

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Teens: Information for Parents

It is important for parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teens to remember that each child is unique and will have their own experiences and feelings. "Coming out" is a lifelong journey of understanding, acknowledging, and sharing one's gender identity or sexual orientation with others. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents support their teen's journey.

What Your Teen May Be Experiencing and What You Can Do

"I feel different from other kids..."

Feelings of being "different" emerge throughout childhood, although it may not be clear to the child what the feelings mean. Children may begin exploring gender before kindergarten, so coming out and sharing these feelings of being different with others may happen at any time. For many kids, gender identity becomes clearer around puberty as their bodies change. Romantic attractions during the teen years may also be experiences that highlight same-sex attractions for lesbian and gay youth. However, many LGBT teens have said, in retrospect, that they began to sense something different about themselves early in life, and for gender diverse youth, this feeling sometimes begins as far back as preschool.

It is common for LGBT teens to feel scared or nervous during this stage. Some can start to feel isolated from their peers, especially if they feel that they don't fit in or are given a hard time for being different. Just remember, research shows that children who feel loved and accepted for who they are have a much easier time.

Parents and families can

- Play an important role advocating for safe spaces where their child can explore interests without judgment or stereotypes.
- Support diverse friendships and social involvement without focusing on expectations around gender or sex.
- Provide exposure to people working and enjoying activities apart from conventional gender expectations.
- Engage in conversations and check regularly with their children about their interests, friend groups, and romantic attractions and about any bullying or teasing that may be taking place.

"I think I might be gay (or lesbian, bi, or trans), but I'm not sure, and I don't know how I feel about that..."

Beyond just feeling different, youth begin to wonder if they might be gay, lesbian, bi, trans, or another term that describes their identity or sexuality. Many teens have mixed feelings when they first try on a new way of identifying. These can be a mix of excitement, relief, and worry.

Many children may try to suppress these feelings to meet societal expectations, to fit in, or even to avoid upsetting their parents or families. In some cases, teens might be overwhelmed by all these feelings, which increases the risk for depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. For example, they may isolate themselves from others for fear of being exposed, or "outed." Some teens may feel very alone, especially if they live in a community that doesn't have an active LGBT-youth support system. Having a supportive and helpful environment at home and good relationships with friends will help teens manage their feelings and deal with any discrimination they may face.

"I accept that I'm gay, but what will my family and friends say?"

Teens may accept that they are LGBT but not yet ready to start sharing this information with anyone. Some teens will feel comfortable with being open about their identity or sexuality, while other teens may not tell anyone for a long time. Teens may look for clues on how you feel about their gender identity and sexual orientation. By speaking positively about LGBT celebrities or current events, you will let them know you are supportive of their identity.

Society has become more open and accepting of LGBT individuals, and youth are beginning to come out at earlier ages than they did a generation ago. Children may first come out to online communities or peers they perceive to be safe and accepting before telling their family.

It is important for parents and children to realize that acceptance is a process that involves the entire family. Just as it takes time and support for LGBT children to understand and accept their identity, the same is true for parents.

"I've told most of my family and friends that I'm gay (or lesbian, bi, or trans)"

Hopefully, teens will feel secure enough in who they are and share that information with loved ones. It takes courage and strength for a youth to share who they are inside, especially for teens who are unsure of how their families will respond. They may be afraid of disappointing or angering their families or, in some instances, may fear being physically harmed or thrown out of their homes. Again, parents usually need time to deal with the news. While it may take them days, weeks, or many months to come to terms with their child's sexuality or gender identity, it is important for parents to show love and support for their child, even if they don't fully understand everything.

Coming out to others can be a liberating experience, especially for teens who are embraced by their communities and families. Coming out allows LGBT teens to feel free to speak openly about their feelings and possibly romantic relationships for the first time. For transgender and gender diverse teens, they may finally feel free to begin expressing themselves genuinely as the gender they feel inside.

Parents and families can

- When your child discloses his or her identity to you, we hope that you will respond in an affirming, supportive way.
- Accept and love your child as they are. Try to understand what they are feeling and experiencing. Even if there are disagreements, they will need your support and validation to develop into healthy teens and adults.
- Stand up for your child when he or she is mistreated. Do not minimize the social pressure or bullying your child may be facing.
- Make it clear that slurs or jokes based on gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation are not tolerated. Express your disapproval of these types of jokes or slurs when you encounter them in the community or media.
- Be on the lookout for danger signs that may indicate a need for mental health support. These are anxiety, insecurity, depression, low self-esteem, and any emotional problems in your child and others who may not have a source of support otherwise.

- Connect your child with LGBT organizations, resources, and events. It is important for them to know they are not alone.
- Celebrate diversity in all forms. Provide access to a variety of books, movies, and materials—including those that positively represent gender diverse individuals and individuals who have different sexual orientations than the norm. Point out LGBT and queer celebrities and role models who stand up for the LGBT community, and point out people in general who demonstrate bravery in the face of social stigma.
- Support your child’s self-expression. Engage in conversations with them around their choices of clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, friends, and room decorations.
- Reach out for education, resources, and support if you feel the need to deepen your own understanding of LGBT youth experiences.

Remember

Even if you are having trouble understanding your child’s identity or feelings, not withdrawing from your role as a parent is probably one of the most important ways to help a child continue to feel a sense of being cared for and accepted. Feeling loved has been shown to be critical to overall health and development of all children regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Many parents do need their own supports to help them understand and cope with their own difficult emotions and concerns during a child’s coming out.

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