

Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual



The teenage years can bring lots of change for children and parents. Children are working out who they are, and dealing with relationships and sexuality. For some, working out their feelings towards others and whether they are gay, lesbian or bisexual might be an extra pressure to deal with.

All children and young people want to feel accepted and that they belong regardless of their sexuality. It is important that parents help them work things out in a safe and supportive environment where they feel valued and loved for who they are.

This Guide

This Guide focusses on young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. The term 'same-sex attracted' is used to refer to all of these. Transgender or intersex matters are not discussed as the issues can be quite different.

Young people and sexuality

Moving from childhood into adolescence is a time of great change for young people and their families. Changes in the brain and hormones bring about many physical, sexual and emotional changes. Exploring sexuality and how they feel about others is one of the things young people work out during this time.

The concept of who we are evolves over time. If your child tells you they're same-sex attracted it is likely they've thought about it for a long time - some say they have known all their lives. In the teenage years they work out what they are going to do about it. Others struggle with fear and confusion before they are even able to admit it to

themselves. Your child is not likely to tell you they are same-sex attracted and risk your rejection if they're not sure.

When your child 'comes out' to you

Each parent has their own way of reacting when their child discusses their sexuality or 'comes out' as same-sex attracted. For some it is 'no big deal'. It is just a part of who their child is.

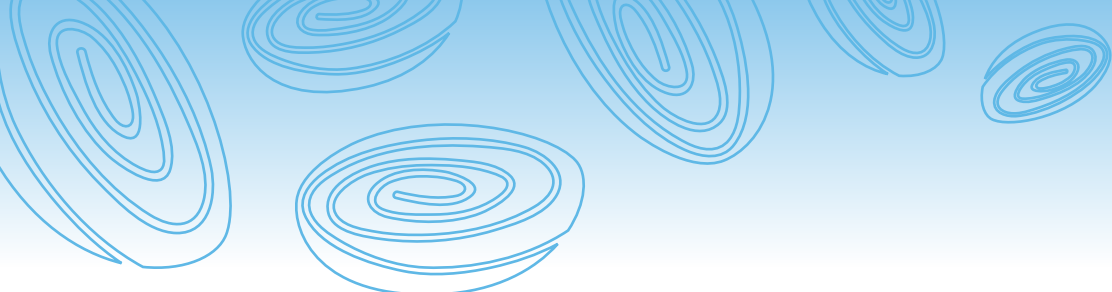
Some parents may have wondered about it and be pleased they can now talk openly. Other parents might need time to adjust, but are happy their child trusts them enough to share this part of themselves.

Some parents might feel shocked, confused, disappointed, guilty or angry. It may challenge their values and beliefs, especially some religious or cultural beliefs. They might feel embarrassed and anxious about the reactions of family members or friends.

Sometimes parents feel the hopes and dreams they held for their child are now lost – to see them in a happy relationship with their own family. However, many parents come to realise their child can live a full life no different from their other children, including having a successful career, a committed relationship and children if that is what they want.

Some parents choose not to accept their child's sexual or gender identity and this can lead to a break in family relationships that is hurtful for everyone.

While having a same-sex attracted child can seem daunting at first, many parents find great acceptance and support in the community. Life may be different but it can be just as full of the many joys of parenting.



Terminology

- **Bisexual** – a person attracted to more than one gender (not always equally)
- **‘Coming out’** – telling others you are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Intersex (LGBTQI). This is a life-long process, not a single event
- **Gay** – often used to describe a male attracted to other males, but can be anyone attracted to the same sex
- **Gender identity** – the gender a person identifies with - usually male or female but can be both, or neither
- **Heterosexual, Straight** – someone attracted the opposite sex
- **Homosexual, Same-sex-attracted** - a person attracted to people of the same sex
- **‘In the closet’** – hiding sexual or gender identity for fear of negative reaction, rejection or harassment
- **Intersex** – a person born with reproductive organs and sometimes sex chromosomes that are not exclusively male or female
- **Lesbian** – a female who is attracted to other women
- **LGBTQI** – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Intersex
- **Queer** – a broad term for people who don’t identify as heterosexual or with their birth gender, but don’t want to adopt the label of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender
- **Sexual identity** – an integral part of who we are, what we believe, how we feel and how we respond to others
- **Sexual orientation** – a person’s emotional, physical and sexual attraction to others

- keep an open heart and mind. Be willing to listen, even if you feel uncomfortable. It may be hard to hear what they say but it is also hard for them to tell you
- not react if you have strong negative feelings. Let your child know you need time to think. Agree to talk again later. When you are ready, share your thoughts and concerns with them. The more open you are, the easier it will be for both of you
- have many conversations over time. This is a journey for both of you. Be patient with yourself and others. It can take time to deal with the many fears and myths that society has about same-sex attracted people
- find out more. This will help you understand what is happening for your child and give you things to discuss with them
- get support from people who understand what you are going through. Parents Supporting Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) can be a great support. Members have been down this road and share a common goal of keeping families together
- take care of your physical and emotional needs by letting others be there for you. Some parents focus on their child’s needs and neglect their own.

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The best thing to say when your child talks about their sexuality or ‘comes out’ to you is ‘I love you’. They need your love, respect and understanding now more than ever.

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Why is my child same-sex attracted?

Parents often ask why their child is lesbian, gay or bisexual. Are they rebelling? Are they trying to hurt you? Are they influenced by others? Can it be changed or ‘cured’ by a doctor or psychiatrist?

There have been many studies to find out what causes people to be same-sex attracted but there is no clear answer. Throughout history there have always been homosexual people whether it was accepted by society at the time, or not. It is now widely accepted by the medical

How parents can respond

When your child tells you they are same-sex attracted, the most important thing is to make sure they know you love them. Tell them you’re proud they trust you enough to be honest with you. It also helps to:



and psychological professions as a variation of human sexuality and not something that needs to be treated or changed. Efforts by the health professions to change people in the past have not often been successful.

Our sexual orientation is what feels right and 'normal' for us even if it is different from how others express these things. If you asked a heterosexual person if they chose to be 'straight' they would likely say 'no, I was born this way – it's just the way I am and I couldn't be anything else'. This is the same for people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. With the prejudice and discrimination that can come with being same-sex attracted most people wouldn't be on this path if it didn't feel right for them.

'Did I do something wrong?'

Many parents worry they did something wrong and may be 'to blame' for their child's sexuality. However, there is no evidence that parenting styles or family situations determine sexuality. If it was about parenting style then other children in the family would be same-sex attracted as well!

Why didn't they tell us before?

You may feel hurt, angry or guilty because your child didn't tell you before. It is important to realise they probably couldn't have told you any sooner. They may have picked up on negative attitudes, been harassed or bullied, rejected by their friends or seen this happen to others. Your rejection might be too much to risk. It says something about your relationship that they've shared this with you now. It shows they want to be honest with you and include you in all parts of their life.

Sometimes children tell their parents in an angry or accusing way because they're stressed and anxious about the reaction. They may worry about hurting you, or feel guilty about ruining your hopes and dreams for them.

To tell a parent you're lesbian, gay or bisexual takes great courage. Once said, it can't be taken back. They know it could change how you feel about them. They might worry they will lose your love

Being supportive

Studies show that when a parent is supportive it can make their child's 'coming out' a lot easier and help them to be confident and resilient. They are likely to have better physical and mental health now and in the future.

It can strengthen your relationship if you find out what is happening for your child and how you can support them, just as you would with any other issue. You could ask:

- how they are feeling
- what it's like for them to talk about this
- who else they have told and what sort of reaction they got
- what support they need. Some might be confident about their sexuality while others may be very anxious and worried.

Children who are rejected by their parents have higher rates of mental and physical health problems including risk-taking behaviour, drug use, self-harm, depression and suicide attempts. They are also at higher risk of homelessness if parents tell them to leave, or the stress and conflict becomes too great and they move out without support.

Telling others

Everyone handles telling others in their own way. Your child might not want to tell anyone else, or they may be happy for everyone to know. If they decide to tell others, it can take time as they will have many different relationships in their life. They may want you to tell other family members, or they might want to do it themselves. It is important to respect their wishes. They need to feel safe about their choice to tell or not, and that others won't take away their right to privacy.



Many people assume everyone is heterosexual. Every day your child might have to decide how to answer questions about their personal life.

Community attitudes and laws

Community attitudes have changed over time to become more accepting and respectful of same-sex attracted people. This is reflected in many of our laws. There are laws to protect same-sex attracted people from harassment and discrimination. Same-sex couples in a domestic relationship now have the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples - with the exception of being able to marry. Laws about adopting children and methods for conceiving vary across States and Territories.

Homophobia and bullying

Despite changes in our laws and community attitudes, prejudice, rejection and bullying make life hard for same-sex attracted people. Young people who are same-sex attracted, or are thought to be, are three times more likely to be bullied or abused at school, work and in social situations. Even if children aren't verbally or physically harassed, they will have heard negative comments and harsh attitudes towards homosexual people.

Homophobic bullying in schools has increased over time, with cyber bullying making it easier to involve many people. Many children miss school which puts them at risk of not doing well or not completing their education. They might not speak up as they don't want to 'come out' to school staff, or are worried about confidentiality.

If your child tells you about bullying, act early. Let them know it is your job to make sure they are safe. The Safe Schools Coalition Australia (see contacts at the end of this Guide) can offer support on how to approach your school.

Negative stereotypes, bullying and discrimination can damage young people trying to work out who they are.

Creating a safe home

Parents can help by creating a safe home where everyone feels respected and that they belong, regardless of sexuality, by:

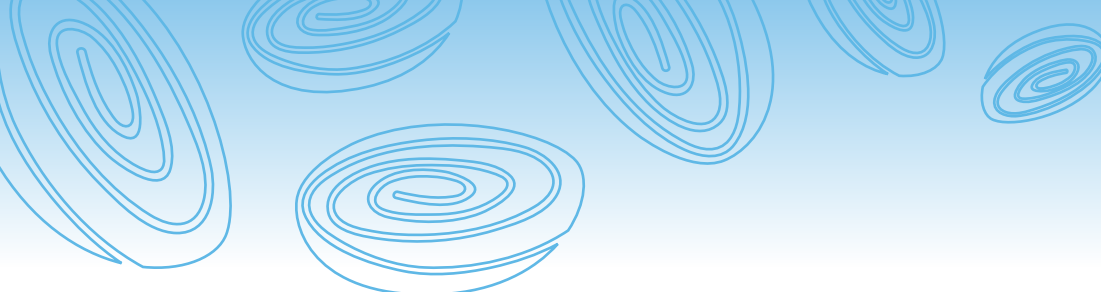
- speaking respectfully about sexual diversity from when children are young. Many children say they know from a young age they are different. They will listen to your words and attitudes to know whether they can talk to you about how they feel
- balancing negative comments with positive messages. Even flippant sayings like 'it's so gay' can send a negative message about being same-sex attracted. We don't say things like 'it's so straight'
- fostering acceptance by showing your family and friends you respect your child. Don't allow homophobic talk or behaviour
- teaching that prejudice is about stereotypes and myths and nothing to do with who people really are
- helping children think about what they can do if they experience bullying or discrimination. Help them build resilience and confidence
- making sure children have information that keeps them safe in both the online and offline worlds.

Getting support

It is important to be around people who support you and your child. You could:

- contact a service or support group at the end of this Guide. Many parents have been through the same thing and can offer words of wisdom and support
- consider whether you want to spend time with any friends, social groups, clubs or other organisations that are not respectful or supportive.





Want more information?

Support for parents

Beyond Blue: Families like mine

A guide for parents and families when young people are questioning their sexuality or gender identity.
www.familieslikemine.beyondblue.org.au

Australian Human Rights Commission

The promotion and protection of human rights in Australia, including sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status.
www.humanrights.gov.au

Gender Centre

Services for the transgender and gender diverse community.
www.gendercentre.org.au

Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Information on gender dysphoria.
<http://blogs.rch.org.au/news/2014/06/10/whats-gender-dysphoria/>

Australian Communications and Media Authority

Online safety advice and resources for children, parents and teachers.
www.cybersmart.gov.au

QLife

Phone 1800 184 527, daily 5.30pm – 10.30 pm
Telephone and online chat, peer support and referral for same-sex attracted and gender diverse people of all ages.
www.qlife.org.au

Youth Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 22 4636
For information on depression and anxiety in young people who are same-sex attracted.
www.youthbeyondblue.com

Reach out

Information for young people coping with tough times.
www.reachout.com

Law Stuff

Legal Information for young people including links for transgender young people.
www.lawstuff.org.au

Australian GLBTIQ Multicultural Council

Linking culturally diverse people to information and support.
www.agmc.org.au

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800
A helpline for children and young people.
www.kidshelp.com.au

Local Services

ACON HIV Counselling

Phone 02 6622 1555
ACON health services also cover sexual health, mental health, alcohol and other drug use, ageing, homophobic violence, domestic violence, counselling, community care, housing, workplace equality.

