

For Parents,  
Guardians  
and  
Family Members  
of Gay,  
Lesbian,  
Bisexual,  
Two-Spirit,  
Transgender,  
Intersex  
or Questioning  
Youth

Composed by Mrs. Carolyn Wagner  
with input from many parents who have known and experienced the  
challenges and blessings of raising a child whose sexual orientation  
and/or gender identity is different from their parents.



## Introduction

I wrote this pamphlet in an attempt to assist parents, guardians and other family members coping with the news or suspicion that a child (under the age of 18) is gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirit, transgender or questioning. My husband and I experienced what you are now feeling when our son told us he was gay at the age of thirteen. At that time no such pamphlet existed nor did we know of the existence of PFLAG.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to first assure you that you are not alone, and to let you know that there are many resources available for you and your child. I have sought input from other parents as well as professionals from various fields so as to provide you with the most accurate information currently available. I have included a list of definitions and some of resources at the end of this pamphlet.

*Carolyn Wagner*

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## For Parents, Guardians and Family Members of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Two-Spirit, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning Youth

If you are a parent/guardian and reading this, you have either been told by your child or by others, or you suspect your child is glbtq (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning his sexual orientation or gender identity). As parents and family members who have been in your shoes, we strongly recommend that you seek the support of other parents of glbtq youth through PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) as well as utilize the resources listed at the back of this pamphlet.

As you read, please keep your heart and mind open. You have taken the first step by reading this. Remember that the child you now know or suspect is glbtq is the same child he or she was before you had this knowledge. This is not something your child is "doing to you," but just is. It may help you to think back to your own feelings of sexual attraction or gender identity and recognize that it is highly probable that your sexual orientation and/or gender identity was not a conscious choice for you as it is not for your child.\* Your glbtq child is probably much more nervous and frightened than you are right now. How your glbtq child will adjust to adult life, their self esteem, emotional and physical well-being is dependent on your words and actions for the next few years.

This is not to suggest that they be treated differently than their heterosexual siblings, but equally. Just as we would not differentiate regarding discipline, assign household chores, homework time, social skill training and so forth due to the fact that one may complain more than the other, neither should we treat our glbtq children any differently. They need the stability of being treated no differently by their parents and family members.

What they will need is guidance, advocacy and above all your unconditional love. Although we will treat them equally, the outside world will not. You must prepare and educate yourself and your child for these obstacles but not allow them to be used as excuses or a crutch.

## What you are feeling and what you must do

Parents/guardians really do know their children in some respects better than others ever will. We see them every day - at their best and their worst. We can sense when they are sad or mischievous, likewise we also notice what their favorite toys and games are, favorite choice of clothes, hairstyles and so forth. Here I will need to make some distinctions for you so you can better understand your own fears and concerns.

If your child is of pre-school or elementary age and the reason you are reading this is your concern that your son prefers female identified clothes or toys, or your daughter is acting in a "tomboyish" manner and you are worried that there is something terribly wrong and are seeking to "correct the wrong." First thing you must do is to RELAX. Neither you nor your child is doing anything wrong. Allow your child their comfort level of expressing themselves honestly. Many effeminate boys and tomboy girls grow up as heterosexual adults and identify with their birth gender. There are those children who are, however, expressing their internal feelings through their choice of clothes, playmates, toys and so forth. Even so, much more harm can be done if you attempt to force the socially acceptable gender roles on your child. Some of these children will grow up to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or two-spirit and an even smaller percentage will identify with the gender that is opposite to their birth gender and are known by the term transgender or transsexual. A small percentage of infants are born as intersex, previously known as hermaphrodite. These children are then assigned gender by a pediatric surgeon and the vast majority are assigned the female gender. This can be problematic as well since

many of these children, upon entering puberty or earlier, may identify with the opposite gender than that which was assigned.

There are resources given at the end of this pamphlet that will have much more information regarding intersex children and their families.

Regardless of whether your child identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirit or transgender, it does not mean that the mother was too assertive or that the father was absent from the home. None of these old stereotypes have ever been proven, in fact they have not been anywhere near the norm for the families from which glbt adults come. It does not reflect on your parenting skills. If you are feeling guilt it is because we were raised in a world where such "things" were frowned upon.

If you are the parent/guardian of an adolescent whom you suspect or know is glbt you are in usually one of two places. This news has either come as a complete surprise or you have suspected as much for some time. How you should handle this information is dependent on how you learned. Did this come to you because of a crisis in your child's life; are there problems at his school? Is he/she depressed and you are worried about your child's potential for suicide or running away? If you feel that your child is in a crisis situation you must first ensure that he/she is in a safe environment and call and utilize as many resources as you need to assist you in helping your child be safe. Many of us as parents have been in your shoes. We encourage and want you to contact us for help. We (PFLAG members) ALWAYS maintain confidentiality about those people who attend meetings and/or seek our help or support privately.

Regardless of the method by which you learned your child is glbtq, you are encountering your own troublesome emotions. I am going to list some of these and remind you that most parents have experienced one or all of these and we also know that in time and with support and education most of your fears and concerns will be greatly diminished or disappear entirely. You may be feeling guilt, anger, shame, remorse for some odd thing you may have said or done that your child probably has no memory of, and fear. Fear is a big one. You fear what others will think of you as a parent, fear of losing

friends, and fear the alienation of your church family or real family members. Last but certainly not least, your fear for the well being of your child. You have read or heard the news reports of glbt people, even teenagers, being beaten to death just for being glbt. You remember the news from the 1980's regarding the "gay virus" we now know as HIV/AIDS.

First I will address your fear for you child's well being. The estimated number of glbt people who are beaten or murdered in an anti-glbt attack is small in proportion to the estimated number of glbt people, and you can educate yourself and your child on how to be safe.

HIV/AIDS is an autoimmune virus that is spread through sexual contact or via blood or body secretions. It is not a glbt disease. Our heterosexual or straight children are just as susceptible to this or any other sexually transmitted disease. Glbt people are no more prone to diseases than non-glbt people, period. The solution to this is education, safe sex education is just as important for our glbt youth as straight youth.

GUILT is a very powerful emotion and one that a parent will rarely deny having felt when learning that they have a glbt child. The best advice I or other parents can give you is to work on reviewing why you feel guilty. I felt this emotion as well as the one of shame, and then I learned that this was directly related to the current and historical stigma placed on people who are glbt. Most of us have a mental picture of what defines a glbt person, and I, like most heterosexual adults, had an image that was very far from the truth. In time guilt and shame will evaporate for most parents/guardians through education and support, and in its place will come an incredible pride of your glbt child. There are a few parents who are never able to let go of the stigma and prevailing myths regarding glbt people. Unfortunately these are the parents who we know to have emotionally or physically abused and/or kicked their underage glbtq children from their homes.

If you are angry that is probably related to being confronted with a situation you feel inept to cope with, your lack of experience and factual knowledge of what it means to be glbt. Anger may also come

from the need for blame to be placed somewhere, even if it is on yourself - and this is unnecessary and can only create more harm for yourself, your child and family. No one has done anything wrong or bad to be blamed for.

As a parent/guardian of an underage (18) glbtq youth, you are now among a growing and visible family model. In 1999 the average age of glbtq youth who are coming out is 13. The coming-out age has dropped dramatically in the past decade due to many factors. In the past the majority of parents who discovered they had a glbtq child did not learn this till their child had left the home. Some parents did not discover the truth till their child was even "middle aged." The author of this pamphlet and the parents/family members who contributed to the information in this pamphlet, learned of their child's sexual orientation or gender identity during the previous decade when their child was an adolescent or younger. Therefore our best advice to you is to seek the support of other parents, know that we have experienced just about every emotion possible, and that we have made mistakes as well.

## *Siblings, Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, other Family Members and Friends*

What if anything do you tell them and if so when?

The first thing you must understand and accept in relation to discussing your child's sexual orientation or gender identity with anyone is that this should always be done with your child's permission and with their input.

Siblings: This will depend on the age of the sibling and the desires of your glbt child. If the sibling is close to the age of your glbt child, the odds are pretty good that they already suspect or know, and if so that is all the more reason to have a family discussion so that this sibling will know that the parents know and provide for this sibling age appropriate factual information for their education as well. Remember, siblings will also need the support and education that parents require.

As parents or guardians, we almost immediately become aware of our own use of words and actions regarding glbt people. Did we come home to share a "gay joke" with our spouse in front of our children? Did we make negative comments when the TV show "Ellen" was in the news so much or when there was a news item about AIDS? These are just examples, but keep in mind that our children will have interpreted what we have said as our attitudes and usually will assimilate the same attitudes. It will be important to initiate positive conversations regarding diversity with all of your children. It is also equally important to challenge your children when they make negative statements about others who are different, including race, religion, handicap, etc. All of these actions will assist your glbtq child as well as your other children to develop positive self-esteem.

For siblings who are elementary age you can begin the process of informing them by first educating them that there are people who are sometimes attracted to other people of the same gender or that some people have always felt that they are a girl even though they were born with a boy's body. There are some excellent books available for elementary age children with photos and brief stories of different types of families, including families that are bi-racial, families with two daddies or two mommies and families with one or more children who are glbt. The foundation you set now will make a big difference in how well your children interact with each other and cope as adults.

Grandparents: The decision as to whether to tell the grandparents must be a family decision and only the nuclear family can decide if this should or should not be done. Grandparents and their affection for grandchildren can be a very special bond, and you should consider the impact a grandparent's possible alienation of affection could have on your glbt child and siblings. This may be something your family decides to wait to do till the child has become an adult who can adjust better if the response is negative.

PFLAG has many grandparents involved who have actually handled the news of a glbt grandchild better than the parents, and a few of the grandparents were the first to know. Each family is different. It can help to discuss this with other families who have been

through this dilemma and to provide factual reading material and resources to the grandparents as well. Most books and reading material for parents is equally suitable for grandparents.

Family members outside of the nuclear family such as aunts, uncles and cousins, usually will not have the same impact if they respond negatively but each family is different. Most children have a favorite aunt or uncle, or a cousin that they have spent a great deal of time with and respect. Overall, most families have found that it is much healthier to "come out of the closet" and allow this to be an educational experience for everyone. It can certainly make family gatherings less stressful for the glbtq child, and your nuclear family if you don't have to be careful when "Aunt Clara" starts to question if "Johnny" is dating "Judy." Keep in mind too that our children have an incredible talent for telling all of the truth at the times when we felt less was more.

Siblings, especially the younger ones, will eventually drop the ball when you least expect it. It is better to inform these family members and friends on your terms and when you are prepared.

Remember that how you present the news to family and friends that your child is glbt can impact not only how those receiving the news will respond but also how your glbt child will feel about themselves.

**School:**  
What glbtq children need from parents  
and how we can advocate  
to ensure a safe and hostile-free  
learning environment

A few school districts and even a state (Mass.) have conducted surveys on how often students and teachers hear anti-gay remarks and threats as well as asking students how they personally feel about glbt people and how they behave toward glbt peers. The results are not only staggering but a real cause for concern to glbt students and their families as well as our educators.

All of your children who are attending school, regardless of where you live, from elementary school through college, have heard these negative messages at school. Your glbt child and siblings are greatly impacted by this sort of teasing and name calling regardless if it is targeted toward him/her.

The one thing you cannot afford to do is nothing, even if your child is not a target for this type of harassment or he or she is not out at school. It will have a very negative impact on their self-image and needs to be addressed. If your child is being targeted due to his/her real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity you may live in one of the few states that has laws specifically forbidding this behavior, or the school district may have such a policy. All school districts have anti-harassment policies and you can require that they enforce such a policy as most of these policies do not specify a minority or purpose for the harassment. The organizations listed in the back of this pamphlet can inform you if your state has such a law and may know if your school district or city does or does not. Many times the harassment is sexual and that is covered by a federal law, title IX. All schools who receive federal funds must comply with title IX regardless of the student's sexual orientation or gender identity. Please feel free to contact PFLAG for more detailed information regarding title IX and how it can be used to ensure a safer school environment.

The first thing for you to do is to obtain and read your schools districts various policies on parental complaints, student complaints, discipline, harassment, sexual harassment and so forth.

This is going to be the time for you to reach out for support from others such as PFLAG. Many of us have been down this path and are very willing to guide you. Utilize the resources listed under schools at the back of this pamphlet. There are many organizations with experience in assisting parents and students seeking a safe learning environment — use them.

I was a parent who ended up having to address our school board several times, and I spent more times in the office of teachers, principals and other administration officials than I would like to count. At times I was nervous, angry, frustrated and bewildered.

This can be a stressful time for the entire family, what you are feeling is natural, so you should never be hesitant to call for support or assistance from other parents, we want you to.

Many glbtq children are not completely honest with their parents/guardians because they do not want them to worry or because they want you to think they can handle whatever is "dished out." It is important for you to know what is going on at school - even the good things.

I recommend that you meet with your child's teachers on a regular and frequent basis to be sure they know you are asking questions and care about his/her learning environment as well as the educational content being provided. Some of us who have had to confront the issues of in-school harassment also found it helpful to visit with our children's friends and your other children who attend the same school may be more willingly than their sibling to tell you if there are problems.

## *Community, including religious/spiritual homes*

For most of us our religious/spiritual training and upbringing are deeply rooted in who we are. A person's choice of religion is a very personal decision. It is very likely that some of your own personal feelings and/or perceptions of glbt people are based on your religious community's teachings or position regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

Many glbt people and their families have left their churches because it was too painful to abide with their teaching and position on glbt children and adults. They may seek and find religious homes that are accepting of glbt people and their families, and as a result they can find many new friends and a level of spirituality they never knew previously.

PFLAG members are just as diverse in their religious beliefs as our nation. PFLAG members sometimes choose to remain in their faith community and work to educate these communities from within. It will be important for you, as parents/guardians of underage children,

to remember that the negative statements your child will be exposed to in some religious communities can have a negative impact on the acceptance of your glbt child within your family as well as your glbt child's own self image.

Some communities are more accepting than others. You know your neighborhood and/or community better than anyone and can best decide how to respond. If you live in a small community and your child is out at school, odds will be good that eventually many people in your community will know. You will be establishing a role model for how families respond when they have a family member who is different from the majority. Most parents have found few problems and good support from neighbors, and developed new and closer friendships in this way.

A warning - a ministry that says that glbt children can be changed can be dangerous for many reasons. It is based on the belief that through prayer, reparative therapy, and/or aversive therapy one can be trained to act opposite of how they feel inside. Most nationally recognized professional mental health, educational and social work associations have issued statements opposing this treatment directly due to the harm it can render on glbt children and adults. PFLAG has specific materials that go into more depth on this issue as well as copies of some of these professional association statements. Please contact PFLAG if you wish to receive these materials and we will be sure you obtain them.

## Definitions

**Bisexual:** A person who is romantically/physically attracted to people of both genders.

**Coming out:** Public acknowledgement of a person's own sexual orientation or gender identity.

**GLBTQ:** A common abbreviation for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning.

**Gay:** A male who is romantically/physically attracted to other males. Also used commonly in place of "homosexual" to include lesbians, bisexual and transgender persons.

**Gay-dar:** The ability of some GLBTQ people to recognize one another; combined from "gay" and "radar."

**Gender identity:** A person's self-perception as being male or female.

**Heterosexism:** Bias toward heterosexuality.

**Heterosexual:** A person who is romantically/physically attracted to people of the opposite gender.

**Homophobia:** Literally this term means the fear of - but in contemporary language it means bias against - gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

**Homosexual:** A person who is romantically/physically attracted to people of his or her own gender.

**Intersex:** A person who is born with genitals or chromosomes that are not clearly male or female.

**Lesbian:** A female who is romantically/physically attracted to other females.

**Out or "out of the closet":** to be openly LGBTQ. The closet is a state of being secretive about one's sexual orientation. Some parents/family members live in closets too, not being open when they have permission to be because of their own discomfort or fear.

**Outing:** disclosing someone's sexual orientation to another person without consent.

**Pink triangle:** A symbol of GLBT pride now, originally used during World War II by the Nazis who forced gay people to wear them in order to identify them for persecution.

**Queer:** a once derogatory term for homosexuals that has been reclaimed by many GLBTQ people as a proud name for themselves. Queer includes both gender and sexual orientation, so it is more inclusive than "gay" or "lesbian" but some people are not comfortable with it because of its historical connection as a hateful term.

**Questioning:** A person who is not sure what their sexual orientation or gender identity is.

**Rainbow flag:** A flag of six equal horizontal stripes (red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple) that symbolizes the diversity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

**Sexual orientation:** A person's romantic/physical attraction to the same or the opposite gender.

**Significant Other or Partner:** A person with whom one has a romantic or committed relationship.

**Straight:** Another term for heterosexual.

**Transgender:** A person whose appearance, personal characteristics or behaviors are gender role non-conforming.

**Two-Spirit:** A third gender, not exclusively male or female, in Native American cultures. Two-Spirits are a part of many creation myths and stories. They hold a special spiritual status. Now Two-Spirit is also a generic Native American term for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

**Note** — It is important to be aware that certain commonly used words and phrases may unintentionally offend. Two examples are "**gay lifestyle**" (this term trivializes. What would a "straight lifestyle" be?) and "**sexual preference**" (implies choice. Use "sexual orientation" instead.) For more information on this subject, see the *GLAAD Media Reference Guide* at: <http://www.glaad.org/media/guide/index.php> and Safe Schools Coalition's *Glossary* at: <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/glossary.pdf> (PDF format)

### *Some resources for you, your child + family members*

**Bisexual Resource Center** — P.O. Box 1026; Boston, MA 02117-1026  
phone: (617) 424-9595; email: [brc@biresource.org](mailto:brc@biresource.org);  
website: <http://www.biresource.org>

**COLAGE** — 3543 18th ST #1; San Francisco, CA 94110  
phone: (415) 861-KIDS (5437); fax: (415) 255-8345  
email: [colage@colage.org](mailto:colage@colage.org); website: <http://www.colage.org>

**FUAH** (Families United Against Hate) — created by and for families and survivors of hate motivated violence, in collaboration with other individuals and organizations. website: <http://www.fuah.org>

**GenderPAC** (The Gender Public Advocacy Coalition) —  
1638 R Street, NW, Suite 100; Washington, DC 20009-6446  
phone: (202)462-6610; fax: (202)462-6744  
email: [gpac@gpac.org](mailto:gpac@gpac.org); website: <http://www.gpac.org>

**GLAAD** (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) —  
248 West 35th Street, 8th Floor; New York, NY 10001  
phone: (800) GAY-MEDIA or (212) 629-3322; fax: (212) 629-3225  
email: [glaad@glaad.org](mailto:glaad@glaad.org); website: <http://www.glaad.org>

**GLSEN** (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) —  
121 West 27th Street, Suite 804; New York, New York 10001-6207  
phone: (212) 727-0135; fax: (212) 727-0254; email: [glsen@glsen.org](mailto:glsen@glsen.org);  
website: <http://www.glsen.org>

**Intersex Society of North America** —  
PO Box 301; Petaluma CA 94953  
Phone: (707) 283-0036; fax: (707) 283-0030;  
email: [info@isna.org](mailto:info@isna.org); website: <http://www.isna.org>

**Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc.** —  
120 Wall Street, Suite 1500; New York, NY 10005-3904  
phone: 212-809-8585; fax: 212-809-0055  
email: [legalhelpdesk@lambdalegal.org](mailto:legalhelpdesk@lambdalegal.org);  
website: <http://www.lambdalegal.org>

**National Center for Lesbian Rights** —  
870 Market Street, Suite 570, San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 392-6257, fax: (415) 392-8442; email: [info@nclrights.org](mailto:info@nclrights.org);  
website: <http://www.nclrights.org>

**NGLTF/Task Force** (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) —  
1700 Kalorama Road NW . Washington, DC 20009-2624  
phone: (202) 332-6483, fax: (202) 332-0207, tty: (202) 332-6219  
email: [info@TheTaskForce.org](mailto:info@TheTaskForce.org); website: <http://thetaskforce.org/>

**The National Youth Advocacy Coalition** (NYAC) —  
1638 R Street NW, Suite 300; Washington DC, 20009  
phone: (202) 319-7596, fax: (202) 319-7365  
email: [nyac@nyacyouth.org](mailto:nyac@nyacyouth.org); website: <http://www.nyacyouth.org>

**PFLAG** (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) —  
1726 M Street, NW Suite 400; Washington, DC 20036  
phone: (202) 467-8180; fax: (202) 467-8194  
email: [info@pflag.org](mailto:info@pflag.org); website: <http://www.pflag.org>



**PFLAG's Families of Color Network** (FOCN) — facilitates PFLAG activists of color to work together on local and national levels to fight homophobia, striving to promote cross-culture synergism & to make ethnic communities safe for GLBTs through education. Specific information on African American; Asian-American/API; Arab-American/Muslim; Latino; and Native American communities, as well as news stories; and cross-cultural links.  
website: <http://community.pflag.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?id=462&srcid=212>



**The Safe Schools Coalition (SSC)** — an international public-private partnership helping schools become safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. email: [questions@safeschoolscoalition.org](mailto:questions@safeschoolscoalition.org)  
website: <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org>

**TransYouth Family Allies (TYFA)** — parents, family, friends and caring adults dedicated to educating and raising public awareness about the medical and cultural challenges faced by children with gender variant and gender questioning identities and the families who love them. Whenever children are able to express or articulate their gender identity, however young, they have the right to a caring atmosphere supporting that identity.  
website: <http://www.imatyfa.org>

**Youth Guardian Services (YGS)** — peer run safe email support listservs YOUTH discussion and support lists for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth between the ages 13-17, 17-21, or 21-25; the STR8 list for straight and questioning youth aged 25 or younger who have friends or family members who are glbtq; and The LivingColor List is a discussion and support list for glbtq youth between the ages of 13 and 25 who are affected by eating disorders and/or eating issues.  
website: <http://www.youth-guard.org>



**Note** — There are **more resources** on Gabi Clayton's website at:  
<http://www.gabiclayton.com/gcresources.htm>