



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #02:

HOW TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ2+



To say that parenting is a journey of continued learning and unique experiences may be one of life's biggest understatements. There will be instances of laughter and tears, excitement and frustration, uncertainty and challenges of varying degrees. There is no instruction manual. It's unpredictable, and sometimes things arise that you may know nothing about. Regardless of your role as a parent, guardian or primary caregiver, you have a choice: to explore new ground or stay put. So, what happens when your child begins to wonder about their sexuality or gender identity? What if your child identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender-variant, or maybe they just have questions? What should you do? And how can you best support them?

What is LGBTQ2+ and what is the +?

LGBTQ2+ is an abbreviation that includes: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, two-spirited, intersex, quest, questioning and asexual.

One of the most frequent seen usages is LGBTQ.

Thankfully we are living in a time where there is more openness and information is becoming more readily available. It's important to recognize that this doesn't mean that there's more understanding.



How to Support Children Who Identify as LGBTQ2+

Perhaps the best ways to support your LGBTQ2+ child are to recognize your own biases and barriers; consider your child's reality and what they may confront each day; figure out what you should do more of, do better or do differently, and know where to go when you need help because you don't have answers.

It was a gut feel. She never ever talked about it but in her last year of high school, she finally told me. In my heart, I already knew, so I wasn't surprised when she said it out loud. I just sat on the bed and hugged her while she cried. I can't imagine the weight that had been lifted once she said that she was gay. I told her I loved her more than she could ever imagine, and nothing would ever change that.²

It's not about you. It's about them.

Coming out is supposed to be about being proud of one's identity and being happy to show the world one's most authentic self. It's a pure expression of emotion and vulnerability. There is no "right way" because it belongs only to that person. It's always their news to share, not ours.

No matter how confusing or surprising you may find this as a parent, try to remember that in the end, it's not about you. The best reaction you can have is to be grateful that your child has dared to share this part of themselves with you and show them support that is constant and unconditional.

Never ask when or why this happened, or when your child began to identify as LGBTQ2+. The reality is, it doesn't matter, and you should never ask or suggest they justify their position. There is nothing you could have done differently to change this, any more than you could affect how many birthmarks or freckles they might have. It isn't a clinical diagnosis or an aspect of their personality. They are your child, so any advice you can offer needs to be heartfelt, emotional and supportive.

Even if your child has not made a declaration and is merely asking questions because they are curious, treat them the same way you did before. This is all your child wants and needs.

We had just pulled into the driveway and opened the car doors to get out when he simply said, 'Mom, I'm a boy.' And I said, 'No, you're not.' I wasn't thinking that this casual statement would explain what had been tormenting him for years. Initially, I thought he was just joking around.³

Look critically at yourself

So much emphasis is placed upon the attachment and learning parents leave with their children in the early years of their lives. We take these little beings who need help with everything as infants, and as they grow, we show them the world and guide them so they can connect to, and interact with it, safely and successfully.

We have dreams of what the future will hold for them as adults. We are often wrapped up in the vision we've created for our children that is based on our own experiences, realities and goals. It's influenced by how we grew up, our values and our faith, and inevitably we end up seeing everything through that lens. We influence our children with our every word, action and expression of belief.

Things that don't go unnoticed

Homophobic language, inappropriate gestures and mannerisms, and insulting or shaming are learned behaviours that don't go unnoticed. They usually manifest in fear of the unknown but can also be influenced by their use within popular culture to express disapproval. Think of times where there has been shouting at a hockey game that is "intended" to inspire different performance. You might hear someone say that a player should "man up" or worse. Maybe you've been inclined to make a slur or mimic an openly gay performer or celebrity? While to you, these may seem innocent enough, these are actually one of the quickest ways to alienate someone who is questioning their sexuality or gender identity. Demonstrations such as these and other kinds of disparaging behaviour all send an implied message of disapproval that will inevitably harm the child's developing sense of self.

I've supported her for the last 6 years, even helping her girlfriend tell her own parents. [My daughter's] dad accepted it but with difficulty. His inability to move forward cost him relationships with both her and with me. We're divorced now. In the end, your child doesn't need the added pressure of your emotional distress along with all of the other challenges they may have to face. Hopefully one day that will all go away!⁴

Consider their reality

Perhaps the biggest realization as a parent comes when you begin to consider your child as their own person, independent of the script and goals you've imagined for them. It can be scary, but it also shows that you've reached a new level of understanding as a parent because you can consider your child's reality and independent thought.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ2+) children are often targets of hate crimes, bullying, sexual harassment, violence, and shaming within social media and social pillars, including churches, schools, homes, and community spaces. Many children fear being ridiculed and facing a lonely existence where they are isolated, judged, and abandoned.

He told me that he was scared to transition because at school they won't hit him if he's a girl, but they will when he's a boy. Those other children, full of violence think that being transgender is wrong. They don't like that he is not using the gender he was assigned at birth. After his top surgery, he tried to use the boys' washroom and was threatened by another student. He was also humiliated when he was kicked out of a family washroom in a mall by a custodian.⁵

The loneliness and confusion LGBTQ2+ children may experience can be overwhelming and present in a number of ways at home. They may be vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse as they use these substances to try and cope with mounting anxiety, depression and/or other mental health disorders. In many instances, they could be inclined to run away in an attempt to escape their pain and seek acceptance.

Worse yet is the alarming rate of suicide. Many statistics show the depth of the problem:

- 33% of LGBTQ2+ youth have attempted suicide in comparison to 7% of youth in general.
- Over half of LGBTQ2+ students have thought about suicide.
- LGBTQ2+ youth are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- Adolescent youth who have been rejected by their families for being LGBTQ2+ are over 8 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- Both victims and perpetrators of bullying are at a higher risk for suicide than their peers.⁶

What can parents do?

The best thing you can do for your child is to be present and listen with intention. You don't need to have all the answers. You won't have them. Listen carefully. Listen to understand. Pay attention. These actions mean so much more than passive listening or trying to offer solutions without information.

1. Get more information and get educated.

Find support organizations and rainbow parenting groups either locally or online. If you don't know where to start, explore one of the links we've included below, ask your child's school or speak with your family doctor regarding what resources might be available in your community. Many groups host meetings in person or through webinars. Some even offer a private facility to email other parents who have experienced similar discussions with their own children and now volunteer their time to provide support for other parents.

Many schools (elementary through to post-secondary offer GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender and Sexuality Alliance) Support Groups. Encourage your child to attend a meeting at their school.

2. Teach others and lead by example.

Once you have more information, advocate, teach and share with everyone who needs to better understand.

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3. Keep listening. Don't stop.

There are key moments where our children try to tell us things, and sometimes we are not paying attention. If you come across something you don't immediately understand or support, seek the required help. This is critical. As one parent put it, they would rather learn how they can help their child navigate the world as LGBTQ2+ than live in a world without them. Ask your child how they are feeling. Ask them what you can do to help. Be prepared to let them lead. Trust them.

4. Love them.

Finally, don't do anything differently than you would have before. Love them exactly like you love everyone in your family. Laugh, be joyful and celebrate them. Support can start immediately with a simple hug.

Where to go for more help

There is a lot of information available, and it can be overwhelming to try and take it all in. Here are some starting points. If you or someone you know may be facing similar challenges or looking for additional support, seek out professional help from a qualified and experienced professional or organization. They will be able to provide you with a range of support options to alleviate some of the questions you may have.

PFLAG Canada (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)
<https://pflagcanada.ca/resources/>

Lead with Love, a short film <http://www.leadwithlovetfilm.com>

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, An explanation of Bill C-16
<https://youtu.be/s4BSkw62T1s>

The Lifeline Canada Foundation

<https://thelifelinecanada.ca/resources/lgbtq/>

It Gets Better Project <https://itgetsbetter.org>

References:

1. <https://ok2bme.ca/>
2. Interview with a parent of a gay daughter. All names have been withheld to preserve privacy.
3. Interview with a parent of a transgender son, female to male.
4. Interview with mother of gay daughter.
5. Interview with parent of transgendered son, female to male.
6. Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (ECHRT) [Blog] What You Should Know About LGBTQ Youth Suicide in Canada, Egale (2013)



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