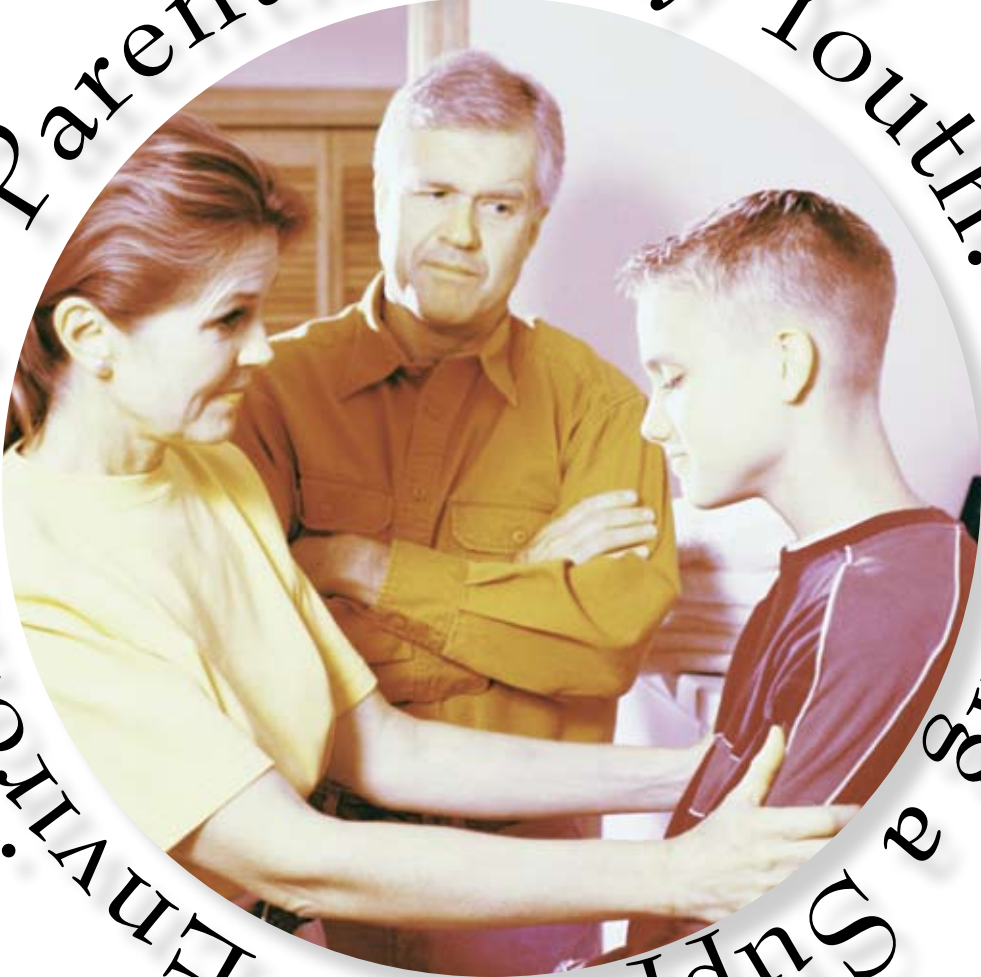


Parenting Gay Youth: Creating a Supportive Environment



by Linda Goldman

(Excerpts and adaptations from Coming out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream America. Goldman, L. (2008). Taylor and Francis.

Parenting gay children can be challenging, rewarding and ultimately life changing. The level of acceptance of sexual orientation and gender identity by fathers and mothers can detract from or expand a child's healthy growth and development in countless ways. Too many of our LGBT (lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender) youth face emotional isolation, rejection, and complete withdrawal from parents that lead many to depression, drugs and alcohol and even homelessness.

As a teacher and counselor in the public school system for 20 years, I witnessed LGBT students exposed to sexual harassment, bullying and victimization issues, and emotional and

physical abuse that create an unsafe educational environment. As a therapist for 25 years, I have come to see the struggles gay youth face by living with societal stereotyping that becomes internalized homophobia and sexual prejudice projected from the heterosexual world. Consequentially, they then face the additional trauma of hate crimes, abandonment and parental rejection. All of these challenges are a breeding ground for low self-esteem, depression and suicide ideation. And, as a parent of a gay child, I have very personally experienced the challenges LGBT young people face in coming out and then suddenly being out in very uncharted territory. Positive parental attitudes and understanding can be of the utmost importance to ensure healthy outcomes.

“Mom, Dad, I’m gay!”

Hearing the words “Mom, Dad, I think I am gay” can be life changing for many parents. Within an instant of hearing these words, their preconceived image, dreams and future expectations of their child are dramatically reshaped. Parents can choose to be supportive – this is still the same child they have always loved – and they can grow with their children as they venture into lives with LGBT relationships.

All too often, young people look to parents to be their ultimate support, but, unfortunately, parents cannot overcome the hurdles of prejudice. Ultimately, many mothers and fathers distance, alienate and disown their children because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Some young people would choose isolation or death rather than disclose to their parents, while others feel they are the only people they can turn to. The level of trust is immense as a child who has inwardly struggled with sexual orientation or gender identity decides to confide in his or her parents.

Clearly, parental responses to a child’s gay disclosure can range along a continuum from complete rejection to extreme activism. Points on this continuum vary, grow and evolve as the nature of the relationship and deeper understandings emerge. Parental alienation can reinforce self-hatred, isolation and suicidal ideation; indeed, parental rejection can be life threatening.

Parent Education

As parents begin to become an integral part of their child’s disclosure of being gay, it is important that they examine their own feelings and thoughts. Many mothers and fathers, even the most liberal, are surprised at their hidden prejudice and challenging ideas, as they felt they were devoid of bigotry until they found their own child to be homosexual.

Often, parents have been bombarded with cultural stereotypes and outdated information. When their daughters and sons disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, distress and misinformation may surface. Educating families on LGBT issues includes establishing clear language, creating strategies for empowerment, dispelling outdated myths and providing information on resources and supports.

Myth 1: Homosexuality is linked with problems in a child’s relationship with parents, such as a domineering or possessive mother and an ineffectual or hostile father.

LGBT individuals are no more likely to be smothered by maternal love than heterosexuals, nor were they more neglected by fathers or sexually abused.

Myth 2: Homosexuality involves a fear or hatred of people of the other sex, leading individuals to direct their sexual desires toward members of their own sex.

LGBT youth are very capable of warm friendships and loving ties with both the opposite and same sex and appear to have positive feelings toward both.

Myth 3: Homosexuality is a choice.

Reframing the assumption that “there is a choice to sexual orientation” and transforming this assumption to “there is no choice for the homosexual adolescent” begins the evolutionary trend leading to acceptance of homosexuality as being a state one is born into.

Myth 4: Homosexuality is caused when children were victimized, seduced, molested or sexually assaulted by an adult homosexual. There is no biological basis for homosexuality.

New research indicates that sexual orientation is at least partly biological, as the brain may differ with sexual orientation. This research affirms the possibility of homosexuality not being linked to sexual abuse as a child. Some researchers indicate evidence of a genetic component to homosexuality as well as the influence of prenatal hormones.

Myth 5: Homosexuality is a mental disorder.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed the term homosexuality from the list of mental and emotional disorders stating sexual orientation is not a disorder. Therefore, it does not need to be cured.

Myth 6: Homosexual men are pedophiles.

There is constant confusion over the use of the term pedophilia, which properly refers to offenses against or attraction to prepubescent children. There is no inherent connection between an adult’s sexual orientation and her or his propensity for transgressions against children. There is no factual basis for organizations to avoid hiring homosexual or bisexual people on the basis of their sexual orientation for positions that involve responsibility for or supervision of children, adolescents or adults.

Myth 7: LGBT parents raise their children to be homosexual.

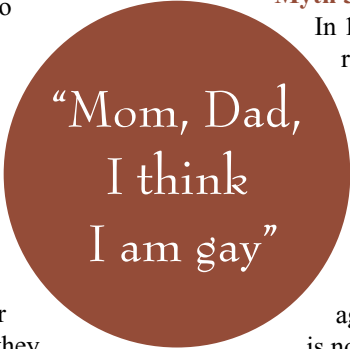
The myth that LGBT parents will raise their children as homosexual has not been validated by experience or research.

Support

Often, parents feel alone, as they assume no other friends, relatives or mothers and fathers of their child’s friends are living the experience of having a LGBT child. Finding a support group with other parents is of great help. They begin to see many of their thoughts and feelings are very common, and they have companions who understand.

Organizations such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays) are essential in providing parents with ongoing support to help them explore issues involving gay children.

On the other hand, parental support can be a major force in children’s well-being as they step out and reveal with others that



“Mom, Dad,
I think
I am gay”

their son or daughter is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The enormous trust that children display in sharing what had been hidden for so long is a powerful tool in building a strong bond. Their ability to create a secure environment is paramount for their child's well being. The following are interventions adults can create to facilitate a comfortable and safe atmosphere:

- Create a supportive environment.
- Educate parents, students, school personnel and community and health professionals.
- Develop a sense of community by becoming involved with LGBT related organizations.
- Engage LGBT role models as identifiable supports and mentors for gay youth.
- Maintain firm boundaries and clear limits against any slurs or abusive words or actions
- Distinguish between simplistic and negative media stereotyping and supportive films, TV, newspaper articles and music portraying LGBT relationships in a real and thoughtful way.
- Construct language that elicits acceptance and understanding of LGBT issues and expresses equality.

Conclusion

Parents of gay youth want for their children the same things all parents want for their children. They want to see their daughters and sons in a meaningful love relationship, becoming productive members of society and achieving a creative family life. Parents can become educated on the myths of homosexuality and the outdated cultural indoctrination they have unconsciously absorbed. They can become involved in group supports such as PFLAG that allow mothers and fathers a safe forum for coming out too.

Parents can become involved in joining their children in being open about their child's sexual orientation or gender identity. Ultimately, parents can become advocates seeking freedom and equal rights for all young people and speaking out against sexual bias and prejudice. The goal of each and every mother and father is not merely acceptance, but a total embracing of their children and their lives free from judgment and filled with loving support. ◀

Resources for LGBT youth, families and friends

COLAGE: Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere
1550 Bryant St. Suite 830
San Francisco, California 94103
415-861-5437
<http://www.colage.org>

Family Acceptance Project: Cesar E. Chavez Institute
San Francisco State University
3004-16th St. #301
San Francisco, CA 94103
fap@sfsu.edu

Family Diversity Projects, Inc.
PO Box 1246
Amherst, MA 01004-1246
413-256-0502
<http://www.lovemakesafamily.org>

Family Pride Coalition
P.O. Box 65327
Washington, DC 20035-5327
<http://www.familypride.org>
202-331-5015

Gay and Lesbian Parents
Coalition International
PO Box 50360
Washington, DC 20091
202-583-8029
<http://www.GLPCI.org>

GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network
90 Broad Street
New York, NY 10004
212-727-0135
<http://www.glsen.org>

L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center
McDonald/Wright Building
1625 N. Schrader Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90028-6213
<http://www.lagaycenter.org>
323-993-7400

Human Rights Campaign (HRC)
919 18th St. NW #800
Washington, DC 20006
800-777-4723
<http://www.hrc.org>

PFLAG: Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
1726 M St. NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC. 20036
202-467 8180
<http://www.pflag.org>

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She is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) and a National Certified Counselor (NBCC). She worked as a teacher and counselor and currently has a private grief therapy practice in Chevy Chase, MD. She works with children, teenagers, families with prenatal loss and grieving adults and shares workshops, courses and trainings on children and grief and trauma and currently teaches as adjunct faculty in the Graduate Program of Counseling at Johns Hopkins University. She has also taught on the faculty at the U. of MD. School of Social Work and lectured at many other universities including Penn State University, Buffalo School of Social Work, University of North Carolina and The National Changhua University of Education in Taiwan, as well as numerous schools systems throughout the country. She teaches the course on "Working with LGBT Youth" at the University of Maryland School of Social Work and Child Welfare Administration. She was named by the Washingtonian Magazine as one of the top therapists in the MD, VA, DC area (1998) and again as a therapist to go to after the terrorist attacks in 2001. Linda contributed in many ways after 9/11, including writing articles and book chapters, playing a strong role in the TAPS (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors) response team at the Pentagon Family Assistance Center and conducting workshops about children and is the recipient of the "The Tenth Global Concern of Human Life Award 2007."