

TIP SHEET FOR RELATIVES AS PARENTS

SUPPORTING A GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDERED OR QUESTIONING CHILD

Families are often puzzled and uneasy when they become aware that their child is questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is best to keep an open mind and open lines of communication with your child. He or she is likely to feel worried about your reactions. It is very important for your child to know that you love and support them “no matter what.”

As you work to keep an open attitude, consider the following:

- First, do not panic, listen to the child, and avoid jumping to conclusions.
- The social problems related to being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning (LGBTQ) are much less than when you were young. Public acceptance of gays and lesbians has increased greatly, especially among mature young people.
- Sexual orientation is not about sex. It’s about our identity and about who we are attracted to romantically as well as physically. You can understand this as you also have a sexual orientation. You did not choose it, and it is quite unlikely that you could change it.
- Gender identity is a different from sexual orientation. Gender identity is about our experience as masculine (male) or feminine (female) or somewhere in between. When thinking about people who do not fit into typical American ideas of female or male, know that only some people want to change genders. Others want simply to be accepted as they are.

Here are some more things to be aware of:

- In high school, and even more in middle school, anti-gay language and attitudes are still widespread, and your child may be targeted for harassment. Maine has strong laws designed to protect LGBTQ youth from abuse. It is helpful to your child if you are ready to advocate for your child’s safety and respectful treatment. Transgender youth are more often targeted than gay and lesbian youth.
- LGBTQ people are at increased risk of dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, depression, and suicide. This is not because of their sexual orientation. It is because of the extra stress our society places on them. Most LGBTQ youth grow through their adolescence well, especially if they have acceptance and support. When family and community fail to support them, they are at increased risk.

Common caregiver concerns and ways to think about them:

- I am afraid for the child’s present and future safety and happiness. *Acknowledging orientation is a step to safety and happiness. Though there are challenges in being a minority group, there are also strengths.*
- I am afraid I did something wrong that led to my child questioning identity. *Having a LGBTQ child does not indicate parenting mistakes.*
- My religion holds that homosexuality is immoral. *Remember that your child needs love and acceptance.*

Here are some suggestions:

- Consult a pediatrician or mental health professional for more information about identity development. Be clear to your child that going to counseling does not mean there is something wrong with them.
- 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 predictable. So don’t try to predict how this is going to work out for your child. Instead, express your support for your child’s search for his or her identity.

This tip sheet was compiled from an article written by Dr. Peter Rees, a retired psychologist who has worked in Maine schools for many years, and is active with the Downeast Chapter of GLSEN.

To obtain a copy of the full article, visit our website at www.mainekids-kin.org or contact us 1-866-298-0896.