Information for Parents, Families and
Friends of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or
Trans* people,
Someone You Love

A letter from PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

This book has been written to assist parents, families and friends of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans* and intersex people (GLBTI) with the sometimes difficult process of coming to terms with the changes that are taking place in the lives of the children whom they love.

It is important to remember that they are still the same children that you loved yesterday, before you learned something new about them. Most people have strong feelings about their children’s sexuality and gender. Many parents go through a process similar to grief.

For the first few weeks you may find yourself crying a lot, and not knowing where to turn for help. You may feel that you are the only person who has a GLBTI child. But you are not alone, and there are organisations that can help you through these difficult times. These include, PFLAG, The Freedom Centre, The WA AIDS Council and the Gay and Lesbian Community Service.

PFLAG has a voluntary Helpline that is staffed every day. We have a small library of books on GLBTI issues. We meet on the second Saturday of each month at Women’s Health Care House, at 1.30pm. Please feel free to contact us, use the library or attend our meetings.

As a result of the 2003 changes to the legislation in this state, more children are coming out to their parents, hence more parents are seeking support and information. You will always be welcome at our groups.

Giz Watson and Dianne Guise were a great support to us during the Parliamentary debates on the proposed changes to legislation.

We hope that reading this book will be a positive move for you towards developing a deeper understanding and support for your child or loved one.

PFLAG WA Inc.
www.pflagwa.org.au
Helpline (08) 9228 1005

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Common Questions about GLBTI People

How many GLBTI people are there?
The number of young people who are attracted to people of the same gender is generally believed to be approximately about 10% of the population. Estimates vary depending on the comfort levels of people being surveyed. That works out to be one person in every extended family. Sexual and romantic relations between people of the same gender have been found in every known culture and religion in society. It happens in every social, economic, racial, and religious group. People who feel this way are in all professions; they are our friends, our families and our colleagues. We all know a number of GLBTI people, but we may not be aware of it.

What Causes Someone to be gay, lesbian, trans* or bisexual?
The answer to "what causes someone to be GLBTI is probably the same as the answer to "what causes someone to be heterosexual"? The research so far has highlighted only one thing – we do NOT know what causes anyone’s sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian, trans* and bisexual people have been raised in all kinds of homes, as have heterosexual people. What is clear is that this is a complex, multi-faceted issue.

Is Homosexuality natural?
Being GLBTI is as natural and as healthy as being heterosexual. For the approximately 200,000 people in Australia who are GLBTI, it is a natural part of who they are, and for them to be heterosexual would be unnatural. The vast majority of psychologists and psychiatrists consider it unethical to try to change a person’s sexual orientation.

Can you identify GLBTI people by the way they behave and dress?
GLBTI look and act so much like everyone else that most people assume they are heterosexual.

Gay, lesbian, trans* and bisexual people, like all people, behave in all kinds of ways. Stereotypes and assumptions arise out of ignorance and prejudice. Sometimes a stereotype about a group doesn’t fit anyone in that group, sometimes it fits a few people, sometimes more. But a stereotype never fits everyone in any group. Physical appearance and mannerisms have nothing to do with a person’s sexuality, they are part of their personality.

Do GLBTI people have more sexual partners than heterosexual people?
GLBTI share the same amount of interest in sexual activity as heterosexual people, neither more nor less. Just like the heterosexual community, the GLBTI community has a diverse range of lifestyles and relationships. Maintaining relationships is often more difficult for same gender couples, as society does not provide any of the supports for these relationships that it provides to heterosexual couples. No social, legal, or religious support is provided and often no family support. With the high rates of divorce amongst heterosexual marriages, it’s probably amazing that so many same gender couples do stay together.

Do lesbians really want to be men and gay men really want to be women?
The very nature of same sex relationships provides an impetus away from rigid gender roles and stereotypes. However this has nothing to do with wanting to be the opposite gender. Trans* people often do not identify with the sex or gender they were born with. This has to do with the feeling of not being born into the right physical body. Confusion about one’s gender is a very real issue, but does not necessarily have anything to do with sexuality or sexual orientation. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual doesn’t mean someone is trans*, and being trans* doesn’t mean someone is gay, lesbian.
or bisexual. (For more information on trans* or gender issues, ask the organisations listed at the back of this book for referrals.)

Do gay men abuse children?

Paedophilia and other forms of child abuse occur mainly in the home environment by a family member. 95% of child abuse is carried out by heterosexual identifying people. (4)


In discussions covering several years, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) have discovered that:

- people are often aware of their sexual orientation at a very early age, whether they be heterosexual or homosexual;
- none of the children were influenced or taught to be lesbian or gay by any other person;
- family fears of “catching” homosexuality or being recruited are without scientific foundation, but are generated by feelings of vulnerability, like most fears; and
- in families where homosexual children try to deny their sexuality, the ramifications can be enormous.

Common Questions asked by families concerning their loved ones

Why did they have to tell me?

“Our first response was to tell him we loved him and that nothing had changed. But in fact everything had changed. Suddenly he was a stranger.” Peg

“Since my daughter has told us she’s a lesbian, we have become much closer.” Maureen

Some families believe they may have been happier not knowing. They start to recall the time before they knew as “problem free”, remembering an ideal situation rather than the reality.

Sometimes we can try to deny what is happening by rejecting what we’re hearing (“It’s just a phase; you’ll get over it”); by shutting down (“If you choose that lifestyle, I don’t want to hear about it”); or by not registering the impact of what we’re being told (“That’s nice, dear, and what do you want for dinner?”).

Parents and families may feel resentment towards their child or loved one’s sexuality. This feeling is based on the belief that to be gay, lesbian, trans* or bisexual was a conscious decision. The main decision most GLBTI people have to make is whether to be honest about who they are or hide it. Hiding it imposes a tremendous burden. A large part of their life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole person.

While people may experiment for some time with their sexuality, someone who has reached the point of telling a parent or someone close to them that they are GLBTI is not usually a person who is going through a phase. Generally they have thought long and hard to understand and acknowledge their sexual orientation.

Telling their family or someone close to them that they think they are GLBTI involves overcoming a great many negative stereotypes and often taking a great risk, and few would take that step lightly or prematurely.

Why didn’t they tell us before?

Your child or loved one has probably been thinking this through for months, even years. This does not mean a lack of trust, lack of love, neither is it a reflection on your relationship. If you are a parent it can be painful to realise that you don’t know your child as well as you thought you did and that you have been excluded from a part of their life. To some extent, this is true in all parenting relationships, regardless of sexuality.

Gay, lesbian, trans* and bisexual people often recognise at an early age that they feel “different” but it may take years before they can put a name to it. It is often not until this stage that they consider telling someone.

Even though you may have some sadness for not having been able to help your child or loved one through that period, or that the outcome would have been different if you’d known earlier, understand that your child or loved one probably could not have told you any sooner. More importantly, doing so now is an invitation to a more open and honest relationship.

What did we do wrong?

Parents and family members can sometimes experience feelings of guilt when they first find out about their child or loved one’s attractions for the same gender. However, there is no evidence that different parenting styles or family situations have a bearing on the development of sexual orientation. What families can provide is an environment in which a young person can understand themselves and strive to reach their full potential.

Why am I uncomfortable with my child or loved one’s sexuality?

Our culture and society provides us with messages about a number of issues, including sexuality. The negative messages and myths we have learned from our society about sexuality are very strong and not easy to dismiss. However, developing a better understanding of your child or loved one, and becoming more familiar with the issues will help reduce these uncomfortable feelings.

Homophobia is a strong part of our culture, and is similar to many other forms of discrimination and prejudice. As long as homophobia exists in our society, GLBTI people and their families may have very real and legitimate fears and concerns.

Could a counsellor or therapist be helpful?

Support for parents and families coming to terms with their child or loved one’s sexual orientation can be gained from a counsellor or therapist trained in the area. You may want to talk about your own feelings and how to work through them. It may help you and your child or loved one communicate clearly through this period.

Young people who have acknowledged their attractions to people of the same gender can still have feelings of depression and fear, and may need help with self-acceptance.

Consulting a counsellor or therapist in the hopes of changing your child or loved one’s sexual orientation has little value. Homosexuality is not a disease or illness and so is not something to be “cured.”

There are other services that can provide information and advice. Please refer to the resource section in the back of this book for suggestions.
sexual intercourse in public places, regardless of WA it is illegal to have Health Department the same gender to show affection in public, in the same way as it is legal for heterosexual couples to show affection in public; (08) 9227 6177 WA it is legal for couples of Family Planning Association (08) 9482 0000 family needs to be concerned about HIV/AIDS – regardless of sexuality. Everyone should make sure they understand censor their own behaviour because they fear negative public reaction, and you therefore, every parent and family needs to be concerned about HIV/AIDS – regardless of sexuality. Everyone should make sure they understand how STDs and HIV are transmitted and how to protect ourselves and our loved ones. HIV is transmitted through blood or semen. It can be transmitted through unprotected sex, sharing needles, or from mother to child through breast milk or during birth. Practicing safe sex and not sharing needles or equipment is the best way to protect ourselves from HIV, STDs and other blood borne viruses. If your child or loved one has HIV or AIDS, they need your support more than ever. You should know that you are not alone. There are numerous local and national organisations that can help you with medical, psychological and physical care. There are excellent resources with more information available about STDs and HIV from the following organisations: WA AIDS Council (08) 9482 0000 Family Planning Association WA (08) 9227 6177 Health Department of WA 1300 135 030...
How can I support my child or loved one?

Reading this book is the first step to supporting your child or loved one. You have shown that you are open to new information and hopefully you are now better informed. Every child needs different things from their family. Some parents find that they are better able to understand and support their child by recognising the similarities and differences in experiences. You can support your child or loved one by educating yourself as much as possible about sexuality.

Young people realise that GLBTI people are condemned by society. Even before they reach the kindergarten playground, they learn negative words for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Young people generally assume that all the people they know are heterosexual; they have no idea that some of the respected adults around them are GLBTI.

Many GLBTI young people feel profoundly isolated: “Surely I am the only person like this.” Some are viciously harassed and abused by peers, family members, school, agency personnel and others. Whether or not they are labelled by others, these young people often:

- fear being discovered and expect rejection;
- carefully guard their feelings to maintain acceptance (or merely to survive);
- have no opportunity openly to date each other or flirt or engage in sexual experimenting like other teens; and
- lack accurate information about their feelings and experiences.

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Risk of depression and suicide

A young person’s sexual identity does not itself cause them to feel depressed or suicidal. It is the experience of growing up “different” in a society that often does not support difference and expects everyone to be heterosexual that can be devastating. In fact, research (5) has indicated that 25% to 40% of young GLBTI people have attempted suicide due to their fear of rejection and feelings of depression and isolation.

Education about GLBTI people is an important step in being able to support young people and prevent further suicide attempts. Avenues need to be created to help young people develop positive self-esteem and skills to deal with a sometimes hostile environment.

These young people need:

- supportive opportunities to socialise with one another;
- resources that specifically address their concerns, and
- sensitive, non-judgmental help as they come to understand themselves.


How to Help Your Child or Loved One if they are Feeling Depressed or Suicidal

If you feel that your child, loved one or anyone you know may be feeling suicidal, here are some suggestions that will help:

- Have available the numbers for the crisis lines that have trained counsellors who can talk to people about their feelings. The best way to help someone who is feeling suicidal is to get them to contact one of the crisis lines listed below, or call them yourself for some advice.

- Don’t agree to keep their suicidal thoughts a secret. Get a professional to do a suicide risk assessment and don’t leave the person alone.

- Take notice of threats. Try not to change the subject because you’re scared. This may look like you don’t care.

- Don’t try to solve their problems as soon as they share them. To a person thinking about suicide, the problems look major and unsolvable right now. They may just want to share them with someone at this stage.

- Don’t tell them they’re selfish to consider suicide when their life is so good, or that suicide is the easy way out. This will make them feel guilty as well as depressed.
Will I ever learn to deal with my child or loved one’s sexuality?

Perhaps the best way to answer this is to listen to other parents.

“I think the turning point for me was when I read more about it, and realized that most kids who can accept their sexuality say they feel calmer, happier and more confident. And of course that’s what I wanted for my child and I sure didn’t want to be what was standing in the way of that.” Peter

“I have to tell you, there are so many pluses now. You begin to recognize what an incredible child you have to share this with you and to want you to be part of their lives. The trust that’s been placed in your hands, and the guts it took to do that, is amazing.” Frank

“Most of us are like three leaf clovers – sort of ordinary, not much attention is given to us – but once in a while we find a four leaf clover – a rare and wonderful discovery. I remember, as a girl, spending hours looking for that four leaf clover. Occasionally I would find one and press it in a book or iron it between pieces of waxed paper. It was something I treasured, wanted to save and protect. My daughter is like one of those four leaf clovers; her sexual orientation just happens to be different from mine. She is someone I treasure and want to protect. A four leaf clover is not unnatural, just unusual and different from the rest. I would have never considered removing one of the leaves so it would appear to be a three leaf clover.” Carol

Information

For more information contact Freedom Centre www.freedom.org.au or GLCS (WA) www.glcs.org.au.
Famous Lesbian, Trans*, Bisexual or Gay People.

Patrick White, Australian author
Robyn Archer, Australian singer
Ian Roberts, Australian rugby player with Super League
Giz Watson, Western Australian Member of Parliament
Dr Bob Brown, Australian Federal Senator
Monique Brumby, Australian Singer
K.D. Lang, singer
Dr Kerryn Phelps, Australian Medical Association President
Hon. Justice Michael Kirby, High Court Judge
Sir Robert Helpmann, dancer and choreographer
Julie McCrossin, ABC TV presenter
Molly Meldrum, rock music commentator
Michaelangelo, artist
Billie Jean King, pro tennis champion
Elton John, pop star
Melissa Ethridge, singer
Rock Hudson, actor
Martina Navratilova, pro tennis champion
Vita Sackville-West, author
Roddy Bottum, keyboardist of Faith No More
Janis Joplin, singer
Bruce Springsteen, rock star
Dr Amanda Bearse, actress
Indigo Girls, musicians
Cole Porter, songwriter
William S. Burroughs, novelist
Sophie B Hawkins, singer
Joan Baez, singer
Midge Costanza, White House aid to USA President Carter
William Yang, Australian photographer
Dorothy Allison, novelist
Quentin Crisp, writer, actor and humorist
Ellen DeGeneres, comedian
Greg Louganis, actor & three-time Olympic gold medallist in diving
Susan Love, breast-cancer surgeon
Oscar Wilde, writer
Virginia Woolf, writer
Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Churches
Sandra Bernhard, comedian
Christopher Smith, member of the British Parliament
Gertrude Stein, writer
Craig Claiborne, food writer
Karen Clark, Minnesota state legislator
John Corigliano, classical composer
Michelle Crone, comedian
Gasparino Damata, Brazilian writer
Justin Fashanu, British pro soccer star
Jean-Paul Gaultier, French fashion designer
Sir John Gielgud, award-winning actor
Bruce Hayes, Olympic gold medallist in swimming
Nona Hendryx, pop singer
Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris, pro models/bodybuilders
Marc Jacobs, fashion designer
Judy Connelli, Singer/Actor
Paul Capais, Performer
Jimmy Somerville, Singer/songwriter
Freddy Mercury, singer
Peter Wharrett, Australian racing driver and TV personality
Peter Allan, Australian singer/songwriter/entertainer
David Marr, Australian journalist
Rita May Brown, writer
Portia De Rossi, actor
John Hyde, politician
Brian Griege, politician
Bob Downe, actor
Rupert Everett, actor
Alan Turing, computer inventor
Prince Henrik of Prussia
Frederick the Great
Tchaikovsky, composer
Alexander the Great, ancient conqueror
E.M. Forster, writer
Sappho, ancient poet
James Baldwin, writer
Rudolf Nureyev, dancer
Marlene Dietrich, actress
Mykal Judge, priest
George Michael, singer
Cary Grant, actor
AND MANY, MANY MORE…
Someone You Love

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