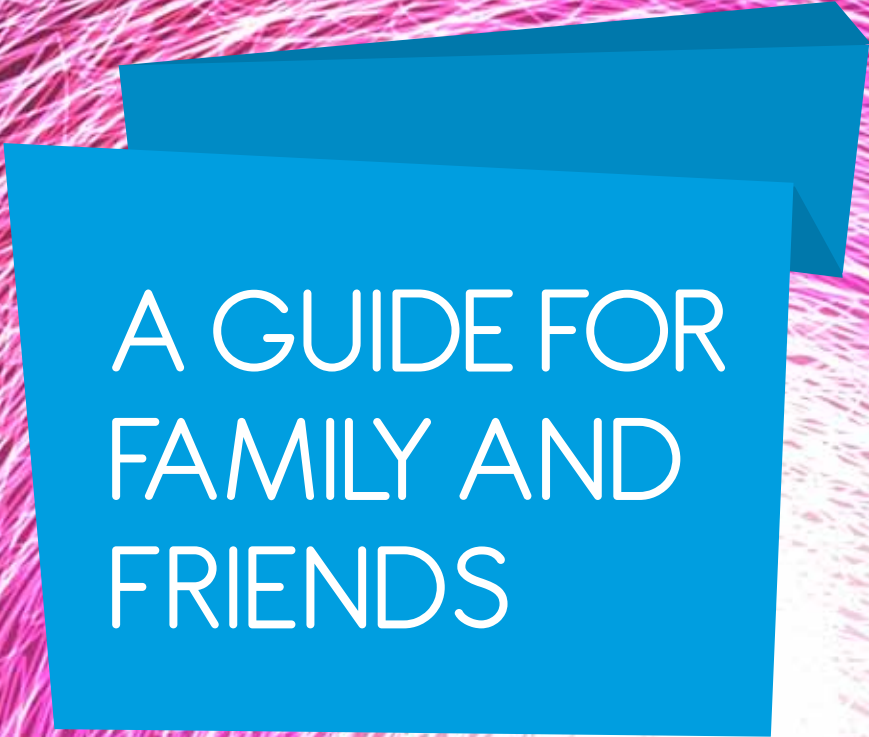




FFLAG

Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays



A GUIDE FOR
FAMILY AND
FRIENDS

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.



A GUIDE FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Revised Edition published by FFLAG
(Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) 2012
© Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

Preface

A Guide for Families and Friends is just that – a guide that will help you to support and understand someone close to you who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). In this Guide, FFLAG shares the knowledge and experience gained over years of supporting parents, families and LGB people.

In the text of the Guide, we have deliberately, as and where we felt it appropriate, interchanged the words ‘lesbian, gay or bisexual’ and the acronym LGB. 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 pieces of advice and support offered will be more useful to you than others. Dip in to the Guide and use whatever information is most helpful to you.

No two families are the same

Your daughter or son may have just told you that she/he is lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). You might have been wondering about their sexuality for a while, or the announcement might have come as a bolt out of the blue. Perhaps they have yet to 'come out' but somehow you know that they are gay and want to offer your support.

Most parents assume that their children will grow up to be heterosexual (straight). They won't have thought that one day they would hear the words 'Mum. Dad. I've got something to tell you. I'm gay!'

We know that each family situation is different but most parents find it helpful to know how other parents have coped in a similar situation. It is often helpful to know that your emotions and concerns are shared by other parents who have an LGB daughter or son. Many parents want to know why their daughter or son is LGB. There are endless theories about sexual orientation. There are theories about parenting; discussions about anatomy; talk of an elusive 'gay gene'. The Nature v Nurture debate has raged for decades and will no doubt continue for years. Perhaps there is no single answer and sexual orientation is a complex interaction between environmental, cognitive and anatomical factors which shape an individual from an early age.

Whatever the theories, as a parent you are now facing the fact that your child is lesbian/gay/bi. You are probably coping with some complex emotions of your own as well as wanting to understand what is going on for your daughter or son.

Not a choice

The most important thing to remember in understanding your child's sexual orientation is that it is not a choice. No one chooses their sexual orientation. No-one chooses to be straight; no-one chooses to be gay. It is simply a part of them – an important part, but never the less only a part of that person.

The belief that some people still hold that being LGB is somehow a 'choice' is mistaken. Given the level of prejudice, bullying and out right homophobia that LGB people face even today, why would anyone 'choose' to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. No-one can 'make' someone LGB – in the same way that no-one 'makes' a person straight.

It might be that your daughter or son approaches you saying that they 'think' they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. They may be questioning their sexual orientation and wondering if they might be LGB. It is a mark of their trust in you that they are willing to share this. Please accept their questioning and let them know that you will support them whatever their sexual orientation. As they grow up, many young people experiment with different sexual behaviour. It may be that your daughter or son is attracted to someone of the same sex as part of growing up. If this passes, then it was a part of that growing up process - only time will tell. If your child is indeed LGB they won't want to have been told that it's just a 'passing phase' and they will 'grow out of it'.

Supporting your child

As so very many LGB people have told us 'Coming out to your parents is really scary!' Even in the most loving of parent/child relationships, there is that moment of doubt about how your parents may react. Stories of parental rejection, negative reaction from friends or family... will be familiar to your daughter/son. That your daughter or son has told you that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual is a huge step in building an open and honest relationship for the future.

Whilst accepting that many people say that they 'felt different' when they were growing up, a lot of LGB people say that they knew they were different to their peers at an early age.

"My son said that he knew he was somehow 'different' when he was nine years old. I found it hard to believe but he is adamant"

Your daughter/son will probably have spent a long time, possibly years taking on board the fact that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. They will probably have absorbed some of the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotypes that unfortunately are still around. They will have become familiar with 'teasing' and homophobic bullying and the way that 'gay' can be used as a term of abuse. The teasing and bullying might not have been aimed at them, but they will have taken on board some of the negativity that even today is associated with being anything other than heterosexual. So no wonder it's 'really scary' to tell your parents you're lesbian, gay or bisexual!

Although you might be surprised/shocked by your child's news, try and remember how vulnerable they are feeling. Remember too, that they are still the same daughter or son that you have always known and loved. Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is part of who they are, not what they are. No-one, gay or straight, is defined entirely by their sexual

orientation. They have shared an important part of who they are. Please accept their honesty and openness and move forward together as a family in that spirit.

“I came out to my mother in a random outburst...but her reaction calmed me down and reassured me. I was so relieved because my mother showed me that our relationship had not changed – I was still the daughter she knew and loved.”

Parents' reaction

Many parents who believe that they are totally accepting of lesbian, gay or bisexual people, and who don't consider themselves prejudiced or judgemental are likely to find themselves, if only temporarily, knocked off balance by an announcement that they have a lesbian, gay or bisexual daughter or son.

There are a whole range of emotions that are common to many parents who have just learnt their child is LGB. These emotions can be everything from a sense of loss, guilt, denial, worry, isolation through to relief and affirmation.

Some parents feel a sense of loss when their daughter or son comes out.

“When Glynn came out, it felt a bit like bereavement, a grieving for the life I'd had planned for him: the happy and successful life, the daughter-in-law, the grandchildren.”

Guilt is another emotion that many parents experience. Sometimes this guilt is because parents think that they are somehow to blame for their child being LGB. Some parents ask “Where did I go wrong?” This is only an issue if being LGB is thought to be a ‘problem’. It cannot be emphasised enough – no one can make a person lesbian, gay or bi.

Parents can also feel guilty because they didn't know about their daughter or son's sexual orientation. They feel that as a caring and loving parent they have perhaps let their child down by not knowing about that important aspect of their child's life.

"I was distressed to realise that my son knew from around age 11 that he was different, had hoped it was a phase he was going through, and later had prayed he'd be delivered from it. He had been going through something on his own for years and thought he might never be able to tell anyone. I'd hoped I was a good mother and yet I had been totally ignorant of all of that."

Some parents simply try and deny the facts. They might have wondered if their child could be lesbian/gay/bi, but denied that it could possibly happen to them. Other people might have a lesbian/gay/bi child, but not them!

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

On learning their child is lesbian/gay/bi many worries come to the fore. Parents worry that their daughter/son will be ignored or rejected by their friends or other family members or they will be bullied at school. They worry about their child finding a partner and having a loving relationship. They worry about their child's sexual health particularly about HIV/AIDS. Sometimes parents are saddened by the thought that they might not become grandparents.

Many of these worries will not seem as pressing once you have got used to the idea of having a lesbian/gay/bi daughter or son. If you have a positive and supportive attitude to your child's news, family and friends are likely to take their lead from you. Whilst homophobic bullying is a reality, schools and colleges should have anti-bullying policies in place to address this. Your lesbian/gay/bi child is just as likely as their straight friends to find themselves in a loving and fulfilling long-term relationship. Everyone, gay or

straight should make sure that they educate themselves about sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS and practise safer sex. Many LGB people have children – different families: same love.

Many parents talk of their sense of isolation when they learn that their child is lesbian/gay/bi. They might be totally accepting of their child, but still have concerns that they find difficult to share.

“I told a couple of friends at work. They were supportive but really didn’t understand what I was going through. I don’t think anyone other than another parent quite understands the different emotions.”

To some parents it comes as a relief to know that their child is lesbian/gay/bi. They might have known that their child was worrying about something. Perhaps their child had been withdrawn, anxious or depressed. As a loving parent, the imagination can go into overdrive worrying about what is wrong with your child. So learning that your child is lesbian/gay/bi can come as a relief when one thinks about all the real difficulties and problems that could beset your daughter or son. Having a child who is lesbian/gay/bi is not a problem unless someone makes it a problem.

There are people in every walk of life who are successful, happy and fulfilled – and who also happen to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Once you start to think about it you will become aware of the many people in business, health professionals, teachers, politicians, musicians, actors, lawyers, sportsmen and women etc who are lesbian, gay or bi. There are lots of role models out there, and the list of names of those role models grows all the time. Your child’s sexual orientation will not stand in the way of them achieving whatever goal they set out to achieve.

Emotions are alright

Don't smother your emotions. Some parents will say that they have come to terms and that they accept this is the way their child is, even when feeling upset and confused inside.

It is better to tell your daughter or son that their news was a surprise/shock that you were totally unprepared for. Say that you still love her/him and that nothing has changed that, but that you still need time to adjust to the reality.

Get in touch with a parents' support organisation where you will be able to talk through your emotions. It may be that you don't particularly want to talk, but just to listen to other parents' experiences.

Joining a Parents' Support group can really help. You can share your worries, listen to others parents' experiences and know that you are amongst people who understand at least part of what is going on for you. Expressing your feelings with someone outside the family, who nonetheless, understands will really help.

Even if there isn't a group in your area, talking to another parent or sharing your feelings via email can make all the difference! Visit www.fflag.org.uk to find your nearest group or to speak to another parent 0845 652 0311

"I must say going along to a parents' group, was one of the best decisions we've made. I found a group of people who understood and accepted us."

Religious beliefs

Discovering that one of your loved ones is lesbian/gay/bi can be particularly traumatic for parents who come from a faith background. It can often cause conflict with deeply held views and can lead to great soul searching and questioning of one's fundamental beliefs.

Strong religious communities provide definite answers to important life questions and also stable relationship structures. Living without these can be a scary experience but many have found that they have been made stronger as a result of their questioning journey.

FFLAG does not presume to offer interpretation on such texts as the Bible, the Koran or Torah but does have members who have faced these issues and who are able to share their experiences with others. Again, contact details can be found on FFLAG's website or by phoning the helpline number.

Some parents speak first

Just occasionally parents will realise that their child might be lesbian/gay/bi before their child feels able to approach them. It might be that you have found something that indicates your child might be gay – perhaps accessing gay websites. It might be that someone outside the family has said something to you.

What lesbian/gay/bi people generally say is that for them, the easiest way for the subject to be brought up would be if one of their parents were to say something like the following: 'I've wondered for a while if you might be lesbian/gay/bi. If you are, I want you to know that it makes no difference to the love that I feel for you. I will always do my very best to support you. Whether you are lesbian/gay/bi or not, I love you, and if you want to, let's talk about things'

In some families it might be better to write something rather than speak. This perhaps can provide a bridge for the child who may be anxious to talk but is unable to find the words. Even young people who clearly know that they are lesbian/gay/bi can have difficulty in accepting the reality – and putting it in to words to your parents, makes it very real.

Your child might well deny that they are lesbian/gay/bi. You might have read the signals wrong or it might be that they simply aren't ready to tell you yet. But gradually and gently restate, over a period of time, your love for your child and the strength of that bond. In that way you will create an atmosphere in which it is easier for your daughter or son to talk to you when they are ready.

Language

Language continually evolves and words that were once in common usage become less so – their meanings change and some come to have negative connotations. Using the term homosexual to describe a lesbian/gay/bi person is now considered to be offensive. The negative connotation of the word homosexual came from religion (the ones that are against homosexuality) and also from early psychoanalysis. For many years it was believed that lesbian/gay/bi people could be changed to be heterosexual (straight). There is still that totally mistaken belief held by a minority of groups/individuals. If the word 'homosexual' appears in the press/media it is usually because the user is anti-gay or has little understanding of/empathy towards lesbian/gay/bi issues.

Terms like 'sexual preference' or 'alternative lifestyle' are not considered appropriate as they imply that lesbian/gay/bi people are making a choice.

Moving forward

If your daughter or son wants to bring their girlfriend/boyfriend/partner to meet you, that is a measure of their regard for you and their need for your approval. It might take a while for this to happen, but when it does, it is likely to be a big step for each and every one of you. Your child is trusting you to offer the same level of welcome and hospitality that you would offer any other member of the family. The warmth and sincerity of your welcome will help strengthen family relationships.

“Open your mind, ears and heart. If your child trusts you enough to show you who she/he really is, live up to that trust!”

Conclusion

We hope that this booklet has given you some insight and understanding. Some pieces of advice will be more useful to you than others. A large amount of it is aimed at parents of lesbian/gay/bi young people, but the advice is also relevant to parents whose daughter/son is older. We have concentrated on the parent/child relationship because it is unique. However, the advice in this booklet is just as relevant to a sibling, grandparent or other family member or friend who wants to support and understand a loved one.

Being a parent is never easy, but being the parent of a lesbian/gay/bi daughter or son is enriching and really no more difficult than being the parent of a straight daughter or son. Some of the challenges may be a bit different but the love and special bonds between parent and child remain the same.

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.

Our thanks to
Procter & Gamble



Sponsors of FFLAG publications

Our thanks to
College Print of the Cornwall College group
for designing and printing this revised edition





www.fflag.org.uk

Central Helpline: 0845 652 0311

email: info@fflag.org.uk

FFLAG

PO Box 495

Little Stoke

Bristol BS34 9AP

Registered Charity 1079918

