





Families and Friends of Lesbians and 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

How do I tell my parents?

LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED

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

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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 of 'Lesbian or Gay - Telling Your Parents' 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.

Telling Your Parents

In this booklet we are trying to help you to find the best way to approach your parents with what may be regarded by them as news they will find shocking. You must be prepared for the possibility that this shock may result in a reaction that you may feel to be rejection. Try to understand that this will hopefully become an acceptance given time, so be patient and try not to give way to anger if your news results in what you feel are hurtful responses.

Many parents have difficulty with openly discussing sex. They may perhaps not have come to terms with their own sexuality and experience personal problems. You will probably be aware of the level of their ability to speak on this matter, and should take account of this in your approach. Obviously you will have worked out that your existence need not indicate that your parents are very knowledgeable about sexual subjects. Perhaps the amount of sexual knowledge they have imparted to you should be a guideline.

How to tell them

There is no single, sure-fire way of telling your parents that you are lesbian or gay. Just as no two families are exactly the same, so the method, even the words, will vary from one family to the next. But many reactions are common to all families, and knowing this, it is often possible to work out the best method for your family. Very few parents imagine that their children could possibly be lesbian or gay. Even those who may have had suspicions still feel shocked, sad or angry when confronted with the fact. Try to understand this. You have had, perhaps, several years to gradually come to terms with the fact that you are lesbian or gay. Your parents, when you tell them, will have had no time at all.



Although teenagers sometimes find it difficult to accept that no-one knows them as well as their parents, there is no denying that they have watched you develop from birth to the present moment, so they will find it hard to accept that there is a side to you they never knew about.

In the immediate reaction there are certain things that nearly all parents say. These include: "How can you be sure at your age?" "I went through a phase like this, you'll grow out of it." "You haven't tried hard enough with the opposite sex;" and, ominously, "What about this terrible AIDS?" These are difficult things to answer if you feel unsure of yourself.

If you are under the legal age of consent for sexual relations remember there are two aspects to your situation. The first is your homosexual feelings, and the second is your sexual experience, if any. You should, therefore, carefully consider to what extent you are going to reveal yourself to your parents.

Homophobia (hatred or prejudice against homosexuals) has many forms, but it is based upon ignorance and can be dispelled by knowledge. Remember your parents will have to consider how they will deal with relatives, neighbours, friends and perhaps their employers or the local church who may become aware that you are lesbian or gay. Try to understand this concern - perhaps point out that you too have to deal in greater measure with the hatred of others. Your parents' reaction may be to become over protective. Remember that to balance all the homophobia there exists a lot of positive and enlightened thought and attitudes.

Safe Sex

AIDS is almost certain to be a major worry with your parents, and, indeed, it should be a matter of deep concern to you to ensure that you practise safe sex with your partner at all times. This, of course, applies just as much to heterosexual as to homosexual activity. HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a viral infection that can lead to the development of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

The commonest cause of infection is by unprotected sex with an infected partner (who may be completely unaware that she/he is infected) It is passed on when blood, semen or vaginal fluids are exchanged during intercourse; or by using shared needles in intravenous drug injection. Rarely, it can result from blood transfusions where the donor blood has not been properly screened, but this is unusual in the UK.

The only real safeguard is to ensure that in all sexual acts which involve vaginal, oral or anal intercourse a protective sheath (condom) is used to prevent actual unprotected contact. If using lubrication a non-oil based "KY" type must be used: oil, Vaseline, baby oil and similar products will break down the latex sheath. So, make sure for the sake of yourself and your partner that, at all times, you use a sheath in any act of intercourse. Also, be able to reassure your parents of your continued intention to use "safe sex" methods (as, indeed, should your heterosexual brothers and sisters). Lesbians need to be aware and take care.

Thus, it is best that you are as confident, and, indeed, as happy about yourself as possible before talking to your parents.



This can be very difficult if, for you, being happy about being lesbian/gay depends upon your parents accepting the fact. If that is indeed the case for you, you may need the advice of a sympathetic counsellor, but be sure you approach one who can accept lesbian/gay attitudes.

For others, the confidence needed to approach their parents can come from several sources: from joining a lesbian/gay youth group, or a social group if you are older; or from having lesbian/gay friends or pen pals who may be in the same situation; or, perhaps, from talking to parents who already accept their lesbian/gay offspring; or from getting to know a family where one or more of the children are accepted as being lesbian/gay. It is for you to decide which of these will give you the confidence to approach your parents.

Who to tell?

Meanwhile you can start by making a positive decision. Do you want to tell both your parents at this stage, or only one? Most of us find it easier to talk to one parent than the other when something is bothering us. It might also be that one of your parents could not accept the fact at this moment, or that, for them, the news might come better from the parent you have talked to. Decide what is right in your particular family.

Decide, too, if there is a relative or family friend it would be better to talk to first, either for advice about how to tell your parents, or for help in telling them. By making these decisions you are already starting to bring under control what has until now been nothing but a problem.

Sons and daughters frequently try to get a guide by watching their parents' reaction to a TV soap, a play or documentary that features homosexuality; or hearing their response to media news; or perhaps by noting how they get on with someone known to be lesbian/gay.

This is not a true guide. Parents might say: "Look at those queers," not dreaming for a moment that this could mean you. Similarly, accepting someone as lesbian/gay in the next street or at work is not the same as accepting your own child as lesbian/gay. Usually, it is most helpful to think of your relationship with your parents and what happened when other things have been difficult for you.

The right time

Choose your moment. All families have times that are right for talking, and these are usually better than trying to create a moment. Sometimes events make this choice for you. When something is on your mind, it can build up to such a point that it simply spills out. Let it happen. Your unconscious mind often knows best about these things. Also, be prepared for one of your parents making the first approach. They may have found something that alarms them, or feel that you have something on your mind. You will be caught off guard and feel trapped. Admit that you are lesbian/gay and say you would like to talk about it. That is enough to start with.

People want to tell their parents that they are lesbian/gay for many reasons, but mostly these are to do with honesty and love.



Just occasionally you may want to tell them so you can hurt them, perhaps when you are in a bad mood. This rarely works, and usually rebounds badly. Neither is it fair. Your parents have not made you lesbian/gay, even if mistakenly they think they have. They will realise that you are talking out of temper, and your words will carry less weight.

The 'right' words

There are no standard phrases or words for telling your parents that you are lesbian/gay. Many people start by saying they want to tell their parents something that fear has forced them to keep hidden, or that there is something on their mind that they find very difficult to talk about. If your parents have wondered whether you are lesbian/gay that is when they will ask you, making this probably the easiest way for the subject to come up.

Perhaps a good approach to take would be to say: "I've known for X years that I'm lesbian/gay and I've been too frightened to tell you. I didn't want to hurt you and I was worried you might reject me. I hope you don't because I don't feel any different about you." However, there are not many daughters or sons who would start a conversation like that. Indeed, it's enough to say, as most do: "I'm lesbian/gay," or "I think I'm lesbian/gay," or "I've known for a while I'm lesbian/gay," or whatever words come most easily to you. Tell your parents why you have not told them before. Usually this is because children fear rejection by their parents, or have not wanted to hurt them. You may have got used to these fears, but they will be new to your parents.

After this point it is difficult to give specific advice because parents' initial reactions can vary. There are, however, two points nearly all gay children have in common, which are best mentioned early on. The first is that coping alone is extremely difficult and so pressure has built up inside you. This may help your parents to understand moods and reactions of yours that seemed out of character at the time.

Still the same person

The second point is that you still love your parents, you are the same daughter or son they thought you were, and it is a measure of your love that you have been able to tell them about yourself after such a difficult time.

Religion

If either you or your parents hold religious beliefs it may be helpful if you contact the appropriate religious organisation. You should recognise that, in the case of certain religious beliefs, there are difficult, even dangerous problems, and we advise you to contact your local Lesbian and Gay Switchboard before "coming out" to parents.



Not only sex

If your parents think that being lesbian/gay is just a matter of sex, explain that it is not. The love, happiness, trust and affection that your parents hoped you would find in marriage will still happen, but with someone of your own sex. Just as in marriage, sex will be part of this love. When your parents are in shock, they may not completely understand this at first. Nevertheless, it will help them to hear it at this point.

No choice

Usually there are three things parents find particularly difficult to understand about homosexuality. The first is choice. Many believe this is something you have chosen to do, or have been persuaded into by someone already homosexual. Try to point out how unlikely this is.

Adolescence is difficult anyway. Someone who thinks they are lesbian/gay has had to face the thought of rejection by their friends as well as parents; scorn, or worse, from those they mix with day by day ; isolation; immense difficulty in finding other lesbian/gay people; and, maybe, even aggression. Would you have taken on these pressures if you did not have to? It is most unlikely. Emphasise that you do not choose to be lesbian/gay. It might be helpful to write to us for our companion booklet 'A Guide for Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays' which could be given to parents, friends, family etc. to read. Ask them to consider it before discussing further. Say how much their love, acceptance and support will mean to you as problems are faced.

You may hear your parents express the fear that you are under the sexual influence of another person. Agree that it is true that some people can so respond, but it will only be lasting if this reaction is natural to them. Point out that heterosexuals, too, are subject to similar reactions in their relationships, and can also be unwise.

This leads on to the second thing that most parents find very difficult. Often, from memories of their own childhood, parents will ask about a "homosexual phase" when someone has fantasies about, a "crush" on, or sex with, one or more people of their own sex before settling down into a heterosexual (male-female) relationship. Parents call this a passing phase of homosexuality. This has nothing to do with homosexuality, but is just an experiment with sex that could have happened with almost anyone around at the time, male or female, and is usually forgotten very quickly.

When young people hero-worship someone of their own sex to the point of wanting sex with them, this, too, is very different from homosexuality. If the fantasies were to come true, most people, unless they were in fact lesbian/gay, would actually find it totally unsatisfactory and would not pursue it.

Bisexual

There are persons who are equally attracted to sexual relationships with the opposite sex as well as their own. They are termed bisexual and this feeling is obviously natural to them. They should be accepted as such, neither condemned nor applauded for their orientation. It is all a matter of determining for yourself your own sexual orientation.



This leaves a very small minority of people who have relationships involving both sexes and affection with someone of their own sex. These are one-off relationships which happen with a particular person at a particular time, probably never to be repeated, and not to be confused with searching for lovers of your own sex.

The third thing parents find difficult is the way you relate to the opposite sex. You may have good friends, or have gone out with someone of the opposite sex, so parents will assume you are attracted to them. If you took someone out as a cover up say so. These are simple explanations of something your parents find very baffling. Explain also that you can enjoy friends or companions of both sexes at a social level without a sexual link.

Parents' shock

In their shock your parents may say things they do not mean or afterwards regret. Don't be frightened, we all do this. When the shock wears off parents will often say: "Why did this happen to us?" or "Where did we go wrong?" There is a limit to how much you can explain about yourself, and sometimes this is where the limit is reached. If you have not previously given them the booklet referred to, consider telling them about the parents' organisations that exist, run by parents who have undergone similar experiences.

Support systems

With pressures of any sort it is often easier to talk with someone outside the family. But it is important that a sympathetic person be sought. Regretfully, some members of medical and religious bodies can be opposed to lesbians and gays. Even if your parents do not wish to contact parents' organisations straight away, they may do so later.

There is a time, too, to stop talking. This usually comes naturally, often when everything has been said and perhaps repeated. At this point let the subject go. Let a little ordinary life resume. This in itself will help. It is then best to let your parents bring up the subject if they choose to do so. Several things can happen at this point. Your parents may gradually accept the fact; they may want to talk about it at a later date, perhaps in a guarded way; or perhaps when they are less bewildered than previously. They may try to ignore what has happened, or they may even, after a little while, pretend nothing has happened. Whatever occurs, remember they have had a immense shock.

The time people take to absorb shock varies with every individual. Be aware of your parents need for this thinking time of their own, but if, after this, it seems that what you have said is being ignored or forgotten, talk to them again using the knowledge and experience you gained the first time. If this does not work, or seems impossible, it is time to get help from outside. Remember you have access to advice and support from the many Lesbian and Gay Switchboards listed in the telephone directory, and also the lesbian and gay advisory organisations that exist. Contact them and explain your dilemma.



Even when things turn out well parents sometimes feel a delayed shock later on. They, like anyone else, can find that something they have accepted in their minds is difficult to fully accept in their hearts. Here again, if you realise what is happening it will be easier to cope with.

If you have thought along the lines suggested in this booklet and understand that your parents cannot come round overnight, it is reasonable to say to them that you have been honest with them, that you have tried to live your life in a way that respects your family, and, as they tried so hard to understand, why let all this go to waste now? It is better, surely, to talk things over again, particularly as it was helpful the first time.

Families differ

In some families, talking directly about your lesbian/gay orientation is not helpful. It may be better to gradually let your parents know that you are lesbian/gay, allowing them to realise at a pace they can take. Sometimes it will be fairly clear that this is the best way. In other families, it may take a discussion with someone outside the family to work out that this is the best approach for you. If you are in a permanent relationship try to gently introduce your partner into your family when you feel that they are most at ease with the idea of a same sex relationship. Remember, it can be difficult for some parents, especially fathers, to cope with physical displays of affection. Same sex partnerships often highlight the fact that there may not be grandchildren, and many parents will regret this. This is another unfair emotional burden that is put upon lesbians and gays.

Legal matters

Unless you are married or in a Civil Partnership your parents will probably be your legal 'next of kin' and if you were unconscious, in hospital or if you died suddenly, they can take over or insist on directing your funeral, denying that your partner exists or leaving your partner right out of things. You can avoid this by making a Will, naming your partner in the event of death, or a declaration called a 'Living Will', or a more formal and equally binding 'Lasting Power of Attorney' giving your partner the right to make decisions if you were incapable. These are complicated however so building up a happy and accepted relationship with your family is most important to you, your family and your partner.

Younger lesbian and gay persons are, in general, more vulnerable to problems arising from rejection. However, in our experience, much of the advice given above applies equally to the older person who wishes to be honest and seeks the acceptance and love of parents who have been unaware of their sexual orientation. Equally, it provides a basis for "coming out" to brothers and sisters and other members of the family. It is simply because of the unique position of parents that we concentrated on this particular aspect.

Conclusion

There are many pieces of advice in this booklet. Don't think that you have to remember them all. The points that are the most helpful to you will stand out and should enable you to approach one or both of your parents with confidence. Homosexuality is part of you, it is not all of you. It is not as important, for instance, as the type of person you are. However, it is impossible to become a full, happy human being if your sexuality is denied, particularly by those who love you. By helping your parents to see this last part of you, you will be helping to strengthen the bonds between you, and greatly raise everyone's chance of happiness.

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Registered charity no 1079918

