



KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER



a Handbook for
Families and Friends

This booklet is dedicated to Keith Phipps, past president of PFLAG NSW Inc., who passed away on 10th September, 2007.

Keith was a tireless warrior for the human rights of the GLBT community. He strove with a passion to offer much needed support to their parents to keep communication lines open and their families together.

This booklet has been produced by PFLAG NSW Inc. and Twenty 10 GLBT Youth Support. We are very grateful for the assistance provided by Twenty 10.



We are the parents and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. We hold monthly support meetings, provide a telephone information service and other resources to educate parents and others on issues of same-sex attraction.

This booklet is not specifically designed to give information and advice on issues of gender identification. If you have questions or need support around your child or loved one being transgendered please contact Twenty10 GLBT Youth Support or the Gender Centre.



PFLAG parents

Welcome



This is the 3rd edition of 'Keeping Families Together', which was originally produced to fulfil the need for a booklet for parents.

A small sub-committee of Mollie Smith, Pamela Garske and Jeff Edgell collaborated with Twenty 10 GLBT Youth Support to bring the project to fruition.

We are very grateful for the assistance provided by Twenty 10 GLBT Youth Support, then and now.

After PFLAG, we believe it is crucial for families to have accurate, unbiased information. PFLAG receives many calls from parents whose son or daughter has 'come out' to them. They are frequently in a state of crisis. They feel their hopes and dreams are shattered and they are often fearful for their child. Who can they talk to? Who can they trust?

After they have spoken to a parent, they need more information in the form of reading matter that will help them understand that homosexuality is not a choice and that their child needs their support and love – more than ever.

This booklet will help address that need.

It will help families realise that having a homosexual child is not the end of the world. They will discover they are not alone and there are many other parents and families with a son or daughter who happens to be homosexual.

Many parents say the experience of having a gay or lesbian child has enriched their lives and they find they have grown as people, becoming much more accepting of differences in other people.

At PFLAG our goal is to keep families together. We believe this booklet will help to achieve that aim.

The Committee of PFLAG NSW Inc.

Thank you

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet, we hope you find it a helpful resource. We would like to reassure you that the questions or concerns you may have are shared by many parents and friends of GLBT (Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender) young people . This booklet aims to provide a starting point towards finding answers to these questions. At the back of this booklet we have included a suggested reading list . We encourage you to continue your own research and to talk to PFLAG or a trained counsellor for additional support.

The decision for somebody to reveal his or her same-sex attraction ('coming out') is not taken lightly. Often individuals give a great deal of thought to this decision. Some people may approach this decision with apprehension and fear, others with excitement and relief. For some, these emotions may be mixed and complex. At times, the process of 'coming out' is associated with the risk of rejection. How you react to this news can greatly impact your child / loved one. Upon hearing this news some parents and friends may become concerned about their child or loved one's future, and the difficulties they may now face. Remember that you can make a difference here and your love and support right now will make the present and the future easier for your child or loved one.

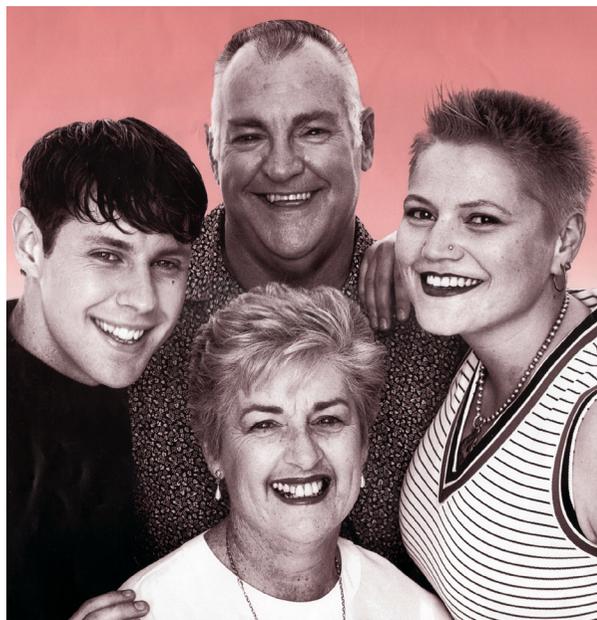
Right now you may feel confused or you may be wondering where you went wrong. You might be blaming yourself or wishing you could return to the status quo. Be reassured that a combination of mixed feelings including grief, fear, dismay, and anger are quite common. You may also feel relieved that everything is out in the open and you can now have a more trusting relationship with your loved one.

At this time it is important to remember that your loved one is the same person you have always known, with the same strengths and faults. Sexual orientation is only one part of a person's life. Likewise your parental

role or friendship has not changed and is not dependent upon your loved one's sexuality. Your loved one did not choose to be same-sex attracted any more than you chose your sexuality.

There are many other people who have been through the same experience and who are willing to help you. Detailed information is available at the back of this booklet. However, a good place to start is by contacting your local PFLAG support group.

Thank you again for taking the time to read this booklet, it is a positive step and shows your desire to support your child or loved one despite any questions or difficulties you are having.



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Same-sex attraction

Sexual desire and feelings of love felt primarily toward people who are of the same gender.

Lesbian

A woman whose sexual desire and feelings of love are primarily for women.

Gay

People whose sexual desire and feelings of love are primarily for people who are the same gender. In Australia this can mean men or women, though the term tends to be used mainly for men.

Bisexual

People whose sexual desire and feelings of love are for both men and women.

Transgender

An umbrella term used to include any person who feels their assigned sex or gender does not adequately reflect their internal gender. Transgender people may express or live this divergence in a number of ways, including (but not limited to) those who live as their internal gender and undergo hormone treatment and gender reassignment in order to have their physical body “match” their internal gender. Being transgendered is not related to any specific form of sexuality. A transgendered person may identify as heterosexual, same-sex attracted or bisexual.

While some of the issues GLB people face are similar to the challenges involved in being transgendered, many are not. This resource cannot do justice to the issues faced by transgendered people and their loved ones. Again, please contact Twenty10 GLBT Youth Support or the Gender Centre.

Definitions

GLBT

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender.

Queer

Queer is a term that is often used as an umbrella term for people who do not identify as heterosexual or as their birth gender. This may include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people however it also refers to people who do not strictly identify with those labels.

Homosexual

People whose sexual desire and feelings of love are primarily for people who are the same gender. This term is largely outdated. Historically this label has been used to define same-sex attraction as a psychological illness. Very few people identify as homosexual in today's society.

Heterosexual

People whose sexual desire and feelings of love are primarily for people of the opposite gender.

Homophobia

The irrational fear of and hatred towards GLBT people.

Homophobia includes prejudice, discrimination, harassment and acts of violence brought on by fear and hatred. Discrimination, harassment and violence are against the law.

Heterosexism

The assumption that everybody is heterosexual and that heterosexual relationships are superior to same sex relationships. Heterosexism is more subtle and insidious than homophobia. For example, GLBT people 'come out' while heterosexual people do not. This is due to the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and natural and does not need to be explained or "confessed" like non-heterosexuality.

Coming Out

The process of 'coming out' as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) has several stages. Initially, the individual realises they are attracted to members of the same sex and then they decide to tell trusted others about their feelings and attractions. The time period it takes to move through these steps varies for different individuals. 'Coming out' is not a one-off process, rather this process occurs each time a LGB person considers disclosing to someone. People may choose to 'come out' or not to 'come out' for many reasons. It is important to be aware that whilst some LGB people may decide to be 'out' to everyone, some may decide to be select in who they tell, or may feel their sexuality has nothing to do with anyone else. LGB people do not have to 'come out' if they do not want to. This should always be their decision.

Some individuals prefer ideas such as 'coming-in', 'coming home' and 'be-coming'. These notions place an emphasis on notions such as finding acceptance within oneself, or of inviting others into your life. 'Coming out' also refers to the process parents go through when telling others about their child's sexuality.

Myths and facts

MYTH (X) Gays, lesbians and bisexuals do not have long term relationships.

FACT (✓) Gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships do work. Long term partnerships are not rare at all. Some same sex couples do not access gay venues or frequent 'the scene' and therefore are not as visible to the community.

MYTH (X) Gay, lesbian and bisexual people grow up to be lonely old people.

FACT (✓) Gay, lesbian and bisexuals develop long lasting friendships and relationships that they consider part of their family. Many have children.

MYTH (X) Gay men are more likely to sexually abuse children.

FACT (✓) Paedophilia and other forms of child abuse occur mainly in the home environment by a family member. 95% of child abuse is carried out by heterosexual-identifying people.¹

MYTH (X) Same-sex attraction is contagious.

FACT (✓) People cannot 'catch' a sexuality. People cannot be recruited to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. Many gay, lesbian and bisexual people state that they have always felt different, and that as they got older they learnt what this difference is called. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is about expressing who you are, and is not the result of another person's influence.

MYTH (X) Same-sex attraction can be 'cured'.

FACT (✓) Same-sex attraction cannot be cured because it is not a disease. It is also not a 'choice' or an 'affliction'. There have been, and still are many, often religious based organisations that claim same-sex attraction is a curable psychological disease or even a demonic possession. These institutions recruit troubled, vulnerable gay people into attending 'conversion therapy programs' and 'sexual reorientation camps' with the aim of turning them into heterosexuals that are no longer attracted to the same sex. Teenagers are sometimes forced by their parents and church leaders into attending against their will. Virtually all major independent studies of this process have shown that not only is there a negligible 'success' rate – but that the process of 'conversion' often burdens gay people with even greater feelings of guilt, self hatred and isolation. The suicide rate amongst those who have been subject to these 'reorientation' programmes is significantly higher than amongst the general gay population. Psychiatric and psychological organisations in most countries almost universally condemn this practice, and several 'Conversion Courses' have been shut down due to questionable and illegal practices.

MYTH (X) Bisexuals just can't make up their minds.

FACT (✓) The point is they have! Sexuality ranges on a scale between being exclusively same-sex attracted and exclusively heterosexual. Many people are naturally between extremes of the spectrum.

MYTH (X) All gay men have anal sex.

FACT (✓) Gay men are diverse and have preferences like anyone else. Some practise anal sex, some do not. Anal sex is not exclusive to gay men, some heterosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals also practice anal sex.

1. Jenny, C, Roester, T, Poyer, K (1994) Are children at risk for Sexual Abuse by Homosexuals? Pediatrics Vol 94 (1)

Myths and facts

MYTH (X) Gay men want to be women and lesbians want to be men.

FACT (✓) This myth confuses sexuality with issues concerning gender and stems from a stereotyped understanding of gender. Gay men and lesbians, like all people, are diverse. They express their sexuality in different ways, and may also express their gender in different ways. However, if a person does not 'fit' the stereotype for a man or a woman this does not mean that they are confused about their gender, or that they are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

MYTH (X) Lesbians, gays and bisexuals have more sexual partners than heterosexuals.

FACT (✓) Lesbian, gay and bisexual people share the same amount of interest in sexual activity as heterosexual people. They have a diverse range of lifestyles, relationships and interests in sexual activity. Many gay, lesbian and bisexual couples commit to each other for life and hold commitment ceremonies to celebrate their relationships formally, in the company of friends and family. Some may have more than the average sexual partners. This is no different to the diversity found in the heterosexual community.

Q. How many gay, lesbian and bisexual people are there?

Research tells us that approximately 10% of the population are gay, lesbian or bisexual². It could be argued that this is in fact an under-estimate, due to people not identifying their sexuality because of the shame still associated with being gay, lesbian or bisexual. If this is the true figure, it still means that on average, someone in every extended family is gay, lesbian or bisexual. Love and sexual relations between people of the same gender have been found in every known culture and society. These relationships are in every social, economic, racial and religious group. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people work in all professions. They are our friends, our families, our colleagues. We all personally know gay, lesbian or bisexual people. We just may not realise it.

Q. What causes someone to be same-sex attracted, bisexual or heterosexual?

Research so far has highlighted only one thing – we do NOT know what causes anyone's sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people have been raised in all kinds of homes, as have heterosexual people. This is a multifaceted issue which goes beyond the scope of this resource, for more information refer to the recommended readings at the back of this booklet.

Q. Is same sex attraction natural?

Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is as natural and healthy as being heterosexual. For the approximate 10% of Australians who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, it is a natural part of who they are and for them to act as if they were heterosexual would be unnatural.

2. Bell, A and Weinberg, M (1978). Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity among Men and Women. New York, Simon and Schuster

Questions and answers

Prior to the 1950's same-sex attraction was treated by psychiatrists as a disorder. Times have changed and today same-sex attraction is accepted by psychiatrists and many general people as a legitimate and psychologically healthy expression of human sexuality.

Over the years, discussions between Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) have revealed that:

- People are often aware of their sexual orientation at a very early age, regardless of whether they identify as heterosexual or same-sex attracted
- No children were influenced or taught to be gay, lesbian or bisexual by any other person
- Family fears of 'catching' same-sex attraction or being 'recruited' are without scientific foundation. These fears are irrational (see homophobia). In families where GLB children and adults try to suppress their sexuality because they do not feel safe or supported, the ramifications for the GLB individual and the family's relationships can be enormous.

Q. Can you identify gay, lesbian and bisexual people by the way they behave and dress?

Australia is a richly diverse society, in which people behave and dress in all kinds of ways. Ignorance and prejudice give rise to assumptions and stereotypes. A stereotype never fits everyone in any group. Physical appearance and mannerisms have nothing to do with a person's sexuality - these are part of their personality.

Q. Why did they have to tell me?

It is important to accept and understand your child's sexuality. Some families believe they may have been happier not knowing. They start to recall the time before they knew as 'problem free', remembering an ideal rather than the reality, and failing to account for

the often significant distress of the GLB person who is under the pressure of hiding a part of their life from people that they love.

Sometimes we can try to deny what is happening by rejecting what we're hearing ("It's just a phase, you'll get over it"), or by not registering the impact of what we're being told ("That's nice dear, and what do you want for dinner?")

Parents and families may feel resentment towards their child or loved one's sexuality. This feeling is based on the belief that it was a conscious decision to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. It also comes from the parent's fears of pain or discomfort associated with their 'coming out' and the resulting homophobia they too may experience.

The main decision most gays, lesbians and bisexuals have to make when deciding whether to come out to their loved ones is "Will I be honest and talk about who I am, or do I have to hide it?" Hiding it imposes a constant and tremendous burden on the individual. A large part of their life would be kept secret from you and you would never really know the whole person. All young people face the stress involved in adolescence and developing their sense of self. GLB young people also face the challenge of developing a positive self identity in a society that still perpetuates discrimination and homophobia. This challenge is even more difficult if the GLB young person's family and friends do not demonstrate support and love.

Someone who has reached the point of telling a parent or someone close to them that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual is not usually a person who is going through a phase. Generally they have thought long and hard to understand and acknowledge their sexual orientation.

For someone to tell their family or friends that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual often means taking a great

Questions and answers

risk – the biggest risk is that of rejection. Few people would take that risk lightly or prematurely. This is a crucial risk when GLT people are ‘coming out’ for the first time and how you react and support them can make it a positive experience.

Q. Why didn't they tell us before?

Your child or loved one has probably been thinking this through for months, even years. It is important to note that the time prior to your loved one coming out has no reflection on your relationship with them, it does not mean a lack of trust or love was present. If you are a parent it can be painful to realise you don't know your child as well as you thought you did and that you have been excluded from a part of their life. To some extent, this is true in all parenting relationships, regardless of sexuality. What you should focus on is that your child or loved one has told you now, and you can prove to them that the trust they have given you is not misplaced.

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people often recognise at an early age that they feel ‘different’, but it may take years before they can put a name to it. It is often not until this stage that they consider telling someone.

Even though you may have some sadness for not having been able to help your child or loved one through that period and you may feel that the outcome may have been different if you'd known earlier, it is important to understand your child or loved one probably could not have told you any sooner and that no matter how soon they told you, you would still be feeling confused and sad. Even more importantly discussing the situation now is an invitation to a more open and honest relationship. You cannot force your child or loved one not to be GLB. You can make a positive difference in the way your child or loved one feels about themselves and about their sexuality.

Due to homophobia still being prevalent in our society it takes time for lesbians, gays and bisexuals to acknowledge their own sexuality. Queer people may internalise self-hate or insecurity about their sexual identity. They may feel uncomfortable within themselves, due to judgements and negative behaviour experienced toward them by others. Thus, for many reasons it may take time for someone to think through and work up the courage to tell a parent. Even if you feel your child should have known they could tell you anything, remember that our culture's treatment of gays, lesbians and bisexuals communicates “don't ask, don't tell” and being GLB is “wrong”. These are the messages young people get from an early age, and what they have already battled in order to trust you with this information and the possibility of rejection that comes with it.

Q. How can I approach my child or loved one about their sexuality?

If you suspect that your child or loved one is same sex attracted it is helpful to show your support towards them and their sexuality. This can be done indirectly by positively reinforcing queer related events and references. Demonstrating your acceptance toward same sex attracted people allows your child or loved one to know how you feel about queers which may make it easier for them to talk to you about their sexuality.

Directly asking your child or loved one if they are same sex attracted may not be the best way of encouraging your child to talk to you about their sexuality. Some people may feel too confronted by this and may still be confused about how they feel and may not be ready to come out to you upon demand. Remember, it is important for your child or loved one to come out to you when they are ready and feel comfortable doing so.

Questions and answers

There is no universal way of approaching your child or loved one about their sexuality as each person is unique and responds to situations differently. Talking to PFLAG, Twenty10, GLCS or another counselling service may help advise you on the best approach to take for your situation.

Q. What did we do wrong?

Parents and family members can sometimes experience feelings of guilt when they first learn of their child or loved one's attraction to people of the same gender.

Some parents react with shock, denial and anger to the news that their child is lesbian, gay or bisexual. One response is to wonder "How could he/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 or loved one and losing what you saw for the future of your child or loved one. While their future may not be what you envisaged, that does not mean your child or loved one will not have a happy and fulfilling life and that your relationship with them will not be a fantastic one.

Some parents feel that they did something "wrong" to raise a child who is lesbian, gay or bisexual. This belief stems from the dominant view in society that labels gays, lesbians and bisexuals as less than heterosexuals. There is no evidence that different parenting styles or family situations have a bearing on sexual orientation.

As you work through your feelings, you can take courage from the fact that the one thing your child has 'done' to you is to trust that your relationship will grow as a result of you knowing the truth.

What families can provide is an environment in which a young person can understand themselves and strive to reach their full potential.

Q. Why am I uncomfortable with my child or loved one's sexuality?

Our culture and society provides us with messages about a number of issues, including sexuality.

The negative messages and myths we have learned from our society about sexuality are very strong and not easy to dismiss. However, developing a better understanding of your child or loved one, and becoming more familiar with the issues will help reduce these uncomfortable feelings.

Some parents may confront another source of guilt. Parents who see themselves as 'open-minded' believing they have put sexual prejudice behind them are sometimes stunned to realise they are uncomfortable when they learn it is their child who is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

These parents not only have to grapple with suppressed, deep-rooted personal fears of same-sex attraction but also have the added burden of dealing with their conscious self-image of being 'open-minded'.

It helps to concentrate on real concerns – what your child needs from you now. Try not to focus on the guilt. It is baseless and it accomplishes nothing for anyone. Neither you nor your child had or will have any control over the arrival and determination of your child's sexuality.

Q. Could a counsellor or therapist be helpful?

Support can be gained from a counsellor or therapist experienced with family issues and sexual orientation. 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 recognise that your child is unhappy and needs help with self acceptance.

Questions and answers

Try to find someone who you and your child can feel safe with and can talk openly with. Respect and trust are fundamentals in any relationship with a helping professional. Like finding a good doctor – sometimes finding a good therapist or counsellor can take time. So don't give up if the first one you find is not to your liking.

Consulting a counsellor or therapist in the hope of changing your child or loved one's sexual orientation has little value. Same sex attraction is not a disease or illness and so is not something to be 'cured'.

We encourage you to explore your options and to use those best suited to you and your family. Please refer to the resource section in the back of the booklet for suggestions.

Q. Will they be rejected, have trouble finding or keeping a job or be physically attacked?

Unfortunately individuals and groups in our society can discriminate or be violent towards people who are seen to be different.

Homophobia is still a strong part of our culture. As long as homophobia exists lesbian, gay and bisexual people and their families have some very legitimate fears and concerns.

However, attitudes toward different sexualities have been slowly changing for the better and are more positive in many places. There are a growing number of groups who are working for such a change and who are ready to help those who have difficulties. Most areas in Australia are covered by some form of anti-discrimination laws. Check your state or territory laws for specific information on your area. In NSW it is illegal to discriminate, harass, vilify or victimise a person based on their sexuality or their perceived sexuality. You can contact the Anti-Discrimination Board on (02) 9268 5555 for more information.

It is important to remember that many lesbians, gays and bisexuals have grown to fulfil their dreams and have become very successful and respected people in the community. As a society we may have a long way to go but giving your child or loved one support and love will go far to making his or her life journey easier.



How can I show support?

You are already supporting your child or loved one by taking the time to read this booklet. You can further support your child or loved one by educating yourself as much as possible about sexuality. Every child needs different things from their family and every relationship is unique.

It takes a lot of consideration and courage for your child or loved one to come out to you. You can show them support by:

- Focussing on the love that you have for your child or loved one.
- Learning all you can about the queer community, networks, support groups and issues relating to GLBT people (see resources at the back of this booklet).
- Researching social groups for GLBT people which you may like to suggest to your child or loved one to attend.
- Educating yourself and your child or loved one about safe sex HIV/ AIDS and other STIs (refer to resources at the back of this booklet).
- Reading about how you can 'come out' to your friends and family about your child or loved one being GLBT.
- Admitting when you do not know something, or if you are uncomfortable – but do not blame your child or loved one for this. Take the time to get comfortable. Find a counsellor if you need to. Deal with your disappointments and issues as exactly that – yours.
- Using the language that your child or loved one uses to refer to themselves. For example, if your daughter identifies herself as a lesbian, a dyke, or gay, use the same term when referring to her sexuality.
- Respecting who they are ready to tell and when they are ready to tell them – do not "out" your child or loved one to the rest of the extended family before they are ready.

Encourage your child or loved one to introduce you to their friends and/or their partner. Treat their friends and partners exactly as you would if they were heterosexual. Encourage them to talk to you about their experiences, and listen without judging when they do.

If you know of an adult GLB person that you like and trust, see if they are open to the idea of being a 'sounding board' for you and/or a role model for your child - many young gay people find inspiration from knowing older gays that are leading happy, fulfilled lives.



Coming out

Should we tell family, neighbours, friends?

Just as “coming out” is difficult for gay, lesbian and bisexual people, the coming-out process is equally difficult for parents. Many, upon learning their child is gay, lesbian or bisexual, go right into the closet. As they struggle with accepting their child’s sexual orientation, they often worry about other people finding out. There is the challenge of fielding such questions as, “Has he got a girlfriend?”, and “So when is she going to get married?”

You may 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.

One parent said,

“I used to go in the bathroom and close the door and practise saying to the mirror, ‘I have a lesbian daughter’ and saying it with pride. And it helped, but you really do have to practise”.

Talk to people who understand your concerns. Remember your child or loved one has been down this road already. They may even be able to help. PFLAG members may be helpful to you in discussing their own experiences too.

And remember, who you tell about your child’s sexuality should be a decision both of you discuss and reach together, as a matter of respect. After all, it’s their life you’re discussing.

What will the neighbours say?

This could be a very real concern, especially for families who consider themselves part of a close community

One parent said:

“I thought I was the only mother in our community who had a gay son and when I started speaking out on the issue, other parents started coming forward. Now every time someone says to me ‘I need to talk to you’, I know exactly what’s coming up”.

A message from The Reverend Dorothy McRae-McMahon, patron of Twenty10 GLBT Youth Support

For some parents and their GLBT children, spirituality may be the most difficult issue to face. For others it’s not an issue.

When their spirituality is connected with particular religions, people sometimes face the fear of rejection or, at the very least, judgement by others in their faith tradition. Many people carry with them a terrible sense of guilt, even if they end their formal religious connections. People who have been taught that living and relating in other than heterosexual relationships is a serious sin, often have a subconscious self-hate or, in the case of parents, a terrible anxiety for their children. In fact, GLBT people are found within all religions over the ages and, in many cases, there are now serious discussions taking place around the issues of sexuality and gender. The changes are slow, but can be seen around the world. Those GLBT people, or their parents, who are troubled in this area of life, can be given resources to help them grapple with the ancient texts, especially in relation to the Christian and Jewish Bible. There are also mainstream GLBT friendly churches, synagogues, clergy and rabbis in each state in Australia and networks of people who give support to each other, as well as the explicitly GLBT congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church.

GLBT friendly churches

Metropolitan Community Church

www.mccsydney.org or www.mccgoodshepherd.com

Catholic Acceptance

www.gaycatholic.com.au

Uniting Churches

Pitt Street Church

264 Pitt St, Sydney

South Sydney Church

56a Raglan Street, Waterloo

Chester Street Church

Chester St, Epping

Paddington Church

Oxford St, Paddington

Wayside Chapel

Kings Cross

Anglican Churches

St. Luke's Church

Enmore Rd. Enmore

St. James Church

King Street, Sydney

Christ Church

St. Lawrence

George St, Sydney

No virus is smart enough to be able to tell what a person's sexuality is. All people and communities face the threat of HIV/AIDS.

HIV / AIDS is not a gay men's disease. In fact, the most at risk group world wide is heterosexual identifying women.

It is the activities a person practices that place him or her at risk of HIV / AIDS infection. Everyone should make sure they understand how sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS are transmitted and how to protect both themselves and other people. The best cure is prevention. Be informed. Like education on drugs, educate and inform yourself and your child or loved one about safe sex, HIV / AIDS and other STIs.

HIV / AIDS is transmitted through blood, semen and breast milk. It can be transmitted through unprotected sex, sharing needles or from mother to child during birth or through breast feeding.

Practicing safe sex and not sharing needles or equipment is the best protection from HIV /AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections and blood borne viruses.

If your child or loved one has HIV or AIDS they need your support more than ever. You should know that you are not alone. There are numerous local and national organisations that can help you with medical, psychological and physical care. There are excellent resources with more information available about STIs and HIV/AIDS from the following organisations:

ACON

Telephone 1800 063 060 (Freecall outside Sydney), or (02) 9206 2000

Albion Street Centre Hotline

Telephone 1800 451 600

Also contact Community Health Centres or Sexual Health Clinics in your local area.

Depression, suicide or self harm

A young person's sexual identity does not itself cause them to feel depressed or suicidal. It is the experience of growing up 'different' in a society that often does not support difference and is homophobic that can be devastating. The result of this can be what is known as 'internalised homophobia', that is, a person's belief that their sexuality is inferior. Without acceptance, reassurance and support, internalised homophobia may result in a person trying to hide their sexuality, feeling a sense of shame or engaging in behaviours harmful to self or others.

Some research has indicated that young gay, lesbian and bisexual people are up to 7 times more likely to attempt suicide³.

Isolation contributes to the depression and sense of hopelessness. It can be physical and / or emotional. We know from research that isolation plays a big role in the youth suicide rate particularly in Australian rural and indigenous communities.

We also know that a lack of support and awareness of support services contributes to the feelings of isolation experienced by lesbian, gay and bisexual young people.

Gaining an understanding of the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people is an important step in being able to support young people and prevent further suicide attempts. Avenues need to be created to help young people develop positive self-esteem and skills to deal with a sometimes hostile environment.

These young people need:

- Supportive opportunities to socialise with one another.
- Resources that specifically address their concerns.
- Sensitive, non-judgmental help as they come to understand themselves.

How to help your child or loved one if they are self harming, feeling depressed or suicidal

If you feel that your child, loved one or anyone you know may be feeling depressed, suicidal or is self harming here are some suggestions that may help:

- The best way to help someone who is feeling suicidal or self harming is to get them to contact one of the crisis lines (listed at the back of this book). You could also call them yourself for some advice. Crisis lines have trained counsellors who can talk to people about their feelings.
- If your child or loved one is self harming do not pass it off to be attention seeking. Take the situation seriously and communicate with them about it. Focus questions on 'how' rather than 'why' the young person self harms. 'Why' questions can open up past trauma and abuse and should be dealt with by an experienced mental health clinician.
- If someone is self harming it is important to ensure all their injuries are physically examined and treated. Know when to seek medical attention and call an ambulance if need be.
- Take notice of threats. Take everything your child / loved one is saying seriously. Try not to change the subject because you're scared - this may look like you don't care.

3. Remafedi G, Farrow J and Dister R (1991). "Risk Factors for Attempted Suicide in Gay and Bisexual Youth" *Pediatrics* 87 (6) 869-876

Depression, suicide or self harm

- Don't try to solve their problems as soon as they share them. To a person thinking about suicide, the problems may look major and unsolvable right now. They may just want to share them with someone at this stage. Acknowledge the difficulties and offer unconditional support to help them choose to live and to continue to work on their problems - together as a team.
- Don't tell them they're selfish to consider suicide when their life is so good, or that suicide is the easy way out. This will make them feel guilty as well as depressed.
- Listen openly, calmly and without judgement. Show you care. Don't be afraid to talk about suicide, self harm or any problems that your child / loved one has. Problems don't get worse by talking about them.

A psychiatrist spoke to PFLAG about how many parents feel:

"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 people are just like any other community."

Some parents share their feelings:

"I'd say that reading and learning more about sexual orientation is what helped me most...laying to rest some of the myths I had heard...So the more I learned, the angrier I got, and the more I wanted to change society instead of my son."

"I think the turning point for me was when I read more about it, and read that most kids who can accept their sexuality say they feel calmer, happier and more confident. And, of course, that's what I wanted for my child and I sure didn't want to be what was standing in the way of that.

"It's really important to talk about it, to know you're not alone and 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 want to be isolated from their kid."

"I have to tell you, there are so many pluses now. You begin to recognise what an incredible child you have to share this with you, and to want you to be part of their life. The trust that's been placed in your hands, and the guts it took to do that, is amazing."

How do young people feel?

Some young people from Twenty10 share their feelings about coming out to their friends and family:

Q. What makes you scared to come out to family, friends or loved ones and why?

A. “Basically it is the fear that they won’t accept you for who you are. They don’t have to understand but there is so much more to us than our sexuality. We don’t choose to be gay, bi, transgender or even straight. It is just who we are. I was scared that they would be ashamed or even angry over me just being myself.”

Q. When a child comes out to their parents, what would you (as a young person) suggest parents say?

A1 “Just listen to everything I have to say. It’s fine to ask questions, as long as they remember that it takes so much courage to come out to your parents and we probably feel as uncomfortable talking about it as they do. I would suggest that parents just be really open and calm and listen to what their child has to say, remembering that it’s a big step to come out to your parents and friends. We just want them to be there for us.”

A2 “I believe we are all unique and just because a child is different (gay) doesn’t mean the parents should treat them differently. Let the young person tell you how they feel from their experience of coming out. I felt quite fragile, so give your child support, hug them and sit down and listen to what they have to say.”

Each state of Australia has its own laws and statutes. There has been substantial progress in achieving equal rights for lesbian, gay and bisexual people across Australia. Since 1982 discrimination on the grounds of same-sex attraction is outlawed in New South Wales. Additionally, in 1999 same sex de facto couples were granted legal recognition in most areas of NSW law.

It is against the law to discriminate against a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person in the areas of employment, public education, accommodation, the provision of goods and services, or by a registered club. It is also unlawful to vilify someone on the grounds of their same-sex attraction. Vilification is any public act that is likely to incite (stir up) hatred, serious contempt or severe ridicule toward a group of people because of their same-sex attraction.

There is, however, a lot of discrimination against same-sex attraction still taking place in Australian law and policy. In 2007 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission launched a report outlining the 58 pieces of federal legislation which discriminate against same sex couples and families. This is indicative of the laws still to be challenged.

The law around same sex rights and entitlements is constantly changing. Thus, the information in this booklet may be subject to change over the years. To keep updated on the law around rights for GLBT people refer to the websites and phone numbers below in the legal information/ laws section.

Pamela's story

I am the mother of two children, a gay son and a straight daughter. I consider I raised both my children using the same guidelines but having regard to their different personalities.

Our son was very easygoing, very friendly, played easily with other children and loved school in the early years. He was a very bright student, attended cubs, then scouts and a drama group. His acting was outstanding.

Parents have hopes for their children. My hope for my son was to combine his intellect and his acting ability and to me that made him a barrister. I always told both my children to always do their best. Life was pretty good until my son was in Year 5. The other students decided he was "different". At the end of Year 5 he was elected school captain for Year 6. The teachers were thrilled as were my husband and myself. The kids at school booed him. We wondered why.

He was not popular because he was not sporty and did not enjoy contact sports at all. He had been a gymnast for a number of years and he loved doing that. It was at this time I started wondering about him being different. How? What was different? My son thought that by joining the baseball team he would be accepted. He was not a great player and the other boys quickly decided they did not want him on the team. He stayed until the completion of the season, but it was not a happy time at all.

Boys started calling him "Gaylord", which hurt. I tried to explain that they did not know what they were saying but they certainly knew it was derogatory and that it hurt. Was I to blame for all this because I was an elder mother (for those days)? Was I dressing him differently? What was I doing wrong? Was it the little rag doll he had as a baby? I kept all those concerns to myself.

High school was a nightmare. He was bullied to and from school and verbally and physically harassed at school. On one occasion he went missing. The school

phoned and I spent the latter half of the day walking his route to school looking in bushes and calling his name. He eventually arrived home. He had spent the day with a sympathetic friend. He said he just couldn't face another day of harassment at school. Every single day at high school dealt him further blows. His self-esteem was almost non-existent and he never smiled. Our home life was suffering as well.

After our son was hit in the head with a chair, we moved him to another school. I soon came to realise that the problem was my son himself. The boys hated him, the girls loved him.

It was at this time that I wondered if he was gay. What will I do if he is, I asked myself. I kept all these thoughts to myself. Another year passed and I was almost at my wit's end. He was moody, withdrawn, dark and his paintings and drawings depicted death in some form. I felt sure he would commit suicide. I took him to an adolescent paediatrician who suggested he might be gay but was still sorting himself out. I felt I would rather have a gay son than a dead son, so I felt a little relieved.

He survived another year at high school. He left at the end of Year 10 and did a Fine Arts Course at TAFE and then went into hairdressing. My dream of a barrister was shattered. The harassment did not stop. He was attacked on public transport, sitting at the bus stop. We had graffiti painted on our property.

Finally he left home to live in Surry Hills. I found it hard to accept that he would rather live in a terrible place, half-starving most of the time, than be at home with his family. He had had enough.

He eventually came out. While it wasn't news to me, it was to my husband, who was wonderful. Eventually we all came out and what a liberating experience that turned out to be. The coming out experience for us was a very hard thing to do. It made us realise how hard it is for the gay person themselves. Parents are the ones

Pamela's story

they do not want to disappoint. They need to know that their parents are supportive and will still love and care for them.

I would not change my son for anything. He did not choose to be gay and it is not easy to be gay. Homosexuals only want to be accepted as human beings. Their sexuality is such a small part of the whole person – as it is for heterosexuals.

...An open letter to my daughter on her birthday...

Just twenty-three years ago, I recall holding you in my arms for the first time. I remember the turmoil inside as you turned my ordered world on its end. Little did I know this was just the beginning as you captured the part of my heart reserved for a first child.

It was at that point that I discovered there is no more fervent a feminist than the father of a baby girl! No daughter of mine was going to be forced into any stereotypical role imposed by society. I didn't know how true this was going to be.

The early years were easy. Nothing more traumatic than scraped knees and fights with your sister and plenty of hugs. Then came the teenage years when you battled against confines and restrictions as you searched for the real you. Feminine pink turned to black as you tried to express yourself. I couldn't hug you then, you wouldn't allow it.

Then crisis, as you realised you couldn't fit the design I had created for you. I recall the hurt and pain as we all dismantled the flimsy structures we had created as our ideal of a family and rebuilt it piece by piece. But we've come out the other side and I realise you are still the same little girl I held two decades ago.

As I see you take charge of your life and steer the path that only you can find I am indeed very, very proud to call you my daughter.

Be true to yourself only.....

Contacts

Support Groups

PFLAG (Parents and friends of lesbians and gays)

Telephone (02) 9294 1002
www.pflagaustralia.org.au

Twenty10 (Gay and Lesbian Youth Support)

Telephone 1800 65 2010 or (02) 8594 9555
After Hours Telephone (02) 8584 9596
www.twenty10.org.au

ACON (AIDS council of NSW)

Telephone 1800 063 060
Telephone (02) 9206 2000
www.acon.org.au

Phone Counselling

GLCS (Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service)

(7 days, 4pm-midnight)
Telephone 1800 18 4527
Telephone (02) 8594 9596
<http://www.glcsnsw.org.au/>

Kids Help Line (24 hours)

Telephone 1800 551 800
www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline (24 hours)

Telephone 131 114
<http://www.lifeline.org.au/>

Legal Information / Laws

Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby

Telephone (02) 9360 6650
www.glrll.org.au

HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission)

Telephone (02) 9284 9600
<http://www.hreoc.gov.au/>

Anti- Discrimination Board

Telephone (02) 9268 5555
http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/adb/ll_adb.nsf/pages/adb_adlaw

NSW Inner City Legal Centre

Telephone (02) 9332 1966
http://www.iclc.org.au/front_page.html

Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project

(homophobic violence)
Telephone (02) 9206 2116

Legal Information (designed to be comprehensive for young people)

www.lawstuff.org.au
Transgender Links

The Gender Centre

Telephone (02) 9569 2366
<http://www.gendercentre.org.au/index1.htm>

Gender Identity Support Group

<http://www.gisg.org/index.html>

Anti-discrimination Board

http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/adb/ll_adb.nsf/pages/adb_transgender
http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/adb/ll_adb.nsf/pages/adb_glbti_consultation

Sydney Star Observer

(Transgender support group and drop-in service
for transgendered women)
Telephone 9360 5388
<http://www.ssonet.com.au/display.asp?ArticleID=7114>

Sexual Health

ACON (AIDS council of NSW)

Telephone 1800 063 060
Telephone (02) 9206 2000
www.acon.org.au

Sexual Health Information Line

Telephone (02) 9382 7440 (Mon-Fri 9-5)
Telephone 1800 451 624 (freecall outside Sydney area)

Albion Street Centre

HIV / AIDS information line
Telephone (02) 9332 4000
www.sesahs.nsw.gov.au/albionstreetcentre

Aboriginal Medical Services

Telephone (02) 9319 5823
Nature – Nurture debate around same sex attraction
<http://allpsych.com/journal/homosexuality.html>

Books / readings

Always My Child

Pat Jennings

[Fireside Books, 2003]

Beyond Acceptance

(Rev.Ed.) G.W.Griffin, M&A.Wirth

[Griffin Press, 1996]

Inside Out

Erin Shale (Ed.)

[Australian][Bookman,1999]

Is It a Choice?

Eric Marcus

[Harper SanFrancisco, 1993]

Loving Someone Gay

(Rev.Ed.) Don Clark, Ph.D

[Celestial Arts, 2005]

My Child is Gay

Bryce McDougall

[Australian] [Allen&Unwin, 1998]

Now That You Know

B.Fairchild & N.Hayward

[Harcourt, 1998]

When Our Children Come Out

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

[Australian] [Finch Publishing, 2005]

Bouncing Castle (DVD)

Rainbow Screen Productions, '05

[The Story of PFLAG, Western Sydney]

www.odietamo.net/bouncingcastle

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