



Tips for Coming Out to your Kids

The first thing to note is that it is really terrific that you are taking time to consider how to sensitively approach coming out to your kids.* Here at COLAGE we have found that children really want to know the truth about our parent's sexual orientation, and usually they have some idea before you even tell us! But just because we want to know doesn't mean that we always are thrilled about the situation, especially initially. It can signify a big change in the family, especially when accompanied with all the transitions that come with a divorce or break-up. Here are some tips to keep in mind that might help:

- ❖ It's **never too early** to come out to your child/ren. Kids understand love. What they don't understand is deception or hiding. And it's **never too late** to come out to your child. COLAGE has met folks in their forties whose parents are just now coming out to them. A lot of mysteries are being solved, and missing puzzle pieces falling into place for these families. Often knowing the truth will be a relief for kids of all ages.
- ❖ Tell your child/ren in a **private space** where the conversation can't be overheard and will be completely confidential. Telling them at your regular Saturday night dinner at your favorite restaurant will be overwhelming.
- ❖ Make sure you tell them when there will be **plenty of time for the conversation** to continue if it needs to. If they are staying with you for the weekend, for example, talk with the kids on Saturday morning instead of waiting 'til the drive back to their other home on Sunday night.
- ❖ If you are agonizing over exactly what to say, **try writing it down first or practicing** with a friend.
- ❖ **Kids' responses are going to vary.** Some may need some time and space to process the information on their own. Some might have a million questions. Others may barely react at all. No matter how your kids respond to your coming out, honor the process that they need to go through for themselves.
- ❖ **Listen and ask** your children what they already know and feel about LGBT people. Both as a starting point for them to have a discussion about sexual orientation; as well as in regards to suspicions they may have had about you.
- ❖ Don't think that coming out to your kids means it's time to have "the big sex talk." **Explain your sexuality in age-appropriate ways and in ways that they can understand.** Talk about having feelings of love, care, and concern, along with attraction, for the same-sex. If you are involved with someone and feel comfortable sharing this information, it's a good idea as you will be explaining your feelings for someone your kids know. Another person makes the whole thing more concrete and less abstract. (See "What Does Gay Mean" in resources section)
- ❖ **Think of this as a lifelong conversation, not a one-time deal.** Your children's thoughts, feelings, and questions will continue over time and change as they get older. This month they might not care, next month they might be mortified, next year they may have lots of questions. Keep the conversation alive; the tricky part is avoiding them feeling like you want to talk about it ALL the time (but believe me, that's better than not enough).

* Note: This guide primarily focuses on the issue of parents coming out to their children about their sexual orientation and discussing questions and challenges that come up in that coming out process. For information, resources, and support for parents coming out about their gender identity and for transgender family resources, visit http://www.colage.org/kids/kids_w_trngndr_prnts.html or contact COLAGE at 415-861-5437.

- ❖ **Let them know that no matter what, you love them.** One of the main things kids worry about is that you will no longer share the common interests that you used to, or that you will somehow be different than you used to be. At the time of coming out some parents do go through what we fondly refer to as a "second adolescence." Let your kids know that you are happy and are enjoying a new aspect of your life, but that no matter what, they are your number one priority. And then prove it to them by being consistent, attentive, and communicative.
- ❖ Help **break down stereotypes** of gay people for them. If your children already know other gay people draw comparisons between you and them. If they don't, tell them things that may seem obvious to you, like not all gay men are hairdressers; give examples of famous LGBT people who they can look up to. They may be concerned that your whole personality is going to change now that you are gay; **reassure them that you are still you**- being gay is simply one more thing about you and that there is no one way that all LGBT people must be and act.
- ❖ **Give them options of other supportive adults** to talk with. Sometimes it's easier for kids to express some of their feelings with another adult because they don't want to hurt your feelings. If one of your parents, siblings, or friends is being especially supportive or there is another adult that you trust, arrange for them to spend time with the kids to provide a sounding board.
- ❖ **Your kids may be gay. They may be straight.** Either way, it's not a judgment on your parenting. Nor are they doomed to a life of loneliness and desperation and homophobia (if they are gay). Be as supportive of your kid's orientation as you wish your parents were of yours.
- ❖ **Respect your kids' wishes** about how, when, and who they come out to about you. Let them tell their friends, peers, and others at their own pace and in their own time. Recognize that now they too have the joy and burden of coming out.
- ❖ **Most importantly, connect them with other kids who have LGBT parents.** Studies show that when children know they are not alone and have opportunities to share with other kids with LGBT parents they have fewer problems. Go to events with your local LGBT family group if there is one, go to Family Week co-sponsored by COLAGE and Family Pride Coalition in the summer, buy books for them about gay families, have the kids join the on-line discussion groups run by COLAGE, become COLAGE members so your family receives our publication *Just For Us*, or sign them up for a COLAGE Pen-Pal. Just let them know they are part of a community that cares and understands. They are not alone. Millions of other kids have experienced what they are now going through and there are ways that they can connect to this caring community of peers.

Resources on Coming Out to Kids:

COLAGE. Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere. COLAGE is a national organization that engages, connects, and empowers people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents. Provides support programs, resources, advocacy and education on national and local levels.
www.colage.org 415-861-KIDS

Witney, C. "Coming Out To Children." From *Uncommon Lives*, by Catherine Whitney, and Brian Miller's chapter from *Gay and Lesbian Parents*, edited by Frederick W. Bozett.
<http://world.std.com/~ewk/outchil.html>

Macpike, L. *There's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You.* True life stories from 25 lesbian and gay parents who have come out to their children. Naiad Press, Tallahassee, 1989.

Ponton, Dr. Lynn "What Does Gay Mean?" Published by the National Mental Health Organization. To request a copy call 1-800-969-6642. This booklet discusses how you can talk to kids about sexual orientation. It includes information about different ways to address sexual orientation for different age groups and how to talk about homophobia and discrimination.

"Talking to Children About Our Families." Margie Brickley and Aimee Gelnow for the Family Pride Coalition. Topics in this guide include talking to kids about sexual orientation, how LGBT families are created, changes that occur within families, gender identity and the larger LGBT community and families. To order visit: www.familypride.org/library/talking.htm

Buxton, Amity Pierce. "Thoughts on a Father's Coming Out to His Children." GAMMA Newsletter, July/ August, 1998. Available at <http://www.ssnetwork.org/reading.shtml>. This article suggests ways for gay fathers to make disclosure to children safe and comfortable for both parents and children from the perspective of a straight, former spouse of a gay father.

"Coming Out to Your Children - A Guide for LGBT Parents." Pamphlet from the Family Pride Coalition. You can order online at: <http://www.familypride.org/library2.htm> This includes articles on coming out to children and where to seek additional resources and support. With special emphasis for the formerly or currently married LGBT parent.

Corley, R. *Final Closet: The Gay Parents' Guide for Coming Out to Their Children*. Editech Press, Miami, 1990.

Advice and Insight from kids of LGBT parents:

My advice to parents is to come out CLEARLY-- not once, but several times in different ways. There should be the sit down at home and have a frank talk about it version. (And remember: coming out as a LGBT person doesn't have to include talk about SEX.) Then there should be reminder/check-in discussions, as in "What did you think of that gay character in the movie?" or "What do you want to do for gay pride month?" or "How do you feel about putting this rainbow sticker on the family car?" Just as your coming out process was probably gradual, your kid(s)' process will take place over a period of time. Being honest in the beginning will save a lot of grief later. *Meema, New York City, NY.*

I often hear that children are smart, and can pick up on a lot. I can vouch, that this is very true. A few years before my dad came out to me, I suspected that it was true. Unfortunately, before my dad told me, I had already found a card from a man he had been dating. My advice to parents in the process of coming out to their kids is the sooner the better. In your coming out process, be as open, and honest as you can. Make the situation a positive thing in your child's life. Be confident in your decisions, and know that your child loves you for you, and not your sexuality. *Amber, Lawrence, KS.*

When my mum came out to me more than four years ago, I was not upset about it. The idea of having two mums was very exciting and I felt, and still feel, like it was a huge bonus for me. To me it feels like there can't be anything better than having two mums. I was never upset that my mum was a lesbian, only worried about the difficulties that it would entail. Though I came across some problems at school etc, I feel that my family situation has made me a stronger and better person. Being in the minority has a lot to be said for it, and it really makes you appreciate everything that you have. I'd never change my mums' sexuality. It's a blessing. *Hannah, United Kingdom*

Tell your kids as soon as possible- its better that they hear it from you than from anyone else. Also if you have more than one child, try and tell them all at the same time. Otherwise you will put the kids that know in a difficult situation of not telling their siblings. When this happened to me, although I was okay with the idea of having a gay parent, I was uncomfortable with it being a secret. Being as open and honest as possible about your sexual orientation will role model to your kids that difference is not something for which you need to be ashamed. *Max, San Francisco, CA.*

When my mom came out to me, she just slipped it into a conversation. It felt uncomfortable, awkward and a total surprise. I wish that my mom would have said something like, "I have something that I want to talk to you about. It might sound surprising and I'm not sure how you will take it. I have had some realizations about my feelings in relationships. I am starting a relationship with a woman and I feel very much in love with her. Our friendship has been growing for 8 years and we have mutual feelings. What do you think about what I just said?" *Lisa, Portland, OR*

When I was in third grade my mom went to her friend Debbie's wedding. When I asked her how it went she told me she had a lot of fun dancing with Kathy... I laughed and said "Duh mom what are you gay?" She said "actually I am." This is the first time I really understood what she meant by "I love Kathy" (her partner). Don't ask her about it though... she swears that's not how it happened. *Diane, Kingston, Rhode Island*

My advice is don't sweep it under the rug or assume that it doesn't affect your children because it is simply YOUR identity. In fact, it changes the identity of your entire family and the way in which they see themselves in relationship to other families. Your children will be very sensitive to the homophobic images and comments they are exposed to, and this is not always easy for children to understand or voice, especially when they have not formed their own sexual identities. An additional piece of advice is to never hide your relationships. If your children are raised around out, honest and loving relationships, they will be more likely to enter the world with a strong sense of the legitimacy of their family and personal identity. By being a visible LGBT parental presence, you can help affirm the normalcy of your existence for you, your children, and the society in which they will raise their children. *Ava, Wellesley, MA.*

COLAGE Programs and Activities

Regional and Local Chapters for Youth and Adults
Annual Family Weeks
Publication, *Just For Us*
Email Discussion Groups
Award Winning Website
Support Groups
Information and Resource Referral
Pen Pal Program
Summer Internships
Scholarship for Undergraduate Students
Net News Email Update Lists
Youth Leadership and Action Programming
Speaker's Bureau
Book, Media, and other Resource Lists
Book and Video Library

This resource sheet was developed by:
COLAGE

Support, advocacy, and education by and for people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents
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