in this book.

## **We have accepted the situation, but why must they flaunt it?**

Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are often accused of "flaunting" their sexuality when they "come out" as gay, when they are publicly affectionate with a same-sex partner, or when they wear gay symbols and T-shirts or participate in gay parades.

In a world that still assumes all people are heterosexual, "coming out" is the only way gay, lesbian and bisexual people can make their sexual orientation known. Coming out is often considered a positive way to avoid societal invisibility that can lead to internalized self-hate or lack of self-esteem.

You may be uncomfortable with your child's public displays of affection with his or her partner. Remember that all couples--straight and gay--often show affection with his or her partner. Remember that all couples--straight and gay--often show affection publicly because they feel love and appreciation for their partner. Stop and think--are you as uneasy about heterosexuals showing affection in public??

In these two instances, "flaunting it" may only be behaving in a relaxed, natural fashion in public. In other circumstances, it may be a political decision to assert one's sexuality by wearing a T-shirt or participating in a public event. In cultures that either ignore homosexuality or deride it, stressing one's sexuality publicly can be an important act of self-affirmation.

If you worry about possible negative reactions to any behavior that identifies your child as gay, keep in mind that many gay men,

bisexuals and lesbians will, of course, censor their own behavior because they share those fears. But it is up to your child to make those decisions for him or herself.

## **Will my child have a family of his or her own?**

Longtime gay and lesbian couples perceive their relationship as just as committed and just as much a family as married heterosexuals. Many gay men and lesbians hold commitment ceremonies to celebrate their relationship formally, in the company of friends and family.

A number of state and local governments now recognize same-sex partners. More and more companies, like Apple Computer, also provide “domestic partner” health coverage and benefits.

Increasingly, gay and lesbian couples are also becoming parents. Some lesbians have used artificial insemination to conceive a child that they can raise with their lesbian partner. Some gay men and lesbians, who came out after they’d been involved in heterosexual relationships, are raising the children from those relationships with their gay partners. Also, more and more gay couples are adopting children together.

## **How do we tell family and friends?**

Just as coming out is difficult for gay people, the coming-out process is equally difficult for parents who often go right into the closet. Parents who are still struggling with accepting their child’s sexual orientation often worry about other people finding out. You will not probably have to field the questions, “Has he got a girlfriend?” “So when is she going to get married?”

Many of us found that our fears were far worse than the reality. Come of us held off for years in telling our own parents only to have them respond, “We knew that quite a while ago.”

Our advice to you is the same advice we give to gay and lesbian individuals. Learn more about the origins of sexual orientation and about the changing thinking within medical, psychiatric, religious, professional, and political circles. There are plenty of “authorities” you can quote as allies in defense of equal rights for gay people. We provide you with partial lists in the back of this pamphlet.

Reread the list in this booklet of famous gay men, bisexuals and lesbians who have made lasting contributions to our world. Remember with many gay people keeping their sexual orientation hidden, this is just a fraction of the names you could cite. It also means that you probably already know many gay people.

Practice what you would say just like you might practice for a public speaking engagement, for a job interview, for being assertive, or for anything new to you that makes you afraid or nervous. One parent says, “I used to go in the bathroom and close the door and practice saying to the mirror, ‘I have a lesbian daughter’ and saying it with pride And it helped. But you really do have to practice.”

Talk to people who understand your concerns. PFLAG members may be helpful to you in discussing their own experiences. Contact the national office or a local PFLAG leader to learn more about PFLAG’s extensive network.

Most likely, you will get some negative or, at the least, insensitive comments from relatives, friends or co-workers. But you’ll probably find that those comments are fewer than you now fear.

Remember that your child has been down this road already. He or she may even be able to help.

Remember also that who you tell about your child’s sexuality should be a decision that both of you discuss and reach together.

## **What will the neighbors say?**

This could be a very real concern, especially for families who consider themselves part of a close community or in regions where fundamentalist religions are strong.

Lesbians, gay men and bisexual people however, come from families from all corners of the earth, from every culture, religion, ethnic group, and occupation. One parent says, “I swear to God I thought I was the only mother in Tulsa, Oklahoma who had a

lesbian daughter. And then, as I started speaking out on the issue, other parents started coming forward. And by now, every time someone says to me, ‘Nancy, I need to talk with you,’ I know exactly what’s coming up.”

Again, you may well encounter reactions that are difficult to take. More often, however, PFLAG members encounter reactions of “And I thought I was the only one.”

## How can I support my child?

As a parent, you have to take care of yourself and your child. PFLAG is here to help you with your individual needs so that you can be an even better parent.

Reading this booklet is the first step to supporting your child--you have shown that you are open to new information and hopefully you are now better informed. Supporting your child now should be a natural extension of your general support as a parent: we need to talk, listen and learn together.

Every child needs different things from his or her parents. It is up to you to learn how to communicate with him or her about his or her needs and issues surrounding sexuality.

Some parents find that they are better able to understand and support their child by recognizing the similarities and differences in your own experiences. In some cases it may help to talk about how you dealt with hurtful incidents. In other cases, however, you must recognize that sexual discrimination is hurtful in a unique way. Here, you can support your child by educating yourself as thoroughly as possible about homosexuality, and by helping to bring it out of hiding in our society. It’s the hiding that allows the prejudice and discrimination to survive.

## Will I ever learn to deal with this new knowledge?

A psychiatrist answered the question this way: “Once most people adjust to the reality of their child’s sexual orientation, they feel like they’ve had a whole new world opened to them. First they become acquainted with a side of their child they never knew. They now are included in their child’s life. Usually, they get closer. And the parents begin to meet the gay community and understand that these are people just like any other community.”

Another way to answer this question is to let some parents speak for themselves:

“I hit a point where I was felling sad and thinking what would I say when people asked, “How is Gary?? And then it occurred to me: Gay’s fine. I’m the one who’s not. And once I reached that point, it was easier..as we met Gary’s friends, we found them to be wonderful people and realized that he’s really part of a pretty terrific community. So what’s the problem?? It’s society’s problem. That’s when we figured we were over the hump.” *Mother of a gay son*

“I’d say that reading and learning more about sexual orientation is what helped me most--laying to rest some of the myths I’d heard. So the more I learned, the angrier I got, and the more I wanted to change society instead of my son.” *Mother of a gay son*

“I was teary-eyed for three months off and on. But we’ve always had a very good relationship. It has never changed from that. We never had an instant’s question of our love for him, and we both assured him immediately that we loved him. And since then, our relationship with our son is strengthened, because we have a bond simply because we know what he is up against in our society.” *Mother of a gay son*

“It’s really important to talk about it, to know that you’re not alone, that there are other people who have had this experience and are dealing with it in a positive way. And the benefit is that you establish a good relationship with your child. Parents want to parent. They don’t generally speaking, want to be isolated from their kid.” *Mother of a lesbian daughter*

“I have to tell you, there are so many pluses now. You begin to recognize what an incredible child you have to share this with you and to want you to be a part of their lives...(Look at) the trust that’s been placed in your hands, and how much guts it took to do that.” *Father of a lesbian daughter*

“For me, it was my son saying to me, “Dad, I’m the same person I was before.” Now it’s been six months, and I realize even more that really, nothing’s changed in his life. It was our perception of him, I guess.” *Father of a gay son*

“Most of us are like three leaf clovers--sort of ordinary, not much attention is given to us--but once in a while we find a four leaf clover, a rare and wonderful discovery. I remember, as a girl, spending hours looking for that four leaf clover. Occasionally I would find one and press it in a book or iron it between pieces of waxed paper. It was something I treasured, wanted to save and protect. My daughter is like one of those four leaf clovers; her sexual orientation just happens to be different from mine. She is someone I treasure and want to protect. A four leaf clover is not unnatural, just unusual and different from the rest. I would have never considered removing one of the leaves so it would appear to be a three leaf clover.” *Mother of a lesbian daughter*

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## **PFLAG**

*Parents, Families and friends of Lesbians and Gays, Inc. Is a support, education, and advocacy organization. Founded in 1981 by 25 parents, PFLAG now represents more than 40,000 households, and speaks for thousands of others. PFLAG affiliates are located in more than 350 communities in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 11 other countries. PFLAG is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.*

## **OUR MISSION STATEMENT**

*Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons, their families, and friends through support; to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public and advocacy; to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. PFLAG provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.*

### **PFLAG**

1726 M St., N.W., Suite 400  
 Washington, D.C. 20036  
 202/467-8180, ext. 215 or 211  
[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

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