



FFLAG

Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays



HOW DO
I TELL MY
PARENTS?

What is FFLAG?

Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays is a national voluntary organisation and registered charity

FFLAG is dedicated to supporting parents and their gay, lesbian and bisexual sons and daughters.

FFLAG offers support through its central telephone helpline, email and website in their efforts to help parents and families understand, accept and support their lesbian, gay and bisexual members with love and pride.

FFLAG members are parents of lesbian, gay or bisexual daughters and sons. These young people and families still face homophobia in our society, which brings in its wake prejudice, bullying and alienation.

FFLAG supports the full human and civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals.

FFLAG speaks out and acts to defend and enhance those human and civil rights.



HOW DO I TELL MY PARENTS?

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Preface

'How Do I Tell My Parents?' will help you find the best way for you to approach your parents with your news. In this booklet, FFLAG shares the knowledge and experience gained over years of supporting lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and their parents. In our experience, even if parents' reaction is initially negative, once they get used to the idea most parents become accepting and supportive of their LGB child. There is a glossary of the words and concepts at the end of the booklet that we hope you will find useful.

We know that some of the issues faced by transgendered people are similar to those faced by LGB people. We work closely with our friends and colleagues in the trans community and there is supportive information for trans people and their families at the end of the Guide.

Some of the advice and support offered in this booklet will be more useful to you than others. Once you have read through it we hope that you will feel more confident about talking to your parents.

I've got something to tell you

You have, perhaps, known for a while that you are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). Your parents, on the other hand, might have absolutely no idea that you are anything but heterosexual (straight). Even the closest of families with parents who think that they know their children really well can be taken by surprise when they learn that their daughter or son is LGB. That your parents are surprised by your news doesn't mean that they won't adjust. It might take them time, but most parents will come to accept their daughter or son for who they really are. Most parents will be proud that their daughter or son feels able to 'come out' to them.

It is probably helpful to realise that many parents will go through a whole range of emotions. Some of these might sound a bit negative, but most parents are anxious to do their best for their child.

How to tell them

No two families are the same, so there is no single sure-fire way of telling your parents that you are LGB. Emotions, circumstances, situations will all vary from family to family.

Just as no two families are exactly the same, so the method and probably the words will vary from one family to the next. But many reactions are common to all families, and knowing this can be helpful and make you feel stronger. Very few parents imagine that their children could possibly be LGB. Even those who may have wondered about their child's sexuality may still feel shocked, sad or angry when they know for a fact. Try to

understand this. You have perhaps, had several years to gradually realise that you are LGB. Your parents, when you tell them, will have had no time at all.

The right time

Choose your moment. Most families have times that are right for talking, and these are usually better than trying to create a moment. Sometimes events make this choice for you. When something is on your mind, it can build up to such a point that it spills out. Let it happen.

Listening to LGB people and parents over the years, we know that there are a few do's and don'ts about the right time to tell your parents.

DO

Give yourself time to say what you want to say and give them time to hear what you're saying.

Do try and have a clear head (not under the influence of alcohol/other substances or hung-over etc) when you decide to tell them.

Remember that you will be the same daughter/son after you've told them.

Do give them time to adjust to what you have just told them.

DONT

Don't come out to your parents at big family occasions such as a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah. Other times to try and avoid – Christmas; Mothers' Day; birthday parties. All these occasions are full of heightened emotion anyway, and your news is unlikely to be met with the undivided attention it deserves.

“Sara told us she had a girlfriend on the morning her elder sister was getting married. I was trying to hold it together for everyone but there were so many emotions spinning in my head I didn't know what to do”

Don't tell them just as you are leaving to go away from home i.e. to University, off on a gap year etc.

“Dan told us at the station on his way back to uni. I cried all the way home. I so wanted to have time to talk to him. Not just to ask questions, but to tell him we loved him whatever. But he was gone and I felt so alone.”

People want to tell their parents that they are LGB for many reasons, but mostly these are to do with honesty and love.

Just occasionally you may want to tell them so that you can hurt them, perhaps when you are upset or in a bad mood. Try not to break the news to your parents like this. If you tell them when you are in a temper, your words won't carry as much weight and there will be lots of negative emotions around. It's not fair on you and it's not fair on them.

The 'right' words

There are no standard words or phrases for telling your parents that you are LGB.

Whatever words come most easily to you are the ones you need to use. It's often enough to say something like;

'I'm lesbian/gay/bi' or 'I think I'm lesbian/gay/bi' or 'I've known for a while that I'm lesbian/gay/bi'

Let your parents know why you haven't told them before. It might be that you feared being rejected by them or that you didn't want to hurt them. You have got used to these worries, but they will be new to your parents.

Point out to your parents that you are still the same daughter or son that you have always been. Say that it is because you love them that you need to be honest with them about this important part of yourself.

Parent's initial reactions to the news that their daughter or son is LGB can vary from being totally understanding and supportive to anger and disbelief. If their reaction is negative, remember that they probably need time to adjust and to sort their own emotions out.

If in their shock, your parents say things that they do not mean or regret afterwards, try to be understanding. Many parents who initially react badly to their daughter or son's news, become really supportive and understanding once they have had time to think about things calmly.

Hopefully once you have shared your news with your parents, you will all be able to talk things through and be supportive and understanding of each others emotions.

Give it time

However, there's a time to stop talking. This usually comes naturally, often when everything has been said and perhaps repeated. At this point, let the subject go. Let life get back to normal.

It's likely that your parents will bring up the subject again, perhaps in a day or two, or it may take several weeks. Your parents may gradually accept the fact; they may want to talk about it at a later date, perhaps in a guarded way; or perhaps when they are feeling a bit less confused about their feelings. They may try to ignore what has happened or may even pretend that nothing has happened.

Your parents may need quite a while to adjust to the news. Be aware of your parent's need for their own 'thinking time.' However, if you feel that what you have told them is being ignored or forgotten, talk to them again using the knowledge and experience you gained the first time.

Once you've given your parents some time and if they seem to be ignoring what has happened, it is reasonable to try bringing up the subject again. Ask them if they've any questions. Tell them that you have been honest and upfront with them; you are trying to live your life in an open and truthful way; you respect their feelings and hope that they understand your feelings too.

If it's not working out, or seems impossible, it is time to get some outside support. There are help-lines and email answering service (FFLAG – 0845 652 0311 or info@fflag.org.uk); Stonewall (www.stonewall.org.uk) and various lesbian and gay switchboards. There is endless information on-line, but be selective and careful of the services you use. Your feelings and emotions are as important as your parents.

Families differ

In some families talking directly to your parents about your sexual orientation may not be a sensible thing to do. It may be better to gradually let your parents know that you're LGB, allowing them to realise at a pace they can take. It may be clear to you that this is the best way for your family. In some families, it may take a discussion with someone outside the family to work out the best approach for you.

It might be easier to talk to a relative or family friend first, either for advice about how to tell your parents, or for help in telling them. By making these decisions, you are bringing under control some of the difficulties you might have been worrying about.

"I had a phone call from my daughter telling me her younger brother had come out to her and he wanted her to break the news to us. I didn't really understand why our son didn't want to tell us himself, but I respected his decision"

You might get an idea of your parent's attitude to being LGB when watching TV with them. Several soaps have LGB storylines. You may try and judge by their reaction to gay issues in the news. If their reaction is negative, remember that it's probably never occurred to them that their daughter or son might be LGB. Once they know your sexual orientation they are likely to react in a more considered way to LGB issues on TV/in the media and probably regret some of the negative things they said in the past.

Parent's emotions

It might be helpful to know that even the most accepting and supportive parents go through a whole range of emotions. Your parents may feel guilty or blame themselves or they may want to deny the facts. They may be concerned about what others think. But they may also feel very ignorant of some of the issues they are now facing and feel frustrated and inadequate as parents.

It may be hard for your parents to accept that there is any important part of you that they didn't know about. This can make some parents feel guilty and that they should have known.

"I felt really guilty that I didn't know my son was gay. It just never occurred to me and I felt so bad that I hadn't been 'there' for him as he was going through all those emotions in his early teens"

Some parents blame themselves and feel that something in the way they brought their child up has 'made' their child lesbian/gay/bi. No-one can make their child gay – the same as no parent can make a child heterosexual (straight). Being gay or straight is part of who you are and that is right for you as a person.

Some parents simply try and deny the facts. They might have wondered if their child could be LGBT, but denied that it could possibly happen to them. Other people might have an LGBT son or daughter, but not them!

"I didn't think Gemma could possibly be a lesbian – she had pictures of these boy bands all over her bedroom wall"

Parents are often concerned about how other people will react to the news that their daughter or son is LGB. Some parents fear prejudice or hostility from work colleagues, family members or from their religious community. Do try and understand that your parents might feel very isolated and unsure of themselves and will take time to adjust to this new situation.

"I wish I could say all my concerns were for our son but that wouldn't be true - I also acted very selfishly because I cared desperately about what others thought"

Not a choice

One thing that everyone needs to know is that being LGB is not a choice. No-one chooses their sexual orientation. No-one chooses to be straight; no-one chooses to be gay.

Being LGB is part of who you are, not what you are. You are yourself. You may be a son/daughter; a brother/sister; nephew/niece; uncle/aunt; a grandchild; a student; a work mate; a friend. You also happen to be lesbian, gay or bisexual; it's an important part of who you are, but doesn't define who you are.

Some people still mistakenly believe that being LGB is somehow a 'choice'. It is worth pointing out to them, that given the level of prejudice, bullying, negative stereotyping and outright homophobia LGB people still face, why would anyone choose to be LGB?

If your parents think that you chose to be LGB, it might be helpful for them to read FFLAG's booklet 'A Guide for Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men'. It can be downloaded from our website www.fflag.org.uk or you can get in touch and we will send a hard copy.

Your parents may say that they believe you are under the sexual influence of another person. That may be true. Point out that straight people experience similar influences. The 'age of consent' (the age you are allowed to have sex) is 16 and that is the same whatever your sexual orientation. In the UK, having sex with someone at 16 is legal, except with someone who's in a 'position of trust' over you. This includes teachers, youth workers, carers and doctors etc. It's illegal for them to have sex with under-18s in their care.

"Just because we've blown out 16 candles on our birthday cake, doesn't mean we're ready for sex. Do what feels right for you. Just make sure you understand what sex is about and get clued-up on safer sex before you do anything."

Some parents believe that if their teenage daughter or son says that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual that it is 'just a phase' and that they will grow out of it. A lot of people feel drawn towards a member of the same sex when they're growing up, and not all of them are LGB. It is absolutely okay to be attracted to members of the same sex and then to perhaps question if that is right for you. No-one can make you LGB. If you are physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex then that is right for you.

There is a choice in whether or not you 'come out' and who you decide to tell. Some people only come out to their friends but not to their family; some to their family but not to their work mates; some wait until their 30s or 40s and some come out when they are 13 or 14 years old. Some people never come out. You are an individual and will know what is right for you.

Safer Sex

Parents worry about their son or daughter having sex. Sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS are matters of deep concern to parents – as they should be to everyone. Everyone should practise safer sex. Get up to date advice from organisations such as THT (www.tht.org.uk); Avert (www.avert.org) or the NHS (www.nhs.uk)

...but not just sex

If your parents think that being LGBT is just a matter of sex, explain that it is far more. A loving same-sex relationship involves the same levels of trust, affection, companionship and commitment as any other. Any long term commitment to a same-sex partner will involve all the emotional input that a male-female partnership demands – and sex will be just a part of this relationship. Your parents may not understand this at first, but it will help them to hear you say it.

Think on!

Be sure you can trust the person you come out to. Hopefully your parents will respect your wishes on whether/when/if you are happy for them to share your news. If you tell a best friend – be sure they can be trusted not to spread gossip.

You may want to come out to one of your parents rather than both. That's fine if it works for you. Just think about how it will be for the parent that 'knows'. If you come out to one parent, talk through with them when/how the other parent will be told. Keeping secrets in families doesn't usually work.

Coming out isn't a once and only event. Over the years and in different situations you will need to make snap decisions about whether or not it is in your best interest, or indeed safe to come out to someone.

Remember you're not alone – it's estimated that about 7% of the population are lesbian or gay (the figures are less clear about people who identify as bisexual).

There are endless discussions, claims and arguments about why some people are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Was the individual simply born that way or was it down to the way the child was brought up? The Nature-Nurture debate has been going on for decades. It will probably continue being argued over for years to come.

Conclusion

Hopefully you will have found the advice in this booklet helpful. Some pieces of advice will be more useful to you than others. A large amount of it is aimed at younger LGB people, who we recognise as being more vulnerable to parental questioning and possible rejection. However, in our experience, much of the advice applies equally to older LGB people who wish to have an open and honest relationship with their parents who have been unaware of their sexual orientation. Equally, it provides a basis for coming out to other members of the family. It is simply because of the unique position of parents that we concentrate on this particular aspect.

Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is an important part of who you are. We hope that having read this booklet that you are in a better position to be open and confident about being true to yourself.

Glossary

This is a brief guide to the terms used in FFLAG's publications.

Bisexual: refers to someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to women and men.

Coming out/Outing: Coming out is telling other people that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Being outed is having someone else reveal you as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, usually against your will.

Gay: refers to someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex. Some women prefer to refer to themselves as gay women, but lesbian is the word more often preferred by women, and the word gay is often used just to refer to men.

Heterosexual /straight: refers to someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Homophobia /transphobia: prejudice against anyone who is or is thought to be lesbian, gay or bisexual or transgender.

Lesbian: refers to a woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other women.

LGBT: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender. This is the term most commonly used to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities.

Sexual orientation: term for an individual's enduring emotional and sexual attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (straight) orientations.

Trans: a term intended to include and welcome all who are transgendered / transsexual, or transvestite or cross-dressing

Trans support

FFLAG recognises the difference between identifying as transgendered/ transsexual and identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual(LGB). For trans people the issue is gender identity and for LGB people it is sexual orientation. Although our expertise and experience is around supporting families and friends of lesbian, gay and bisexual people and issues of sexual orientation we work closely with members of the trans community. Together we work to educate, to inform and to address the homophobia and transphobia that our daughters and sons often face.

If you are looking for expert advice and support on all issues relating to gender identity do contact GIRES (Gender Identity Research and Education Society - www.gires.org.uk). GIRES is also the umbrella organisation for The Beaumont Society, Women of the Beaumont Society and Mermaids among others.

Mermaids offers support and information for children and teenagers who are trying to cope with gender identity issues, and for their families and carers

We are confident that you will find the information and support that you need from GIRES and their affiliated organisations. If there is anything further that the FFLAG team can do to support you, your family/loved one or friend, do please contact us via email or call our helpline.

Tribute

The original booklets in this series were inspired and written by Rose Robinson (1916 - 2011) who was a pioneer in the Parents' Movement. Rose was FFLAG's President until her death in 2011. Rose's insight, many years of counselling and hard work resulted in the present pattern of nationwide parents' support groups.

The original booklets were published in 1971-2. It is a tribute to Rose's vision and foresight that for many years the majority of the text of the booklets remained unchanged.

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