

Be Yourself

Questions & Answers for
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
& Transgender Youth





Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is the nation's foremost family-based organization committed to the civil rights of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender persons. Founded in 1973 by mothers and fathers, PFLAG has 200,000 members and supporters in more than 500 chapters throughout the United States. This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced and serviced by the PFLAG national office (located in Washington, D.C.), the national Board of Directors and our Regional Directors. PFLAG is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

For more information, please visit www.pflag.org.

Our Vision

We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Only with respect, dignity and equality for all will we reach our full potential as human beings, individually and collectively. PFLAG welcomes the participation and support of all who share in, and hope to realize this vision.

Our Mission

PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender 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. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

Be Yourself: Questions and Answers for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth.
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Definitions used in this booklet:

Sexual Orientation

Defined by a person's enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to other people.

Gender Identity

A person's internal sense of being male or female.

Heterosexual (or "straight")

Refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are mostly for the opposite sex.

Homosexual (or "gay")

Refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are mostly for the same sex.

Lesbian

Refers to women who are homosexual.

Bisexual (or "bi")

Refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are for both genders.

Transgender

Refers to someone whose gender identity or expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex.

Intersexed

People are individuals born with anatomy or physiology, which differs from cultural and/or medical ideals of male and female.

Introduction

Sexual orientation and gender identity are complex issues, and figuring it out can be difficult and confusing for anyone. Coming out as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT) youth can be especially complicated and fraught with questions.

As a questioning or GLBT youth, you are at a time in your life when you are becoming an adult, yet you might not have adult rights. Your relationship with your parents, guardians or family is changing. You're becoming more independent, and they're having to accept that you're not their little girl or boy any more. That's not easy for either of you.

And all of a sudden, something you didn't think about a few years ago – sex – might feel like the most important thing in the world.

If you're a GLBT teenager – or if you think you might be or wonder if you are – it's even more confusing, because probably no one ever prepared you for that.

Growing up, your friends and family may have teased you about liking girls if you're a boy, or boys if you're a girl. Maybe they talked about dating, falling in love and getting married. But they probably never talked about when you grow up and fall in love with another guy, or about marrying a woman just like you, or what it would be like to feel that your physical sex doesn't match up with how you feel inside. In fact, in your family or at school you probably have heard “gay,” “fag,” or “dyke” used as an insult or witnessed – or experienced – harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Popular culture is still dominated by heterosexual images. TV, movies and magazines mostly show men and women together. Most music you hear is about falling in love with the opposite sex. If you're a guy, your friends are probably talking about girls, and if you're a girl, they're talking about guys. And, while most people your age seem to fit neatly into expected gender roles, you may feel you don't – or don't want to.

All of that makes things hard if you're GLBT – or think you might be – because you don't have much that relates to you.

This booklet was written to try help you, to answer some of your questions, to suggest websites you can visit, and people to whom you can talk, and to help you understand three things:

One: It is ok to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Being GLBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed. Your sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who you are.

Two: It takes time to know who you are. It's OK to be confused, it's OK to be unsure if you're GLBT, and it's OK to take your time finding out. There's no need to rush.

Three: You're not alone. Right now, there are tens of thousands of other youth, all thinking they're GLBT or wondering if they are, all wondering if they're the only one, all trying to find someone to talk to about it. Hundreds of thousands more, however, have already traveled that road.

One of them or another helpful person will be on the other end of the line if you call any of the numbers at the back of this book or log on to any of the website resources that are listed. They're people with whom you can talk openly, compare notes, and ask advice.

The questions other youth have had about being GLBT shape this booklet. We hope it will help you find your own answers.

I think I might be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, but what if I don't know for sure?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *You'll know when you know. It could take a while, and there's no need to rush.*

Some GLBT people say that, from the time they were very young – even just five or six – they “felt different.” They didn't share the grade-school crushes about which friends talked, they had crushes on friends of their own sex, or they questioned their gender identity – and no one seemed to be talking about that.

Often, they say, it took a while to put a name to their feelings – to begin to think of themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. But when they started thinking in those words, it made sense – it fit with the feelings they'd had growing up.

Many other people, though, don't begin to figure out their sexual orientation or gender identity until they're teenagers or even adults – and it can be confusing.

At some point, almost everybody gets a “crush” on someone of the same sex. And we often explore or identify with different gender roles and expectations. But none of that means you're GLBT.

One or two sexual experiences with someone of the same sex may not mean you're gay, either – just as one or two sexual experiences with someone of the opposite sex may not mean you're straight. Many GLBT people have some sexual experiences with the opposite gender, and many straight people have some same-sex sexual experiences. People who have same-sex and opposite-sex experiences often identify as bisexual.

It's important to know, too, that you can be a virgin or not be sexually active and still know that you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Your feelings and your emotional and physical attractions will help tell you who you are.

Our sexuality develops over time. Don't worry if you aren't sure. Your school years are a time of figuring out what works for you, and crushes and experimentation are often part of that. Over time, you'll find that you're drawn mostly to men or women – or both – and then you'll know. You don't have to label yourself.

As with sexuality, some people know at an early age that their gender identity and how they want to express their gender publicly doesn't match what their parents and others expect of them. For others their gender identity develops and changes over time. If you feel your gender identity does not match the “boy or girl” label that others have assumed about you, that is something to explore and learn more about.

If you think you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, don't be afraid of it, and don't hide your feelings from yourself. All that does is keep you from figuring out your sexual or gender identity – from figuring yourself out.

I don't see anything that says other people are GLBT. Am I the only one?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *No.*

In terms of sexual orientation, Dr. Alfred Kinsey, the world's best-known sex researcher, concluded from his research that almost nobody is purely straight or gay. He found that most people have some attraction to the same sex during their lives, and that many people have some sexual experiences with the same sex, or with both sexes.

Think of it as a range, or “sexual continuum.” At one end of the range are many people who are attracted only to the same sex. At another end of the range are many people who are attracted only to the opposite sex. And in between are people who are attracted to both sexes.

Like our sexuality, our gender identity can be looked at as a continuum as well. There is a whole range of identities to be found on the transgender or “gender different” spectrum. Through our lives, we can experience and express our gender in a variety of ways.

So wherever you are on that continuum, you've got plenty of company. Most estimates say that 4.5 to 10 percent of the population is gay, lesbian or bisexual.

There are GLBT people all around you – you just can't tell who they are all the time. They're white, black, Asian, Latino, and Native American. They're Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, and Buddhist. They're old and young, rich and poor. They're doctors and nurses, construction workers, teachers and students, secretaries, ministers and rabbis, store clerks, mechanics, business people, police officers, politicians, and athletes.

And when they were teenagers, most of them probably felt the same way you do. If you get to feeling you're all by yourself, just remember: singer Ani DiFranco probably felt that way too. And musician Elton John. And tennis star Martina Navratilova. And actor Alan Cumming. And author Leslie Feinberg. And thousands of other people.

Is it okay to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Yes. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is as okay and as natural as being straight.*

No one knows exactly how human gender identity or sexual orientation – gay or straight – are determined. Most experts think it's a matter of genetics, biology and environment – that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity could be set before birth or as early as two or three years old.

Dr. Richard Pillard, a psychiatrist at Boston University School of Medicine, points out that homosexuality exists “in virtually every animal species that has been exhaustively studied.” Homosexuality is as much a part of nature as heterosexuality.

Not only is it as natural, it's as healthy to be gay, lesbian or bisexual as to be straight – no matter what some people might tell you. The American Psychiatric Association declared in 1973 that homosexuality is not a mental disorder or disease, and the American Psychological Association says that it would be unethical to try to change a person's sexual orientation.

Being transgender or gender variant is not a disorder either, although Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is still listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association.

Being GLBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed – a person's sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who they are. There is nothing wrong with being GLBT. In fact, you'll find that there's a lot to celebrate.

What about “ex-gay” ministries and “reparative therapy” – can it help me?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *No. Not only do these measures not work, but they are unnecessary and likely to harm you.*

Because homosexuality is not “chosen,” you cannot “change your mind” if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, in spite of what so-called “reparative therapists” and “ex-gay ministries” claim. In fact, these measures have been rejected by every major medical and professional association and have been proven to cause serious damage and even lead to suicide.

Here are a few points to know:

- In 1990, the American Psychological Association stated that scientific evidence shows that reparative therapy does not work and that it can do more harm than good.
- In 1997, the American Psychological Association again publicly cautioned against so-called “reparative therapy,” also known as conversion therapy.
- In 1998, the American Psychiatric Association stated it was opposed to reparative therapy, stating “psychiatric literature strongly demonstrates that treatment attempts to change sexual orientation are ineffective. However, the potential risks are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive [suicidal] behavior...”
- The American Medical Association, states in its policy number H-160.991, that it “opposes, the use of ‘reparative’ or ‘conversion’ therapy that is based upon the assumption that homosexuality per se is a mental disorder or based upon the a priori assumption that the patient should change his/her homosexual orientation.”
- In 2001, The U.S. Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior asserted that homosexuality is not “a reversible lifestyle choice.”

Many PFLAG parents have seen firsthand how damaging this so-called “reparative therapy” has been to their children. PFLAG members believe that it is important that we educate society based on scientific facts and reputable professional opinions, not on the ideological and pseudo-scientific beliefs expressed by ex-gay ministries and advocates of reparative therapy.

Knowing who these groups are and the various names under which they work is critical. See page 21 for a list of just some of them.

What is gender identity? What does transgender mean?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Most people identify as male or female, but for some of us, how we identify and how we feel doesn’t match the gender assigned to us at birth.*

A person’s gender identity is their internal sense of being male or female. Gender expression is how someone presents their gender to the world. We all have a gender identity, and we all have ways of expressing it.

A *transgender* person is someone whose gender identity or expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex. The term “transgender” is used to describe several distinct but related groups of people who use a variety of other terms to self-identify, including transsexuals (not all transsexual people need or want sex reassignment surgery), masculine women, feminine

men, drag queens/kings, cross-dressers, gender queers, two-spirit, butches, transmen, transwomen, etc. Like other people, transgender people can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual. It's okay to be transgender – the most important thing is to be yourself.

I thought GLBT people act certain ways. If I don't fit a stereotype, am I still GLBT?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Ignore the stereotypes. Some people fit them, some don't. Be yourself.*

GLBT people, like straight people, act all kinds of ways. Stereotypes arise out of ignorance and prejudice. Sometimes a stereotype about a group doesn't fit anyone in that group. Sometimes it fits a few people, sometimes more. But a stereotype never fits everyone in any group.

For example, you might hear that gay men aren't athletic. Well, what about Dave Kopay and Esera Tuaolo, both of whom played NFL football for 10 years? Or Olympic gold medalist diver Greg Louganis? All of these men are gay – along with many other famous athletes.

Some gay men are “butch,” and some are not. Either way, it is okay. The same thing goes for lesbian and bisexual women. There are many stereotypes about lesbians. Some women fit them, some don't. Don't worry about the stereotypes – you can't let them define who you are, whether they fit you or not. There are as many different ways to express your GLBT identity as there are people in this world.

Some people react to stereotypes by trying to act just the opposite. Some guys who aren't sure of their sexuality may act super macho, as do some gay men who are afraid of being identified as gay, or “outed.” Some lesbian women act very feminine for the same reason.

Remember – you don't need to prove anything to anybody. Just be yourself.

I don't always see myself reflected in the GLBT community. Are there resources for youth of color?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Yes – there are more and more resources for GLBT youth of color and for others who have multiple identities (disabled youth, homeless youth and others).*

As a GLBT youth of color you might face a lot of issues that effect how you experience, act on and come out about your sexual orientation and gender identity – including cultural and family traditions, access to resources, and immigration status. In deciding to come out, it might be hard to risk relationships with your family and friends in your racial/ethnic community and you might not feel accepted as a person of color in white GLBT groups.

There are the multiple impacts of being GLBT and a person of color in our society, being GLBT in your community of color and then also dealing with the racism and ignorance that you find in some segments of the GLBT community. But there are GLBT people in all communities and in all cultures, and there are an increasing number of resources available for you and your family.

Do I need to worry about HIV and AIDS?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Everybody has to be informed about HIV and AIDS.*

Being young doesn't protect you from getting AIDS. A lot of people in their 20s and 30s living with AIDS today became infected when they were teenagers. It's not who you are – GLBT, straight, male, female – but what you do that puts you at risk for HIV infection.

Since the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many people have viewed HIV/AIDS as a gay issue. The GLBT community mobilized early in the epidemic to formulate a response that included educating communities, creating visibility to reduce stigma, developing prevention strategies and advocating for appropriate care and treatment options for People Living with AIDS. Yet the epidemic has continued to progress and take its toll on many communities globally. Still, despite overwhelming statistics documenting the spread of HIV/AIDS in other communities, many people still choose to view HIV/AIDS as a gay issue.

The truth is that being GLBT does not give you AIDS. Certain sexual practices, drug use, and other factors can put you at risk for catching HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, as well as other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Everyone needs to get the facts about HIV/AIDS.

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by sharing needles and/or syringes (primarily for drug injection) with someone who is infected, or, less commonly (and now very rarely in countries where blood is screened for HIV antibodies), through transfusions of infected blood or blood clotting factors. Babies born to HIV-infected women may become infected during birth or through breast-feeding after birth. While research has revealed a great deal of valuable information, a lot of false or misleading information, often fueled by homophobia, continues to be shared widely, so be sure to consider the source when educating yourself about HIV/AIDS.

Will people accept me?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Some people will accept you and some won't.*

Prejudice and discrimination are everywhere in America, and around the world. There's prejudice against African Americans, against Latino/as, against

Arabs, against Asians, against women, against poor people, against older people and youth, disabled people and others. It takes time to overcome prejudice and change attitudes.

If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender you're going to run into prejudice. Our society has a "heterosexual assumption." We're taught by our families, our schools, our religions and the media to assume that everyone is straight, and we're often influenced to discriminate against those who aren't or who don't appear to be. That "assumption" has begun to change only recently. Likewise, our society has assumptions about what it means to be a boy or girl, man or woman, and may judge others by how they conform to those preconceptions.

The prejudice you run into could be fairly mild, like people assuming you're straight when you're not, and embarrassing you (and themselves) with their mistake. But it could be much worse. GLBT people are at risk to be beaten up, kicked out of their homes, and fired from their jobs – just for being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. And, the discrimination that GLBT people face can be compounded if they belong to other communities that experience discrimination. People often fear what they don't understand, and hate what they fear. That's the basis of prejudice and, when it's aimed at GLBT people on the basis of their sexual orientation, it's called "homophobia."

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are being challenged, however, as more and more people are learning the truth about GLBT people. Attitudes are starting to change partly because GLBT people are being open and honest about who they are. Attitudes are changing also because other people are standing up with GLBT people to say, "They are my friends, or my children, or my brothers – and I'm proud of them."

I feel so alone. Who can I talk to?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *You don't need to be alone. There are people out there who can help.*

Unless their parents have been very open with them about sex, most teenagers can feel guilty and ashamed of any sexual feelings and experiences, straight or gay.

On top of that, it's not easy to discover that you are GLBT. The prejudice that exists in our society can make you want to hide the way you feel, even from yourself. And that can make you feel isolated and all alone.

The best thing you can do is find someone to talk to that you can trust. Maybe that's someone you already know – a friend, parent, brother or sister, or a friend's parent or older brother or sister. Maybe it's an adult to whom you confided in the past, whom you know you can trust again.

But, right now, until you're comfortable and happy with yourself, avoid talking with anyone who you think might judge you or anyone who might be anti-GLBT. You could possibly check out people's reactions by bringing up the subject of homosexuality or bisexuality in general. Ask questions like: "I saw a TV show about being gay. Do you know any gay people?" or "Some kids in school were making fun of a kid who is bisexual. Do you think that's wrong?" or "I heard about a kid who is a lesbian and whose parents threw her out of the house. Why would they do that?"

When you ask questions like this, however, you have to realize that people's responses aren't personal comments about you. They don't know the real intent of your questions. They might have negative comments about GLBT people in this situation, but respond very differently about you being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

If you don't know anyone with whom you're comfortable talking and who will be supportive and understanding, start by calling one of the helpline numbers or organizations listed in the back of this booklet. You can talk to a teenager or an adult. You don't have to give your name, and they won't try to talk you into or out of anything.

If you don't feel ready to talk with someone on the phone, you can learn more by reading resources and information from other youth on some of the websites listed at the end of this booklet. Many organizations provide e-mail addresses to which you can send questions confidentially. Please remember to use good judgment when making any contacts, whether on the phone, online, or in person.

Whatever you choose, talking does help. Talking to others and being open and honest can be an affirming way for you to connect with others in your life and in vibrant and diverse GLBT communities. And you'll learn you're really not alone.

Should I come out?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Only if you want to, and only when you're ready and feel safe doing so. Don't come out just because someone else thinks you should.*

Hiding the fact that you're GLBT is called "being in the closet." Being open about it is called "coming out." You can come out to one person, to friends and family only, or to everyone you know. It's up to you.

There's no reason you have to come out if you aren't ready. Sometimes there are very good reasons not to come out. There are real risks in coming out. There are people who won't accept you if you're GLBT, people who will do and say terrible things. They could be your parents or your friends or your classmates

or your teachers, people you love or depend on for financial help, companionship, encouragement, or other support.

There are also very good reasons, however, to let some people know that you're not straight. Hiding your sexual orientation or gender identity keeps the important people in your life from knowing about a big part of you. By coming out you can live with integrity, begin building community support and form healthy relationships. At some point, many GLBT people find that the loneliness and isolation of keeping a secret is worse than any fear of coming out.

Whatever your reasons for thinking you should or shouldn't come out, it's your decision and no one else's. It's also one you should take at your own speed.

Before you come out to others, you have to come out to yourself. That means not only knowing you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, but being comfortable with being GLBT, and being sure of who you are as a person.

Keep in mind that knowing you're GLBT is just being aware of one more piece of who you are. You're the same person you were before, but now you just know more about yourself. A lot of GLBT youth have learned to say to themselves, "I'm not straight GLBT and that's OK."

Before you come out, you might want to become more educated about sexual orientation and gender identity for your own information and to be able to respond to the people you will encounter who will have wrong ideas about these things. You'll feel proud to know the facts if someone asks you a question or if you want to correct someone's misinformation about GLBT people. Explore the resources listed at the back of this booklet. By learning about other's experiences and talking about yourself, you'll know more about who you are and what to expect when you come out. Let your friends and allies know that you're getting ready to come out so they can support you.

A support system is important when you're coming out. You'll want people around who care about you and will be there for you, whether it's just to talk or to give you a hug when you need one, or to give you a place to stay, if necessary. If you don't feel that you already have people like that, contact the nearest PFLAG chapter or one of the other groups listed at the back of this booklet.

Who should I tell?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *To start, only those people who you want to know and who you have reason to trust.*

Coming out isn't something that you do once and then it's over. You might come out now to your family and later to friends, or the other way around. You could come out only to one parent, or to a brother or sister, and later to

the rest of the family. Many people come out more than once as they grow into their identities, or as their identities change. And disclosure can be more complicated when you need to disclose a transgender identity, HIV status or other issues.

If you are transgender, some people, including your parents, teachers, principal and classmates might be uncomfortable with how you publicly express your internal sense of gender, especially if it challenges people's sense of how women and men are supposed to dress and act. How you express to others your internal sense of gender is something to think about, discuss with people you trust, and evaluate in terms of your safety and what kind of community you have to support you.

The people you tell first about your sexual orientation or gender identity should be the ones you trust the most. You need to be able to trust them not to hurt you, to accept you for who you are, and to respect your privacy and not tell anyone you don't want told.

Think about what you could lose by telling a particular person. If it's a parent, might they kick you out of the house? Cut you off from your friends? If it's a friend, are they likely to withdraw from you? Would they tell other kids at school? What would happen if they did?

Think also about what you could lose by *not* telling a particular person. Is your relationship with your parents or your friend strained because you're keeping a secret from them? Would you be closer with them, and be able to get more support from them if they understood why you were acting withdrawn?

Think about what kinds of things you've been able to share with them in the past and how they reacted. If there's someone to whom you want to come out, and you aren't sure how they'll react, try to feel them out first. You could get them talking about a book, movie or a television show about gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people.

Keep in mind though that someone's reaction to a GLBT person in a movie might not be the same if that person is their daughter or their brother or their friend. And it can work both ways – people might seem either more or less prejudiced in a hypothetical or movie-type situation than they would when responding to someone close to them.

For example, because homophobia and transphobia are so common and widely accepted in our society, a friend or a parent might, without thinking, joke about a GLBT character in a movie – or might do so because they think you expect that – but show far more thoughtfulness and desire to understand when responding to your coming out. On the other hand, parents or friends who seem accepting of GLBT characters in the media might be far less accepting of homosexuality, bisexuality or transgenderism in someone close to them.

To get a sense of how someone will react to your being GLBT, try to keep your questions specific, personal, and thought-provoking. Say you have a friend who has an older brother off at college, or in the military. You could say something like “I’ve been reading about gay groups on college campuses” or “I’ve been reading about gays in the military. Would you be upset if your brother came home and told you he was gay?” Your friend might surprise you and answer, “My brother is gay.”

How do I tell my parent(s) or guardian(s)?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *When you’re ready, and with care.*

Many GLBT teens say that their relationship with their parents was much closer after they came out because it was more honest. They say it was relief to feel like they weren’t keeping a secret any more. PFLAG was founded by these kind of parents who wanted to support their GLBT sons and daughters, work with their children for equal rights, and who wanted to welcome their sons’ and daughters’ partners into their families.

But it doesn’t always work that way. Some teens who come out to their parents are forced to leave home. Some parents become abusive. Some family relationships never recover.

Before you come out to your parents, there are some things for you to consider.

Think about your parents’ general reaction to GLBT people. Find out as much as you can, by observing your parents or asking indirect questions. Do they have gay friends? Do they read books or go to movies that include same-sex relationships? Is their religion accepting of GLBT people? Have you heard them say that there’s nothing wrong with being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?

Think about your relationship with your parents. Have they shown that they love you even when they’re upset with you? Have they stuck by you even when you’ve done something they didn’t like?

Be prepared, and make a plan for if they don’t respond well. Have someone to call right away if you need support. If you had to leave home, do you have a place to stay? If your parents cut off financial support, do you have someone else you can turn to?

If your answer to all of these questions is “no,” **do not** come out to your parents until you have a safe place to go to and way to support yourself. You’ll probably be better off waiting until you’re on your own. You might decide never to tell them, because they wouldn’t understand.

If your answer to all of these questions is “yes,” then it’s probably safe to tell them.

You're the only one who can answer those questions. Weigh the balance of "yes" and "no" responses when you're thinking about coming out. Trust your gut. It's almost always frightening coming out to your parent(s) or guardian, but if you're terrified about it, you should pay attention to that. Not all parents will be accepting.

If you decide you can and want to tell your parent(s), think about how you can make it easiest on them and yourself. Try to think about how they're going to feel, and the questions they may have, so that you're ready for them. Call a local PFLAG chapter and speak to a parent who can talk with you about how your own parent might react (you can find a chapter close to you by looking at the PFLAG website at www.pflag.org).

It will also be best if you can pick a time when your parents are relaxed and not pressured by work or family worries. Otherwise, they may feel they don't have the time to deal with it, and shut you out.

Be prepared for your parents to need some time to accept your being GLBT – just as you probably needed some time yourself.

Remember that your parent(s) are from an older generation – one that was more homophobic and transphobic than yours. Even if they're accepting of GLBT people in general, your parents may be shocked at learning that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. They may not want to believe it at first, or they may want to try to bring in a psychiatrist to "cure" you (see page 5 for more information about this situation).

Before the psychological and psychiatric associations concluded that homosexuality is perfectly ok, there were a lot of theories about how people became GLBT because of how their parents acted. Your parents may worry about what your being GLBT says about them and about whether they failed you in some way, and that worry can come out as anger and defensiveness.

Your parents could also feel that you've rejected them or their way of life by being GLBT, or that you've somehow ruined their dreams for you. There's often some of this feeling in all relationships between teens and their parents, as the teen becomes more independent and parents have to let go of the image they have of what their son or daughter will be. Parents of GLBT people may feel this sense of loss and rejection even more strongly.

Even if they don't have those reactions, your parents are probably going to feel worried about you, about whether this will put you in danger, about whether your life will be happy, about whether you'll have a family of your own. That can make them want to ignore or deny what you've told them.

They may worry about how they're going to tell their parents and friends. They'll be starting a coming out process of their own.

The best thing you can do is be ready with answers – or suggest people with whom they can talk. The more homework you’ve done, and the more self-assured you seem, the more you’ll convince your parents that you’re ready to take responsibility for yourself. Then they won’t worry so much about you.

PFLAG can help a lot with this process. PFLAG and PFLAG members can help provide books, films, and information for you and your parents, and by providing contacts with other families who have GLBT children, or counselors who can help your parents work through their feelings.

And remember – you don’t have to come out to your whole family at once. Many teens have talked first to the parent, family member or guardian they thought would be more accepting or with whom it was easiest to talk.

Recognize, though, that confiding in only one parent may cause hurt and tension between your parents. The parent who is not told may feel slighted when he or she finds out, and the one who is told may feel tension because he or she has a burden of explaining your silence or of keeping a secret until you are ready to talk to the other parent. Think it through if you plan to tell just one parent.

Most importantly, make sure that you have other people with whom to talk, because, even when coming out to your parents is relatively easy, it is still a difficult process. The more support you have, the better.

What if I’m being harassed at school? What can I do about it?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *You shouldn’t have to deal with harassment at school, and there are many resources available to help you.*

School can be a hard place for GLBT people. Most GLBT people hear lots of jokes and insults on a regular basis at school – and some of those jokes might come from teachers or principals as well as other students. Some GLBT people are physically assaulted at school or by classmates off school property. As a transgender person, your school probably does not have dress codes, bathrooms, locker rooms, gym classes or athletic teams that meet your needs.

Regardless of your sexual orientation or gender identity, you have the right to a safe learning environment, and there are lots of resources available to help you and your parent(s) or guardian achieve it. One of PFLAG’s top priorities is to help students, parents, guardians and educators create safe and affirming schools in their communities.

If you are being harassed by your peers or finding barriers to being yourself at school, try talking to a supportive teacher or staff member or to someone else in your life who can listen and give you support. It is also good to see what kinds of policies against harassment and discrimination that your school has in

place. Recent legal rulings hold schools responsible for preventing anti-GLBT abuse in some cases, and some states have anti-discrimination laws that apply to educational institutions.

If you are not getting any support at school, you can contact PFLAG, or one of other organizations listed in the back of this booklet.

Will I lose my straight friends? And where do I find GLBT friends?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *To the first question – probably not. And to the second – everywhere.*

Many people say they have more straight friends now that they're "out," and that they're a lot happier and more confident since coming out. It's easier to be close to people when you're not hiding anything and when you're comfortable.

Some people, however, have had horrible experiences coming out at school. Kids can be very cruel, especially when they're insecure and are looking for ways to build themselves up. They can harass you and make your life miserable. GLBT teens have a high drop-out rate because of the way they're treated.

If you want to come out to friends, be careful to trust only friends who will respect your privacy and confidentiality. Friends who tend to gossip can cause problems, even if they don't mean to hurt you.

Some friends will be supportive right away. One or two friends might have already guessed that you're not straight or that you are transgender. You may find that you already have GLBT friends, and didn't know it.

Some friends may need time to adjust to the idea of your being GLBT. Some may wonder if your coming out to them is a way of coming on to them, and that might make them feel uncomfortable. Some may wonder, since you're a close friend and you're GLBT, whether they're GLBT too. Just as you did with your parents, try to think about how each friend is likely to feel, and how you can let them see that you haven't changed. Just as with your parents, offering them some of the resources listed in the back of this booklet can help.

Talking to GLBT friends about their coming out experiences can also help. Finding new friends who are GLBT is really important – friends who know exactly what you're going through because they've "been there," or are in the process of coming out themselves.

GLBT youth organizations are a good place to start, because there you won't have to try to figure out whether another teen is GLBT or not. Most major cities have GLBT youth organizations where you'll be able to meet people easily. You'll find new friends with whom you can share experiences and support and learn more about yourself.

If you're in a small town or in a rural area, it may be harder to find groups like these. In that case, you can get in touch with peers through the websites and hotlines listed in the back of this booklet. The organizations in the resource directory can also help you find more specific groups, such as organizations of GLBT African Americans, Arabs, Asians, or Latinos, or support groups for GLBT people with disabilities.

And remember – even if it seems to you that you must be the only GLBT person at your school, you aren't. With as much as 10% of the population being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, there are other GLBT students at your school whom you might already know (but not know that they're GLBT) or whom you might not yet have met.

People joke sometimes about having “gaydar,” a type of “radar” for telling who is and isn't GLBT. Figuring out who is GLBT if they're not completely “out,” is like figuring out if someone's interested in you. Sometimes you can tell, sometimes you can't.

Can I have a family of my own?

THE SHORT ANSWER: *Yes.*

Throughout the world same-sex couples form and build long lasting family units. Many same-sex couples hold ceremonies to celebrate their commitment to each other and to share their relationship with family and friends. As of 2006, same-sex marriage is legally recognized in the state of Massachusetts while Vermont and Connecticut have legalized civil unions, a form of relationship recognition that provides benefits similar to marriage under state law. Marriage for same-sex couples is now legal in Spain, Norway, the Netherlands, South Africa and Canada with many countries providing benefits and/or civil unions to same-sex couples as well. More and more companies, such as IBM and American Express, now treat same-sex partners like any other married couple, and provide health care coverage for their GLBT employees' partners.

Many same-sex couples are also raising children together. Some couples and individuals have used artificial insemination in order to conceive a child. Other GLBT people are raising children from previous heterosexual relationships on their own or with their new partners. As society's attitudes continue to change, adoption of children by gay couples has also become more common.

GLBT couples continue to build family units despite legal concerns over parental recognition, gender identity, lack of protections and benefits. While it sometimes can be a legal battle for same-sex couples, GLBT people throughout the world have managed to create both tradition and non-traditional units of support and love.

And many GLBT people see their friends and the local GLBT community as their family. In most cities, there is a large and close-knit GLBT community that offers the same type of love and support we look for from our families.

Be Yourself

Obviously, this booklet cannot ask or answer every question. But we hope it gives you a place to start. You don't have to be alone when exploring your sexual or gender identity. The resources beginning on the next page will give you a place to continue – to find information, to find answers, to find friends, and to get support.

You'll learn that the best advice is to be yourself. If you are GLBT, you'll soon find that you have the power to shape and define your identity and the way you choose to express it. While coming out will present you with questions and situations you never faced before, you'll also find great joy in the journey of discovery.

Resources

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

The best way for parents, family members, friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people (as well as themselves) to get support, receive educational materials and learn about PFLAG's advocacy efforts is to visit a chapter. PFLAG has more than 500 chapters located in all 50 states.

We suggest you call the local chapter whose name is stamped on the back of this booklet. If there is no chapter listed, you can visit PFLAG on the web, call PFLAG's national office for a referral, or you can use directory assistance to find PFLAG in your local area.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

1726 M Street, NW, Suite 400

Washington, DC 20036

Voice: (202) 467-8180

Web: www.pflag.org

Other Support and Advocacy Organizations

There are numerous other organizations that work on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. The following list includes just a few of the groups that may be able to provide you with information or services:

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

www.glsen.org
(212) 727-0135

The National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC)

www.nyacyouth.org
(800) 541-6922

Gay-Straight Alliance Network

www.gsanetwork.org
(415) 552-4229

TNET (The PFLAG Transgender Network)

www.pflag.org/tnet.html

GenderPAC

www.gpac.org
(202) 462-6610

National Center for Transgender Equality

www.nctequality.org
(202) 903-0112

Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)

www.isna.org

Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL)

www.smyal.org
(202) 546-5940

The Hetrick-Martin Institute, Home of The Harvey Milk High School

www.hmi.org
(212) 674-2400

Youth Resource

www.youthresource.com
(202) 419-3420

Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC)

www.lyric.org
(415) 703-6150

Bisexual Resource Center

www.biresource.org
(617) 424-9595

The Rainbow Alliance for the Deaf

www.rad.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

www.thetaskforce.org

(202) 393-5177

COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere)

www.colage.org

(415) 861-5437

Family Pride Coalition

www.familypride.org

(202) 331-5015

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)

www.glaad.org

(323) 933-2240

Human Rights Campaign

www.hrc.org

(202) 628-4160

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)

www.SIECUS.org

(212) 819-9770

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund

www.lambdalegal.org

(212) 809-8585

National Center for Lesbian Rights

www.nclrights.org

(415) 392-6257

Toll-Free Helplines:

The Trevor Project: (866) 488-7386

The Gay & Lesbian National Hotline: (888) 843-4564

The GLBT National Youth Talkline (*youth serving youth through age 25*)

(800) 246-7743

The National Runaway Switchboard: 1-800-RUNAWAY

For HIV/AIDS Information:

National AIDS Hotline

(800) 342-AIDS

In Spanish: (800) 344-7432

TDD: (800) 243-7889

Publications, Periodicals, and Films:

There are literally hundreds of books, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and films available that provide additional support and resources to parents and families of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals as well as the individuals themselves. The web is a great place to look for information as are bookstores and libraries. For some of PFLAG's recommended reading lists, visit the PFLAG website at www.pflag.org.

Anti-GLBT Organizations to Avoid:

There are a number of groups that have formed to oppose basic civil rights and equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals. Many are difficult to immediately identify since they frequently claim that they are committed to "traditional values," when in reality they advocate for harmful "reparative therapy" and anti-gay legislation.

Knowing who they are and the harms that they pose to you is critical. Below are the names of just a few of these groups. You can learn more about such groups online – People for the American Way (www.pfaw.org) has a resource center that lists these groups, descriptions of their work, and archives of what they've advocated in their own words. You can also get news on these organizations from PFLAG.

American Center for Law and Justice

American College of Pediatricians

American Family Association

Christian Communication Network

Christian Families with Faith for Lesbians and Gays (CFLAG)

Concerned Women for America

Courage/Encourage

Eagle Forum

Family Research Institute

Focus on the Family

Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality (JONAH)

Liberty Counsel

National Association for Research and Therapy for Homosexuality (NARTH)

Parents & Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays, (PFOX)

Positive Alternatives to Homosexuality (PATH)

Traditional Values Coalition

Support PFLAG

The Benefits of PFLAG membership:

- A subscription to our newsletter, the PFLAGpole
- The PFLAG Weekly Alert and Action Alerts via e-mail
- Discounts on PFLAG publications
- Invitations to local, regional and national events and conferences
- Voting privileges for national board members and regional directors
- Satisfaction that you are part of the nationwide network of PFLAG families and friends advocating for GLBT equality

To join as an at-large member, visit www.pflag.org or fill in the application below and mail the application to:

PFLAG

1726 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

Member Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Phone: _____ e-mail: _____

Payment Information:

Check enclosed made payable to PFLAG.

Visa Mastercard Discover American Express

Please charge my card:

\$50 \$75 \$100 \$250 \$500 \$1,000

Card Number: _____

Card Expiration: _____

Important:

The member name and address must match what appears on your credit card billing statement to be processed.

Other PFLAG Publications

Our Daughters and Sons: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People

One of our most popular publications, this is a “must read” for parents who are forming new and honest relationships with a loved one who has come out to them. This booklet answers several commonly-asked questions about having a gay child and includes a list of related resources.

Nuestras Hijas y Nuestros Hijos: Preguntas y respuestas para padres de gays, lesbianas y bisexuales

A culturally appropriate Spanish translation of *Our Daughters and Sons*, this booklet is a valuable resource for Spanish-speaking families coming to terms with homosexuality and bisexuality. It answers commonly asked questions about having a gay or lesbian loved one, and includes Spanish language resources.

Faith in Our Families: Parents, Families and Friends Talk About Religion and Homosexuality

Discovering that a loved one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender can pose new questions about your faith and may prompt you to re-evaluate beliefs that you previously took for granted. By using personal experiences, this publication provides examples for reconciling your faith with the knowledge that a loved one is gay. Includes an updated list of gay and lesbian religious and spiritual groups to watch out for.

Bisexuality Resource Packet

Bisexuality is a commonly misunderstood and misrepresented concept. This packet provides facts about bisexuality, commonly-asked questions, resource lists and a set of articles.

From Our House to the Schoolhouse: A Safe Schools Publication

Making schools safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth is an important part of PFLAG’s work. Facts about anti-gay harassment in schools and important legal landmarks are detailed in this booklet for educators. Resources and a “safe schools checklist” are also included.

(continued)

Opening the Straight Spouses' Closet

Finding out a spouse is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender can be difficult. Questions about sexual orientation, fidelity, self-esteem and fear often go unanswered. This recently updated and expanded publication provides insight into issues facing spouses, including coping stages, identity crises, concerns about children and support avenues.

Our Trans Children

PFLAG'S Transgender Network (TNET) published this booklet as an introduction to transgender (TG) issues especially for parents of "children" of all ages. The booklet covers transgender-related terms, TG youth, transition processes, family journeys, commonly asked questions, commonalities and differences between sexual orientation and gender identity, legal concerns, a brief bibliography, a list of resources, and trans family websites. This is an excellent educational tool for families, friends, employers, and the larger community. (This publication is also available in Spanish.)

Coming Out Trans to Your Parents and Family

This single-page handout outlines things you need to consider when you plan to come out to your parents and family as transgender. It is a guide to making the coming out process as comfortable as possible.

All publications are available as a free download on www.pflag.org and also for purchase. Visit our website or call (202) 467-8180 for more information.



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