

## **PARENT SERIES**

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# **Responding to Your Adolescent “Coming Out”**

## ***Adolescent Sexuality and Sexual Health***

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Many parents are not prepared for their adolescent to tell them that he or she is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ). It is normal for parents to feel a wide range of emotions upon hearing these words, including fear, guilt, sadness and anger. You may have a lot of questions or doubts.

These are normal reactions. However, it will be a process to address these reactions; respond to your child; learn about LGBTQ issues; and share this information with family and friends. Remember, you are not alone. There are more than eight million LGBTQ people in the United States, many of whom came out during adolescence or early adulthood. There are many resources for parents of LGBTQ children. You can find a support group by visiting the PFLAG (Parents, Families, Friends and Allies United with LGBTQ People) website, listed in the Resources section of this handout.

When responding to your child, remember that as hard or easy as this may be for you, it was probably harder for your child to come out, or be outed to you. Many children worry about losing their parents' love; how their parents will react; and even about losing their family and home.

Parents hold a powerful role in their LGBTQ child's health. Ultimately, positive, supportive responses lead to healthier children. Several research studies have found certain responses that are more likely to result in better physical and mental health for your child.

### **Helpful Responses**

- Talking to your child about his or her LGBTQ identity.
- Expressing unconditional love for your child.
- Supporting your child's LGBTQ identity even if it makes you uncomfortable (this may include using your child's new preferred name and pronouns).
- Finding your child an adult LGBTQ role model.
- Expressing your fear, worry, anger, doubt or other feelings of distress away from your child. If you have already expressed negativity toward your child, remember — it is never too late to respond with love and support.

Parents may see certain responses as helpful when they actually have negative effects on children. These behaviors include blocking access to LGBTQ friends, events or resources; telling children that God will punish them; making children keep their LGBTQ identities secret; and pressuring children to be more or less masculine or feminine. LGBTQ youth ages 14-23, who participated in a research study, described parental acceptance, and parents not using guilt to change their kids' identities, as the most important actions that parents could take. The Center for Disease Control has some useful fact sheets on LGBTQ health, listed in the Resources section.

## **Do's and Don'ts**

### ***Do***

- Accept your adolescent's gender and sexual identities, which may include being LGBTQ.
- Buy or borrow reputable sexuality education books for yourself and your adolescent about LGBTQ issues.
- Educate your adolescent on using condoms and safer sex with both opposite- and same-sex partners.
- Communicate love and support.

### ***Don't***

- Assume your adolescent will only have opposite-sex partners.
- Express fear, worry, anger, doubt or other feelings of distress directly to your child.
- Block access to LGBTQ friends, events or resources.
- Pressure your child to keep his or her identity a secret, or express that identity in a certain way.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Books for Parents of LGBTQ Children**

*Is It A Choice?: Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gay and Lesbian People.* Eric Marcus, HarperOne, 2005.

*Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, or Questioning Son or Daughter,* Paperback. Kevin Jennings. Touchstone, 2003.

*Coming Out, Coming Home: Helping Families Adjust to a Gay or Lesbian Child.* Michael C. LaSala, Columbia University Press, 2010.

### **Helpful Websites**

***Planned Parenthood Federation of America***

[plannedparenthood.org](http://plannedparenthood.org)

[plannedparenthood.org/parents/parenting-lgbt-and-questioning-kids](http://plannedparenthood.org/parents/parenting-lgbt-and-questioning-kids)

***Sex, Etc. | Sex education by teens, for teens***

[sexetc.org](http://sexetc.org)

***Scarleteen: Sex education for the real world***

[scarleteen.com](http://scarleteen.com)

***PFLAG***

[pflag.org](http://pflag.org)

**Center for Disease Control Fact Sheets**

***Sex Education***

[cdc.gov/std/healthcomm/fact\\_sheets.htm](http://cdc.gov/std/healthcomm/fact_sheets.htm)

***Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health***

[cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm](http://cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm)