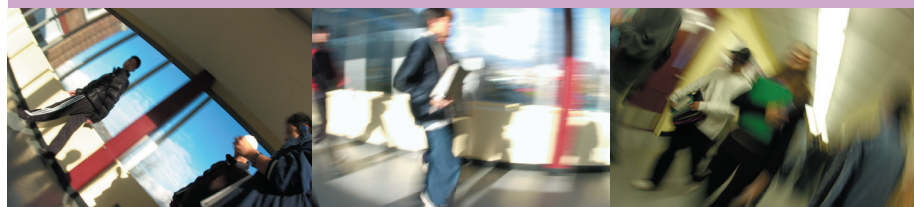




# Questions & Answers

*for Parents and Family Members of  
Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth*









***Questions and Answers  
For Parents and Family  
Members  
of Gay, Lesbian  
and Bisexual Youth***



**Vancouver School Board  
2011**

*Please check our website  
for translated versions of this booklet:*

本小册子备有简体中文版，可于 ... 阅览  
[www.vsb.bc.ca/multilanguage-brochures](http://www.vsb.bc.ca/multilanguage-brochures)







**All children and teenagers need to feel good about themselves. All people are valuable and deserve to be treated with respect. It can be difficult for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, or those who are questioning their sexual identity, to feel good about themselves when many people around them discriminate against them. Many of these youth feel they need to hide who they really are because of fear that society, and even the people they love the most will not accept them.**

**The purpose of this booklet is to guide parents and family members on how to best support, love and appreciate their children and keep them safe, healthy and happy.**

**Because language is a key component to understanding you will find a glossary at the end of this booklet for words you may not be familiar with.**

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Like many human differences, sexual orientation is not black or white. It refers to a person's physical and emotional attraction to others. While sexual orientation and gender identity are sometimes linked, this booklet is meant for families of students who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, in other words, those who have attractions for others of the same sex. Gender identity refers to a person's internal feeling of being male, female, or a blend, which may not be the same as their birth gender or how they present to others.

If you are concerned because your child identifies primarily with his/her non-birth gender, is questioning their gender identity or is transgender please use the booklet, Q&A for Parents and Family Members of Gender Variant and Transgender Youth or refer to the website [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org).



**Here are some common questions that you might be asking:**

## **How does my child know they are gay, lesbian or bisexual?**

If your child has already talked to you about this, it probably means that they trust you and are confident that you will be supportive. Keep the lines of communication open, but try not to ask too many questions. Most adolescents find it difficult to talk to their parents about sexuality in general.

Just like anyone else, LGB individuals experience attraction to another because they feel physically and/or emotionally drawn to that person. When that person is of the same gender as they are, then they might realize that they are gay, lesbian or maybe bisexual. This realization may be surprising because from birth we are conditioned to conform to traditional male/female coupling patterns. This expectation or assumption that everyone is attracted to someone of the opposite sex is delivered and reinforced in almost every aspect of our environment (i.e. books, movies, television, music, arts, culture, and social interaction with friends and family members). However, as history shows, not everyone is heterosexual and there is a minority of every population, culture and religion who are not.

As high school can often be a judgmental place, it is no surprise that many LBG youth will try their best to fit in, so they don't experience harassment and rejection. If your child is telling you that they are LGB, it is probably because they feel it is the only way they can live truthfully. This is not only emotionally healthier, but shows courage and honesty, which they should be commended on. The vast majority of health and mental health professionals agree that parents cannot control their children's sexual orientation, but they can influence their feelings of self-esteem and well-being.

## **I think my child may be LGB, or is questioning their sexual orientation; how should I approach this?**

If your child has not spoken to you about this, but you wonder if they might be questioning their sexuality, remember that parents are often the last to know because our children care deeply about a parent's response. Youth may also not be aware of it themselves, or are just beginning to question their identity. Asking them directly if they are gay may force them to face something that they may not be ready to discuss. They may also simply say, "No" regardless of their attractions simply to avoid the discussion.



A better approach may be to communicate your support generally by commenting positively on a gay issue or mentioning gay friends or colleagues in an affirming way. Another way to introduce the topic might be to ask if your child's high school has a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) club. More and more schools in BC have GSA clubs, which act as a welcoming gathering place for students, both gay and straight, who are concerned about homophobia and want to take action.

Once you and your child begin this discussion, remember to try to stay positive and listen to their point of view. While society is becoming more inclusive and accepting, it may have taken your child a long time to be comfortable with this part of themselves. You may also need some time to adjust and understand this news. Both child and parent need to have patience and be gentle with themselves and each other.

Remember, your child is still the same person, with the same interests, skills and talents as always. Many lesbian, gay and bisexual people lead highly productive and interesting lives, and contribute much to society and to their own families. Your child hasn't changed, it's simply that you now know an important part of who they are, which may be different from what you expected.

## **What if members of my family disapprove of lesbian, gay and bisexual people?**

Parents and other family members may have different viewpoints, thoughts and personal connections to LGB people. In fact, most of the issues faced by LGB youth are a direct result of the discrimination and isolation they often experience. Yet without a doubt, all parents want their kids to be safe, happy and healthy. Groundbreaking research from the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University shows that families and caregivers have a major impact on their LGBT children's well-being:

When compared to LGBT youth whose parents were supportive or even neutral, youth whose parents' reactions were highly rejecting were:

- More than 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide;
- Nearly 6 times as likely to report high levels of depression;
- More than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs;
- More than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and STDs.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence shows that a parent's reaction cannot change a child's sexual



orientation. However, research clearly shows that a positive and supportive reaction can make a huge difference to a child's well-being. If extended family members are not supportive, you may need to help educate them, and ultimately make choices which will help maintain your child's self esteem.

### **What if my religious beliefs or certain members of my culture disapprove of lesbian, gay and bisexual people?**

Remember that LGB people are found all over the world, in every ethnic group and religion, and have always been a part of history. Also remember that within every religion and culture there are parents just like you, including many who are very supportive of LGB people and their relationships. There are likely people in your faith and/or culture who can help you to reconcile your beliefs with this news about your child. Many religious LGB people also want to, and do stay connected with their faith. In the Greater Vancouver area there are many supportive churches and LGB groups for people from various cultural backgrounds. There are also books and films, which can help you understand that you are certainly not alone in having an LGB child.

### **What is the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity?**

Sexual orientation (being gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual) is about who you are physically and emotionally attracted to. These feelings don't usually begin until adolescence so it is premature to focus on a child's future sexual orientation before puberty. Gender identity (feeling male, female or somewhere in between) is about how a person sees their gender, and is present in childhood. While some gay, lesbian and bisexual people cross mainstream gender expectations, many do not. Likewise a transgender person's sexual orientation depends on who they are attracted to.

### **Why are some people LGB while others are straight?**

All living things (human beings, animals, plants, fish, etc.) appear in nature with a wide range of naturally occurring variations. Human beings vary in skin colour, hair colour, height, weight, left or right-handedness, etc. Just as society would normally expect that some people have red hair, are left-handed, or have blue eyes, it is also normal to expect that some people in any population will feel innately attracted to members of the same sex.

It is common for parents to wonder if they have done something to cause their



child to be LGB. There has been NO scientifically valid research to suggest that this is the case.

While there has been considerable research done, no one knows with 100% certainty why some people are straight and others are LGB. Most scientists believe that a person's sexual orientation is determined by a combination of influences before, during and after birth. These influences (whether genetic, hormonal, emotional, environmental, etc.), may act together during a person's growth and development to determine, among other characteristics, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Some people believe that sexual orientation is a choice. Just as most heterosexual people would not regard their attraction to the opposite sex as a choice, most LGB people also feel that they did not have a choice in who they are attracted to and fall in love with. Many, in fact, spend considerable time and energy trying desperately to fit into heterosexual norms.

## **Can a person's sexual orientation change?**

Adolescence is a period of tremendous growth and change both physically and emotionally for any youth. This involves self-reflection and discovery about who they are and how they see themselves in the world. The important part is to be supportive of your child as they are. Listen to their level of certainty regarding their sexual orientation. While there is nothing wrong with being certain, there is also nothing wrong with uncertainty. In fact, many youth today feel uncomfortable with labeling themselves with respect to sexual orientation. The important thing is to keep the lines of communication open and respectful, so your child will be more likely to continue sharing new discoveries with you along the road to adulthood. As mentioned earlier, one cannot change a person's sexual orientation, so the best option is to be supportive and to create a loving environment.

The terms 'reparative therapy' and 'sexual orientation conversion therapy' refer to counselling and psychotherapy aimed at eliminating or suppressing same-sex attraction. The most important fact about these "therapies" is that they have been discounted as harmful<sup>2</sup> and fully rejected by all major mental health professions. The belief that homosexuality is a mental disorder has NO support among any mainstream health and/or mental health professional organization.<sup>3</sup>

## **How common is it to be lesbian, gay or bisexual?**

Due to the complexity, invisibility and very personal nature of a person's



sexuality, this question is extremely difficult to answer in a statistically valid way. However, in a 2008 survey of over 50,000 high school students conducted in districts across British Columbia, 11% identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure.<sup>4</sup>

## **What do same-sex relationships look like?**

We all want our children to experience happy and healthy relationships and friendships. LGB people are just as diverse as the rest of society; many will find wonderful partners, others will struggle to find the right person and some may choose to be happily independent. Thankfully, in Canada, your child can grow up to marry whomever they fall in love with, regardless of their gender. There are gay and lesbian couples all over the world who are in committed and loving life-long relationships and more and more governments are recognizing their relationships.

Learning how to maintain healthy relationships (with friends, family, romantic partners etc) starts at home. The more positive role models your children have for creating healthy relationships, the better their chances will be at having successful relationships themselves. A parent's love and support is very important in maintaining any relationship. It is also very valuable to feel support from extended family and community. A couple is more likely to maintain a strong relationship if they feel safe to express their affection and love for each other. Welcoming your child's same-sex partner to family functions is likely to be important to both of them. Some parents have found that they may need to be clear with extended family about their expectations that everyone is accepted and treated with respect.

## **Should I talk to my child about safer sex?**

As you would for your other children, you should talk to your LGB child about practicing safer sex. If you are uncomfortable with this, you can at least encourage them to talk to a school counselor, teacher, health care provider or LGB youth group leader. Any teens who are sexually active should regularly visit a health clinic for testing and advice. They should also be reassured that anything discussed with a health care professional remains confidential. While sexually transmitted infections (STI's) can affect anyone, those with a supportive and healthy living environment are less vulnerable and less likely to engage in risky behaviours.



## **I'd like to be a grandparent. Will my child have children?**

Parenting is increasingly a personal choice. More and more people in same-sex relationships are having children, and many in heterosexual relationships are not. Having children is not for everyone and is becoming less of a societal expectation, regardless of a person's sexual orientation.

## **Will my child or my family experience discrimination?**

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the British Columbia Human Rights Act prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. This means that it is a violation of those rights to deny service, employment, benefits, and other treatment to someone because they are lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Despite this, many forms of discrimination, including racism, are still present in Canada – regardless of laws prohibiting them. LGB people and their families sometimes experience ignorance and misunderstanding from others. This ignorance, which sometimes leads to fear and discrimination is commonly referred to as “homophobia.”

Homophobia exists in many forms and can range from remarks and jokes that demean LGB people, to denying rights commonly enjoyed by those in heterosexual relationships, to more serious physical harassment. However, it may be empowering to realize that incidents of homophobia should be challenged and are decreasing as society becomes more accepting and understanding. Many parents show their support to their gay children by speaking up when and where it happens. This is also why it is so important for LGB people to feel supported by family, friends, work and school colleagues. This helps them to develop healthy self-esteem, which is an essential part of dealing with the hurt that comes when one experiences homophobia.

## **Will my child be safe at school?**

Your child has a right to be safe at school. The BC Ministry of Education requires all schools to include information in their Code of Conduct about the forms of discrimination included in the BC Human Rights Act, including sexual orientation. The ministry also states that schools should teach, model and encourage socially responsible behaviours that contribute to the school community, solve problems in peaceful ways, value diversity and defend human rights. Furthermore they should work together to better understand issues such as bullying, intimidation and harassment, racism, sexism, and homophobia, and to learn new skills to respond to them.<sup>5</sup>



Furthermore, courts have ruled that public schools must be inclusive and secular. More and more teachers and schools are including age appropriate books, guest speakers, films and discussions about sexual orientation and homophobia. This information is important because it helps everyone to understand and be more accepting. Harassment and discrimination is unacceptable in schools. Schools must work to prevent bullying, harassment, and discrimination in all of its forms – including homophobia. Talk to your school’s principal if you have any questions.

## **How can I learn more and connect with other parents with LGB children?**

PFLAG (Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is a non-profit group that has chapters across BC, and is an excellent way for parents to connect with others who are in a similar situation or simply want to learn more. For more information or to find a local chapter that can connect you with another parent, please refer to [www.pflagcanada.ca](http://www.pflagcanada.ca)

<sup>1</sup> Ryan, Caitlyn. (2009). Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults. *Pediatrics: Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, 123, 346-352.

<sup>2</sup> Schroeder, M., & Shidlo, A. (2001). Ethical issues in sexual orientation conversion therapies: An empirical study of consumers. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 5, 131-166; Shidlo, A., & Schroeder, M. (2002). Changing sexual orientation: A consumer’s report. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 33, 249-259.

<sup>3</sup> Just the Facts Coalition. (2008). Just the facts about sexual orientation and youth: A primer for principals, educators, and school personnel. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from [www.apa.org/pi/lgb/publications/justthefacts.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/lgb/publications/justthefacts.html).

<sup>4</sup> BC Centre for Safe Schools and Communities, University of British Columbia, University of the Fraser Valley. (2008) Safe School Social Responsibility Survey for Secondary Students.

<sup>5</sup> BC Ministry of Education. (2008) Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools – A Guide.



## Glossary:

**Language is a key component to understanding and respectful dialogue.**

**Ally** - Someone who is not LGBT but who is supportive of LGBT people and their well-being. This can be you!

**Biological Sex** - A biological classification based on physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. At birth, it is used to identify individuals as male or female. For those whose sex is not easily categorized as male or female, see Intersex below.

**Bisexual** - A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females.

**Gay** – A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. The word gay can refer to both males and females, but it is more commonly used to identify males.

**Gender** - A socially influenced concept of identity based on the roles, behaviours, activities, and appearance that are on a spectrum from masculine to feminine.

**Gender expression** – how a person shows his or her sense of gender to others.

**Gender identity** – A person’s internal sense or feeling of being male, female, or a blend, which may not be the same as their birth gender or how they present to others.

**Heterosexism** – The assumption that everyone is heterosexual (straight), that this sexual orientation is the only natural orientation and that it is superior. Heterosexism is much more pervasive and subtle than homophobia and can be seen daily in media and advertising.

**Heterosexual** - A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the opposite sex. The more commonly used word for heterosexual is “straight”.

**Homophobia/Transphobia** – Fear, ignorance, and mistreatment of people who are LGBT, which is directly related to the silence and invisibility that has historically hidden them.

**Homosexual** - A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. Because of its medicalized history, most people prefer the terms gay, lesbian, two-spirit or queer.



**Intersex** – A person who is born with an anatomy (genitals and/or other reproductive organs) that does not seem to conform to expectations of distinctly male or female. In some cases it is not discovered until puberty.

**LGBT** - A common acronym which means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender. It is intended to include all sexual minority people, and sometimes includes a Q which can mean Queer or Questioning.

**Lesbian** – A female who is attracted physically and emotionally to other females.

**Queer** – A historically negative term for homosexuality. Recently many LGBT people, especially youth, have reclaimed it as positive and inclusive of all sexual minority and gender variant people.

**Sexual Orientation** – A term that refers to being physically and emotionally attracted to people of a specific gender. A person's sexual orientation and their gender identity are separate and distinct parts of their overall identity. Although a child is not usually aware of their sexual orientation until adolescence, they usually have a strong sense of their gender identity. Terms like "sexual preference" and "lifestyle" are poor substitutes as they imply a choice which most lesbian, gay and bisexual people say is not their reality.

**Transgender/Trans** – A person whose gender identity, appearance, or expression does not fit with conventional ideas of male or female. Being transgender or transsexual does not determine any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, trans people may additionally identify as straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual depending on their attractions.

**Transsexual** – A person who experiences intense personal and emotional discomfort with their assigned birth gender. They may opt for various changes to physically alter their appearance to match how they see their gender. These range from simple things like hair and clothing to sex reassignment surgeries as adults. Because of its medicalized history, many transsexual people prefer the terms "transgender" or simply "trans".

**Two Spirit** – An Aboriginal notion of LGBT people as special and honoured based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.



## Resources

### **American Library Association Rainbow List**

The ALA provides an annual list of librarian reviewed books with significant and authentic LGBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth to eighteen years of age.

<http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/rainbow-books-lists>

### **Ambleside Youth Centre, West Vancouver: Whatever Group**

LGBTQ drop in group in West Vancouver.

[www.amblesideyouthcentre.ca](http://www.amblesideyouthcentre.ca)

604-925-7233

### **C.A.L.L. Out! (Creating Action, Learning and Leadership)**

C.A.L.L. Out! works with organizations across BC to engage Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Two-Spirit, Queer, Questioning and Allied youth in healthy, meaningful activities that increase their leadership capacity and connection to community

[www.vch.ca/callout](http://www.vch.ca/callout)

604.315.3668 or 1.877.515.3668 (toll free in BC)

### **Campbell River Multicultural & Immigration Society – Youth 4 Diversity**

Youth learn how to respond to, and prevent racism and discrimination, plan activities and strategies to encourage others to explore and build on their leadership skills, and most importantly have FUN while celebrating diversity.

[www.crmisa.ca/youth-cultural-diversity-programs-campbell-river](http://www.crmisa.ca/youth-cultural-diversity-programs-campbell-river)

250-830-0171

### **Family Services of Greater Vancouver – LGBT Options**

Short-term counseling for LGBT people and their family members to address coming-out, relationship/family issues.

1616 West 7th Avenue

604-874-2938

### **Fraser Valley Youth Society**

Regular drop-in group for LGBTQ and allied youth in Abbotsford.

[www.fraseryouth.com](http://www.fraseryouth.com)



### **Kamloops Safe Spaces at Interior Community Services**

Support and outreach service for LGBT youth (ages 14 to 25) in the Central Interior.

Email: [sspaces@interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca](mailto:sspaces@interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca)

250-371-3086

### **Kelowna Unity LGBT2S**

A group offered by the Kelowna Boys and Girls Club.

Email: [club180@boysandgirlsclubs.ca](mailto:club180@boysandgirlsclubs.ca)

250-868-8541

### **OPT: Options For Sexual Health**

Reliable sexual health services, education and support provided non-judgmentally and confidentially.

[www.optionsforsexualhealth.org](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org)

1-800-SEX-SENSE

### **Out in Schools**

Province wide youth facilitated films and discussion in schools about homophobia and LGBT lives. Youth film-making workshops and annual anti-homophobia video competition.

[www.outinschools.com](http://www.outinschools.com)

604-844-1615

### **Outlet (Kootenays)**

Support services for queer and questioning youth meeting in several communities including Castlegar, Trail, Nelson and the Boundary region.

[www.queerkootenays.com/resources.php](http://www.queerkootenays.com/resources.php)

### **Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)**

We provide support for all family members and friends. We work to create an environment of understanding so our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered children can live with dignity and respect.

Vancouver: [www.pflagvancouver.com](http://www.pflagvancouver.com)

604-626-5667

Victoria: e-mail: [victoriabc@pflagcanada.ca](mailto:victoriabc@pflagcanada.ca)

250-385-9462



### **PLEA – Community Services - Generation OUT**

Regular drop-in groups for LGBTQ youth in Maple Ridge, Coquitlam and Vancouver.

E-mail: [info@plea.bc.ca](mailto:info@plea.bc.ca)

### **QMUNITY - BC's Queer Resource Centre**

Information and referral, education, library, peer groups, social support, and free counseling.

1170 Bute Street @ Davie, Vancouver      [www.qmunity.ca](http://www.qmunity.ca)

604-684-5307

Prideline (LGBT peer support) 7-10 pm nightly:

604-684-6869 or 1-800-566-1170

### **QMUNITY Gab Youth**

Youth Drop-ins, one-to-one support, Pridespeak workshops for schools.

604-684-5307 ext 107 or 108

### **South Island Pride Community Centre**

Drop in and resource space for queer youth and allies in Victoria.

1330 Fairfield Rd., Victoria, BC

[www.youth.southislandpridecentre.ca](http://www.youth.southislandpridecentre.ca)

### **Surrey Youth Alliance**

Drop-in and support group for LGBTQ and allied youth between the ages of 14 and 21 in the Fraser Valley and surrounding area.

Newton Youth Resource Center

13479 76 Ave, Surrey, BC.

Email: [syabc@live.com](mailto:syabc@live.com)

### **Transgender Health Program**

Information and referral, education, peer support, advocacy, and training. Both youth and parent drop-in groups run regularly.

[www.vch.ca/transhealth](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth)

604-734-1514

### **UBC's CampOUT!**

An annual summer camp for queer, trans and allied youth ages 14-21 from across BC.

<http://campout.ubc.ca/>

604-822-8298      1-877-678-CAMP(2267)



**Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA)**

Services and programs for Native and LGTB two-spirit youth in BC.

1640 East Hastings St.

Email: [schoolsupport@unya.bc.ca](mailto:schoolsupport@unya.bc.ca)

604 854-7732

**Vancouver School Board Anti-homophobia and Diversity Mentor –  
Social Responsibility & Diversity Team**

Teacher mentor working to ensure schools are inclusive and welcoming for all students and families regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Email: [pride@vsb.bc.ca](mailto:pride@vsb.bc.ca)

604-713-5180

**YouthCO HIV and Hep C Society of BC**

Youth-driven organization leading HIV and HepC peer education, support, and shared leadership.

#205 – 568 Seymour, Vancouver BC

[www.youthco.org](http://www.youthco.org)

604 688-1441









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