

“Mum, Dad, I've got something to tell you”

**A guide for Parents who have Lesbian, Gay or
Bisexual Children**

Foreword

fpaNI (formerly The Family Planning Association, Northern Ireland) works extensively with young men and women throughout Northern Ireland and often encounters young people who are struggling with their sexual identity. Usually they desperately want to confide in their parents but dread their reactions.

fpaNI is also contacted by parents or carers who think that their child is not heterosexual or whose child has "come out". They simply do not know how to handle the situation or who to turn to for advice. To date practical information to help parents and others deal with such situations has not been available in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area. I was therefore delighted to be a member of the group set up to produce this booklet, and was particularly pleased to be asked to write this foreword.

The individual and personal experiences of some parents of lesbian, gay or bisexual young people have directly influenced the structure and content of the booklet. The primary aim of the booklet is to answer some questions and concerns which many parents will inevitably encounter as they come to terms with the fact that their child is not heterosexual.

Lesbian, gay or bisexual people are very aware of the potential negative hostility and reaction they may encounter from their parents when they announce they are gay. They often feel that their parents will be disappointed in them. It is therefore important to recognise and acknowledge that it may have taken courage for them to confide in their parents. Some choose to distance themselves from their families for fear of rejection. Some attempt suicide.

It is vital that parents whose children take that first step remember that their child is still their child regardless of their sexual identity.

Society's reaction to those who are not heterosexual often means that parents find it difficult to cope when their child tells them that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual.

I hope that the booklet will give parents answers to some of their questions and help them to realise that their child still needs to love and be loved but especially needs the continuing love of their parents. Being lesbian, gay or bisexual will never change the fact that they are your child.

Audrey Simpson
fpaNI

Introduction

It is never easy for parents when their children tell them something which they find uncomfortable. Nor is it easy for organisations to be advised that they are failing to meet the needs of those they serve. The introduction of the Childrens Order (1995) Northern Ireland Act (1998) and Human Rights Act (1998) highlighted the need for organisations to ensure that they respond to the needs of individuals who require advice and information.

The Eastern Health and Social Services Council brought to the attention of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board a deficiency in the information available to parents when their children tell them they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Society does not encourage an open acceptance of those who are not heterosexual. This can result in a significant level of prejudice or discrimination against the person.

Lesbian, gay or bisexual children are up to six times more likely to commit suicide because of bullying and a general lack of self-esteem. Many of them drift into substance abuse. Anorexia and bulimia are other reactions to the increased stress of being a lesbian, gay or bisexual child. The difficulties which some children experience in talking openly about their sexuality to anyone can leave them very isolated and depressed. The effects of such prejudice have been well documented in terms of the devastating impact on an individual's health and well being.

The Eastern Health and Social Services Board's response to this unmet need was to convene a steering group to address the lack of information and to assist in the development of a local support group for parents.

This steering group was made up of Board Officers, representatives of gay organisations, (such as Cara-Friend, The Rainbow Project,) and other voluntary organisations, the fpaNI, ACET, the Parents Advice Centre and parents who had personal experience in this matter.

The first product of this partnership is the completion of this information booklet. The Board's intention is that parents and carers receive factual information, as early as possible, to help and assist them at a difficult time to understand and come to terms with their child's sexuality. I commend this booklet to parents, families, general practitioners, teachers and social care staff and others involved in providing advice. I hope the contents are both informative and helpful. I would like to thank everyone who assisted in the preparation and publication of this booklet.

John Richards
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Mum, Dad I'm lesbian, gay or bisexual

None of us like situations that make us feel insecure. All of us are afraid of the unknown and like to feel in control of the situation. Then you hear those words - "Mum, Dad, I'm lesbian, gay or bisexual".

Because of our socialisation, our background, our religious beliefs and our upbringing, it may be difficult to cope when your child tells you that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Suddenly the person who carries your aspirations may seem like a stranger.

The first reaction is generally shock and disbelief. You may feel fear and sadness for your child, and for yourself, anger, revulsion, shame and dismay. You may think it is just a passing phase. You may look for someone to blame; sometimes you may even look for cures.

Often you may feel a sense of loss; the person whom you thought you knew so well seems to have changed. Pain, tears and sleepless nights generally accompany the impact of the news, with the added feelings of alienation and isolation.

How do I cope?

The shock of hearing that your child is lesbian, gay or bisexual can last for hours, days, weeks, months or even years. Every parent reacts differently depending on the beliefs and morals they hold (religious, social or otherwise). Disbelief is an obvious defence mechanism; "It's just a phase", "You'll get over it", "How can you do this to me?", "What will the neighbours say?", "Why can't you just get married, settle down and forget about it?".

Sorrow is also a natural reaction. Sorrow for the child who you may feel is being denied a "normal" life with a partner and children. Sorrow for yourself and your expectations for your child. You may feel sad at the thought that your child will live a lonely, rejected and unfulfilled life because of the things you have been led to believe. This is not the case. Most lesbians, gays and bisexuals live full and happy lives. Research now confirms that the overwhelming majority of lesbian, gay or bisexual people are happy. Those that are not are usually those who have been rejected by family and friends.

Give yourself time to come to terms with the new situation. Tell your child that you need time to adjust. More than likely your child has taken a long time to come to terms with their sexuality before telling you. They may not realise that the news may be shocking and that you will need time to deal

with it.

It is to your advantage to try and adapt and not reject your child.

Some people cannot accept the fact of their child's sexuality and will not discuss the subject with anyone. They live in denial, which doesn't make the facts go away, but rather only delays the facing of them. Not everyone is prepared for this, but do try to take a positive view.

It is best to talk to someone you trust about how you feel - your fears, your frustrations, your anger and your grief. Be honest about how you feel. This may all be new to you and there are no right or wrong ways to deal with it.

This booklet contains a list of organisations that may be able to provide you with support. Listening to and speaking with other parents who are coping, or those who now understand their child's individuality, may make you feel less alone.

When you are ready to talk to your child about how you feel, ask them how they are feeling. They are likely to feel relieved, scared or uncertain about your reaction and how their sexuality will affect their relationship with you. Ask them the questions you want answered but remember they may be as unsure or as confused about the situation as you are.

What does it mean to be a lesbian, gay or bisexual ?

Being lesbian, gay or bisexual is not just about physical attraction, but encompasses the same need we all have to love another person and be loved by that person. We all hold the same basic emotional needs.

At times you may have heard lesbian, gay or bisexual people spoken of as if their whole existence was limited only to their sexuality, but this is only one part of their being or how they define themselves. Throughout history many of our great writers, poets, actors, scientists, artists, thinkers, sports men and women, philosophers, musicians and politicians were lesbian, gay or bisexual.

There are many figures in contemporary life who are lesbian, gay or bisexual including: Sir Elton John, Pam St Clements (Pat in Eastenders), Martina Navratilova, Stephen Gateley, KD Lang, Chris Smith MP, Graham Norton, and many many more.....

There are lesbian, gay or bisexual people in your life, in your community, at your workplace.

Why did you have to tell me?

You may be angry with your child for telling you. You may ask "Why did you have to tell me? "Everything was fine before". This is a common reaction. Your child may be telling you that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual for lots of different reasons.

Most children tell their parents in order to 'come out', to feel honest about who they are. This process helps to remove the hidden barriers of secrecy and enables them to be honest about themselves and be accepted as they are, not what you might expect them to be.

Imagine what it must be like not being able to talk about who you are attracted to; how you feel about that person; or even where or with whom you socialise. To live a lie and ignore your true sexuality, which is an integral part of you, can be emotionally damaging and isolating.

Not being honest or open about their sexuality (often referred to as 'being in the closet') has led many young lesbian, gay or bisexual people to attempt suicide or remove themselves from their family, friends and community for fear of rejection. Recent research indicates that young lesbian, gay or bisexual people are up to 6 times more likely to commit suicide because of bullying and lack of self esteem or fear of how family and friends will react.

Telling you that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual can be incredibly difficult for your child. Your attempt to accept and support your child in 'coming out' is simply continuing the role you have provided since the day they were born. Your child needs the reassurance that you love them as much as ever and this has not changed.

Given the discrimination lesbians, gays and bisexuals can suffer because of who they are, try and remember the courage they required in 'coming out' to you.

I think my child is lesbian, gay or bisexual

Sometimes parents think that their child may be lesbian, gay or bisexual, but because their child has not talked about it, parents may not know how to approach the subject.

For many reasons lesbian, gay or bisexual young people may not tell their parents about how they are feeling. They may not be aware of their own sexuality yet and, if they are, they may be having difficulties in coming to

terms with it. Some may not tell their parents for fear of rejection; others may feel, and even hope that "It is just a phase", "It will pass" and therefore there is no need to tell anyone.

Some children may feel insulted and upset by raising the suggestion that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Approaching the subject indirectly may be a good way to start. You could begin by talking to your child about sex and relationships. You could emphasise that you want them to be happy and secure and that you will always support them no matter what life decisions they make.

There are no rules about how best to approach sexuality with your child. It is not always easy. If you think your child may be lesbian, gay or bisexual, you may find some of the books listed at the end of this booklet helpful.

If you can show that you are relaxed about talking about sexuality and make sure that you have all the necessary facts then your child may be more likely to talk to you about how they are feeling.

Where did I go wrong?

It is only natural to want someone or something to blame. You may ask yourself "Did I not love them enough?", "Did I love them too much?", "Did their friends influence them?", "Have they had a bad experience which made this happen?", "Was I too strict?", "Was I not strict enough?", "Did an older person encourage them?". There is no explanation.

One question many parents ask their child is "When did you realise you were lesbian, gay or bisexual?". Think back to what you felt like when you began to become sexually aware. More than likely it was a gradual process of adapting to your new awareness of the changes in your body and a realisation of sexual feelings for others around you. It is the same process for your child, perhaps just a little harder to accept or to come to terms with.

If you think or believe being lesbian, gay or bisexual is wrong then you will always be searching for explanations. Parents are not responsible for their children's sexuality. Many people have searched for reasons and some have written theories, but that's all they are, theories. No one really knows. Try not to blame yourself and don't blame your child.

It is no-one's fault and your child, whatever their sexuality, is simply a human being with the same feelings and needs, to love and be loved.

What will everyone think?

Fear is a natural reaction. Fear for your child, fear of what people will say, fear of the unknown, fear because things will change.

You may also fear for their happiness, but remember that relationships are never easy for any of us, no matter what our sexuality. You may fear what the neighbours will say, but who is more important, your neighbours or your child? You may fear what you do not understand, so educate yourself about the facts rather than believing the myths. You will never fully understand what it means to be lesbian, gay or bisexual but you do not have to. Just try to be as supportive and as loving as you have always been.

Try and not reject your child even if you feel dismayed, repulsed or sad. Your child's sexuality is as natural to them as your sexuality is to you. If you find this difficult to accept, try to understand that your child is an individual with the right to lead their own life.

Who should I tell?

Often when a lesbian, gay or bisexual child 'comes out' to their parents they feel relieved. Many parents however may feel that their child's "burden" or "problem" has been transferred to them. Your child's sexuality is often not the burden or the problem, but how you feel about it or how you react to it, may be. These feelings are common and you may want to talk about them or simply tell someone else.

So, who do you turn to? Who do you tell? How will your family and friends react? What should you tell your other children? Will they understand? The questions are endless. Be patient. Take as much time as you need to explore how you feel. Allow yourself time to get used to the idea.

Take your time in order to think, to question, to talk, to listen, to discuss, to share, to learn and to adapt. You may decide you need to talk to someone who will listen and be sensitive. This could be your partner, another family member, your GP, a counsellor or therapist, your minister or priest. Please remember that like you, they may never have had experience of dealing with a situation like this and may even respond negatively. So think carefully before you decide who to tell or whom you should turn to.

If there is someone you feel you want to tell, you should discuss this with your child first. Why? By telling another person about your child's sexuality you are automatically 'outing' them to that person and you may have no way

of judging their reaction. Remember, it may have taken your child some time before telling you that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual for fear of rejection. So be sensitive and talk with your child first.

Your child may wish to inform other people themselves and in their own time or they may prefer you to do this for them, for example, telling their brothers or sisters, grandparents, relatives or close family friends. This may be difficult for you, but remember it is a good thing that your child is coming to you for help.

You may find that some of the books listed at the end of the booklet may be helpful to you in deciding who to tell and how to tell.

Should tell my other children?

Many parents with other children frequently ask this question. Your child may have already 'come out' to a brother or sister before telling you, so ask your child if any of your other children already know. If they don't you should discuss with your child first whether or not to tell them.

When it comes to considering whether to tell younger children in the family, many parents feel they shouldn't tell them at an early age. It is worth considering, would your lesbian, gay or bisexual child not have found it much easier in their early years to know that not all people are heterosexual?

With younger children you can approach the subject by talking about different kinds of love without needing to be specific. Later, when they are older you should answer their questions as openly and honestly as possible.

For parents with a lesbian, gay or bisexual child, 'coming out' to others may not always be easy. Each time will be an achievement to feel good about, for even if it has a negative reaction, those who have been told will at least realise that ordinary families can have lesbian, gay or bisexual members.

Is there a choice?

Sexual orientation is not something we choose, it is something which is formed within us. There are two differing views as to what may determine sexual orientation. One view would suggest that sexual orientation is in-born and as such is fixed and not subject to change. The other view would suggest that our sexual orientation is formed as part of our development, shaped by influences in early childhood.

Some people are attracted to members of the opposite sex, some to members of their own sex and some to both sexes. Whilst most people appear to have a clearly established sexual orientation, others find that their sexual feelings may vary at different times of their lives. It is therefore important not to stereotype or label our children, but instead to allow them to define their own sexuality.

For a variety of reasons (personal, cultural, religious) some people may be unhappy being attracted to members of their own sex and may look for support to explore the reasons why.

While it may often be helpful to provide support to someone who wishes to explore their options, for others, it is not. In either case the views and wishes of your child should be respected, even if their views differ from yours.

What about religion?

All of the main Christian denominations, together with most traditional faiths, have taken the view that sexual activity is only appropriate between members of the opposite sex who are married to each other. It is therefore unlikely that lesbian, gay or bisexual children will find acceptance within traditional faiths. There are some small church related organisations in other countries which hold the view that there is no conflict between the Christian faith and lesbian, gay or bisexual relationships.

Over recent years there has been an on-going debate within some of the more traditional churches about the acceptance and recognition of long-term, same sex relationships. This has not resulted in any substantial change to mainstream theology and values. Some churches continue to demonstrate prejudice and a lack of understanding towards lesbians, gays and bisexuals. In some cases this has resulted in them experiencing unnecessary intolerance, hurt and damage.

Many individuals within churches are now becoming more informed and are offering acceptance to lesbian, gay or bisexual people. Whilst not changing their theology and values, they have drawn a distinction between sexual orientation and sexual activity and offer acceptance and support to lesbian, gay or bisexual people who have chosen not to pursue same sex relationships.

There are many groups and organisations worldwide who have explored and debated this issue. Details of their websites are listed at the end of this booklet.

What about partners?

Your child telling you that they have a partner may be something you dread, as it is all so different from your expectations for their adult life.

If you find it difficult, try taking some time to adjust to the news. Disapproval will not only hurt your child but may drive them away from you altogether. Take one step at a time. Encourage your child to tell you about their partner e.g., where they are from, what they do for a living. By doing this you will let your child know that you care about their happiness and that you are interested in what is going on in their lives. The fact that you are able to speak about their partner will give an indication that even though you may be having some difficulty dealing with this situation, you are willing to try and accept it.

The next step could be meeting your child and his/her partner for a coffee or suggest going out for dinner in a restaurant. Get to know your child's partner as a person and not just as your child's same sex partner.

How can I support my child?

Many parents want to support their child in whatever way they can, but some find it extremely difficult to do this when it comes to sexual orientation. Parents may feel that they are not in a position to provide support because they know little or nothing about being lesbian, gay or bisexual.

When your child 'comes out' to you, it is best not to let the matter sink into silence. You and your child may need some time to adjust to the news but try not to leave it hanging. When you feel ready, try to take the initiative by talking to your child. It is important to let them know that you still love them. You could also try discussing some of the issues you both face such as: "How do they feel about their sexuality?", "Do they have any lesbian, gay or bisexual friends or contacts?" and "Would you like me to meet them?"

By asking these questions you will open up communication between you and your child and reassure them that you will be there for them should they need you. It may also be a good idea to give them information on helplines, support organisations and groups which exist in Northern Ireland. You will also find a list of these at the end of this booklet. While it is good to talk to your child and while you may feel you have many questions you want answered, there may be questions which they cannot answer or some questions which they are still seeking answers to for themselves. Try to strike a balance between talking and listening.

Terms and what they mean

lesbian - a woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other women.

gay man - a man who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other men.

bisexual - a woman or man who is emotionally and sexually attracted to both men and women.

homosexual - a man or a woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex.

heterosexual - a woman or man who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

transsexual - a man or woman who believes they were born with the wrong body for the gender they really are. Also known as 'Gender Dysphoria'.

transvestite - a man or woman who gets sexual or emotional pleasure from wearing clothing associated with the opposite sex.

homophobia - an irrational fear, dislike or hatred of people believed, or perceived, to be lesbian or gay and may be expressed through name calling, ostracism, verbal and physical harassment e.g., "queer bashing" and acts of discrimination.

heterosexism - a set of assumptions and practices that promote heterosexuality as the only valid and natural form of sexuality. Heterosexism rewards those who are heterosexual and penalises those who are not.

Further reading and information

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Useful contacts

The Rainbow Project
2-6 Union St, Belfast, BT1 2JF
Tel: 028 9031 9030 Fax: 028 9031 9031
www.rainbow-project.org

Cara-friend
Cathedral Buildings, 64 Donegall St, Belfast,
BT1 2GT
Tel: 028 9027 8636 Fax: 028 9027 8636
www.cara-friend.org.uk

Foyle Friend
32 Great James St, Londonderry, BT48 7DB
Tel: 028 7126 3120
www.folyefriend.org

Brook Advisory Centre
29a North St, Belfast, BT1 1 NA
Tel: 028 9032 8866 Fax: 028 9023 5735
www.brook.org.uk

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113 University St, Belfast, BT7 1HP
Tel: 028 9032 5488 Fax: 028 9031 2212
www.fpa.org.uk

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Fax: 028 9055 3620
www.ehssb.n-i.nhs.uk

Parents Advice Centre
Franklin Hse, 12 Brunswick St, Belfast, BT2 7GE
Tel: 028 9023 8800 Fax: 028 9031 2475
www.pachelp.org

ACET
P.O. Box 118, Belfast, BT1 6HD
Tel: 028 9032 0844
Fax: 028 9032 9907
E-mail: belfast@acet.ie www.acet.ie

Samaritans
Tel: 0845 790 9090

Gay Helpline
Mon, Tues, Wed 7.30pm-10pm Tel: 028 9032 2023

Lesbian line
Thurs 7.30pm-10pm Tel: 028 9023 8668

Gay Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland
Tel: 028 9027 8636
www.glyni.org.uk
E-mail: support@glyni.org.uk

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