

When Your Child “Comes Out”

by Kathy Byrd

“Mom, Dad, I’m gay.” Whether your child whispers it in private, or shouts it during an argument, you’re not alone if you’re completely unprepared for the news. Your emotions may run the gamut from shock and denial to anger or even grief. Your treasured images of your child’s future may be completely changed — but hang onto one important fact: this is the same son or daughter you’ve loved all along!

Whatever your emotional reaction may be, it is vital to focus on your child. If you can look past your own feelings, you’ll realize your teen has done a wonderful thing by sharing something intimate with you. How you continue the discussion is up to you. Remember: your child may have experienced a great deal of agony prior to his or her coming out to you. (Adolescents who are struggling with their sexuality are frequently clinically depressed or anxious, and there is evidence that the suicide rate among this group is higher than that of other teens.)

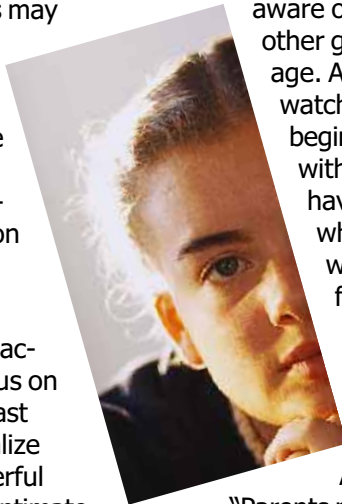
The best thing to do next is to throw your arms around your child and say, “I love you. Thank you for telling me.” An accepting reaction from you helps keep the lines of communication open.

What is homosexuality?

Television and movies have given us extreme stereotypes of what gays and lesbians are like: The limp-wristed man with a flair for interior decorating. The tough-looking woman who loves the hardware store. Stereotypes don’t tell you much about your child.

Simply put, homosexuality is the persistent sexual and emotional attraction to someone of the same sex. It is estimated that 1 in 10

people are homosexual. (That means in a class of 30 students, 3 could be gay or lesbian!) Your daughter may have become aware of feelings for other girls at an early age. And, as your son watched his peers begin to “go steady” with girls, he may have realized that what he wanted was a boyfriend.



According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, “Parents need to clearly understand that homosexual orientation is not a mental disorder. The cause(s) of homosexuality are not fully understood. However, a person’s sexual orientation is not a matter of choice. In other words, individuals have no more choice about being homosexual than heterosexual. All teenagers do have a choice about their expression of sexual behaviors and lifestyle, regardless of their sexual orientation.” (www.aacap.org, “Facts For Families,” Fact Sheet #63)

Education and support

First, separate your child’s needs from your own. You will both need more information and support, but you’ll need to do this in your own ways. For you, a great place to start is PFLAG: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Your local chapter of PFLAG can provide educational materials plus real-life support from people who truly understand your family. (If there is no chapter of PFLAG where you live, visit them online at www.pflag.org.) You will meet other parents of gay youth and adults, and discover how they have adjusted to life after the big

announcement. Information shared at PFLAG meetings is confidential.

On the other hand, your teen may be uncomfortable about his or her feelings. He or she may want to talk about “crushes” but have nobody to talk to! In middle school or high school, gay youth find very little acceptance from their classmates, and it is very difficult to figure out who is safe to talk to.

A confidential support group provides a safe place for many gay and lesbian youth. School counselors or social workers may be a good resource. Many high schools now have Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA’s) that meet regularly. Your child may be surprised to discover that some of his or her classmates are also gay or lesbian!

Respect your child’s privacy

You are now the family member of a gay or lesbian person, but that news belongs to your child.

You are now the family member of a gay or lesbian person, but that news belongs to your child. Although your instinct might be to share with others (your parents, your best friend, your pastor), remember that it is your son or daughter’s business to decide whom to tell and when to tell them.

The fact that your son or daughter has “come out” doesn’t give you the right to pry! Of course you’re going to want to know more (what parent doesn’t?) and it’s possible your teen



may be willing to share more information. But set healthy boundaries. For example, just as you wouldn't ask about every aspect of your daughter's date with a boy, give her some space when she goes out with her girlfriend.

Resist the urge to pinpoint moments in the past that could have "turned my child gay." There is nothing that you or your spouse did or didn't do that "caused" your child to be gay or lesbian, just as there is nothing you did or didn't do that "caused" your heterosexual children to be straight!

Watch out for bullies

Unfortunately, anti-gay harassment is alive in our schools. If your child says he or she does not feel safe at school, or tells you stories of harassment or bullying: listen. Then take action.

School districts are bound by law to protect students from anti-gay harassment, no matter what the school officials' personal views on homosexuality may be. Tell school officials, if you must, that your child is protected from anti-gay harass-

ment by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and by the 14th Amendment's requirement of equal treatment under the law.

If your child is being harassed at school, the Safe Schools Coalition (1-888-SAFE-SAFE or 1-877-723-3723) offers help, from telephone consultations to in-person interventions at your school.

Having "the sex talk"

Although our youth are bombarded by sex messages everywhere they look — TV, billboards, music, magazines — most of them are not as educated about sex as they pretend to be. The "sex talk" is important for any parent and child, but particularly so with gay teens because the education they seek is harder to find. School sex education courses rarely touch on gay sex; there are high school materials about AIDS that never even mention homosexuality!

You may think, "But I'm straight! How will I know how to talk to my gay child?" On one level, there are many topics that are the same, no matter what your teen's sexual orientation. Respectful and healthy rules for dating

apply, no matter what. Frank discussion of sexually transmitted diseases from herpes to AIDS is a must. Even if you hope your child will not become sexually active at his or her age, it is important to include a discussion of safe sex.

At least one counselor suggests involving a trusted gay or lesbian friend to help you talk about subjects that seem foreign to you. One excellent teen-level book with information about subjects including coming out, dating, and sex is, "GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens" by Kelly Heugel.

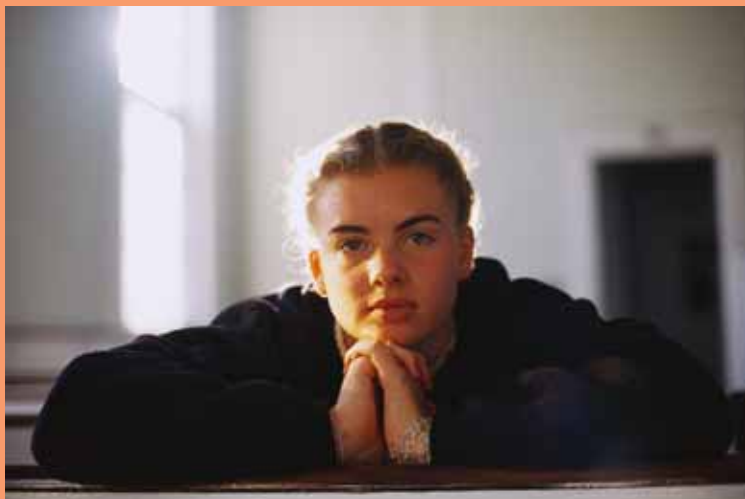
If you think your child is homosexual but he or she hasn't said anything to you, a discussion about dating and sex could be a good place to open the door. You might mention that "some kids have feelings for other kids of the same sex" and tell your teen that it's OK to come to you with any questions. If your child is aware that you're approachable, he or she will be more willing to talk.

Your teen has many other facets

Last but not least, as one young man says, "don't make it all about the gay thing." Your child is still the same skateboard dude, computer geek, science fiction fan, orchestra member, basketball jock, that he or she was yesterday, last month, or last year! Your son or daughter is also an adolescent, and will be experiencing the same frustrations, insecurities, crushes, and triumphs experienced by every adolescent, gay or straight.

Kathy Byrd is a freelance writer living in Seattle, Washington.

Reprinted by permission. Far West Family Services is an Employee Assistance Program providing services in the state of Washington. 1-800-398-3440. www.farwestfamilyservices.com



"Your child is still the same skateboard dude, computer geek, science fiction fan, orchestra member, basketball jock, that he or she was yesterday, last month, or last year!"