



FFLAG

Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays



A GUIDE FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS

Information for family and friends with a gay, lesbian or bisexual member

What is FFLAG?

Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays is a national voluntary organisation and registered charity

FFLAG is dedicated to supporting parents, families and their gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans loved ones.

FFLAG offers support through its website, email answering service, helpline and local parents support groups in their efforts to help parents and families understand, accept and support their lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans members with love and pride.

FFLAG members are parents, carers and families of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people. LGBT people and families still face homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in our society, which brings in its wake prejudice, bullying and alienation.

FFLAG supports the full human and civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans individuals.

FFLAG speaks out and acts to defend and enhance those human and civil rights.

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Preface

This Guide for Family and Friends is a guide to help you support and understand someone close to you who is lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). If someone close to you identifies as trans, please see the companion booklet in this series. We know that some of the issues faced by trans people and their families are shared by LGB people and their families, but recognize that there are important differences.

In this Guide FFLAG shares the knowledge and experience gained over many years of supporting parents, families and their lesbian, gay and bisexual sons, daughters and loved family members

In the text of the Guide, we have deliberately, as and where we felt it appropriate, interchanged the words 'lesbian, gay or bisexual' and the acronym LGB(T). There is a glossary of the words and concepts at the end of the booklet that we hope you will find useful.

Some of the information and support offered will be more useful to you than others. Dip in to the Guide and use whatever is most helpful to you.

No two families are the same

Your daughter or son may have just told you that she/he is lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). You might have been wondering about their sexuality for a while, or the announcement might have come as a bolt out of the blue. Perhaps they have yet to 'come out' but somehow you know that they are gay and want to offer your support.

Most parents assume that their children will grow up to be heterosexual (straight). They won't have thought that one day they would hear the words 'Mum. Dad. I've got something to tell you. I'm gay!'

We know that each family situation is different but most parents find it helpful to know how other parents have coped in a similar situation. It is often helpful to know that your emotions and concerns are shared by other parents who have an LGB daughter or son. Some parents want to know why their daughter or son is lesbian, gay or bisexual. There are endless theories about sexual orientation. There are theories about parenting; discussions about anatomy; talk of an elusive 'gay gene'. Whatever the theories, as a parent you are now facing the fact that your child is lesbian/gay/bi. You are probably coping with some complex emotions of your own as well as wanting to understand what is going on for your daughter or son.

Not a choice

The most important thing to remember in understanding your child's sexual orientation is that it is not a choice. No one chooses their sexual orientation. No-one chooses to be straight; no-one chooses to be gay. It is simply a part of them – an important part, but never the less only a part of that person.

The belief that some people still hold that being LGBT is somehow a 'choice' is mistaken. Given the level of prejudice, bullying and out right homophobia and biphobia that LGBT people face even today, why would anyone 'choose' to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. No-one can 'make' someone lesbian, gay or bisexual – in the same way that no-one 'makes' a person straight. It might be that your daughter or son approaches you saying that they 'think' they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. They may be questioning their sexual orientation and wondering if they might be LGBT. It is a mark of their trust in you that they are willing to share this. Please accept their questioning and let them know that you will support them whatever their sexual orientation. As they grow up, many young people experiment with different sexual behaviour. It may be that your daughter or son is attracted to someone of the same sex as part of growing up. If this passes, then it was a part of that growing up process - only time will tell. If your child is indeed lesbian, gay or bisexual they won't want to have been told that it's just a 'passing phase' and they will 'grow out of it'.

Supporting your child

As so very many LGBT people have told us 'Coming out to your parents is really scary!' Even in the most loving of parent/child relationships, there is that moment of doubt about how your parents may react. Stories of parental rejection, negative reaction from friends or family... will be familiar to your daughter/son. That your daughter or son has told you that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual is a huge step in building an open and honest relationship for the future.

Whilst accepting that many people say that they 'felt different' when they were growing up, many LGBT people say that they knew they were different to their peers at an early age.

"My son said that he knew he was somehow 'different' when he was nine years old. I found it hard to believe but he is adamant"

Your daughter/son will probably have spent a long time, possibly years taking on board the fact that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. They will probably have absorbed some of the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotypes that unfortunately are still around. They will have become familiar with 'teasing' and homophobic bullying and the way that 'gay' can be used as a term of abuse. The teasing and bullying might not have been aimed at them, but they will have taken on board some of the negativity that even today is associated with being anything other than heterosexual. So no wonder it's 'really scary' to tell your parents you're lesbian, gay or bisexual!

"I don't know why but my biggest fear was that my dad wouldn't hug me again if he knew I was gay. A fear completely unfounded, but one of the many different fears and emotions you experience when coming out"

Although you might be surprised/shocked by your child's news, try and remember how vulnerable they are feeling.

“When my teenage daughter came out as bisexual I was shocked that she found it so difficult. Our family is a ‘bubble of love’. I have always brought my children up to believe that love is love and is beautiful in all its forms. Now she is much happier and we continue in our bubble of love.”

Remember too, that they are still the same daughter or son that you have always known and loved. Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is part of who they are, not what they are. No-one, gay or straight, is defined entirely by their sexual orientation. They have shared an important part of who they are. Please accept their honesty and openness and move forward together as a family in that spirit.

“I came out to my mother in a random outburst...but her reaction calmed me down and reassured me. I was so relieved because my mother showed me that our relationship had not changed – I was still the daughter she knew and loved.”

Parents’ reaction

Many parents who believe that they are totally accepting of lesbian, gay or bisexual people, and who don’t consider themselves prejudiced or judgemental are likely to find themselves, if only temporarily, knocked off balance by an announcement that they have a lesbian, gay or bisexual daughter or son.

There are a whole range of emotions that are common to many parents who have just learnt their child is lesbian, gay or bisexual. These emotions can be everything from a sense of loss, guilt, denial, worry, isolation through to relief and affirmation.

“I have just found out my son is gay and I feel like my world has fallen apart”

Some parents feel a sense of loss when their daughter or son comes out.

“When Glynn came out, it felt a bit like bereavement, a grieving for the life I’d had planned for him: the happy and successful life, the daughter-in-law, the grandchildren.”

Guilt is another emotion that many parents experience. Sometimes this guilt is because parents think that they are somehow to blame for their child being LGB. Some parents ask “Where did I go wrong?” This is only an issue if being LGB is thought to be a ‘problem’. It cannot be emphasised enough – no one can make a person lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Parents can also feel guilty because they didn’t know about their daughter or son’s sexual orientation. They feel that as a caring and loving parent they have perhaps let their child down by not knowing about that important aspect of their child’s life.

“I was distressed to realise that my son knew from around age 11 that he was different, had hoped it was a phase he was going through, and later had prayed he’d be delivered from it. He had been going through something on his own for years and thought he might never be able to tell anyone. I’d hoped I was a good mother and yet I had been totally ignorant of all of that.”

Some parents simply try and deny the facts. They might have wondered if their child could be lesbian/gay/bi, but denied that it could possibly happen to them. Other people might have a lesbian/gay/bi child, but not them!

“I didn’t think Gemma could possibly be a lesbian – she had all these pictures of boy bands over her bedroom walls.”

On learning their child is lesbian/gay/bi many worries come to the fore. Parents worry that their daughter/son will be ignored or rejected by their friends or other family members or they will be bullied at school. They worry about their child finding a partner and having a loving relationship. They worry about their child’s sexual health particularly about HIV. Sometimes parents are saddened by the thought that they might not become grandparents.

Many of these worries will not seem as pressing once you have got used to the idea of having a lesbian/gay/bi daughter or son. If you have a positive and supportive attitude to your child’s news, family and friends are likely to take their lead from you. Whilst homophobic bullying is a reality, schools and colleges should have anti-bullying policies in place to address this. Your lesbian/gay/bi child is just as likely as their straight friends

to find themselves in a loving and fulfilling long-term relationship. Everyone, gay or straight should make sure that they educate themselves about sexually transmitted infections and HIV and practice safer sex. Many LGB people have children – different families: same love.

Many parents talk of their sense of isolation when they learn that their child is lesbian/gay/bi. They might be totally accepting of their child, but still have concerns that they find difficult to share.

“I told a couple of friends at work. They were supportive but really didn’t understand what I was going through. I don’t think anyone other than another parent quite understands the different emotions.”

To some parents it comes as a relief to know that their child is lesbian/gay/bi. They might have known that their child was worrying about something. Perhaps their child had been withdrawn, anxious or depressed. As a loving parent, the imagination can go into overdrive worrying about what is wrong with your child. So learning that your child is lesbian/gay/bi can come as a relief when one thinks about all the real difficulties and problems that could beset your daughter or son. Having a child who is lesbian/gay/bi is not a problem unless someone makes it a problem.

There are people in every walk of life who are successful, happy and fulfilled – and who also happen to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Once you start to think about it you will become aware of the many people in business, health professionals, teachers, politicians, musicians, actors, lawyers, sportsmen and women etc. who are lesbian, gay or bi. There are lots of role models out there, and the list of names of those role models grows all the time. Your child’s sexual orientation will not stand in the way of them achieving whatever goal they set out to achieve.

Emotions are alright

Don’t smother your emotions. Some parents will say that they have come to terms and that they accept this is the way their child is, even when feeling upset and confused inside. It is better to tell your daughter or son that their news was a surprise/shock that you were totally unprepared for. Say that you still love her/him and that nothing can change that, but you still need time to adjust to their news.. Do please be kind to yourself and recognise that you need some time and space to work through your feelings.

Get in touch with FFLAG. We are all parents who have an LGB or T son or daughter. There may well be a local parents’ support group where you will be able to talk through your emotions. It may be that you don’t particularly want to talk, but just to listen to other parents’ experiences.

Joining a parents’ support group can really help. You can share your worries, listen to others parents’ experiences and know that you are amongst people who understand at least part of what is going on for you. Expressing your feelings with someone outside the family who, nonetheless, understands will really help.

Even if there isn’t a group in your area, talking to another parent or sharing your feelings via email can make all the difference! Visit www.fflag.org.uk to find your nearest group or to speak to another parent 0845 652 0311

“I must say going along to a parents’ group, was one of the best decisions we’ve made. I found a group of people who understood and accepted us.”

Religious beliefs

Discovering that one of your loved ones is lesbian/gay/bi can be particularly traumatic for parents who come from a faith background. It can often cause conflict with deeply held views and can lead to great soul searching and questioning of one's fundamental beliefs. Strong religious communities provide definite answers to important life questions and also stable relationship structures. Living without these can be a scary experience but many have found that they have been made stronger as a result of their questioning journey.

FFLAG does not presume to offer interpretation on such texts as the Bible, the Koran or Torah but does have members who have faced these issues and who are able to share their experiences with others. Contact details of different faith groups offering support and understanding can be found on FFLAG's website.

Some parents speak first

Just occasionally parents will realise that their child might be lesbian/gay/bi before their child feels able to approach them. It might be that you have found something that indicates your child might be gay – perhaps accessing gay websites, something on a mobile phone. It might be that someone outside the family has said something to you.

What lesbian/gay/bi people generally say is that for them, the easiest way for the subject to be brought up would be if one of their parents were to say something like the following: 'I've wondered for a while if you might be lesbian/gay/bi. If you are, I want you to know that it makes no difference to the love that I feel for you. I will always do my very

best to support you. Whether you are lesbian/gay/bi or not, I love you, and if you want to, let's talk about things'

In some families it might be better to write something rather than speak. This perhaps can provide a bridge for the child who may be anxious to talk but is unable to find the words. Even young people who clearly know that they are lesbian/gay/bi can have difficulty in accepting the reality – and putting it in to words to your parents, makes it very real. Your child might well deny that they are lesbian/gay/bi. You might have read the signals wrong or it might be that they simply aren't ready to tell you yet. But gradually and gently restate, over a period of time, your love for your child and the strength of that bond. In that way you will create an atmosphere in which it is easier for your daughter or son to talk to you when they are ready.

Language

Language continually evolves and words that were once in common usage become less so – their meanings change and some come to have negative connotations. Using the term homosexual to describe a lesbian/gay/bi person is now considered to be offensive. The negative connotation of the word homosexual came from religion (the ones that are against homosexuality) and also from early psychoanalysis. For many years it was believed that lesbian/gay/bi people could be changed to be heterosexual (straight). There is still that totally mistaken belief held by a minority of groups/individuals. If the word 'homosexual' appears in the press/media it is usually because the user has little understanding of/empathy towards lesbian/gay/bi issues.

Terms like 'sexual preference' or 'alternative lifestyle' are not considered appropriate as they imply that lesbian/gay/bi people are making a choice.

Moving forward

If your daughter or son wants to bring their girlfriend/boyfriend/partner to meet you, that is a measure of their regard for you and their need for your approval. It might take a while for this to happen, but when it does, it is likely to be a big step for each and every one of you.

"I was a bit nervous when Pete brought his boyfriend home for the first time. But it was all fine. I should have realized my son would choose a nice boyfriend"

Your child is trusting you to offer the same level of welcome and hospitality that you would offer any other member of the family. The warmth and sincerity of your welcome will help strengthen family relationships.

"Open your mind, ears and heart. If your child trusts you enough to show you who she/he really is, live up to that trust!"

Conclusion

We hope that this booklet has given you some insight and understanding. Some parts of it will be more useful to you than others. A large amount of it is aimed at parents of lesbian/gay/bi young people, but the words are also relevant to parents whose daughter/son is older. We have concentrated on the parent/child relationship because it is unique. However, this booklet is just as relevant to a sibling, grandparent or other family member or friend who wants to support and understand a loved one. Being a parent is never easy, but being the parent of a lesbian/gay/bi daughter or son is enriching and really no more difficult than being the parent of a straight daughter or son. Some of the challenges may be a bit different but the love and special bonds between parent and child remain the same.

"Thanks for being so reassuring in what you say"

"Again, thank you - as you say the international language of parental love is the same. It is very much appreciated here in Seoul"

"As a gay man and on behalf of all my friends in the LGBT community, I would like to thank the parents of FFLAG for their ongoing support, love and for the fight they have fought to make our lives better."

Glossary

This is a brief guide to the terms used in FFLAG's publications.

Bisexual: refers to someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to women and men.

Coming out/Outing: Coming out is telling other people that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Being outed is having someone else reveal you as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, usually against your will.

Gay: refers to someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex. Some women prefer to refer to themselves as gay women, but lesbian is the word more often preferred by women, and the word gay is often used just to refer to men.

Heterosexual/straight: refers to someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Homophobia/biphobia/transphobia: prejudice against anyone who is or is thought to be lesbian, gay or bisexual or trans.

Lesbian: refers to a woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other women.

LGBT: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender. This is the term most commonly used to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans communities.

Sexual orientation: term for an individual's enduring emotional and sexual attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (straight) orientations.

Transgender: a person who feels the assigned gender and sex at birth conflicts with their true gender.

Trans: a word used as an umbrella term to encompass all forms of transgender, transsexual, transitioning etc.

Transsexual: a transgender person who lives full time in their true gender

"I have more respect than I can possibly express for all of you who love, love, love and support your children so much. I know you must feel it, but I have seen both sides where the children are embraced or rejected and knowing there are parents out there who love unconditionally is such a source of comfort to me! Keep up the wonderful, worthy, fabulous fight – after all, love is always worth it!!

Joyce DiDonato

The FFLAG booklets are all written by parents who have lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans sons and daughters.





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