

Young people who are gay or lesbian

YOUNG PEOPLE

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Most parents don't think much 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 have not really understood, or given much thought, to what 'homosexuality' means. To discover that 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. This guide may give you some understanding of what other parents have experienced and what they found was helpful when they found out their young person was gay or lesbian.

What are the terms we use?

Heterosexual	a person sexually attracted to others of the opposite sex
Homosexual	a person sexually attracted to others 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 that you are gay or lesbian.

What parents feel

Learning that 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 child if they are seen as homosexual. Some parents feel they have done something wrong or have 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 has been troubling their young person.

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 is too young to know for sure! Why didn't she tell us before? Will they 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' his sexuality. Sexual orientation (which sex a person is attracted to), whether it is same sex or the other sex, or both, comes from within.
- Sexuality is part of our whole being and is not a decision. No one can change their sexual orientation just by deciding to. Parents, counsellors and not the young person himself can change his sexual orientation.
- Sexual orientation is not caused by anything parents are, or have done, and cannot be changed by anything parents do.
- With the difficulties and discrimination that can come with being gay or lesbian, most people would not choose this lifestyle if it didn't feel right for them.
- The choice your young person has made is more about whether to face facts, accept who they are, or to feel shame try to block out a basic part of them.

It may be hard for you to know that your child has probably been dealing with her sexuality for years and hasn't told you. You may feel hurt or angry or guilty because she did not come to you before.

Isn't 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 that he is gay, he would not usually do this if he wasn't sure. He needs to feel you believe and will support him.



dhcs | ACT

THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

Why didn't she tell us before?

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

To tell your parent that you are gay or lesbian takes great courage. Once it's been said, your young person can't take it back and they know it could change how you feel about them.

Fear may mean that many young people take a while to tell parents about their sexual orientation—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 workplace. The longer it takes to come out, the more the fear grows. It may be hard for you to realise that your young person 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 could not have told you any sooner. It says something about your relationship that she has shared this information with you now. It shows that 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 are so stressed with worrying about it, or they may be anxious about your reaction. They may feel worried about hurting you, or they may be feeling guilty about the loss of your dreams and expectations.

Will they be different now?

Your son or daughter is still the same person you have loved and cared for all these years. He has not changed because he has told you about his sexuality. Sexuality is one part of a person. There

are many parts that you know and love that have not 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 is 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 is also one that provides a unique opportunity for even greater closeness.

Coming to terms with changes

Whatever your response, you will 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 will be acceptance.

Your young person has probably become used to feelings about their 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 had for them and for you, and practical things like how you can get the support you need, who you want to tell and how you will tell them.

While you are going through this period, you might find it helpful to talk it over with people who understand. Get support from other parents who have 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 will take. It's different for everyone and there is no one right way. Some parents may show acceptance of their young person's sexuality with 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

- Your son or daughter is not a different person because they have told you about their sexuality.
- Talk to them about needing time to get used to your new knowledge.
- Share your feelings and worries with them—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 is important not to reject your young person—they need to know that your love and support is strong through both good times and difficult times.
- If you choose not to accept your son or daughter's sexuality you may lose your relationships with them.

Contacts

ACT Rights Commission	9am–5pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6207 2222
AIDS Action Council Support, information, counselling	9am–5pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6257 2855
Kids Help Line	24-hour	1800 55 1800

Websites

www.aidsaction.org.au	AIDS Action Council provides support, information, counselling, referral and advocacy on all matters relating to HIV/AIDS and some non-HIV related services
www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.hrc.act.gov.au	ACT Human Rights Commission Investigates complaints of discrimination and sexual harassment
www.kidshelp.com.au	Kids helpline
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides

This guide's content has been produced by Parenting SA and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

© Department of Health, Government of South Australia. Revised 04/10

Published by ParentLink
Department of Housing, Disability & Community Services | ACT
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601

T 13 34 27
F 6205 0968
E parentlink@act.gov.au