

# For Parents, Families and Friends of LGBT People

FIRST STEPS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS  
ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

**PFLAG** LOS ANGELES

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Many of you who are reading this pamphlet have learned that your child, a member of your family or a close friend is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Now what? You have two challenges: dealing with your own feelings and responding to your loved ones. This booklet gives some short answers to questions you may have about moving forward.

*Why do I feel all these emotions?* When a family member or friend comes out, it's natural to feel a lot of different things—surprise, shock, love, protectiveness, sadness, fear, anger and confusion to name a few. There is no right or wrong way to feel, and you don't need to be ashamed of any of your feelings. Coming to terms with the sexual orientation or gender identity of someone you love is a process. Give yourself time to collect information and explore your feelings. It's okay not to feel okay overnight.

*What about my dreams for my child?* Our dreams for our children often come from our own experiences and cultural images which are largely heterosexual. You may feel sad that you have lost the future you have envisioned for your child—and yourself. In the process of accepting themselves, LGBT people often feel grief as well. Many of them grew up with the same dreams you have. Remember, LGBT people can fall in love, marry, have children, and pursue successful careers. Your dreams may change, but perhaps not as much as you think.

*Why is my child gay or bisexual?* Research suggests that there may be several contributing biological factors to sexual orientation and gender identity, including genes, birth order, and hormones released during pregnancy, but nothing is conclusive. What we do know is that homosexuality appears in all cultures, in all religions, in all geographic areas and in all types of families. It isn't your fault. It's a naturally occurring variation in human sexuality.

*Isn't my child too young to be sure he or she is gay?* Recent studies have placed the average age a child knows that they are LGBT at 13. They also show that the average age of coming out is in the mid to late teens. Children don't need to have any sexual experience to understand whom they feel attraction toward. They don't choose to be gay. Neither are they "recruited." It's something they recognize about themselves.

*How can I fix this?* Parents are problem solvers. It's natural to wonder whether there is anything you can do to help your child with this "problem." Neither sexual orientation nor gender identity is changeable. According to the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association, it is both futile and unethical to try to change a client's sexual orientation or gender identity. "Ex gay" ministries and "reparative therapy" are controversial and not recommended by mainstream professional organizations. They may change behavior, but they have never been shown by rigorous studies to change underlying sexual orientation. Some people have reported an increase in depression, suicidal thoughts, and self-destructive behavior following these treatments. Parents may encourage LGBT persons to date or even marry a person of the opposite sex in hopes of "curing" them. Think about

whether your heterosexuality could be “cured” by dating a person of your own sex. **Any attempt to change a child’s sexual orientation or gender identity is experienced as rejection with very negative consequences.**

*What about HIV/AIDS?* Today everyone has to be informed about HIV/AIDS and how to protect themselves and their partners. It’s not sexual orientation that makes someone HIV positive, it’s their behavior. Make sure your child knows how HIV is transmitted and how to practice safer sex. If you are not comfortable talking about these issues with your children (all of them!), find a medical practitioner who can give them reliable information.

*How do I reconcile my child's sexual orientation or gender identity with my religion?* Biblical text interpreted as condemning homosexuality may seem insurmountable, and parents may fear for their children’s salvation. Interpretations of these ancient texts depend on a detailed understanding of the context and language in which these passages are written. Many Biblical scholars disagree about anti-gay readings of particular passages, and parents may find exploring these conclusions helpful. Many Christian denominations and branches of Judaism have taken official stands in support of LGBT persons including the Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative Branches of Judaism; the United Church of Christ, the Episcopalians, and the Metropolitan Community Church. Welcoming and affirming congregations and support groups can be found in most other denominations.

*How should I respond to my LGBT loved one?* DON’T reject them. LGBT children who feel rejected are eight times more likely to attempt suicide, six times more likely to report high levels of depression, three times more likely to use illegal drugs, and three times more likely to be at high risk for sexually transmitted diseases than their LGBT counterparts who feel supported.

*What kinds of behaviors are rejecting?* Physical punishment, name calling, excluding LGBT youth from family activities, blocking access to LGBT friends and resources,

pressuring your child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine, telling your child that God will punish them, and telling them you are ashamed of them.

*What kinds of behaviors are supportive?* Talk to your child about their LGBT identity; express affection when they tell you about their LGBT identity; require that other family members respect your LGBT child's identity; connect your child with adult LGBT role models; welcome their LGBT friends; support their gender expression; advocate for your LGBT child when they experience discrimination. Attending a PFLAG meeting also shows support for your family member and can help you implement some of these suggestions in your particular situation.

*How do I tell friends and family?* First, learn the facts about sexual orientation and gender identity. Second, pick a friend or family member who has expressed support for LGBT persons or someone open minded whom you trust. This person will be an ally for you with others. Practice what you want to say, as you would for a job interview or speech. PFLAG meetings can help you prepare.

*Can my child have a happy life?* Yes, LGBT individuals have succeeded in all walks of life, from politics and entertainment to business, science and technology and everything in between. They are now able to marry their loved ones in selected states and many foreign countries, have children, and raise families. Your support is crucial to their success, and you will find that support brings you closer to your children than you ever thought possible.

*What are my next moves?* Utilize the resources listed below and contact our website for additional resources at [www.pflagla.org](http://www.pflagla.org). We would recommend that you come to one of our PFLAG Los Angeles meetings or check at [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org) for a meeting near you. You will find a diverse group of parents, family members, and straight allies who have made the journey you are on. They will listen, share their own experiences, and support you. Your LGBT family members and friends are welcome to come with you as your family grows stronger and closer through understanding, acceptance, and celebration of each unique member.

## RESOURCES

### Organizations

PFLAG National: [pflag.org](http://pflag.org)

Text taken from *Our Sons & Daughters*, published by PFLAG National

Family Acceptance Project: [familyproject.sfsu.edu](http://familyproject.sfsu.edu)

Text taken from "Supportive Families, Healthy Children," published by FAP

Human Rights Campaign: [hrc.org](http://hrc.org)

Intersex Society of North America: [isna.org](http://isna.org)

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund: [lambdalegal.org](http://lambdalegal.org)

National Center for Lesbian Rights: [nclrights.org](http://nclrights.org)

National Center for Transgender Equality: [transequality.org](http://transequality.org)

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: [thetaskforce.org](http://thetaskforce.org)

Safe Schools Assistance, LAUSD: [stephen.jimenez@lausd.net](mailto:stephen.jimenez@lausd.net)

Stephen B. Jimenez, Project 10 Specialist

Visit the PFLAG Los Angeles website for more information: [pflagLA.org](http://pflagLA.org)



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