

Sexual Orientation and Supporting Children and Youth who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Two-spirit, Queer & Questioning



Perhaps you have always wondered if your child might be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Or maybe your teen has just ‘come out’, telling you that she is gay. This fact sheet will help you understand sexual orientation better, and will help you to support your child or teen. The most important thing to remember is that **being gay, lesbian or bisexual is not a mental health problem.**

How does someone become gay, straight or bisexual?

Research studies suggest that our sexual orientation (whether we are gay or straight) is determined when we are very young, maybe even before we are born. And it’s clear that biology and our genes have big roles to play. One thing we know for sure, that being gay or straight is not a choice. But while our sexual orientation is ‘determined’ very early in our lives—we usually don’t begin to understand it until we are older, during late childhood or our early teens. And everyone’s experience is a little different. Adults who are gay often say that they felt ‘different’ from an early age, even though they couldn’t say why. This ‘feeling different’ at an early age is more common with gay men than gay women, though.

So realizing whom we’re attracted to is a gradual process. Children begin to develop romantic attractions sometime during late childhood and the early teen years. Many children and teens find they are attracted to the opposite sex, but some find they have romantic and sexual feelings for others of the same sex, or both sexes. Many youth who are gay, lesbian or bisexual struggle with their feelings as they gradually recognize and accept that they are attracted to the same sex or both sexes.

Some youth are very certain about their sexual orientation, while others are not so sure at first. Youth can have many attractions and sexual fantasies. Having a few same sex fantasies or even some ‘making out’ with a same-sex partner doesn’t mean a teen is gay. Having opposite sex fantasies or some ‘making out’ with an opposite-sex partner doesn’t mean a teen is straight, either. By the time youth reach young adulthood though, most have a pretty good idea of whether they are gay, straight or bisexual.

Just to be clear, let’s go over a few terms...

Bisexual: Being physically and emotionally attracted to both men and women.

Gay: Being physically and emotionally attracted people of the same sex. In the past, this term was used mostly for men. It’s now used for men and women.

GLBTQ: A term used to refer to people who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, Two Spirit, Queer & Questioning sexual orientation and gender identity. This fact sheet is about sexual orientation, not gender identities (like transgendered).

Heterosexual (straight): Being physically and emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Homosexual (gay or lesbian): Being physically and emotionally attracted to the same sex. Many people in the GLBTQ community are offended by this term.

Lesbian: A woman who is physically and emotionally attracted to other women.

Queer: Some GLBT people have ‘reclaimed’ this word, and use it to describe sexual orientations and gender identities different from heterosexual (straight) ones.

Sexual orientation: Whether one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or straight.

Two Spirit: This is a reclaimed concept from First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. It refers to Aboriginal people who are born one sex, and fulfill roles across sex and gender lines, including roles reserved for Two Spirit people. Some say they maintain balance by housing both the male and female spirit. Two Spirit people were considered to be a gift to the community. They were able to cross a range of genders, hold the balance and were respected and honoured as visionaries, peacemakers and healers.



How common is it for people to be gay, lesbian or bisexual?

Researchers estimate that roughly 10% of the world's population identifies as LGBTQ.

How your child or teen may be feeling...

Youth sometimes feel guilty about being gay, lesbian or bisexual. They might be very afraid of being rejected by their parents, families and friends. Struggling with these feelings could cause a teen to become depressed or to withdraw.

Gay youth often worry about:



How you may be feeling: common reactions to finding out a child is gay, lesbian or bisexual

Dealing with the possibility that a child is gay can be very stressful for parents and families. And it will bring out many feelings as you work through it. Parents may feel a sense of loss when they learn their child is gay. Families may react to this possibility with:

- Denial:** It can be hard to believe or accept that your teen may be lesbian or gay. Parents may think things like, “He can’t be gay. He’s had girlfriends before! He plays rugby!” or “She can’t be a lesbian. She had a boyfriend just last month!” or “This is just a phase...”
- Anger:** Some parents feel angry. You may feel your teen is making a choice to upset you, or going against your values on purpose. You may think, “How can he do this to us?” Parents sometimes express this anger through hostility or rejection. In the end, anger is not helpful. Parents need to deal with it and move ahead.
- Guilt:** Parents sometimes feel that they ‘did’ something to cause their son or daughter to become gay. “Was it something we did as parents? We always wanted a boy-maybe we pushed her into being one?”
- Bargaining:** “If he would just give up this idea that he’s gay and get back on track...then we’ll get him that computer for school...”
- Acceptance:** After working through many difficult feelings and fears, many parents are able to accept that their child or teen is gay. “As much as this has been tough on me as a parent, I know it can’t be easy for my child either. In the end, the most important thing is that we give our teen our love and support.”

Regardless of how you feel about people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, the bottom line is that your child needs your love and support. There is nothing wrong with being gay, lesbian or bisexual, and these are not mental health problems. The only thing that is wrong is the stigma and discrimination that people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual often face.



How do I support my child?

GLBTTQ youth can face many struggles as they gradually recognize and accept their sexual orientation. They are concerned about the reaction of the people closest to them, can feel very alone and be targets for bullying or harassment. If youth don't get the support they need, they have a higher risk for mental health problems, or alcohol and drug abuse.

Above all, accept and love your child or teen, who is the same child as before. Teens need to hear that being gay does not make you any less proud of them, nor does it make you love them any less.

- 1 Acknowledge your teen's sexual orientation.** Talk about it together. Your teen may feel rejected if you try to ignore the issue, or pretend it isn't happening. Ask questions about things you don't understand.
- 2 Offer support.** You might say "I love you no matter what. How can I be helpful? How can I be supportive? How about a hug?" Help your teen link with a support group for gay youth if your teen is interested and willing.
- 3 Check in with your teen.** Ask how he's feeling and coping with things. Ask about school-gay youth can sometimes be targets for bullies at school. Keep in mind he may keep this from you as he may not want to worry you.
- 4 Keep a lid on anger.** If you talk or ask questions about your teen's sexual orientation in an angry way, your teen will feel rejected by you. Recognize angry feelings and work through them by learning as much as you can, and remembering that being gay is not a choice. Your teen did not decide to be gay to rebel or make your life difficult.
- 5 Appreciate that your teen told you.** Getting news that you don't really want to hear might make you wish that your teen had kept things to himself. Don't get upset with your teen for sharing that she thinks she might be gay. And don't get upset for not telling you earlier. It was probably hard for your teen to tell you. If you get upset when he shares important things with you, why should he share anything with you at all?
- 6 Get support from others.** Talk with other parents of gay or lesbian youth (see PFLAG in the 'Getting Support' section). Some parents feel ashamed but remember, it's not a disgrace unless you make it one. Respect your teen's privacy by checking with them before you tell anyone else.
- 7 Keep doing things that you would usually do.** Rent a movie. Go shopping. Share a meal. Do an activity as a family. Your teen is still a teen. And while romantic attractions are important to all teens, they have other interests too!



Should I tell the school?

It depends. Would you tell the school if you discovered your child was straight? If your teen wants to tell a supportive teacher, then that's her choice. Some schools are very supportive of students who are gay, some are not. If you or your teen think the school or other students might be hostile, then carefully consider whom to share this with. Reassure your teen that in the future, it gets easier in more mature environments like college, university or most workplaces.

What about dating?

At some point, your teen may ask to bring home a date. Treat your teenager the same way you would if she was dating someone of the opposite sex.

What should I tell my friends and relatives?



At some point, you will want to tell relatives and friends. If you are not sure about it, then wait until you are feeling more okay with it. Get your teen's permission before telling others, and ask her what she feels comfortable with you telling. True friends and relatives will be supportive. For those who are not, you may need to avoid or spend less time with them. If they are critical or hostile, you have a right to ask them to avoid making negative comments around you and your teen.

Aren't gay people at greater risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI's)?

Sexually transmitted infections are common in straight and gay people. And STI's and HIV are almost always preventable with safer sex practices (for example, using condoms). Most of the people in the world with AIDS/HIV are straight, not gay.

Are people who are gay more likely to be pedophiles (want to have sex with children)?

No. Being a pedophile has nothing to do with being gay or straight. For example, research on men found that gay men were no more likely to molest children than straight men.

Sexual Orientation and Human Rights

Over the past generation, there have been important changes in the legal rights of people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. GLBTTQ people, their families and allies have worked hard to make sure that GLBTTQ people are protected from discrimination. For example:

- In 1995, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality to gays and lesbians.
- In 1996, the Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA) was revised to clearly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Now in every Canadian province and territory, human rights laws now protect gay, lesbian and bisexual people from discrimination.



Where to get support

- In a crisis?** Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775
- GLBTTQ Youth Services:** Outreach, support and counseling for young people 12-25 and their families in Ottawa. Request counseling through Social Services Intake 613-233-5430, and leave a phone number or email address where it is safe to contact you.
<http://www.centretownchc.org/en/programs-and-services/services-for-you/glbttq.aspx>
For more info, contact Ernie at 613-233-4443 extension 2171 egibbs@centretownchc.org
- Youth Services Bureau:** GLBTTQ positive individual, family and group counseling and crisis intervention within Ottawa, for youth 12 years and older. Counseling Intake: 613-562-3004 www.ysb.on.ca
- PFLAG Ottawa:** Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Ottawa, is a support group for parents, families, friends and spouses of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, www.gaycanada.com/pflag-ottawa, 613-860-7138
- Pink Triangle Youth (PTY):** For youth up to age 24. Youth lead peer support and discussion group, offered by Pink Triangle Services (PTS). Counsellors from Youth Services Bureau and Centretown Community Health Centre are on site for drop-in counselling. For more information, contact PTS 613-563-4818 or pinktriangle@bellnet.ca
- The Youth Line:** Ontario's provincial LGBT peer support and info line 1-800-268-9688 www.youthline.ca
- Kids Help Line:** 1-800-668-6868 www.KidsHelpPhone.ca

For a more detailed listing of resources fro GLBTTQ youth : http://bit.ly/glbttq_resource



Helpful websites

Alterheros www.alterheros.com

Rainbow Health Ontario: Ontario Provincial LGBT Health program www.rainbowhealthontario.ca

Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition: www.rainbowhealth.ca

Parents, Families and Friend of Lesbians and Gays www.pflagcanada.ca

Parents, Families and Friend of Lesbians and Gays (USA) www.pflag.org

Positive Spaces for LGBT Newcomers: An initiative of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) www.positivespaces.ca Contact Ernie for Ottawa area information 613-233-4443 extension 2171 egibbs@centretownchc.org

The Ten Oaks Project engages and connects children and youth from LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two-spirit, queer) communities through programs and activities rooted in play www.tenoaksproject.org

Around the Rainbow is an Ottawa community-based project that works with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two spirit, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community and allies to support diverse families in childcare, preschools, schools, educational settings and the greater community. www.aroundtherainbow.org

MyGSA.ca is an initiative of Egale Canada. It provides an interactive space for queer Canadian youth, educators and allies, as well as information and educational resources. Includes sections for youth, parents and educators. www.mygsa.ca

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

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