

How to Support a Gay Son, a Lesbian Daughter, or a Bisexual Young Person

As a parent or caregiver of someone who identifies as LGBT you may have concerns about it. It takes a lot of courage for them to tell you that they are gay, a lesbian or bisexual (transgender identity is on a separate guide). However, they need to feel supported and valued to being open about their sexuality, so they can lead fulfilling lives. They may experience a sense of fear, hope, relief, joy and anger, about their conflicting feelings going on. For example, they feel relief about having told you but fear rejection from you or others.

Always be led by your young person to strike up a conversation. If you feel they're ready, tell them, "I've noticed there's something on your mind, you can trust me if something is bothering you." If they're not ready to talk then revisit it another time. You could also suggest other forms of communication like texting a message, if it would make it easier for them to let you know what's going on. If they tell you that they identify as LGBT, hug them, tell them you love them, and you will always be there for them.

As a counsellor, I helped young people to identify the difficulties they might encounter when trying to discover their sexual orientation. I used exploratory questions to help them to talk about any anxieties they may have. This a safe way to acknowledge their feelings by going through four stages, rather than telling everyone at the same time, and risk rejection from homophobic individuals. The stages are:

1. Telling Families

I encourage you to always be led by them in how they describe their sexual orientation, and not to dismiss their feelings or experiences at any stage. If you can try to use empathic responses (see the link to empathy on my website) this will prove immensely helpful. Failure to acknowledge your young person's feelings can be very damaging. If your response was experienced as negative, such as being shocked, guilty, or in denial, and this didn't change with time, then this would affect your young person's ability to move through the other three stages. Here are some suggestions:

- Validate their feelings by saying, "I understand what you're saying, and it's OK to have those feelings for another man/woman."
- Thank them for sharing what's going on. "Thank you for telling me. It must have taken a lot of courage for you to tell me that you are gay/a lesbian/bisexual or confused."
- Ask them if they need anything more from you with, "Is there anything that I can do which would be helpful?"
- Give them a list of online reputable sites and chat services. One service I recommend is: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/blog/supporting-a-young-person-when-they-come-out/>.
- Discuss ways to have safe sex. You can get advice for gay and bisexual men from NHS website: www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/sexual-health-for-gay-and-bisexual-men. For young women who have sex with other young women the NHS have a lot of information on the same website: www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/sexual-health-for-lesbian-and-bisexual-women.

Once people from the LGBT group have told their families and they have received a positive response, this would encourage most of them to tell their friends.

2. Telling Friends

If your young person is feeling anxious about telling their friends, it's a good idea to practice the conversation. Encourage them to talk to a friend that they know well and trust. Ask them how they will respond if they experience rejection. Today's young people who have a problem with the LGBT community are in an increasingly small minority. Nevertheless, one of the hardest things for LGBT young people is to face rejection from their friends. For those who experienced rejection or didn't have any friends I went online and googled LGBT forums in the York area. I discovered that York LGBT Forum (<https://www.yorklgbtforum.org.uk>) has a section for young people working in the community and at York College to include resources for LGBT people, schools, and parents of LGBT people. Check in your area whether there is something similar.

Some young people at school may get bullied/cyberbullied which can lead to anxiety, depression and the use of drugs. If you think they are being bullied, on my website there is a free guide on how to tackle this and get it resolved.

3. Telling Work Colleagues

Once your young person has told you and their friends if your son or daughter is working there is current legislation in the workplace to protect vulnerable young people from bullying and discrimination in relation to their sexual orientation.

4. Telling the Wider Community

Most young people who have come through the first three stages of the model are not worried about acknowledging their sexuality to the wider community. New laws in the UK have made our society more equal for the LGBT community, and same-sex couples can now get married and have children.

If you need extra advice, an excellent website for parents is: www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/coming-out/coming-out-advice-and-guidance-parents. On this site Stonewall discuss lots of ways you can help your young person, as well as taking your feelings into account.