When Your Teen Comes Out: Dealing with the News that Your Teenager Is Gay or Bi-Sexual

Whether your child has come out to you, or you've found out unintentionally that your son or daughter is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, your child needs you now.

Though it may not be easy, comfortable, or fit with your values, remember that your son or daughter is still the same person you've cared for all these years. The life path you imagined for your child may be far different from reality. The truth, however, is that this is the case for lots of parents, whether there are conflicting notions about educational, work or partner choices. You might feel upset, confused or taken aback—these are all common reactions. But how you handle your response to the news can have a huge impact on how teenagers or young adults feel about themselves and their place in the world.

While no one knows exactly why it is that some people are gay and others are straight, it's generally accepted that nature plays a bigger role than nurture: your teen's sexual orientation is a part of who he or she is just like eye colour, body shape, or height. It's commonly estimated that roughly one in ten people is gay, lesbian or bisexual.

As difficult as this experience may be for you, coming out has probably taken a lot of courage for your teen or adult child. Now it's your turn to be brave—especially if you come from a religion or culture that considers homosexuality shameful or wrong. You will have some real soul-searching to do to muster the courage and compassion to support your son or daughter. Even if you don't agree with it, you son or daughter still needs to know you still love them.

Responding to the News

Remember who you're talking to. This is your son or daughter we're talking about here; the same person you've loved since birth. The teenager who loves soccer and hates turnips is still the same person. Nothing about your child has changed. You just know more about him or her.

Acknowledge the effort. Coming out to a parent can be one of the hardest things a person ever does. Let your child know you appreciate how difficult it was to tell you.

Be an attentive listener. Though you may be reeling from the news you've just received, do your best to lend an ear. Face your teen when they're speaking. Make eye contact when appropriate, nod and acknowledge what's said. Try not to interrupt, and ask questions for clarification when you need to.

Own your feelings. Express the feelings you have using "I" statements such as, "I am surprised," or "I kind of suspected." This approach lets your son or daughter know that what you're feeling is what you're feeling, and is not his or her responsibility. If you are unsure how you feel, say that. Letting your teen in on how you're feeling can do more to keep the dialogue open than saying nothing at all.

Take some time. It is important not to make harsh or rash decisions before you have taken the time you need to adjust to what you've heard. If you need space to digest the new information, take a few hours or days to review and come to terms with your own feelings about the situation.

Get the support YOU need. If facing the fact that your dream of a bride for your son or a husband for your daughter is too much to bear, or you feel like you could use a hand in coming to terms with this aspect of your teenager's identity, help is available. Consider joining a support group for parents of gays and lesbians. Talking to others who have been in your shoes can be a big help.

Keep your sense of humour. Especially if playful conversation or kind joking is an important part of your relationship with your child, use this to communicate the questions, concerns or feelings you have. Even if the news of your teen or adult child's sexual orientation feels heavy to you, the sun will come up tomorrow. Wherever possible, lighten up.

Things You Can Do to Support Your Teen or Adult Child

As we live in a culture that has yet to fully accept people who are gay, lesbian or bi-sexual, your son or daughter may need you more than ever. Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are many times more likely than their straight peers to experience verbal or physical abuse, loneliness, poor self-esteem, alcohol or drug abuse and depression. Help by:

Offering reassurance. Let your child know you love and respect him or her as much as ever—and keep reinforcing this fact. This is the same person you've known in your years together on the planet; you just have more knowledge about who they are. Let your son or daughter know you care and will always do what you can to support him or her.

Keep the lines of communication open. Encourage your child to talk about concerns and challenges. By maintaining a loving, supportive and open style of communication with your teen, you'll help pass on positive healthy attitude about sex, and protect your son or daughter from potentially harmful behaviour.

Be supportive. Make it clear that you are there for them, and wish to help with whatever challenges may arise. Make sure they have a support network amongst their friends, and/or from gay and lesbian-focused organizations in your area. If possible and appropriate, encourage your teen to join a support group.

Do your homework. Gather as much information as you can about being gay or bi-sexual, and the issues that relate to the sexual identity of your teen. As with anything they're interested in, the more you understand, the more you'll be able to relate.

Respect privacy. Your teenager needs to be able to trust you. Get permission from your teen before speaking with anyone who may not already be aware of his or her sexual orientation. Even when seeking support or counsel from your friends, family or members of your spiritual community, it's important to respect your teen's right to privacy.

Talk about sex. There's a lot more to know about human relationships and meaningful, safe sex than what's presented in the media. Though every parent has his or her own view on sex and sexuality, open, honest communication is key to keeping your teen or young adult child healthy in body, mind and spirit.

Remember, too, that other members of your family may need attention or support. Siblings or people outside the immediate family may have their own particular questions or adjustments to make. Be aware of any struggles they may be having and communicate as best you're able to help see them through difficulties.

Though you may not be entirely convinced of this right now, great things can come out of your child's decision to come out. Your relationship may grow and strengthen. Your teen has a better chance at a healthy, happy life than their peers suffering under the immense stress of living a secret life. The more you're able to respond to your teen in an open and supportive way, the closer you'll become: and the better you'll be at supporting your son or daughter during other challenges life throws their way.