



Ministry
of Defence

Guide for Parents of LGBT+ Children

This guide has been created by MOD LGBT+ Allies to provide support and guidance to parents of LGBT+ children.

We hope this will not only help those parents who are going through a similar experience but also raise awareness to everyone who reads this guide. It is crucial to remember that coming out is never a one-time event and that our LGBT+ colleagues may have to face this often-daunting experience many times in both their personal and work life.



For any questions or further information:

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Ross Woodward

*Former Co-Chair of the MOD
LGBT+ Committee, Sh..OUT*



Growing up I always knew there was something different about me. I wasn't interested in football, PlayStation games or action figures. I was much happier playing with dolls or pretend post office.

Towards the end of primary school, I had feelings for some of the boys in my class. I didn't think it was a bad thing and confided in a female friend who happened to fancy the same boy as me. My feelings towards the same sex grew stronger as I entered my teenage years and started at high school.

When I was about 13 my dad saw I had been looking at things on the internet which effectively outed me as gay. My dad was furious and summoned me to the living room where I was lectured that it was wrong to be gay, that people would want to harm me and I would get diseases. This response left me feeling vulnerable, hurt and lost. I couldn't help how I felt yet my own father was disgraced.

At school word soon got round and the bullying started. Name calling soon advanced to physical assault. I reported it to the head of year to no avail and the rest of my secondary education was not enjoyable.

Aged 17 I met a lesbian who knew immediately I was gay. It was thanks to her I began to accept who I was. She understood the pain and hurt I experienced from my dad and bullying at school and helped me explore my sexuality. A secret relationship with a man soon entailed.

10 years on and happily married to a man, these experiences as a child still affect my confidence and comfort with being an openly gay man. Every time I meet someone new I have to assess whether to come out or not. I'm conscious of my behaviour, am I being too camp or do I need to put on a macho front? I have to predict how people will respond when I say husband instead of wife.

Some people choose to hide their sexuality and put on a false pretence. The stress and anxiety this can cause often leads to self-harm and sometimes suicide.

Upon reflection, I could say I was lucky. I know some people whose parents completely rejected them, threw them out of the house, even abused them. If I could go back and change my childhood I would. If I could have lived my teenage years without the shame of being gay, I would. I wish my father had been supportive and sought to understand how I felt.

Unfortunately, I can't change the past and whilst my father is now accepting of my sexuality and husband, I can't erase the memories and hurt I experienced.

I long to become a parent not least to instil the love and acceptance that my children can be whoever they want to be and know I will love and support them regardless.

Top Tips

Sadly, LGBT+ children can have difficult childhoods, however by having a positive attitude, using available resources and putting your child first, you can create the best experience possible for your child...

Be Supportive

Coming out as LGBT+ can be a daunting proposition, and your child has shown you that they trust you and can be honest with you. Reassure them that it doesn't change your love for them. Talk to them about how they're feeling and be an ally!

Know That Whatever You're Feeling – It's Normal

If you experience self-blame, anger, sadness, worry or a combination, know that it's normal and you will get past it. Many families like yours have experienced the same emotions and got through it to become stronger and closer together.

Talk About It

Find a trusted friend or mentor to talk through everything. Sharing your feelings can make you feel a lot more positive and correct some misconceptions you may have. Use all the available support – there are many parents who have been in the same situation as you!

Be Proactive

Learn more about LGBT+ issues – there are some helpful resources later in this booklet! Think about how you can make a difference for your child. For example, do your local schools have good policies for LGBT+ students? Has your child confided in a teacher or are they worried about getting bullied? With your child's consent, you might want to approach the school to tell them and ask how they're going to ensure your child isn't subject to bullying as a result.

Cat Little

*Director General Finance and
LGBT+ Role Model*



When I was 19, I geared myself up to tell my mum and dad I had a girlfriend. I suppose I had always known I was a bit different but didn't really know how or why until I was in a relationship.

I was terrified of what they might think, not because they had ever been anything but liberal and supportive of everything I did, but just because we had never really talked about anyone being gay, let alone me. I also had a feeling I was somehow letting them down, or wasn't living up to their expectations. There was again no evidence to base this on, other than a rather sad combination of what I thought society expected and peer expectations.

My parents were hugely supportive and couldn't have done more to ensure that I knew no matter what I did or who I was in a relationship in, they loved me. I think becoming an accountant was harder news to take in some ways!

Of course, it took a while to understand, and probably several rounds of meeting people in my life before they could see how happy I was with being me. I also know my mother, being deeply religious and catholic, took a bit longer to reconcile it with her faith. If it weren't for my parents, love, care and support, I would never have really been comfortable being me and getting on with life.

Cat's Dad: My reaction to Catherine telling us she was in a relationship with another girl may have been different to that of many parents.

I thought 'This is interesting'. 'As long as she is happy, I am happy'. 'We love her whatever she wants to do.'

My wife took a little longer to understand, but she has also never really had a problem. You either understand and give your support, or you lose a daughter. No contest. There are many ways to be happy in life, and the conventional ways aren't the only ones.

Catherine has never let us down. With both our children, I have always thought, fly as high as you want to, be whoever you want to be. I will catch you if you fall.



Common Myths

There are lots of misconceptions around having an LGBT+ child and it's common to have all kinds of worries – luckily many of them are unfounded...

I Did Something Wrong

There is no link between environment or parenting and the likelihood of being LGBT+. Sexual orientation and gender identity is an inherent trait, like eye or hair colour. LGBT+ people come from all sorts of backgrounds and families.

It's Just A Phase

If your child has 'come out' to you, they've probably gone through a long and hard process of acknowledging their sexuality or gender identity. Dismissing it as a phase will make it seem like you're not taking them seriously – let them define who they are.

I'm Not Going To Be A Grandparent

LGBT+ people have the same rights as heterosexual people to become parents – through adoption, fostering, surrogacy or alternative parenting routes! There are thousands of LGBT+ parent families raising children in the UK and worldwide. There are even specific agencies and charities to help LGBT+ people adopt or foster.

Group Captain Tony Keeling OBE and Mrs Bobby Keeling

Tony Keeling is currently Station Commander at RAF Wittering. Tony and Bobby's son came out at the age of 15. They have a unique perspective from being in a military environment and not being able to find sufficient resources for support.



What particular challenges were found through serving in the military?

Tony Keeling: The requirement for mobility can mean coming out numerous times to new people in new environments, and this can definitely take its toll emotionally.

When you've been in the military for 20-30 years and your child comes out, it can be difficult to break down the barriers to understand their lived experience. I've found that talking and sharing is the best way and you can become a voice to help other people.

I've now become an ally and have reverse mentors – the safe environment to talk everything through with doesn't have to be with your child or your family. It's been so important to get a different perspective.

What about being married to someone in the military?

Bobby Keeling: Moving workplaces frequently has presented its own issues. I've found varying levels of acceptance, and at each new workplace it has taken time to gauge attitudes. It's important to bring your true self to work and having an LGBT+ son is part of your narrative.

It can be difficult to stand up and be brave within the workplace and can be an isolating feeling if you don't have support.

What advice would you give to others in the same situation?

It's important to be tolerant of others who may not be as supportive – generational attitudes within our family initially proved a challenge. It was necessary for us to understand why and how attitudes are formed and have difficult conversations with family members but in a loving way.

We were also surprised at the lack of immediate support from schools and would certainly encourage families to engage with their child's school at the first opportunity; don't wait for the school to come to you!

For us, the main thing that helped us to better support our son was talking to others in the same situation. Please get in touch with us if you would like to talk about anything.

Transgender Children

Unfortunately, resources for transgender children are even more scarce than for lesbian, gay and bisexual. There are unique differences and steps you can take to ensure your transgender child feels as supported as possible.



Top Tips

Learn About Gender

Gender and sex are not the same thing. Sex is generally defined as the binary characteristic assigned at birth – male or female. Gender is more complex, as it can be a spectrum from 'entirely male' to 'entirely female', and there are people that feel they fit in anywhere in between the two or with neither. Gender is about which set of characteristics you identify with the most, and can change more easily.

Follow Your Child's Lead

Transgender means many things to many people. Don't assume that your child will want to transition, wear a certain type of clothing, or change their hobbies. Listen to your child about what being transgender means to them, and know that there's no right way to be transgender.

Use Your Child's Preferred Name and Pronouns

It can take time to get used to calling your child by a different name and using different gender pronouns, and it's okay to make mistakes. Using preferred names and pronouns can go a long way to make your child feel fully supported in the family.

Sergeant Major Mark Hill MBE

Mark Hill is a Youth Engagement Officer within 4th Infantry Brigade in North Yorkshire. He and his wife have a transgender daughter, now coming to the end of her 6-month assessment period at the gender identity clinic.



What was your experience after your child first came out?

My main concern was for her wellbeing and to ensure that she got the help she needed as soon as possible. We took her to the GP immediately and then waited almost a year for our initial appointment at the gender identity clinic.

We were initially worried about the reaction of others around her. We have found that children can be a lot more accepting than some adults and she has been accepted at school by her peers.

Since transitioning, her grades have greatly improved and all her teachers have commented that she is much happier.

We have found that a lot of people think transgender children have a mental health issue. This is not the case – transgender children are the same as any other children.

What advice would you give to others in the same situation?

If any other parents have any thought that their child might be transgender, ask for a referral to the gender identity clinic as soon as possible – a GP can make this referral!

Let your child know that you are there to help and support them and you love them regardless of how they identify. Never question the child as to whether what they are feeling may just be a phase. They should always know that their feelings are valid whatever the outcome.

Support is out there but it is often difficult to find it – Mermaids UK, a charity for transgender children and teenagers, were very helpful and we had a lot of support from them.



Resources

There are resources available that can provide a wide range of advice, support, meet-ups and events with other parents in similar situations.

Stonewall

The largest LGBT+ rights charity in the UK with a mission to let all lesbian, gay, bi and trans people, here and abroad, know they're not alone.

www.stonewall.org.uk/ 020 7593 1850

FFLAG

A national voluntary organisation and charity dedicated to supporting parents and their lesbian, gay, bisexual and Trans sons and daughters.

www.fflag.org.uk/ 0845 652 0311

Families Together London

A London-based support group for the parents, families and friends of LGBT+ people.

www.familiestogetherlondon.com/

Free2B Alliance

A community interest company helping LGBTQ+ young people and parents across London via groups and 1:1 support.

www.free2b-alliance.org.uk/

Transgender-specific Resources

Mermaids UK

Family and individual support for gender diverse and transgender children and young people.

www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/ 0344 334 0550

Gendered Intelligence

Specialises in supporting young trans people 8-25, working with the trans community and all those who impact on trans lives.

www.genderedintelligence.co.uk/

Action for Children

Has a guide on supporting trans children and young people.

www.actionforchildren.org.uk/ 01923 361 500