

Supporting a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Child

Families are often puzzled and uneasy when they become aware that a child in their care is questioning his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Here are some information, suggestions, and references to further information and resources. (For convenience I will use the term LGBTQ or simply “gay” from here on to mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning.)

First, avoid panic and jumping to conclusions, even if that is your first reaction. Keep an open attitude and open communication with your child. She or he is likely to feel worried about your reactions and may be frightened about the implications of their experience. Knowing of your continuing love and support “no matter what” is terribly important.

Here are a few things to be aware of:

- The implications of being lesbian or gay or bisexual are less formidable now than they were when you were young. Numerous popular public figures are now “out”, and public acceptance of gays and lesbians has increased greatly, especially among mature young people, as indicated by support for equality in Maine referenda in recent years.
- The same cannot be said yet about transgender people (see definition below), though there has been movement in that direction.
- In high school and even more so in middle school, anti-gay language and attitudes are still widespread, and your child may be targeted for harassment if others perceive her or him to be LGBTQ, or not conforming to gender stereotypes. Boys who are LGBTQ are targeted for harassment and abuse more often and more harshly than are girls.
- Maine has strong laws designed to protect LGBTQ youth from abuse, but that right to safety, including in school, must often be asserted by the family. You need to be ready to advocate for your child’s safety and respectful treatment. (See GLAD and the Maine Human Rights Commission among the resources listed below.)
- Young people are often “coming out” as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender earlier than was the case years ago, some as early as middle school.
- Sexual orientation is not mainly about sex. It’s mainly about our identity and about who we are attracted to romantically as well as erotically. Don’t forget that you also have a sexual orientation, that you didn’t choose it, and that it is quite unlikely that you could change it. To understand this identity issue, it may be helpful to ask yourself, Is your heterosexual identity only about your sexual behaviors?
- Sexual orientation is a continuum, from extremely straight (heterosexual) to extremely gay, with all shades in between. There are people who are truly bisexual, and some of them move somewhat back and forth along the continuum over their lifespan or may have attraction to persons of both genders. They too do not “choose” their sexual orientation.
- Although LGBTQ people are, on average, at increased risk for several regrettable things (school dropout, drug/alcohol abuse, homelessness, depression, suicide) this is not because of their sexual orientation, but because of the extra stress our society puts on them. Most LGBTQ youth get through their adolescence well, especially if they are provided with acceptance and support; but failure to provide support puts them at seriously increased risk.
- Gender identity is a different matter from sexual orientation. It is about our experience of ourselves as masculine (male) or feminine (female) or somewhere in between. People of any gender identity may be gay or bisexual or straight.

- Transgender (sometimes referred to as “trans”) is an broad category that includes everything from: a person who presents him/herself in an ambiguous way so that gender is not obvious to others; a girl preferring to look and/or act “boyish” or a boy preferring to look and/or act “girlish”; a person who likes to dress in clothing of the opposite gender; a person who wishes he or she were the other sex from what their body is; a person who makes a strong effort to live as the other sex and present him/herself as such; to a person who eventually has medical intervention in order to legally change their sex.
- Because a person is presenting her/himself in some gender-variant way, one should not assume that she/he wishes or intends to actually change sex.
- Many people who are comfortable with LGB people are not yet comfortable with T people – it is a challenge to them. And transgender youth are targeted for harassment more often and more viciously than gay youth. Transgender boys usually get a lot more grief from other people than do transgender girls.
- The most common reasons why parents may be upset when a child is possibly LGBTQ are:
 1. Fear for the child’s present and future safety and happiness due to the prejudice of others.
 2. The challenge to one’s presumptions about what the child’s future will be like (for instance getting heterosexually married and having babies).
 3. Unexamined stereotypes about LGBTQ people that have been learned, but which are mostly false, such as that they are doomed to unhappy lives.
 4. Concern that having an LGBTQ child indicates faulty parenting (it doesn’t).
 5. Religious beliefs about the “immorality” of homosexuality.

With regard to the morality issue, the religious view is perhaps unarguable, but the objective in-this-world view suggests that something is immoral if it causes or is likely to cause specifiable observable harm, like theft, assault, molestation or unfaithfulness. Homosexuality is not objectively harmful. Consider the following table:

moral risk	heterosexual sex risk	homosexual sex risk
disease	yes	yes
exploitation	yes	yes
unintended pregnancy	yes	no

On what objective grounds can we say that homosexuality is more immoral than heterosexuality?

Here are some suggestions:

- Consult someone who knows a lot about the subject of LGBTQ identity development. It may be helpful to the child to arrange for counseling, making clear that it is not for the purpose of “changing them” and that it doesn’t imply that there is something wrong with them. Many mental health professionals and many pediatricians are knowledgeable, as are people in the organizations listed in the resource section below.
- If the child is in high school, check to see if there is a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in the school, and encourage the child to join it if there is. He or she will find allies there. There are also a few LGBTQ support groups for teens in the state, listed in the resource section below.
- While you might be able to talk your child into suppressing or denying their experience of being LGBTQ, you can’t “cure” them of it, either by counseling or by religion. Suppressing and hiding who one is is harmful to one’s development. Do urge them to be sufficiently circumspect to stay as safe as possible, while being safely “out” to people such as yourself and selected people at school whom they can trust.

- Take a half-way position between assuming your child will be forever LGBTQ and assuming that “it’s just a phase”. Nobody’s future is very predictable, so don’t try to predict how this is going to work out for your child. Express your support for your child’s search for identity, with advice such as “Take your time,” “Follow your heart,” “Don’t jump to conclusions based on limited experience,” “Above all keep safe,” “I’ll stand by you and get you whatever help you may need as you explore this matter,” and “If people give you a hard time tell me so I can stand up for you”.
- If because of religious belief or unshakeable personal belief you cannot accept that your child may be gay or transgender you may need to re-examine whether your home is the best place for this child to live. Perhaps there is another relative who can understand your child better right now. Nobody can do everything and perhaps you just can’t do what this child needs. If on the other hand you are willing to work to overcome whatever discomfort you may have, let the child know you are doing that. Remember that she or he is working on that too, though perhaps with a head start.

Here are some organizations that can offer information and help – I encourage you to explore their websites:

- Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays www.PFLAG.org
- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network www.GLSEN.org. That website has contact information for the two Maine chapters of GLSEN, information about starting a GSA, and much more. GLSEN people in Maine are eager to provide support, advocacy and training with the purpose of making schools safe and respectful places for all students.
- LGTBQ youth group in Lewiston/Auburn www.Outrightla.org
- LGTBQ youth group in Rockland www.outmaine.org/
- LGBTQ youth group in Portland www.commcc.org/PRYSM/index.html
- Mental Health America provides suggestions on how to talk with your kids about LGBTQ issues. www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/whatdoesgaymean
- Trans Youth Family Allies <http://imatyfa.org/>
- GLAD (Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) www.glad.org You can download their pamphlet listing the rights of LGBTQ youth in Maine here: <http://www.glad.org/uploads/docs/publications/rights-of-lgbtq-youth-in-me.pdf>
- American Psychological Association – many questions answered here: www.apa.org/topics/orientation.html
- Maine Human Rights Commission – where you may file a complaint if your child is repeatedly mistreated in school or at work because of being LGBT: www.maine.gov/mhrc/
- One helpful book is *Mom, Dad, I’m Gay* by Rich Savin-Williams (American Psychological association Books, 2001).

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