

Young people who are gay or lesbian

Parent easy guide 79



Most parents don't think much about whether their children may be attracted to the same sex. We all grow up with values and beliefs that have been passed down through the generations and we may not have really understood, or given much thought to what 'homosexuality' means. To discover your son or daughter is homosexual could be difficult for you, for them, and for others in the family.

This guide may give you some understanding of what other parents have experienced and what was helpful when they found out their son or daughter was gay or lesbian.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.
Change to suit your young person's sex.*

What are the terms we use?

- > Heterosexual - a person sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex
- > Homosexual - a person sexually attracted to people of the same sex
- > SSA - same sex attracted
- > Bisexual - a person attracted to both sexes
- > Gay - a male who is homosexual
- > Lesbian - a female who is homosexual
- > Coming out - letting people know you are gay or lesbian.

What parents feel

Learning your son or daughter is gay or lesbian may have come as a sudden surprise, or you may have been wondering for some time about their sexuality. You might be feeling many different things such as shock, disbelief, disappointment, sorrow, guilt or confusion, and even relief. Many parents believe life will be difficult for their son or daughter if they're seen as homosexual. Some parents feel they've done something wrong or failed in some way. Sometimes they feel embarrassed about friends or other family members finding out, or anxious about their reactions. Others feel relieved to at last know what's been troubling them.

You may be wondering why a young person would choose to be homosexual. Is she rebelling? Is he sure? Is it just a phase? He's too young to know for sure! Why didn't she tell us before? Will he be different now? What does this mean for her life? What will it mean for ours?

What parents ask

Why did he 'choose' to be gay?

Was he influenced by someone to become like this? Is she doing this just to hurt me? Is it a psychological thing that a psychologist or psychiatrist can cure?

- > No one 'chooses' their sexuality. Sexual orientation or sexual identity, for all people regardless of who they're attracted to, comes from within
- > Sexuality is part of our whole being and isn't a conscious decision. No one can change their sexual orientation by just deciding to. Parents, counsellors and even the young person himself can't change it
- > With the difficulties and discrimination that can come with being gay or lesbian, most people wouldn't choose this lifestyle if it didn't feel right for them
- > The choice he's made is about whether to face facts and to accept who he is, or to feel shame and try to block out a basic part of himself.

Is it 'just a phase'?

Most adolescents go through a phase of being attracted to or hero-worshipping people of the same sex. They may feel unsure about their sexuality for a while and may not want to talk about it. This is a normal part of development. However, if your son tells you he's gay, he wouldn't usually do this if he wasn't sure. He needs to feel you believe him and will support him.



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Why didn't she tell us before?

We live in a society where many people misunderstand same sex attraction. As a result there's a lot of prejudice, violence and fear about it.

Young people who realise they're gay or lesbian can have a difficult time coming to terms with it and may often struggle for a long time by themselves. They may have been harassed or bullied, rejected by friends or seen this happen to others. They almost certainly will have heard negative comments and harsh attitudes towards homosexual people.

To tell a parent you're gay or lesbian takes great courage. Once it's been said, it can't be taken back. They know it could change how you feel about them. Fear may mean that many young people take a while to tell parents - fear of rejection by you, family members and others who are important to them. There can also be fear of coming out to friends, at school, at university and in the work place. The longer it takes to come out, the more the fear grows.

It may be hard for you to realise she has been dealing with her sexuality for years and hasn't told you. You may even question the strength of your relationship if she has kept it from you. If you feel hurt, angry or guilty because she didn't tell you earlier, you need to understand that she probably couldn't have told you any sooner. It says something about your relationship that she's shared this information with you now. It shows she wants to let you in on this part of her life and that she wants to have an honest relationship with you.

Sometimes young people tell their parents in an angry or accusing way because they're so stressed with worrying about it, or they may be anxious about your reaction. They may feel worried about hurting you, or be feeling guilty about the loss of your dreams and expectations.

Will he be different now?

He's still the same person you've loved and cared for all these years. He hasn't changed because he's told you about his sexuality. Sexuality is one part of a person. There are many parts that you know and love that haven't changed - how he treats you and others, what he does, what he likes, all the thousands of things that go to make up who he is.

Your love and support is so very important at this time. There's a lot of research that shows young people can be at increased risk of harm as they deal with coming out. Whilst it can be a difficult time for both of you, it's also one that provides a unique opportunity for even greater closeness.

Coming to terms with changes

Whatever your response, you'll be grieving in some way because every change involves loss as well as gain. You might go through the same grief feelings as for any other loss. This can include shock, denial or disbelief (hoping it will go away), shame (what will people say?), anger or guilt, blaming yourself or the other parent, or even depression. Hopefully, in the end there'll be acceptance.

Your daughter has probably become used to feelings about her sexuality over time. You may also need time to adjust to this new information and think through your feelings about many things. Things such as dreams and expectations you held for her and for you, and practical things like how you can get the support you need, who you want to tell and how you'll tell them.

While you're going through this period, you might find it helpful to talk it over with people who understand. Get support from other parents who've had a similar experience. It can also help to learn more about homosexuality through reading how other families deal with it.

Acceptance takes time and there are no hard and fast rules about how long it'll take. It's different for everyone and there's no one right way. Some parents may show acceptance by having a celebration with family and friends. Sadly some parents choose not to accept their young person's sexuality and this can lead to a break in family relationships that is hurtful for everyone.

Reminders

- > He's not a different person because he's told you about his sexuality
- > Talk to him about needing time to get used to this new information
- > Share your feelings and worries with him - the more openly you can talk together the easier it will be
- > Work out ways to deal with some of the challenges, such as who to tell and how to say it
- > Make contact with other parents of gays and lesbians for support
- > It's important to not reject him - he needs to know your love and support is strong through both good times and difficult times
- > If you choose to not accept his sexuality, you may lose your relationship with him.

Support for parents

Contacts

Youth Healthline: Tel 1300 131719
Monday to Friday 9 am – 5 pm
Youth health and parenting information

Bfriend Project:

Tel: Men's worker (08) 8202 5192
or Women's worker (08) 8202 5805

Free and confidential information and support to parents/family members. Bfriend Parent Volunteers can support other parents through phone contact or one to one meetings.

Relationships Australia Bookshop:
Tel (08) 8245 8100

The Darling House Community Library:

Tel (08) 8334 1611 or freecall 1800 888 559
A joint project of the AIDS Council of SA and the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of SA Inc. Offers a wide range of information about gay and lesbian lifestyle.

Parents Supporting Parents FLAG (SA):

Tel (08) 8369 0718 or pspflag@hotmail.com
PO Box 211, Ingle Farm, SA 5098
Parents and their sons and daughters who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Video or DVD: Closet Space

Websites

www.cyh.com
For parenting and child health information

www.parenting.sa.gov.au
For other Parent Easy Guides

www.ucwesyadelaide.org.au/bfriend
Bfriend Project - Information and support for newly identifying same sex attracted people as well as parents and family members

www.pspflag.org.au
Parents Supporting Parents FLAG (SA)

Support for young people

Contacts

Youth Healthline: Tel 1300 131719
Monday to Friday 9 am – 5 pm
Youth health and parenting information

The Second Story Youth Health Service:
'Inside Out' and 'Evolve' programs for SSA young people

Adelaide (08) 8232 0233
Christies Beach (08) 8326 6053
Elizabeth (08) 8255 3477
Woodville (08) 8268 1225

Bfriend:

Tel (08) 8202 5192
bfriend@ucwesyadelaide.org.au
A support service for people who are coming out or who are exploring their sexual identity.

SHine SA (Sexual Health Information, Networking and Education)

East/West (08) 8300 5300
South (08) 8186 8600
North (08) 8256 0700

Sexual Health Line:

Tel 1300 883 793 (Interpreters can be arranged at no cost)
Freecall: 1800 188 171 (country only)

Kids Helpline: Tel 1800 551 800

Websites

www.cyh.sa.gov.au
Health information, including for young adults

www.shine.org.au
SHine SA

www.kidshelp.com.au
Kids Helpline

For more information

Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

Parenting SA

Children, Youth and Women's Health Service

Telephone (08) 8303 1660

Internet: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

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