



THE
SILVER LINING
FOUNDATION

MOM, DAD
I'M GAY!

A PARENT'S
GUIDE TO
UNDERSTANDING
& ACCEPTANCE

INTRODUCTION

How do you think you would react if your child came to you and said, “Mom, Dad, I think I’m gay”? Most parents would be horrified. They assume that their children are heterosexual.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there are many young people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) and there are those who question whether they are or not. No matter what their age, many people are afraid their parents will reject them if they come out.

How parents respond to their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender teen can have a tremendous impact on their adolescent’s current and future mental and physical health. Supportive reactions can help youth cope with the challenges of being an LGBT teen.

However, some parents react negatively to learning that they may have an LGBT daughter or son. In some cases, parents no longer allow their teens to remain in the home. Others are verbally and physically assaulted at the hands of their immediate relatives and/or are shipped off to live with other relatives. In other situations, stress and conflict at home can cause some youth to run away.

To be supportive, parents should talk openly with their teen about any problems or concerns and be watchful of behaviours that might indicate their child is a victim of bullying or violence or that their child may be victimizing others. If bullying, violence, or depression is suspected, parents should take immediate action, working with school personnel and other adults in the community.

This guide is designed to answer some common questions you may have and address some of the emotions you may be feeling in the wake of this discovery. It will take some time to absorb and process all of this new information. Just remember that you are not alone. According to some widely accepted statistics, roughly one in four families has an immediate family member who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Remember that you love your child, and to preserve-perhaps even strengthen-your relationship with him/her, you must try to move towards understanding and, eventually, acceptance.

STEP 1

You don't know what to say now but- "I love you" is all your child needs to hear before you react.



“Disappointed, devastated and dysfunctional would be the most accurate descriptors for me as following the announcement of my 18 year old, only son that he, in fact, was bisexual ... As his mother, I felt alone, terribly alone.”

~Mother of a gay son



Now that you know (or even think) your child is LGBT there are four things to remember:

Breathe:

The most important thing to do right now is BREATHE. Breathe deeply. Breathe to stay calm. Walk to another room if you must, but do not immediately react.

This is a process:

Responding to your child, learning about LGBT issues, sharing this information; all of these things take time. Know that it is okay to not be okay. Take the time you need to explore your feelings.

You are not alone:

Although it may not appear so, there are LGBT people everywhere, and there are families and allies who are supportive everywhere. You are not alone in this process.

Every reaction is different and valid

There is no one reaction to finding out your child is LGBT. Your response is important, but you should feel no shame no matter how you initially feel.

ALL YOUR CHILD NEEDS TO HEAR...

Like every journey, this one will have its ups and down, but know that many families before you have taken this same path and have arrived in a place they feel is better than where they started – closer to their children, closer to their families, and closer to an entire community that they never knew existed.

You may be asking yourself, “But why is my child gay?” There are a number of ways to answer this question. Some of the most important ones are here:

It is not your “fault”

Nothing you or anyone else did made your child LGBT. LGBT people come from all types of families – from very religious to atheist families, conservative to liberal families of every ethnicity and every economic background. There is no valid, peer-reviewed research that shows that any nurture factors contribute to a child’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

It is not in your genes

Many parents wonder if there is a genetic or biological basis to sexual orientation or gender identity.

There is research that points in several directions from genes, to birth order, to hormones during pregnancy, but nothing is conclusive.

Sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be changed

Every major medical and psychiatric association agrees that attempting to change one’s sexual orientation or gender identity does not work and may be detrimental to the individual.

STEP 2

Listen FIRST and then ask questions.

The dynamics of conversation are simple; we speak in turns. Of course, at this point, you are compelled to say everything on your mind but it is imperative to simmer down and LISTEN first. When speaking to your child about their sexuality, here are some simple questions that you can ask that are not going to negatively impact your child.

- **Affirmation of love** - Start by asking, "You know I love you, right?" - This is a way to open your child up to the conversation, and ensure that you both go into the conversation with the right mindset.
- **Gently approaching the topic** - Consider asking, "When did you know?" - This question allows you to begin exploring the process your child has gone through to arrive at this point.
- **Offer support** - "How can I help?" - You want to make it clear that you are on your child's side.
- **Protect your child**, - "Are you safe?" - Ensure that your child sees you as someone that they can talk to and that will always keep them safe.
- **Love your child**, - "Are you happy?" - Going hand in hand with ensuring your child is safe, you want to make sure that they feel loved once more. Nothing is more important than maintaining love and trust.

Throughout it all remember to stay calm. Breathe. Close your eyes. Breathe. This is your child. Your baby. Your everything. You are the super-power of support. You will do anything in your control to love your child. Now, listen!

STEP 3

Talk.

Before your thoughts explode into words, keep in mind that you are not about to negate everything your child has just said. The point of listening first was not to gather “beef” to cast blame or punishment on your LGBT child.

Here are some goodways starts to your conversation:



“I am surprised but...”

“I appreciate that you have chosen to share how you feel.”

“Your feelings are important and valuable.”

“I understand. I am here.”



As mentioned previously, it is extremely important that the child feels loved, protected and understood.

Some safe topics to cover are:

Let your child know that you are still not fully comfortable, but that you are willing to undertake the necessary steps to being supportive.

Leave out your misconceptions. Parents who offload their preconceived notions about LGBT people are typically motivated by the ideology of helping their children and protecting them from harm. In reality, they are negatively affecting the health and well-being of their LGBT child, and hindering further, open communication.

STEP 4

Don't Assume.

Even after discussion (listening and talking), some of you may still walk away with the assumption that it is just a phase and as soon as it ends, your child will be back to “normal.”

It is important to acknowledge your child's identity because being LGBT is not a phase.

While some people may experiment, someone who has reached the point of telling their parent(s) that he or she is LGBT is usually not going through a phase. Generally, he or she has given great thought to understanding and acknowledging his or her sexual orientation and gender identity.

This is a journey and part of the journey is getting to know your child at a deeper level.

“Years have passed and my parents never directly brought it up again. Just the occasional comment to know what I'm doing, and they hope I find the right girl, and they want grandchildren”

- Luke, on “Coming out”.

Families respond to their LGBT child by trying in a variety of ways to prevent their children from eliciting certain behaviours.

This may include prevention from learning about their LGBT identity, participation in support groups or exclusion from family gatherings.

Families who respond in this way do so without understanding how it affects the child. To you, this is new. To your child this is NORMAL.

“For me, it was my son saying to me, ‘Dad, I'm the same person I was before’. Now it's been almost a year now, and I realized even more that really nothing has changed in his life. It was my perception of him that changed.”

- Father of a gay son..

STEP 5

Read, read, read!

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, sexuality, sexual orientation, self-esteem...

What does it all mean? Perhaps you have heard these words before, or even used it. Perhaps this is the first time you are coming across these words and are very confused. This is normal, dear parent/guardian. This confusion is also a good motivator. You should be confused, and explore it.

One of the best ways to fully become a supportive parent is to know as much as you can about your child's situation. One of the best ways to do this is by **READING**.

Rejecting families become less rejecting over time, and access to accurate information is a critical factor in helping parents, families and guardians learn to support their LGBT children.

To kick start your search for information, here's a glossary of terms that you may find useful:

Gay:

The adjective used to describe people whose enduring emotional, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attractions are to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, lesbian is often a preferred term for women. Avoid identifying gay people as "homosexuals" – see homosexual.

Gender Expression:

A person's way of showing their gender identity to others through means such as dress and/or manner.

Gender Identity:

One's internal, personal sense of being a man, a woman, or gender non conforming. For transgender and gender non-conforming people, their birth-assigned sex and their own internal sense of gender identity do not match.

Gender Non-Conforming:

Gender non-conforming: A person who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender based expectations of society.

LGBT:

An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender which refers to these individuals collectively. It is sometimes stated as GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). Occasionally, the acronym is stated as LGBTQA to include allies – straight and supportive individuals. The acronym sometimes includes Q for queer or questioning

Homosexual:

Someone who is emotionally, romantically, psychically and/ or spiritually attracted to people of their same sex. It is an outdated clinical term which may be considered derogatory and offensive by many gay people.

Replace it with “gay” or “lesbian” to refer to people who are attracted to individuals of the same sex.

Lesbian:

A woman who's enduring emotional, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction is to other women. Avoid identifying lesbians as homosexuals, which is often seen as a derogatory term.

Queer:

Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for gay, queer currently is used by some LGBTs — particularly among younger people — to describe themselves and/or their community.

Some value the term for its defiance, some like it because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and others find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities.

Many within the LGBT community continue to dislike the term and find it offensive. This word should be avoided unless quoting someone who self-identifies that way.

Sexual Orientation:

Permanent emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people.

Straight individuals experience these feelings primarily for people of the opposite sex.

Gay or lesbian individuals experience these feelings primarily for people of the same sex.

Bi individuals experience these feelings for people of both sexes.

Transgender:

A term describing the state of a person's gender identity which does not necessarily match his/her assigned sex at birth.

Other words commonly used are female to male (FTM), male to female (MTF), and gender queer.

Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity.

STEP 6

Trust Help: You need it!

There is a common misconception on our beautiful twin island that there are no facilities, or just expensive ones, that counsel or help.

In this time, with your growing understanding of your LGBT child, it is essential to equip yourself with the contract of a professional, a religious leader or a trusted friend.

Perhaps the most advisable of the three is the professional; a third party observer with no preconceptions about you, your child or your situation.

You may feel compelled to vote against trusting help, since you are still coming to terms with the situation yourself and may not feel comfortable speaking openly.

However, you are a parent before you are a person. The health and well-being of your child is dependent on you. This may also be beneficial for your child as it is for you, if not more.

Negative outcomes for many LGBT youth, including suicide, homelessness, and placement in foster care or juvenile facilities can be prevented or reduced, if parents can turn to a knowledgeable source of guidance for support.

Here is a directory of organizations and help centres in Trinidad & Tobago that are available for your use:

Resources	Addresses	Telephone
National Family Services	ABMA Building, St. Vincent St, Port of Spain	624-5475 / 625-0439 (fax)
T & T Innovative Parenting Support	20 Devenish St, Arima.	664-1520 / 664-2675
Childline		800-4321 / 624-0402 / 658-5110 / 498-4394 / 772-0171 / 466-6696 / 475-9425 / 774-2395

Resources	Addresses	Telephone
Marabella Family Crisis	62 Union Park, Marbella	658-5110 / 498-4394 / 772-0171
Child Welfare League	Belmont Cir Rd, Port of Spain	623-6301
Family Planning Association	Corner Oxford & Charlotte St, Port of Spain	623-4764 / 627-6732
Head Office	69 Independence Square, Port of Spain	623-6369 / 624-0816
North Main Centre	Beacon Building, 78 Independence Square, Port Of Spain	623-7242
Central Main Centre	19 Southern Main Rd, Cunupia	672-2117 / 672-1258
South West Main Centre	63 & 63 A Main Rd, Point Fortin	638-8133 / 638-6454

Mediation Centres

Resources	Addresses	Telephone
Head Office	69 Independence Square, Port of Spain	623-6369 / 624-0816
North Main Centre	Beacon Building, 78 Independence Square, Port of Spain	623-7242
Central Main Centre	69 Independence Square, Port of Spain	623-6369 / 624-0816
North Main Centre	19 Southern Main Road, Cunupia	672-2117 / 672-1258
South West Main Centre	63 & 63A Main Road, Point Fortin	638-8133 / 638-6454

STEP 7

The reality of your child's life.

Of utmost importance, as a concerned and supportive parent, is to understand the blunt reality of your LGBT child: they are/have been bullied, victimized or discriminated against in some form or fashion.

So what happens when you discover that your special someone is being attacked? Before going into full on panic and anger, it is imperative to know and observe some signs which will alert you to the possibility that your child is being bullied:

1. Missing or damaged belongings.
2. Clothing damaged, dirty or unkempt
3. Reluctance to attend school or participate in activities.
4. A drop in academic performance.
5. Mood swings, change in sleeping patterns or any other unexplained changes in behaviour.
6. An increases in fear, anxiety or a sense of vigilance.

If there is one thing you should remember, it is that you must LISTEN; give your child the freedom to fully explain. As you recall in Step 1, you need to take a deep breath, and then another. If need be, take a third, fourth, fifth and a sixth!

Once you are calm, it is time to let go of all misconceptions about the situation at hand.

Do not look for someone to blame for the situation; do not send the impression that your child needs to retaliate against someone; and do not send the idea that your child needs to be the victim of bullying.

Work on talking calmly to your child and ensuring that you allow them the freedom to express both their story and why they think the other person is acting the way that they are. This step will allow them to empathize and understand that the person bullying them is still a person.

Talk and Ask Questions:

But do not send the message that retaliation is a possibility. Ensure that you acknowledge and understand the reason for their behaviour, even if it was keeping the incidents from you. Vocalize the fact that you understand how difficult it must be for them.

Remember to: use open ended questions (explain); do not cast blame or attack your child and make it clear that bullying is unacceptable.

At this point, you may be tempted to go directly to the bully or the bully's parents to rectify the situation. It is important that you do not address the parents or the bully in an aggressive or hostile manner. If you choose to address the situation for the first time, be sure to speak in a calm, respectful manner to the parents and child.

Always be aware of your child's behaviour and what you display to them.

Keep in mind that bullying is neither normal nor positive, and you should always dissuade it. If the situation escalates, contract a professional or the school immediately.

Note: No resource can be fully applicable to each family. Each experience is as unique as the persons involved. But there are similar threads.

The one common denominator is that we all love our children. They are as precious to us as they were before they confided their sexual orientation to us, and we know that they deserve our love and support.

We encourage you to continue learning, reading and understanding and reaching out to us or any of the resources provided in this booklet for assistance.

THE SILVER LINING FOUNDATION

Officially registered as a non-profit organisation with the Ministry of Legal Affairs, Trinidad and Tobago on October 10th, 2013.

The Silver Lining Foundation is a youth led Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) acting to serve the interests of the youths of Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean region, as a whole. The organization primarily acts as a guardian body for marginalized youths seeking to prevent suicide and discrimination. The focus, while on bullying and discrimination, is centred on youth with regards to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues and those of Gender Identity & Expression.

The foundation is a youth-led response to the tragic suicide of a 16 year old high school student. He found it impossible to deal with the difficulties arising from his sexuality and in September of 2011, he took his own life. Young adults from across Trinidad & Tobago came together, in February of 2012, inspired to prevent future tragedies so his death wouldn't be in vain. It was this monumental move that led to the inception of The Silver Lining Foundation.

This organisation concurrently set out to deal with issues of youth sexuality, suicide and bullying prevention. Special emphasis has been placed on the area of addressing bullying and violence within the framework of sexual diversity due to the lack of attention it receives.

The Silver Lining Foundation is guided by a framework of: Support, Education & Advocacy (S.E.A). It is a three pronged approach to the idea of youth empowerment and by acting on these three avenues, we can fully encourage the youth of our nation towards a better and brighter future and hopefully, ensure them a significantly better life.

Through the Pillar of Support, we aim to provide young persons in need, with a friend or in more serious cases, a professional, along with the means of support that they may not have.

Through the Pillar of Education, we move to dispel the host of myths and misconceptions that surround LGBTQ persons.

Through the Pillar of Advocacy, we hope to contribute to the development of national policy that will protect kids from bullying and discrimination.

CONNECT WITH US



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