

## When Your Child Says “I’m Gay”

By Brigitte G. Dutil, ATR, MFT

Not too long ago, if an adolescent declared, “I’m gay” to his parents, he could have expected reactions that ranged from rejection to outright violence to being kicked out of the home. Today’s youth who are “coming out” are doing so at a younger age and appear to be more reconciled to their gay identity. Even some parents can be more accepting.

The increasing number of young people professing their homosexuality might be attributed to increased community tolerance, including a growing acceptance by schools and peers, as exemplified by Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) groups on high school and college campuses. Unfortunately, coming out to one’s parents continues to be a serious issue and concern for many gay and lesbian youth.

### □ Is there a typical reaction?

If a child says, “I’m gay,” what can his parents do? Most importantly, they can listen and refrain from passing judgment or panicking.

“Parents may have a range of reactions, with negative reactions common, but not a certainty in all families. Even when parents are supportive, they may have little patience for the long periods of identity uncertainty and exploration of many adolescents, and may cut off avenues for the heart-to-heart conversations which their lesbian and gay children want. Some parents demonstrate what appears to be an almost obligatory initial negative reaction based on religious doctrine, only to become far more accepting later. Overall, the decision to come out to parents often provokes a family crisis of some sort.” (Fontaine, J.; Hammond, N., 1996).

Many parents experience a period of grief, which can be exacerbated by subsequent events involving their gay or lesbian children. The stages of grief anger, denial, depression, bargaining, and acceptance are non-linear. For example, acceptance might occur after any number of the stages is experienced.

### □ Getting over grief

Parents often grieve the loss of dreams or fantasies they had for the child coming out. Understandably, they may have assumed the child was heterosexual. They may have imagined their child experiencing important rites of passage, such as getting married and having children, landing the first job. Not that being gay or lesbian automatically results in the loss of such privileges, but a parent might initially believe this to be true. Even the gay or lesbian child might grieve the loss of heterosexual privileges, depending on the child’s age when coming out and the degree of acceptance by family and friends in the surrounding community.

How does a family incorporate the identity of a gay or lesbian child? It’s important for the parents and the child to be patient with one another. A family might experience a coming out process of its own. The stages of coming out identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, identity synthesis are also non-linear, and consist of two parallel processes:

- **Internal structures** define the self one’s identity as the parent of a gay or lesbian child, or as a sister or brother of a gay or lesbian sibling.
- **External development** of behaviors and attitudes comprise the coming out process. These behaviors and attitudes, it’s been said, “may or may not be congruent to one’s internal identity.”

During any one of the coming out stages, how the parent or sibling of a gay or lesbian child feels may differ from how he/she acts. One might tolerate or accept a child’s sexual orientation, but struggle to express this acceptance to

the child, or publicly to family, friends, and the community. The child can perceive this internal struggle as rejection, possibly resulting in increased anxiety, depression, acting out behavior, and family discord.

### **Communication is key**

Parents and their gay or lesbian children must keep lines of communication open to address these issues. That doesn't mean parents should necessarily convey their initial reactions to a declaration of homosexuality to the child. Instead, they should inform the child that they are trying to process and understand the information shared by the child. How readily parents accept their child's new identity and how stable the ensuing relationship becomes can be significantly influenced by society's reaction to lesbian and gay youth.

What can one do to help the family? Seek professional assistance in the form of family and individual therapy to assist with communication and alleviate distress. Be advised that conversion therapy trying to convert homosexuals to heterosexuality has been proven ineffective, even dangerous.

Allow your child to teach you about the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender) community and culture. Inquire about the climate at school and within the family. Be an advocate for the child to ensure he is safe and treated appropriately outside the home. Ask for help if needed. There are professional organizations that can provide appropriate resources and referrals, such as PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and Gay & Lesbian Community Centers.

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### **About the Author**

Brigitte G. Dutil, ATR, MFT, an experienced licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (#MFC42451) and registered art therapist (#05-022), provides individual and family, adult, child, and adolescent psychotherapy through the use of art, play, and talk therapy. Specialized training includes such areas as clinical art therapy, spousal/partner abuse, self injurious behaviors, sexual orientation/identity development, and gender identity issues. Clinical experience also includes providing therapeutic services in outpatient mental health settings. Interested populations are children from age's 6-17, young adults, families, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and their families. Learn more about Brigitte Dutil at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/BrigitteDutil>