



# I Think My Child is Gay or Lesbian: Information for Parents



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**Summary:** Whether one is heterosexual (straight) or homosexual (gay, lesbian or bisexual), one's sexual orientation is not something that is chosen, but rather is biologically determined in the brain. Unfortunately, those who are gay, lesbian or bisexual often face significant discrimination, which may lead to stress and contribute to mental health problems. As society and as individuals, there must be acceptance no matter what one's sexual orientation.

## Introduction

Perhaps you have always wondered whether or not your child might be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Or perhaps your child has just 'come out of the closet', and has said that she or he is gay. (Gay, by the way, can refer to a male interested in males, but it can also mean a female interested in females.)

### Typical Parent Responses

Dealing with the possibility that your child is gay, or might be gay, can be an extremely stressful time for many parents and families. Some of the possible reactions that families may have are:

- Denial: "No, he can't be gay. He's had girlfriends before!" or "No, she can't be gay/lesbian. She had a boyfriend just last month!"
- Anger: some parents may act with anger. "How can he do this to us?" It may be tempting to express your anger towards your child with hostility or rejection; in the end, anger is not helpful.
- Guilt: "Was it something we did as parents?"
- Bargaining: "If only s/he isn't gay, then we'll get her whatever s/he wants..."
- Acceptance: "As much as this has been tough on me as a parent, I know it can't be easy for my child either. In the end, the most important thing is that we give him/her our love and support."

Regardless of how you feel about gays, lesbians or homosexuality, the bottom line is that your child needs your love and support.

There is nothing wrong in being gay, lesbian or bisexual, nor is it a mental health problem. The only thing that is wrong is the stigma and discrimination that people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual must face.

## Facts and Myths about Being Gay

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**Myth:** People choose to be gay.

**Fact:** A person doesn't choose to be gay any more than a straight person chooses to be straight. In fact, there is evidence that suggests that sexual orientation is determined before birth or early in life, and that it may be genetically determined. In other words, it may be determined by genes passed on from the parents. Ultimately, worrying about why someone is gay isn't the most important issue. After all, would you worry about why someone is straight? What is important is that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

**Myth:** Gay people sleep around, and get AIDS/HIV.

**Fact:** Being gay doesn't mean that your child is promiscuous, any more than being straight does. Most of the people in the world with AIDS/HIV are straight, not gay.

**Myth:** People who are gay are pedophiles.

**Fact:** The empirical research does **not** show that gay or bisexual men are any more likely than heterosexual men to molest children (Harek, 2007; Jenny, 1994).

**Myth:** My child will never get married, never have children, and live a lonely life.

**Fact:** This is an old prejudice that is simply no longer the case. Gay couples can get married, have children and have healthy families. Having a healthy family is about having caring and respectful relationships between family members; it has nothing to do with sexual orientation. (American Psychological Association, 2007).

## Terms

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**Bisexual:** being physically and emotionally attracted to people of both the same and opposite sexes.

**Gay:** someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. Although in the past, gay mainly referred to males, it can include both males and females.

**LGBT:** an umbrella term used to refer to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual and two-spirited.

**Heterosexual or straight:** someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex.

**Homosexual:** being sexually and emotionally attracted to those of one's own sex. Historically, this term has had a negative connotation, so most people prefer other terms, such as lesbian, gay and bisexual.

**Lesbian:** a woman attracted sexually and emotionally to other women.

**Transgendered:** a person whose gender identity (self-identification as male, female, both or neither) does not match his/her "assigned gender" (classification by others as male or female based on genetic/physical sex). For example, a person who outwardly looks male, but who really feels like a woman on the inside. Or vice versa, a person who outwardly looks female, but who really feels like a man on the inside.

**Transsexual:** a transgendered person who has had treatments to alter the sex of his or her body.

## Key Advice for Parents and Caregivers

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Above all, accept and love your child, who is the same child as before.

Acknowledge your loved one's sexuality by talking about it together. Ignoring it entirely is a rejection. When you talk about your loved one's sexuality, don't reject them with one through anger or insistence that "it's only a passing phase." Ask questions about that which you don't understand.

Don't get upset at your loved one for having told you that s/he is gay and definitely don't get upset with them for not telling you earlier. After all, how would that make your youth feel about talking to you?

Offer support to your child. You might say "I love you no matter what. How can I be helpful? How can I be supportive?"

Get support from others. Talk with others. Talk with other parents of gay or lesbian children. Some parents feel ashamed but remember, it's not a disgrace unless you make it one. Respect your child's privacy by checking with him or her about those with whom it is acceptable to share this personal information.

**Should I tell the school?** It depends. Would you tell the school if you discovered your child was straight? If your child wants to tell a supportive teacher, then go ahead. But if the school or other students are going to be hostile, it may be better to keep silent. Reassure your youth that in the future, it gets easier in more mature environments such as college, university or most workplaces.

**What about dating?** At some point, your gay teenager may ask to bring home a date. Treat your teenager the same way you would if it was an opposite-sex date.

**What should I tell my friends and relatives?** At some point, you will want to tell relatives and friends. If you yourself are conflicted, then wait until you are feeling more okay with it. Get your child's permission before telling others, and ask your child what s/he feels comfortable with you telling. True friends and relatives will be supportive. For those who are unsupportive, you may need to avoid or spend less time with them. If they are critical or hostile, you have a right to ask them to avoid making negative comments around you.

## Summary

Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity, love and respect. We are all sexual beings, and struggle with our drives, desires, orientation, self-identity, loneliness and relationships. We do not choose our orientation. We must learn to accept and love ourselves (or another), without judging or hurting one another. We have far more in common with one another than we have in differences.

## References

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Written by the eMentalHealth.ca Team and Partners.

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