

For Friends and Parents of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youths

If you are a parent or friend of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual teen, you may be wondering how you can support him or her. This handout covers some basics about sexual orientation. Teens may have special issues because they are still learning about themselves. How friends and family respond to teens when they “come out” is very important. Your support can help shape the young person’s view of him or herself for the better. So it’s important to think carefully, seek more information, and prepare for a positive talk.

Straight or Gay, People are Diverse

In our society, a majority of people tend to express sexual and romantic feelings toward members of the opposite sex (heterosexual). Others are more attracted to members of the same sex (homosexual). Still others feel sexual and romantic attraction for members of both sexes (bisexual). Sexual orientation is almost as diverse as the various shades of people’s hair or eye color, things most people take for granted.

Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are coming out in greater numbers. But it takes time to gain acceptance. Many people don’t understand those who are not like them. Unfortunately, when people do not understand something, they tend to fear it. The term “homophobia” refers to this fear. Often, this fear shows itself as prejudice. The good news is that homophobia is being challenged today in the same way that other prejudices have been challenged in the past.

People now realize that someone’s sexual orientation has nothing to do with his or her health, well-being, or ability to be a good person. In fact, most medical authorities and the American Psychiatric Association now believe that homosexuality doesn’t necessarily affect a person’s physical or emotional health. It’s only a problem if the person *thinks* that it is. Doctors and psychiatrists note that this concern holds true for heterosexuals as well as homosexuals.

The Courage to “Come Out”

Our society puts pressure on people to fit in. So it can be very difficult for teens to discover that they are different. They have to figure out how to deal with their own feelings and orientation as well as what it may mean to their friends and family. It takes a lot of courage for a teen to decide to be open about being gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

When teens “come out” to someone, it means that they trust the person they have chosen to tell. The teen feels close to that person – or else he or she would not take the risk of being open and honest.

If a teen has confided in you, it’s now up to you to decide how to match the teen’s courage, commitment, trust, and love. Your support and understanding are crucial to your child or friend. Otherwise, they would not have told you. Lack of support and understanding can be devastating. Gay and lesbian youth who are shut out by their parents or friends tend to use drugs and alcohol more often than other teens. Tragically, they also attempt suicide more often. Parents, friends, and health care professionals can all play a part in supporting youth during their time of discovery.

If a teen confides in you, remember that...

- He or she is the same person as they were **before** you learned about their sexual preferences.
- It's important to listen before reacting – really try to understand what your child or friend is going through.
- You may have a range of responses. You may want to deny what is either by rejecting what you're hearing, by shutting down, or by not acknowledging the importance of what the teen is telling you.
- Your reaction to a teen's news can have a very positive or very negative effect. A neutral, compassionate response is best.
- If you feel you need help talking with your teen or expressing your feelings, many resources are available.

* * * * *

For additional health information you can trust:

- ❖ Visit the Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Web site, also known as PFLAG at pflag.org
- ❖ Visit your physician's home page at kp.org/mydoctor.
- ❖ Visit kp.org/youngadulthealth.
- ❖ Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

If you know a teen who is being hit, hurt or threatened by a partner, it can seriously affect their health. There is help. Call the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline at 1-866-331-9474 or connect to loveisrespect.org.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.