



Our Children

Questions and Answers for
Loved Ones of Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual+, Transgender, Queer,
and Questioning People

If you or a loved one needs immediate assistance, we encourage you to seek out help immediately.

For LGBTQ+ youth, please contact The Trevor Project online at [thetrevorproject.org/pages/get-help-now](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/get-help-now), or call one of the following:

Helplines

The Trevor Project: (866) 488-7386

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255

Trans Lifeline: (877) 565-8860

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Info:

(800) 342-AIDS (2437)

Spanish service: (800) 344-7432

TDD service for the deaf: (800) 243-7889

The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender National Hotline: (888) 843-4564

The GLBT National Youth Talkline (youth serving youth through age 25): (800) 246-7743

The National Runaway Switchboard:

(800) RUNAWAY (786-2929)

Crisis Text Line: Text START to 741-741

U.S. National Domestic Violence Hotline:

(800) 799-7233 (English and Spanish)

(800) 787-3224 (TTY)

Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN):

(800) 656-HOPE | (800) 810-7440 (TTY)

ABOUT PFLAG

PFLAG is an organization of LGBTQ+ people, parents, families, and allies who work together to create an equitable and inclusive world. We are hundreds of thousands of people and hundreds of chapters from coast to coast who are leading with love to support families, educate allies, and advocate for just, equitable, and inclusive legislation and policies.

Since our founding in 1973, PFLAG works every day to ensure LGBTQ+ people everywhere are safe, celebrated, empowered and loved. Learn more, find support, donate, and take action at [PFLAG.org](https://pflag.org).

Our Mission. To create a caring, just, and affirming world for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them.

Our Vision. An equitable, inclusive world where every LGBTQ+ person is safe, celebrated, empowered, and loved.

About this Publication

Our Children: Questions and Answers for Loved Ones of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual+, Transgender, Nonbinary, Queer and Questioning People is copyrighted. For reprint permission, please contact the PFLAG National office via email at love@pflag.org or by phone at (202) 467-8180.

All Rights Reserved, ©2023 PFLAG, Inc.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

About PFLAG	1
About this Publication.....	1
We're Glad You Found PFLAG!	4
Frequently Asked Questions	9
Next Steps	16
Expert Opinions	18
First-Person Stories.....	23

WE'RE GLAD YOU FOUND PFLAG!

You're likely reading this publication because your child (or a loved one—we'll use both terms interchangeably) has come out to you; that is, they've shared with you that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+). Some parents and caregivers are surprised to learn this information; others might be ill prepared to hear about it from a friend, school counselor, neighbor, or online social networking site. Still others may already have an inkling that someone they love might be LGBTQ+ but aren't sure when, how, or if they should address it.

We believe we know our children better than anyone else does. So when a child comes out (reveals their LGBTQ+ identity) and we hadn't a clue, it can make us feel like we didn't know them as well as we thought we did. Whether we suspected beforehand, denied it to ourselves, or simply weren't aware, the implication that we were somehow “wrong” about our loved ones can be upsetting.

Every parent, no matter their child's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, has a vision or dream for their child's future. These visions or expectations are born of many things including personal experiences, family history, cultural or societal expectations, and more. When presented with your child's disclosure or coming out, it might be an adjustment to understand and realize that this future might now differ from the one you'd envisioned.

This is not an end to your dreams for your child or loved one, nor is it the end of your relationship. On the contrary, your relationship can become even stronger, because you know more about your child now than you did before. Coming out is a sign that your child trusts you: If they are telling you, they are making a choice to share this most personal information about themselves.

“For me, it was my son saying to me, ‘Dad, I’m the same person I was before.’ Now it’s been six months, and I realize even more that really, nothing has changed in his life. It was my perception of him that changed.”

— Anonymous, Father of a gay child

#PFLAGProud



Reactions to this revelation vary, from “Now that I know, what can I do to support my child?” to “How will I ever handle this?” For most people, it’s a combination of these two reactions and more. Everyone has different and complex feelings about a loved one coming out. This is absolutely normal, given that you are receiving news that the path you and your loved one are now on is unknown, and likely different from one you expected or for which you had prepared.

Whatever your reaction, PFLAG is here for you.

PFLAG can provide the information you need to understand your reaction to the news and your child’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. We are here to help you respond in a way that is supportive and loving, while simultaneously providing a safe space away from your loved one to bring your own feelings to sort through. Our members—parents, caregivers, family members, allies, and LGBTQ+ people themselves—reside in communities in every state across the country, and represent a wide array of political, religious, and cultural perspectives. Simply put: All of us have either been, or are, exactly where you are now.

Before we delve more deeply into the issues, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- ♥ **You are not alone.** For decades, people have turned to PFLAG for support, resources, and answers to their questions. According to the Williams Institute, an LGBTQ+ research think tank, as of 2020 there are nearly 11.4 million LGBT adults in the United States. Other research shows that eight in ten people in the U.S. personally know someone who is LGB, and one in three people know someone who is transgender. In other words, although it may not appear so, there are LGBTQ+ people everywhere, and there are supportive families and allies everywhere, too. You are not alone.

- ♥ **Your reaction is valid.** There is no one correct reaction to learning that your child or a loved one is LGBTQ+. Whether your feelings are positive (joy, relief, pride) negative (anger, sadness, guilt) or a mixture of emotions, you should be free to feel and process those emotions. These are all understandable reactions, and you may experience some or all of them at once. These are all normal feelings...and you may experience some, or all of them, simultaneously.
- ♥ **You are on a journey.** Some families have traveled this path before you, while others are traveling the same road right now, having a similar experience in their own family. Like every journey, this one will have its twists and turns. Addressing your reaction, responding to your child, learning about LGBTQ+ issues, sharing this information with your family and friends, all of these things take time. There is nothing wrong with recovering quickly, and you are allowed to be not okay for a while. Take the time you need to explore your feelings. You can emerge from this period with a stronger relationship with your child, and arrive in a place that is better than where you started: Closer to your child, closer to your family, and closer to a vibrant community of people you might never have known existed.
- ♥ **You are important.** When you are with your loved one, it is important to put their needs first. But in order to be really focused on their well-being, self-care is crucial.; you must put on your own oxygen mask before you can help your child with theirs. Even as you are learning how best to support your child or loved one, you must also find support for YOU! Whether you feel isolated and nervous—or interested and excited to connect with other families—it’s important not only to find and talk to people who have gone through what you’re going through, but to have information and resources at your fingertips right when you need them. You need and deserve a safe place to work through your feelings away from your child; when you are with them, they should be centered, so you will need to find a place where you can take time to center your needs. PFLAG meetings, whether in person or online through *PFLAG Connects*, are a positive and confidential way to find people who share your experiences. Those in attendance and leading the meetings can point you towards crucial resources such as books to read, telephone helplines to call, websites to visit, movies to watch, and more. Find a local PFLAG chapter at pflag.org/find.

“We laughed, we cried, we hugged and life has never skipped a beat. Andrew is the same wonderful, loveable son that he was the moment before he told us he was gay and our relationship as a family is stronger than ever.”

— Susan H., 59, Sedona, AZ



The Basics: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

What is sexual orientation? What is gender identity and gender expression? And how are they all related? We know this can be confusing, so let's start at the beginning.

When a baby is born—and thanks to modern technology, often long before—a doctor takes a quick look at the baby's visible sex organs and assigns that baby a sex. From this *assigned sex*, we assume the baby's gender (called *assumed gender*). (For more definitions of terms, visit pflag.org/glossary.)

For the vast majority of people, their *gender identity*—that is, their internal sense of being male, female, somewhere in between, or neither—matches their assigned sex at birth. For others, their gender identity does not match, and those individuals often refer to themselves as transgender or nonbinary. For those individuals, there is a disconnect between how others perceive them and their internal sense of themselves.

Most people, whether they are transgender or cisgender (meaning, simply, not transgender) have an innate sense of their gender identity from a young age. Think back, for example, to when you first knew yourself to be the gender you are. It is likely that it was so early in your development that you may not even remember it; you just knew what your gender was. For cisgender people, whose assigned sex matches their gender identity (their internal sense of their own gender) they likely don't give it much thought. For some transgender people it is the same experience; they have an early sense of their own gender identity. However, because their gender identity does not match their assigned sex, they are likely much more aware of this. Not all transgender people understand their gender identity at an early age. For some, this might happen in their teens or

teens, or even into adulthood. While some transgender people feel the conflict between their gender identity and their assigned sex (called *gender dysphoria*) not all transgender people feel that conflict. Just as there is a wide diversity of experiences for cisgender people, so too are there a variety of transgender experiences. Each person is different.

While some transgender people identify as male or female, there are others who identify as both, or neither, or as different genders at different times. They may refer to themselves as *genderqueer* or *nonbinary* or *genderfluid*. These are just a few of the many terms used to describe a variety of gender identities. For more information on providing support to a transgender loved one, we recommend our publication *OUR TRANS LOVED ONES*, available for download or purchase at pflag.org/publications.

Everyone demonstrates their gender—that is, communicates their gender identity in a manner that is comfortable for them—through clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, or other outward presentations or behaviors. That is called *gender expression*. When one doesn't strictly adhere to societal norms of "masculine" or "feminine" in their gender expression—or their gender expression does not coincide with their assumed gender—we refer to that as an example of being gender nonconforming or gender creative. (For more on what it means to be gender nonconforming, turn to the expert opinion from Diane Ehrensaft later in this book).

As a child gets older, they will potentially become aware of feelings of attraction—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, romantic—towards other people. These attractions describe their *sexual orientation* or their *romantic orientation*. There are some who experience no such attractions—sexual or romantic—and those people generally identify as asexual or aromantic. It is important to note that sexual and romantic orientation are separate, distinct from gender identity and gender expression. People who are transgender can identify their sexual orientation as gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual or queer (just to name a few!) just like a cisgender (meaning non-transgender) person can.

Also separate and distinct from sexual and romantic orientation is sexual behavior. One may identify their sexual orientation or romantic orientation one way, but their behavior sometimes may not be in accordance with that orientation.

Sexual orientation. Romantic orientation. Gender identity. Gender expression.

Each one separate, each one distinct, and each of us has all of them!

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why is my child gay (or bi or pan or queer or...)?

Discovering new things about a child’s identity or feelings, whether they are easy to accept or difficult to understand, can inspire the question “why did this happen?” It is okay to ask the question, and here is the answer: Nothing you or anyone else did made your child LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ people come from all types of families—from faith-based to atheist families, conservative to liberal families, families of every race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. They come from one-parent households, two-parent households, households with stepparents, and multi-generational and multi-ethnic households. They live in every kind of community, large and small, rural, suburban, and urban. There is no valid research from any mainstream or scientifically sound source that shows that parenting style affects a child’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. There is also no valid research that points conclusively to any one genetic or biological “cause” for a particular sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

The important thing to keep in mind is that your loved one is the same person they were before they came out to you. What has (perhaps) changed is your perception of your loved one, the hopes or goals you had for them, or the understanding you thought you had of their inner world is the revelation of new information, not a change to who they are. For some, this unexpected journey or shift of perception is an easy transition, while for others it can be difficult. Either way, this can be a positive experience for both of you.



How should I respond?

By leading with love. For some, this will be the natural response. For others, long-held beliefs may get in the way of being able to respond supportively. As best as you can, please remember that as hard as it is for you to learn about your child’s sexual orientation or gender identity, it was harder for your loved one to

come out to you. And if your child or loved one was “outed” by someone else, it can make the situation even more difficult.

Your child or loved one might be worried about losing your love. They might be worried about your response, and may even be worried about losing their family and their home. Sadly, these things have happened and continue to happen. Examples of poor reactions can be found in the media, in your community, or even in your own family. It is no wonder that many LGBTQ+ people fear the response of their family members when they decide to come out.

Although there is no perfect way to react, your response will make an impact on both your child’s wellbeing and your relationship with them moving forward. Therefore, while it is sometimes challenging to control an initial response or feeling, feeling guilty or embarrassed about that initial feeling or response should never dissuade you from trying again and doing better; it is possible to apologize, change course, and do better in future interactions.

If you are not in an immediate place of support and understanding—and as you work towards getting there—do your best to try and remember the following: Positive, supportive responses lead to healthier LGBTQ+ people. What does this mean for you? First and foremost, it means finding a place for yourself—away from your child or loved one—to share the emotions you are having if you are concerned that they might have a negative impact. This allows you to be there for your loved one, as best you can in a positive and supportive way, while at the same time giving yourself time and space to honor your own emotions as you work through them.

Dr. Caitlyn Ryan conducted research that followed families going through the coming-out process. The conclusions reached from this study highlight the powerful role parents play in their LGBTQ+ child’s health: Certain response behaviors reduce a child’s risk for both physical and behavioral health problems. These include:

- ♥ **Speaking with—and listening to—your child about their LGBTQ+ identity.** Give your child ample opportunity to open up and share their thoughts and feelings. Whether they want to talk about their hopes for the future, or a situation that happened in school or at work that day, the prospect for open discussion is endless. If you have a sense that your loved one might want to talk, but isn’t doing so on their own, a gentle open-ended question, such as, “How did things go at school/work/church today,” can open the door to dialogue. Don’t push, and really listen when they talk. If you make a misstep in your response—whether accidentally using incorrect pronouns or asking a too-personal question—apologize; no one is perfect. It is in making the attempt, and doing better when needed, that you show your love and support.

“I waited until I was 26 to admit to myself I might be gay. I was so ashamed of it that I buried my sexuality down in the very deepest recesses of my mind and heart.”

— Anonymous, 43, Seattle, WA



- ♥ **Supporting your child’s LGBTQ+ identity, including their gender expression, even though you may feel uncomfortable.** Despite your potential discomfort, your LGBTQ+ loved one needs your support. This support can take many forms, from welcoming their friends into your home, to taking them shopping for that just-right piece of clothing they’ve been asking for, to helping provide access to age-appropriate resources, such as books and films. Imagine how supported your loved one will feel when you speak positively about an LGBTQ+ character you saw on television, or share a news article on a related issue? Showing an interest in their lives, inclusive of their whole selves, is a powerful way to show that you care.
- ♥ **Connecting your child with an LGBTQ+ role model.** If you come to support easily, it may be because your family or social circle already includes people who are openly LGBTQ+. Connecting your newly out loved one with an older LGBTQ+ role model will give them a chance to see that not only are you close to LGBTQ+ folk (a subtle message of support), but also gives them a chance to see LGBTQ+ people thriving. Showing a young LGBTQ+ person that the positive possibilities for their future are endless offers hope and support in a significant and impactful way, and directly positively affects their health and wellbeing.
- ♥ **Expressing your unconditional love for your child.** Saying “I love you” is, of course, one obvious way to express your love for your child. But it is true that actions speak louder than words, and taking any—or all—of the steps above will help reassure your child that they have your love and support no matter what. And if you find yourself at a loss for words, sometimes a simple hug can be the best response.

No matter what, PFLAG is an essential resource, providing an outlet for people who are right where you are now. There are many ways to connect with PFLAG, such as through our Facebook group called the PFLAG National Online community. We also hold virtual meetings via *PFLAG Connects: Communities*, our program that provides safe, moderated virtual meetings for people from common backgrounds including Asian-American/Pacific Islander families, Latino families, Black/African-American families, and military families. PFLAG chapters have local in-person meetings and online meetings via our *PFLAG Connects* program. On social media, many of our chapters have groups on Facebook, chats via Twitter, and can be reached via direct message. Our chapters also offer non-crisis telephone helplines or can be reached via email or through their websites.

To find your local chapter, or to connect with PFLAG National, visit pflag.org or contact PFLAG National via email at love@pflag.org.



Can my negative feelings or responses harm my loved one?

Dr. Caitlin Ryan's research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth are:

- ♥ Nearly six times as likely to report high levels of depression;
- ♥ More than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide;
- ♥ More than three times as likely to use illegal drugs; and
- ♥ More than three times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

These are staggering statistics—but your actions can mitigate negative outcomes.

Overt negative actions such as hitting your child, name-calling, bullying, or kicking them out of the house are the most obvious responses to avoid, although it is worth noting that there are now-supportive parents and caretakers whose journeys started with one of these reactions, but were later able to make amends to their LGBTQ+ loved ones and move forward. But even the most well-meaning parent or caretaker can act in ways that are subtly unsupportive or negative. Actions such as blocking access to LGBTQ+ friends, events or resources, making a child keep their LGBTQ+ identity a secret from other family members or friends and not letting them talk about it, or pressuring a child to conform to more stereotypical gender expression or behavior can cause harm.

There are also subtle communications that can hurt, whether it's making or sharing a joke that seems innocuous to you, disparaging LGBTQ+ people you see in the media, or even telling an LGBTQ+ loved one that they are being too sensitive when you do one of the above. It may take time to break some old habits, but making your best effort—acknowledging and apologizing for unintentional missteps—is a real demonstration of love and thoughtfulness.

Try to express your fear, worry, anger, or any other feelings of distress away from your child. Remember, it is never too late to respond with love and support. Some parents come to a place of support and understanding early, and for others it takes time. The important thing is that you are working towards understanding and centering the needs of your loved one.

My child is very young, but likes playing with toys and dressing in clothes I usually think of as being for a different gender. What does this mean?

It may mean they are LGBTQ+ or it may not. It may mean that your child is simply creatively exploring different ways of playing and expressing who they are...or it may not. Do your best to allow your child this time of exploration, and leave the door open for positive, honest conversation; by doing so, it is more likely they will continue to communicate with you as they begin to understand themselves more clearly, regardless of what they come to understand about themselves. (For more information on what it means to be—and to support someone who is—gender nonconforming, turn to the expert opinions, beginning on page 18).



How can I keep my LGBTQ+ child safe?

They say “Home is where the heart is,” and never is that more true—or necessary—than for a person who has just come out. If possible, home should be a safe haven for your child or loved one, a place for them to bring their whole authentic selves, to bring concerns and worries, and where YOU are their safe place to land. This may mean listening to your child or loved one talk about someone to whom they are attracted or on whom they have a crush. Perhaps it means sharing affirming television, movies, and books between you or, for gender-creative kids, allowing them to explore the full range of that creativity, whether through clothes, toys, or even a change of name if that is where they are leading you.

“I hope one day we no longer have to ‘come out.’ That it is a non event. Being gay is no different than having green eyes in my opinion.”

— Josh G., 23, San Antonio, TX



Of course, it is possible you will still have conflicting feelings. These feelings should be shared with peers, away from your child; this is exactly what PFLAG is here for, whether you attend an in-person meeting or connect with other PFLAGers online or by phone. Remember to visit pflag.org/findachapter to connect with a local chapter.

Your worries for your loved one’s safety outside of the home are a very real source of concern, especially given the harmful rhetoric online, in media, and in social spaces. There has also been an increase of violence against LGBTQ+ people and those who love them. These worries might make you feel that the best way to protect your loved one is to have them hide their sexual orientation, or avoid dressing in the way that makes them feel happiest and most comfortable. Every situation is different, and your intent to protect your child could be received by them as a subtle message that you are ashamed of them, or don’t support them. If you live in a community where coming out might not be safe—whether it’s concern for physical wellbeing or because there are no legal protections for LGBTQ+ people where you live—have that discussion with your loved one and share those concerns. Work together to make a decision that lets them know you support them and love them, and want what is best for them and for their safety. If together you assess that it is safe for them to be out when outside of the home, then do your best to advocate on their behalf, whether that means asking others to show respect if you hear them speaking negatively or being at your loved one’s side if they should need you.

Concerns abound for parents, caregivers, and loved ones of LGBTQ+ youth. Whether your focus is on school safety, workplace discrimination, supporting your loved one in a faith community, or minimizing social stress, PFLAG National offers resources on all these issues and more. PFLAG National offers resources around all these issues and more; visit pflag.org to find the resource that is best for you.

One of the most important things you can do to keep your loved one safe is to acknowledge their identity and understand that, while a person may choose to change their own sexual behavior or gender expression, **sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be changed by so-called “reparative” or “conversion” therapy.** Every major mainstream medical and behavioral health association agrees that attempting to change one’s sexual orientation or gender identity does not work and is damaging and dangerous, increasing the risk for depression, self-harm, substance abuse, and even death by suicide.

NEXT STEPS

The PFLAG National website, **pflag.org**, is the go-to hub for information, resources, and support. From there you can:

- ♥ **Contact a PFLAG Chapter.** There are hundreds of PFLAG chapters across the United States, each of which provides peer-to-peer support for parents, families, and allies of the LGBTQ+ community as well as support for LGBTQ+ people themselves. This one-to-one connection can be a crucial part of your journey. Through PFLAG you will meet people who have either gone through what you are going through, or are currently going through the same thing, and are ready to share and listen. Whether you need support to work through difficult feelings about your loved one coming out or are immediately accepting but need support and education from others about how you can support your loved one, you will find that help through PFLAG. Find your local chapter at pflag.org/find.
- ♥ **Connect with PFLAG National.** In addition to our many resources, PFLAG National has an online community that offers peer-to-peer support in real time. Additionally, *PFLAG Connects: Communities* offers safe, moderated virtual meetings for people with common experiences and backgrounds. Learn more at pflag.org/connects-communities.
- ♥ **Read Other PFLAG National Publications.** PFLAG National has additional publications on specific issues including
 - *Our Trans Loved Ones*, written specifically for the loved ones of people who are transgender;
 - *Be Yourself*, which is geared toward youth;
 - *Faith in Our Families*, which talks about the ways families of faith can navigate the coming-out process with their loved ones;
 - *At Ease*, for military families with LGBTQ+ loved ones;

“My mother’s last words to me were that of acceptance and love at a time I was filled with fear and hate of the world. My mother will always have the best place in my heart for giving me that gift.”

— Christopher M., 29, Washington, D.C.



- *Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Grandchild*, for grandparents with an LGBTQ+ grandchild; and
 - a whole host of publications from our Straight for Equality™ program, for non-family allies. Find all of our publications at pflag.org/publications.
- ♥ **Do More Research.** There is a tremendous amount of information available about the LGBTQ+ community, parents with LGBTQ+ children, and anything else you might want to know.



A final thought.

After decades of working with parents and families, our experience tells us that the unconditional love you have for your child is the most important thing to remember, whether you came to PFLAG already affirming, strongly in denial, or anywhere in between.

Your child or loved one’s coming out or disclosure is an opportunity to bring your family closer. If you aren’t at a point where you can come out loud and proud as the parent, caregiver, or loved one of a person who is LGBTQ+, there may very likely come a point where you can begin to do so. Be patient with yourself, patient with your loved one, and remember: You always have a home at PFLAG.

EXPERT OPINIONS

Diane Ehrensaft, Ph.D.

*Director of Mental Health and Founding Member,
the Child and Adolescent Gender Center*

What's the first thing a new parent typically gets asked about their baby or baby-to-be?

“Boy or girl?”

We are really asking about the baby's sex, based on observations of the baby's genitals and assumptions about the baby's chromosomes. But nobody yet knows about the baby's gender, who that little person will know themselves to be as male, female, nonbinary, or other, and how they want to “do” their gender—playing by their culture's rules for gender or making up their own as they go.

When it comes to gender, it is not for us to decide, but for the children to tell us who they are, if we give them the chance. And they are now telling us, in words and actions, that gender does not come in just two boxes, male and female, but in an infinite variety of shapes and sizes. We can think of it as a web, with each child, over time, spinning together threads of nature, nurture, and culture to arrive at their own unique gender web, the gender that feels most true and authentic to them. Their gender web will be made up of their gender identity (their sense of themselves as male, female, or other) and their gender expressions (the clothes they wear, the games they play, the children they play with, and so forth). Like fingerprints, no two children's gender webs will be the same. But unlike fingerprints, a child's gender web is not indelible. It can change and flow throughout that child's life.

Most children discover that the gender they know themselves to be is a match with the gender assigned to them on their birth certificate. But a few will let us know that we got it wrong—our youngest cohort of transgender people. And many will be resistant to their culture's rules and regulations for gender, especially if they are rigidly divided for boys and girls. They may be the boy in the pink tutu, the girl who trades her bikini for her cousin's swim trunks, the boy in the doll

corner, the girl enthralled by all the trucks. At the end of the day, we hope all these clothes and toys will become people things, rather than designated boy or girl things. In the meantime, they will remain the tools children may use to tell us who they are. These are the children we refer to as our gender nonconforming, gender independent, gender expansive, gender fluid children—accepting their assigned gender identities but tweaking their gender expressions. Some may take a short excursion in living in the opposite gender, but not stay there. A fair number, but not all, will explore their gender selves on the way to later discovering their gay selves. Yet it should always be remembered that gender and sexual identity are two separate developmental tracks, not to be confused with one another, like railroad tracks—parallel but crossing at certain junctures.

Then there are some young children who re-arrange both—gender identities and gender expressions. They refuse to pin themselves down as either male or female—maybe they are a boy/girl, or a gender hybrid, or gender ambidextrous, moving freely between genders, living somewhere in-between, or creating their own mosaic of gender identity and expressions. As they grow older, they might identify themselves as agender, or gender neutral, or gender queer.

Each one of these children is exercising their gender creativity, and we can think of them as our gender creative children. In their youngest years, adults around them may make the mistake of saying, “Oh, it’s just a phase.” In pediatric thinking, a phase almost always means something negative—like colic or terrible twos—that, to soothe a parent’s anxiety, is guaranteed to disappear with time. That is exactly the negative message often sent to confused or curious parents when the pediatrician counsels them about their young child’s gender nonconformity, “It’s just a phase. Your child will outgrow it.”

Indeed, a child may certainly move on from their current gender presentation as they spin together their gender web over time. But most gender-creative children are not going through a phase, and parents don’t need reassurance that their child will move away from their gender creativity. Rather they need encouragement and support to help their child stay with it to become the most gender healthy child they can be—the child who gets to be the gender that is “me” rather than the gender everyone around them might want or expect them to be.

“Like fingerprints, no two children’s gender webs will be the same. But unlike fingerprints, a child’s gender web is not indelible. It can change and flow throughout that child’s life.”



A young gender creative child will need a psychological toolbox and some resilience to meet the challenges of going against the gender grain in a community that might not be ready to accept that child. Parents, siblings, and other relatives will need professional and community support to be the most accepting family they can be—that is a major ingredient for children’s gender health.

To that end, parents will need constant reminders that any who have “blamed” them for their child’s gender nonconformity will need help learning that parents don’t make their children’s gender, the children do. Some parents see so much else going on with their child that they are stymied—with all that “noise,” how can they even tell if the “gender stuff” is real? That, too, is where a gender-sensitive mental health professional can be a tremendous support in sorting this out. And all of us will need to become allies and advocates for these young children, whether they be transgender, gender fluid, gender queer, agender, and so forth, to create a social world that reaches toward gender infinity rather than shrinking into gender restriction.



Lisa Kenney

CEO; Reimagine Gender

What do you do when your son announces to you that they are “changing their gender,” uses a term you’ve never heard of to describe himself (agender, non-binary, genderqueer, etc.), and when you didn’t know what he meant, he left the room and now won’t speak to you about it? Or perhaps your daughter has begun wearing what you consider to be men’s clothing, binding her breasts to appear more flat-chested, and recently asked you not to use gendered pronouns when referring to ‘her’ anymore, preferring that you use “they.” You’re left wondering if this is just a phase or if there’s something more you need to understand about your child.

Traditional ideas about clothing, accessories, and other expressions of gender are changing. This has always been true as gender norms change over time. However, changes have tended to be slower and more modest. Today’s evolving understandings of gender ask that we broadly examine our assumptions about gender identity and expression and our concepts of masculinity and femininity. Not just for women and gender-diverse people but for all of us. What we decide to do after this examination is up to each of us. The question as parents is how can we best support our children on their path? And what do we do when our child begins to express their gender in new ways or comes to us and tells us something new about their gender (perhaps even something that scares or concerns you or

that you don't understand or agree with)? Their path will evolve, but regardless of where it leads, it starts with our clear message of love.

When our child shares the important identity questions they're exploring, they're taking a risk. They're vulnerable. If we respond to their comments with a genuine desire to learn and understand, our child will continue to share and include us in their process. But if we debate, ask questions that are comments in question form, or minimize their experience, they won't stop exploring; they will simply stop sharing the process with us. Remember, **listening is not agreeing. It's just listening.**

There is a generational divide in understandings of gender. The two genders most of us grew up with (man and woman) have given way to richer, more complex ways of thinking about and discussing gender. Research data from millennials and Gen Z (essentially youth to adults around age 40) indicate that they see gender as a spectrum rather than a binary concept with only two pre-assigned categories. You're not alone if you feel out of touch with what's going on with gender now or if new pronouns and gender terms seem like a foreign language.

As you already know, parenting is an improvisation; we figure it out the best we can as we go along, and what seems initially difficult and overwhelming ultimately becomes manageable. This parenting challenge is no different in that regard. There are no simple, one-size-fits-all answers, but there are strategies you can use as you find your way with your child.

Reassure Your Child

Sharing who we are with another person is an act of trust and love. It also leaves us vulnerable. Your child took a risk in sharing their gender with you in the hope that you would see them as they see themselves.

They will pay particular attention to what you say and do after their disclosure. Be mindful that they will be observing you and interpreting your actions, so be sure to let them know that you understand the importance of what they told you. Communicate your love and respect for them, reassuring them that what they have shared doesn't change that in any way.

Listen

Resist the urge to talk more than listen when your child tells you about their gender. Sometimes as parents, we can fall into the trap of thinking we know our children better than they know themselves. When they tell us something about themselves that doesn't fit the picture we have—or want to have—of our child, we may try to deny it. But listen to what your child is trying to tell you—in all likelihood, they had been thinking about this for a long time before sharing it with you.



“You’re not alone if you feel a bit out of touch with what’s going on with gender now, or if new pronouns and gender terms seem like a foreign language.”

Ask Questions

Language around gender is evolving, and the same terms can mean different things to different people, so it’s essential to ask your child what the terms they use mean to them. Asking, “What does this word mean to you?” or “What language would you like me to use when referring to your gender?” helps you understand important information about your child and how they see themselves while also letting them know you are curious and want to understand who they are.

If Needed, Ask Forgiveness and Try Again

If you felt knocked off balance, confused, afraid, or even angry when

your child shared with you about their gender, please know you are not alone and that other parents have felt the same way. If your initial response to your child was negative, poorly received, or simply didn’t sufficiently communicate your love and commitment to your child, you can change your approach to one that feels better for you and supports them. It is never too late to make that shift.

Get Support for Yourself

It is incredibly important for you to have a safe place to learn and explore issues related to gender. Connecting with parents going through the same process can be a lifeline and an invaluable resource. Go to a local support group, a PFLAG meeting in your area, or an online parent support group. Gender Spectrum and other organizations offer workshops and conferences for parents and other family members of gender-diverse children and youth where you can learn more about gender and connect with others. You’re not alone in this process, and you’ll gain strength in talking with parents from all walks of life who are also navigating this journey.

*(This is adapted from *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* by Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney.)*

FIRST-PERSON STORIES

Lori Duron

parent of a gender-creative son

When our son, C.J., was a toddler and started playing with dolls, wearing dresses and drawing himself as a girl, my husband and I became consumed with feelings of confusion, sadness, worry and constant panic to “figure out” our son who seemed to be a girl at heart.

Six years later, C.J.’s penchant for all things pink, glittery and fabulous hasn’t changed; but we have—for the better. I wish I could go back in time, give myself a hug and tell myself that things do, in fact, get better.

I’d tell myself to chill out and give things some time. The only way to tell if something is a phase or has some deeper meaning is to wait it out and patiently observe it.

I’d tell myself to search out resources and get educated. Before C.J., I didn’t even know the differences between sex, gender and sexuality. This unique parenting journey doesn’t have to feel lonely; support, information and a sense of camaraderie are out there waiting to be found.

I’d tell myself to gather a stellar supporting cast. We’d be lost without our family, friends, pediatrician, therapist and child advocate. It takes more than one or two people to healthily launch a differently gendered child into adulthood.

I’d tell myself to show C.J. examples of other kids like him. Before we were lucky enough to be a part of a gender nonconforming playgroup, we read lots of books about kids who are gender nonconforming or different from the norms of society. Our favorites are *The Boy Who Cried Fabulous*, *A Fire Engine for Ruthie* and anything else by Leslea Newman. Todd Parr books are great, too.

Most of all, I’d tell myself to enjoy the path less traveled. C.J. and our family aren’t weird, we’re just different and if everybody were the same this world would be a very boring place. We paint nails, braid hair, tap dance and smile big. People like C.J. give the world color. We enjoy the rainbow.

“C.J. and our family aren’t weird, we’re just different and if everybody were the same this world would be a very boring place. We paint nails, braid hair, tap dance and smile big. People like C.J. give the world color. We enjoy the rainbow.”



Our family and its support system have evolved over the last several years. We know that we are here to love our child, not change him. He’s absolutely free to be who he was created to be while knowing that we love him no matter what.

Parenting is hard as hell. We used to stop every once in a while and dreamily imagine what life would be like if C.J. conformed to traditional gender norms. Now we wouldn’t change our experiences or our son for anything in the world. We are blessed beyond comprehension to have a gender-nonconforming son. It’s easy to feel blessed when you get what you expect. But can you feel that way and still be thankful when things turn out not as expected? When things are more different than normal, more challenging than easy? Yes, you can. That is what C.J. taught us.



Don Rogers

parent of a gay son

My wife, Gena, and I have been married 48 years. We live in Texas and have three sons and five grandchildren. Our youngest son, Josh, is gay.

When Josh was 14, he told the youth minister at our church that he thought he was gay. The youth minister called Gena in and said that he did not think Josh was gay but simply going through a phase. They basically shut down any effort by Josh to come out; Gena didn’t even tell me about the conversation, and simply ignored it. She told me later that it was incomprehensible to her; she thought it couldn’t be true.

For a few years after that, Josh tried to be straight. He dated girls and tried his best to be someone he wasn’t. Then at the age of 19, he came out to Gena and me.

I was devastated. I was a fourth-generation Southern Baptist and a fourth-generation Texan. Everything I had known, everything I had been taught, was that homosexuality was a sin and could not be accepted. This was something that had been ingrained in me, and something I had never questioned. So Josh's declaration that he was gay shook the very foundation of my beliefs. It took a long time for us to assimilate what had happened, and each of us dealt with it in our own way.

My way was to turn to research and books. I was a schoolteacher, having taught for 34 years. So I began reading everything I could, starting with the history of Christianity and homosexuality in the church. I researched online, and I read books from both perspectives. Ultimately, I realized that I could reconcile my son and my faith. I came to see that Josh was born this way, and he cannot change who he is. Understanding this changed me completely, and it changed the way I look at other people.

It probably took longer for Gena to accept that Josh was gay. She grieved hard. She never said "Leave" or "I do not love you," but it was incredibly difficult for her. She prayed for a miracle—for God to change Josh so he would not think he was gay anymore.

But then she realized her grieving was about her. It was about her grief that Josh would not bring home a daughter-in-law or give her grandchildren. She prayed a lot, and she started to see that God couldn't change Josh, but he could change her heart. She could love Josh for who he is and not for whom she wanted him to be.

Looking back, I am stunned by Josh's courage. He had a difficult time growing up because kids bullied him. I suppose we should have known that Josh was gay, but for Gena and me, that was not something we even considered. We were confirmed Southern Baptists, I served as a deacon in a very large church, and Josh himself was raised in that church. But Josh had the courage to be honest with himself about who he is.

For the past 10 years, Josh has been in a committed relationship with David. When we were first introduced to David, Gena was still grieving and struggling to accept that her son was



“Ultimately, I realized that I could reconcile my son and my faith... Understanding this changed me completely, and it changed the way I look at other people.”

gay. She still worries that she was standoffish to David for about a year, maybe more. But now, 10 years later, we both love David and consider him every bit as part of our family. We are so proud of the two of them, both as individuals and as a couple.

In July of last year, Josh and David were married. They first had a ceremony in Fort Worth on a Saturday night, celebrating with their families and friends. It was an absolutely beautiful ceremony and reception — we never felt more love than we did that night. Josh surprised David by singing “When You Say You Love Me.” There was not a dry eye in the place.

After the ceremony, Josh and David flew to New York to make their marriage legal the following Monday, as this was before marriage equality became the law of the land. It was painful to us that Josh and David were not able to lawfully marry in their home state where they were both born and raised, but we are thrilled that other families will now not have to endure that pain.



Amelia

mother of a young gay son

Parenting young LGBTQ+ kids is hard. But mostly, that’s because parenting is really hard. (Anyone who claims it is easy is lying or selling something.)

I love my kid. I love every single little part of him. I love that he’s such a fierce protector and guardian of his younger brothers. I love that he thinks having bangs that flop into his face is the absolute height of fashion. I love how excited he got when he found out that the “Toads” in Nintendo have no gender. I love how he seems incapable of putting his laundry into the hamper. (Okay, I don’t really love that, but it comes with the package.) And I love that he is gay. Because I am his mom, and I love all the things that make up who he is, and this is part of him.

There is nothing wrong with my son. There is nothing wrong with being gay. But his orientation is something that causes me concern. I don’t want to change my kid, or for him to be anything other than himself. My concern stems from how the rest of the world is going to react to him, my out-and-proud elementary school student, who has never seen the need for a closet.

So, as the parent of this incredible kid, who I love to distraction, I could use some help. I need help knowing how to be the best mom for him. I need help knowing how to talk to schools about how they are going to protect and celebrate my

son for who he is. I need help knowing how to talk to other parents, who think orientation is just about sex acts, and get freaked out when my prepubescent kid tells them he is gay. I need help knowing how to talk to and deal with grandparents and homophobic relatives about my kid. I need help so I can support him and love him and celebrate him for the incredible, rapidly growing kiddo he is. I need this help so that he can grow up into a confident, loving, and wonderful adult gay man. And there is no manual for this. There is no parenting book called, “My Seven Year Old is Gay. Now What?”

Parents like me—parents who love their kids, parents who see their child’s orientation as something to celebrate, but who also know that the world is a scary place—need PFLAG, too, because we want to be the best parents we can be... we need PFLAG’s help to figure out how to do that.

“Parents like me—parents who love their kids, parents who see their child’s orientation as something to celebrate, but who also know that the world is a scary place—need PFLAG, too, because we want to be the best parents we can be...”

—Amelia, mother of a young gay son



LEADING WITH LOVE

PFLAG