



Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

June 2015

Parenting an LGBTQ teen (Q as in “questioning”)

Kermit the Frog sang, “It’s not easy being green.” As his preschool-age audience reaches adolescence, they may be singing the same tune with slightly different lyrics. Because it’s not easy being a teen, as anyone who’s ever been one can attest. There’s schoolwork, social and peer pressure, plus the huge task of trying to figure out who you want to be when you grow up. For LGBTQ teens, fear of rejection by family and friends can make life even more difficult.

LGBTQ stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.” Lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning refer to the gender a person is sexually attracted to — also called sexual orientation. “Lesbian” is used to describe a woman who is attracted to women. “Bisexual” refers to a person who is attracted to both genders. “Gay” is used to

describe a man who is attracted to men, but has been used to mean a same-sex orientation in general. “Transgender” refers to gender identity, expression or behavior that doesn’t conform to that typically associated with the sex to which a person was assigned at birth.¹ Some teens aren’t sure of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They may refer to themselves as “questioning.”

Recognizing and expressing one’s sexual orientation happens at different ages.² No one knows why a person is attracted to one gender or another. There may be biological factors as well as psychological factors. A person doesn’t “choose” to be gay or transgender, just as one doesn’t choose to be straight.³

Many parents of teens grew up in an era and culture in which kids rarely talked about sexual orientation. And when they did, calling someone gay was often intended as an insult. Though this is still the case in too many schools, our culture is evolving. More and more schools have anti-bullying programs. Kids are forming Gay-Straight Alliances clubs at schools. The global It Gets Better Project is committed to spreading the message to LGBTQ youth that life does get better after high school.

Coming to terms with coming out

LGBTQ kids are often afraid of telling their parents and risking rejection. They may fear losing a parent’s love or even being thrown out of the house. If they’ve been brought up to believe that being gay or transgender is bad or sinful, they may feel ashamed. Research shows that negative family reactions to a teen’s sexual orientation are associated with health problems in the next several years. Rejected teens are far more likely — eight times — to attempt suicide compared to teens who report low or no rejection from family.⁴ They are almost six times more likely to report high levels of depression.⁵

That’s why it’s so important for parents to take a breath, and think before they speak — especially during initial conversations. If you can think of nothing else, remember to say, “I love you. I’ve always loved you. I will continue to love you.” You may want to reach out to organizations such as PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) for help coming to terms with your teen’s sexual or gender orientation.⁶

Support and education for teens, parents and allies

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA)
<http://glsen.org/gsa>

GSAs are student clubs that work to improve school climate for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

It Gets Better Project
www.itgetsbetter.org

With a mission to help LGBT youth envision a positive future, the It Gets Better Project is also dedicated to creating and inspiring change.

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
www.pflag.org

Committed to advancing equality and societal acceptance of LGBT people through support, education and advocacy, PFLAG has more than 350 chapters in the U.S.

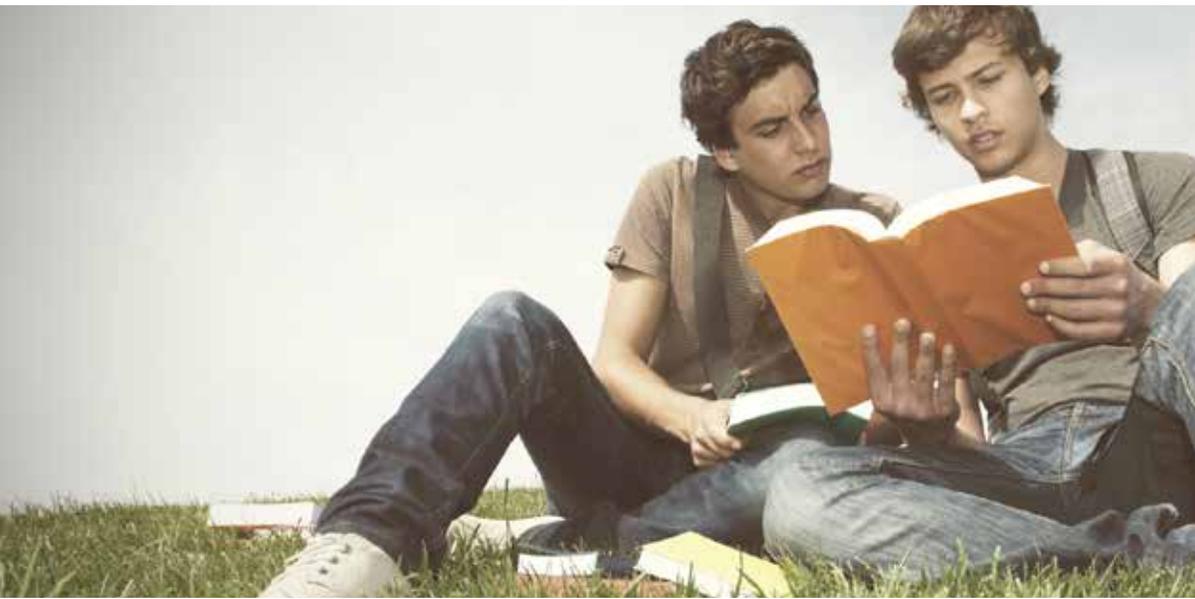
Suicide Prevention Hotlines

1-800-Suicide
1-800-784-2433
1-800-273-Talk
1-800-273-8255

SEAP

Call toll-free
1-800-692-7459
1-800-824-4306 (TDD)
or log on to
www.liveandworkwell.com
access code: Pennsylvania

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Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

At liveandworkwell.com, you'll find helpful articles and resources on LGBTQ issues under the LiveWell section. You can also search for a therapist using the "Search for Clinician" link.

Learning your child is transgender or non-gender-conforming can come as a shock. Some parents may feel disappointed or angry. As with any truth your child shares with you, remember that he or she has entrusted you with important and personal information. PFLAG recommends you seek out support from other parents and allies, which you can do through the website at www.pflag.org.⁷

Supporting an LGBTQ teen

Many LGBTQ kids face intense social challenges — perhaps fearing rejection at home, and facing bullying at school. So it's very important that teens know their parents will help them feel safe and supported.⁸

Counseling may be helpful for a teen who is confused about sexual identity. However, avoid therapy aimed at trying to change a child's sexual orientation. So-called "change therapy" can cause great psychological harm.⁹ The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association and many other medical and mental health organizations agree that a same-sex orientation is not a mental disorder. Thus, it's not something that can or needs to be "cured."¹⁰

Along with your assurances of love, here are some ways to support an LGBTQ teen:

- Ask how you can help.
- Let your teen decide to whom, when and how he or she wants to come out. Don't tell others without his or her permission.
- Help your teen think through how they want to come out and to whom. Offer advice to help avoid risks.
- Make sure he or she knows how to practice safe sex.
- Support your teen's involvement in online and community LGBTQ groups.¹¹

Fortunately, we live in a time when there are many support groups for LGBTQ teens and for those who love them. None of us is alone, gay or straight, parent or teen. We can all be allies for each other.

1. American Psychological Association. www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx
2. American Psychological Association. Just the facts about sexual orientation and youth: A primer for principals, educators, and school personnel. 2008. www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.pdf
3. Planned Parenthood. Parenting LGBT and questioning kids. www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/parenting-lgbt-questioning-kids-37938.htm
4. Ryan C, Huebner D, Diaz RM, Sanchez J. Family rejection as a predictor of negative health outcomes in white and Latino lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults. *Pediatrics*. January 2009; 123(1); <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/123/1/346.full>
5. Ibid.
6. Planned Parenthood. Parenting LGBT and questioning kids. www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/parenting-lgbt-questioning-kids-37938.htm

7. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Welcoming our trans family and friends: A support guide for parents, families and friends of transgender and gender non-conforming people. <http://community.pflag.org/Document.Doc?id=202>
8. Planned Parenthood. Parenting LGBT and questioning kids. www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/parenting-lgbt-questioning-kids-37938.htm
9. American Psychological Association. Just the facts about sexual orientation and youth: A primer for principals, educators, and school personnel. 2008. www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.pdf
10. Ibid.
11. Planned Parenthood. Parenting LGBT and questioning kids. www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/parenting-lgbt-questioning-kids-37938.htm