

FFLAG

Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays



A Guide for Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays



families and friends of lesbians & gays



What is FFLAG?

Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays is a national voluntary organisation and registered charity

FFLAG is dedicated to supporting parents and their gay, lesbian and bisexual sons and daughters

FFLAG offers support through its central telephone helpline, email and website in their efforts to help parents and families understand, accept and support their lesbian, gay and bisexual members with love and pride

FFLAG members are parents of lesbian, gay or bisexual daughters and sons. These young people and families face serious homophobia in our society, which brings in its wake prejudice, bullying and alienation

FFLAG supports the full human and civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals

FFLAG speaks out and acts to defend and enhance those human and civil rights

A Guide for Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED

Fourth Edition reprinted by FFLAG
(Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) 2008

© Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays



Preface

The original booklets in this series were inspired and written by Rose Robertson who was a pioneer in the Parents' Movement and whose insight and many years of counselling and hard work has resulted in the present pattern of nationwide parents' organisations.

It is a tribute to Rose's vision and foresight that in presenting this revised edition the majority of the text remains unchanged. Indeed, most of the revision has simply been updating to take account of the developments, changes in law and problems we have encountered in the years that have ensued since the original publication in 1971-2.

Beginning to understand

Many books have been written, much has been said, and many theories have been advanced about homosexuality, but from all this only one fact emerges: No-one has conclusively proved what it is that causes homosexuality; and yet, unhappily and wrongly, homosexuals are discriminated against.

The weight of evidence increasingly suggests that homosexuality is genetic. That is, just as a random genetic pattern dictates that one member of the family may be blond haired or left handed, so a similar random pattern in the genes will produce a lesbian or gay orientation. However, this and other theories are of little help to people, particularly parents, faced with the news that a person they love may be lesbian or gay.

To explain homosexuality in simple terms is not an easy thing. Basically, it is a whole emotional pattern, present from early years, which the child develops as she/he matures. It need have no effect on their lives beyond the fact that their deepest relationships will be formed with people of their own sex. Like all of us, lesbian and gay people want and need to give love, and to have that love returned. Lesbian and gay people can relate to others who are not homosexual in every way, except sexually. In sex itself, lesbians and gay men are no different from the rest of the population; some have a great interest in sex, others have very little and most are somewhere in between.



Not an illness

The question is often asked "can this condition be cured?" The answer is that homosexuality is not an illness. It is a natural state of affairs for lesbian or gay people. They do not choose this any more than anyone else chooses to be heterosexual. Sexual orientation, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is not of our making, and we are not responsible for the reason or process of creation.

Not chosen

It cannot be repeated often enough that sexual orientation is not chosen, that instead it is an emotional pattern, present from the beginning, which develops as the child grows. As with all children, sexual awareness comes as the body develops. At this point it is very important to make a distinction between a lesbian or gay experience, which many children have, and lesbian or gay orientation.

The first is sexual play, a purely physical experiment without any emotional involvement; the second is a complete way of relating and involves very deep emotional experiences.

Early difference

It is, however, at this early stage of sexual awareness that the lesbian or gay child first feels different; first feels attracted emotionally and sexually to the same sex. In the present climate of hostility, discrimination and prejudice, and perhaps in fear and confusion, a daughter or son will often deny their sexual orientation, even to themselves.

A daughter or son who feels that they are of lesbian/gay orientation has probably been consciously aware of these feelings since the age of 11 or 12. Such people, recalling this period, usually talk of a growing feeling of uneasiness, of feeling apart from other children in a way they cannot quite understand.

Stress and identification

The conflict and lack of identity, the feeling of isolation and guilt they have been taught to have, often results in great distress. Regretfully, current society still focuses on the assumption that only heterosexuality is the accepted norm, although progress to equality continues to be made.

As their sexual development speeds up, it becomes clear that this difference is a sexual one. These children are often overtaken by fear and loneliness. They do not necessarily identify with the lesbian and gay people portrayed on television, even though this image has improved in recent years, and attempts are now made by producers and playwrights to depict more accurate lifestyle characters and programmes for the sizeable lesbian and gay audiences.

Rejection and ridicule

Lesbian and gay young people fear rejection by their parents, and possibly by anyone else they might turn to for guidance. They fear scorn, or even aggression, from their friends or classmates, some of whom may be repeating the sort of "queer" jokes that abound in school playgrounds, and, regretfully, amongst some older people.



They fear they might give themselves away with a look, a glance, or even an untimely remark. They experience great difficulty in meeting other lesbian/gay people and, in isolated circumstances, can feel "they are the only lesbian/gay person in the world" to quote a phrase we have often encountered. In short, lesbian and gay young people feel exactly the same sense of shock and fear that parents encounter when faced with this knowledge of their daughter's/son's orientation. They face it alone. It is not uncommon for a young lesbian/gay person to spend three or four years summoning up enough courage to talk to their parents.

Parents' reaction

For parents, totally unprepared for this development in their child, the general reaction is one of shock, bewilderment and fear. Some blame themselves, some reject the child, some want help but do not know how to cope. Many, in spite of themselves, feel alienated from their own child. Even where love maintains the bond, this does not lessen the shock and the confusion parents feel.

Ignorance

If we examine the reasons for these varying reactions a fairly consistent pattern emerges. Firstly, although there are some well written books concerning lesbians and gays, they tend not to be well known, and are not always stocked by public libraries or booksellers. Secondly, parents, in common with the rest of society, have absorbed all the myths and misunderstandings which exist about homosexuality.

Little information exists for the parents of a lesbian/gay child. Very rarely, if at all, does the subject of homosexuality get talked about in the home or socially other than in a "media sensational" sense, and then usually in a very biased way based upon limited knowledge or distorted by the media. The image which you then have may be very little different from that which you first learned in the playground, in an atmosphere of prejudice, fear and ridicule towards homosexuality. Even parents who consider themselves to be very understanding on this matter do not expect it in their own family. Do not feel guilty. These prejudices, these misunderstandings and misconceptions, are prevalent in our society. They are not ideas that you as parent, family or friend of a lesbian/gay person decides to have. As you gain more information and the shock lessens, you will find, slowly, that they will pass as you realise how distorted and prejudiced these images are, and how much discrimination against homosexuals they are responsible for.

Religious prejudice and intolerance

Thirdly, if parents hold certain religious beliefs, one of the difficulties they may experience is in reconciling these doctrines with the lesbian/gay orientation of their daughter or son. It is not possible in this booklet to reach for, or to offer a solution that would be acceptable. However, a few pointers can be given.

A very great deal of work is being done by clergy of all denominations to bring a more tolerant attitude towards lesbian/gay persons.



The laws of the Church are based generally upon the old Hebraic laws, and whilst it may have been necessary at that time for the Jewish people to "be fruitful and to go forth and multiply" for the sake of their survival, this is certainly not the case today when we need population limitation. The writings attributed to St Paul, for instance, were written nearly two thousand years ago and, however valid they may or may not have been at that time, it is very doubtful whether some of the discriminatory strictures on sex in general that he supposedly expressed would be acceptable in the light of present knowledge. We are taught that "we are all God's children" and many lesbian/gay people are committed believers. For people holding other religious beliefs the problem is undoubtedly more difficult, and for them it would be best to refer to the counselling advice that is offered by appropriate organisations.

Choices

Parents quite often use the phrase "Why did my child choose this way of life?" It must again be emphasised that a lesbian/gay orientation is not chosen, it is natural to the person. In view of the many difficulties with which lesbians and gays have to cope, and the hostility that they will probably face, even from those who know and love them, it must surely be abundantly clear that most people would not go out of their way to choose a way of life so fraught with possible pressures. **People do not choose to be heterosexual. It is simply part of them. It is exactly the same for lesbians and gay men.**

Similarly, parents often ask: "Where did I go wrong?" This is only an issue if being lesbian or gay is thought to be a "problem". They have not gone wrong. There is nothing that they have done, or failed to do, that made their child lesbian/gay.

Parents' organisations

Since 1969 parents' organisations have dealt with many thousands of families from every strata of society - "average" families, families that have faced divorce or separation, single parent families, families of ethnic minorities or of mixed race, families where independence is the "norm", large families, small and single child families, nuclear families, extended families, families undergoing great strain and families with little difficulty.

Parents' organisations are thus in a unique position to see any common factor; any factor in background, upbringing, environment, children's or parents' attitudes or experiences that causes homosexuality. None has been found. Instead the experience of parents' organisations has been that the explanations commonly offered for the existence of lesbian/gay people hold little logic.

Myths around parents' "fault"

Take, for example, one of the most widespread explanations, that a weak or absent father and a strong, dominant mother will produce a gay son - something which is clearly untrue. Were it true, it would mean that the Second World War, when millions of men were absent from home for considerable periods, would have resulted in a huge increase of lesbians and gays amongst the children who were born and grew up at that time: something that did not occur. What these and other theories are really saying, without having the courage to say it outright, is that the parent is to blame for having a lesbian/gay child.



Try to see how untrue this is. If you have other children, ask yourself if there was anything different in the way you brought up this child to the way you brought up the others. If you have only one child, ask yourself if her or his upbringing was so dramatically different to that of other children. It is unlikely. Even if something in this daughter or son's background has been so markedly different, why, of all the thousands upon thousands of consequences this could have had, should it have resulted in lesbian/gay orientation?

The truth is that it is easier for parents to seek faults in themselves than to face the fact that there is a side to their child that they never knew about. This search for a cause inside yourself is a punishment you are inflicting upon yourself. It will help neither you nor your child. Indeed, you are actually increasing the problems of your daughter or son by such agonising.

Family strength

Try to accept the fact that you have had a shock for which few parents are prepared. Your child, gradually over a period of years, has had the same shock. Now put some faith in the strength that family relationships can have in a time of crisis. Recognise that there is no "right" or correct way for parents to react in this situation. As in all family situations, however you would have reacted until now, your child will need a signal that you still love her or him, no matter what. Whether this is done in words or deeds, it is the start of getting things right.

Emotions are alright

Do not smother your emotions with reason. Some parents will say they have come to terms and that they accept this is the way their child is, even while feeling deeply upset inside.

Do not deny your emotions. It is better to tell your child that this was a shock you were totally unprepared for, that you still love her or him and nothing has changed that, but you still need time to let the shock run its course and to get support, such as that offered by FFLAG.

Meanwhile, get in touch with a parents' organisation with the aim not only of getting information and support, but to express your feelings. Parents feel shock, hurt and guilt as much as anyone else. Expressing these feelings to someone outside the family, who, nonetheless, understands, will greatly reduce the burden you feel, and lessen the risk of confrontation in the family.

Some parents speak first

Just occasionally parents will recognise that their child is lesbian/gay before the child has the courage to approach them. What lesbian/gay children generally say is that, for them, the easiest way for the subject to be brought up would be if their mother or father were to say something like the following: "I've felt for a while you might be lesbian/gay. If you are, I want you to know that it makes no difference to the love I feel for you. I will need to find out more about the subject so that I can know how best to help you lead a happy life. Whether you are lesbian/gay or not, I love you, and, if it helps, let's talk about things."



These thoughts, however phrased, and in some families they might be better written than spoken, can provide a bridge to the child who may be anxious to talk, but is unable to find the words. Even young people who clearly know they are lesbian/gay can have difficulty in accepting this side of themselves. Thus, it can be better to gradually and gently restate, over a period of time, your love for your child and the strength of that bond, so creating an atmosphere in which it is easier for your son or daughter to talk.

Bisexual

Parents often ask if their child will change as she or he grows older, and whether it will be too late should the realisation come that she or he is not predominantly homosexual after all - will great emotional damage have been done? The answer is that it is not possible to speak for all children in all circumstances.

If the child is in her or his early teens, there is always the possibility that they are bisexual, although practising bisexuals are a small proportion of the population, and these feelings are natural to them. Given the pressure that a young lesbian/gay person faces, it is unlikely that someone who is not of this orientation would for long believe that they were. What is far more important is that they should not be pressured. The support, love and understanding of parents and those closest are vital at this very difficult time of life.

Not paedophiles

Another misconception that some parents have is that lesbian/gay persons want to have sexual relations with very young children. **This is totally untrue.** It is one of the myths that have grown up out of the ignorance of society about the nature of homosexuality. The normal, adjusted lesbian/gay person has no more interest in young children sexually than does the normal, adjusted heterosexual. Indeed, statistics prove quite conclusively that the greatest amount of child abuse sexually is committed by heterosexuals, and, most regrettably, usually occurs within the family.

It's not unusual

Another very common question is: "Are there more lesbian/gay persons now than there used to be?" Figures used in the pre-1957 Wolfenden Report showed that at least one in twenty of the population is predominantly or exclusively lesbian or gay. More recent surveys show that the proportion is far more likely to be one in fifteen. This is not an increase, it is simply that since a measure of decriminalisation, like the 1967 Act, more people have felt freer to "come out" or be visible. This is particularly true of young people. They are increasingly unprepared to live on two levels: to be one person in the home and another outside of it. This is one of the reasons why so many now tell their parents. If the quoted figures of lesbian/gay statistics are considered, does it not mean that homosexuality could occur in any family? Therefore, this is not a situation in isolation.



The family, we are frequently told, is the very fabric of our society. We may be personally involved with lesbian and gay people in our families, at work or in our social lives. In any of these settings lesbians and gay men need our understanding, our support, our respect and our love. This comes from knowledge. Discrimination comes from ignorance.

HIV/AIDS

Finally, and very importantly, the fears of parents, relatives, friends and associates about HIV/AIDSs must be faced. The one very positive step parents can take, and should take, is to ensure that their children, whether lesbian/gay or heterosexual, have a full knowledge of this subject, and are aware that in all sexual intercourse involving vaginal, oral or anal contact "safe sex" must be practised. This means using a sheath (condom). It should be a priority to make literature available for them. This cannot be over emphasised, since the disease is transmitted via contact with semen, blood or body fluids. As in all sexual matters, knowledge dispels risk and fear. Ignorance and prejudice can be, quite literally, killers. Make sure that you are fully aware.

Accepting the partner

If a lesbian/gay person brings their partner home for acceptance and hospitality, they should be given the same welcome that would be extended to the partner of a heterosexual member of the family.

This stage may take some time to reach, and love and respect are the means by which it will happen, but it is necessary to recognise the need to overcome prejudice in the interests of all, and particularly in order for you to continue to give the warm welcome which is every child's right, and which, if you freely give, will be given to you in return.

Conclusion

We have tried, above all, in this booklet to emphasise that homosexuality is a state of being, just like heterosexuality. It is very difficult to become a full happy human being if your sexuality is being denied, particularly by those who love or have regard for you. By sharing in a part of this person's life you will be helping to strengthen the bonds between you, and greatly raise everyone's chance of happiness.

This booklet is kindly sponsored by
Procter & Gamble

P&G

New cover design by
Sorrel Atkinson

Logo designed by calc@uomi.co.uk

Booklet designed by
Freeline Graphics, Exeter

Printed by
Sprint Print, Exeter

Central Helpline: 01454 852 418

www.fflag.org.uk

Email: info@fflag.org.uk

Registered charity no 1079918

This booklet is also available in Urdu

