COLAGE is the only national youth-driven network of people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer parents. Living in a world that treats our families differently can be isolating or challenging. By connecting us with peers who share our experiences, COLAGE helps us become strong advocates for ourselves and our families.

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Speak Up, Speak Out!
An Activism Guide For Youth And Adults With LGBTQ Parents
Introduction

As the only organization for children, youth and adults who have one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT) parent/s, COLAGE uniquely understands the power and authority of people with LGBT parents to raise awareness, educate the public, foster community and make change. This guide provides some tools, framework, and tactics for using your voice and skills as a leader to promote a safer and more just world for children of LGBT parents and all families.

There are countless ways that you can use your voice to make noise and make change— from doing public education panels to media activism, from creating your own media to lobbying your elected officials. Every time that a COLAGEr raises his/her voice and demands to be heard, the visibility, acceptance and equality of children of LGBT parents is promoted. We hope that this guide will provide you with some basic ideas and skills for doing different types of activism. Together we can make the world a better place for children of LGBT parents and all children, youth and families.

What’s a COLAGEr? We use several terms to describe children, youth and adults who have one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender parent/s and families including COLAGEr and queerspawn. We understand that different people will like or identify with some, all or none of these terms.
What is the COLAGE Speak OUT Program?

The COLAGE Speak OUT Program provides education, support and training to youth and young adults with LGBT parents to be activists and spokespeople on behalf those of us with LGBT parents.

COLAGE and the members of our Speak OUT Program are a powerful antidote to homophobia, transphobia and intolerance as we use our voices and experiences to raise awareness about the real experiences of people with LGBT parents and counter the attempts to invalidate, demean, or attack our families.

Once you join the Speak OUT Program you will receive notice from COLAGE when there are opportunities for you to participate in media advocacy, lobbying, public education and other advocacy efforts.

Resolve to make a difference in the lives of other children, youth and adults with LGBT parents by becoming a member of Speak Out. To join fill out the COLAGE Speak Out Application supplied later in this resource guide.
Public Speaking Tips

COLAGErs are called upon to share their experiences as people with LGBT parents in a variety of public-speaking forums including press conferences, education panels, public forms, and more. To become the best public speaker you can be takes practice. The following tips are just a few things to keep in mind as you grow and expand your skills as a public speaker:

**Eye-Contact:** Look people in the eyes. Move your eyes in slow smooth cycles to cover the entire audience, especially the corners of the room. Eye contact catches attention and creates a connection with the audience. You can pretend to have eye contact by looking out just above people’s heads, circulate your eyes over the tops of the heads of your audience- to the people watching you it will seem as if you have great eye contact.

**Take your time:** Don’t read your speech word-for-word and don’t rush through it. When you are nervous or pumped up to be speaking, it’s easy to completely rush through your words. This makes it difficult for the audience to understand you. Make sure you are articulating. Clearly say your words and pause at the end of sentences. When practicing it helps to exaggerate. When you are nervous or have adrenaline in your system from being in front of a group, people tend to speak 2 times more quickly than normal. So overcompensate by speaking r-e-a-l-l-y slow.

**I can’t hear you!** Project your voice. Talk clearly and loudly; Even if you think you are loud, you probably could be better. It’s much better to talk too loud than to be so quiet that you can’t be heard.

**What is your body language saying?** Don’t stand up there like a stick, clenching the podium at both sides. Be natural and animated. Keep your body centered-with your feet about shoulder length apart, your arms down in front of your lower abdomen, and your hands slightly spread. Use hand gestures, move around a little, then come back to your center. Try to avoid rocking back and forth — that conveys nervousness.

**Hear the question- Take a moment:** As soon as a question is asked you don’t have to jump right in with the first thing that comes to mind. Take a moment to digest the question and think about the best answer/approach to provide the audience.

**Less is More:** Keep it short and simple. The appropriate length varies according to the setting, but be aware of your audience’s attention span. Say each thing that you have to say once. If the audience needs more information or doesn’t understand something, they will ask questions.

**Know What You’re Talking About.** Understand what you’re speaking about, and don’t make up anything. People can generally tell when you’re faking it. Also if someone asks you a question that you don’t know the answer to, the best thing to do is to admit that you don’t know. Your honesty will impress the audience. You can also suggest places that they might be able to find the answer to their question such as the COLAGE website.

**Include lots of first-hand experiences:** Everyone likes to hear about first-hand experiences — things that really happened to you. When you include real-life, personal anecdotes, you virtually guarantee audience interest. Of course, a humorous or deeply meaningful experience will add greatly to your speech.
**Words to avoid.** You've heard it before, but we'll say it again--- when speaking in front of a group, large or small, avoid saying “like,” “um,” “you know” and other types of filler words. They can be distracting and often detract from the power of your speech or presentation.

**What's that you say?** The language you use should be comfortable for you and the audience. Use words which are natural to you, use terms that anyone in the audience can understand. Avoid bookish language, or technical jargon (this includes saying LGBTQ or other phrases that we all know but outsiders might not be hip to. If you are using phrases or acronyms, make sure you explain them. (e.g. COLAGER). Don't feel like you have to impress the audience with really big words- just speak the way you normally would. Be conversational, like you are talking to a group of friends.

**Mistakes are OKAY!** Remember that if you forget where you are going with what you are saying it is better to take a pause and regroup than to stutter or use fillers like and, um, like... Everyone makes mistakes. Chances are only you will notice your own little mistakes.

**Catch your mistakes before they happen!** Be aware of your own usual challenges as a public speaker. If you have a habit of playing with your hair or jewelry- take off bracelets and rings or put your hair back before you speak. If you are have difficulty speaking loudly enough, practice talking twice as loud as you normally might so that when you get in front of an audience you are ready to project your voice.
Commonly Asked Questions And some thoughts about answers

These commonly asked questions include both those questions heard in media interviews as well as on panels or other public speaking forums. We have outlined some of the challenging questions that COLAGE Speak Out members encounter as well as some suggestions for how you might handle these questions.

Are you gay?
This question can be tricky for folks of all sexual orientations and gender identities. But it also is probably the most frequently asked question of COLAGE Speak Out members. RESPONSE IDEAS: It is up to you to decide how to deal with this question. Folks who are straight as well as those who are queer or questioning can approach this in many ways. You can decide when and if to share your own sexual orientation or gender identity. You can share the statistic that about 10% of people in general are gay and therefore about 10% of people with LGBT parents are gay. You can talk about the fact that most gay people have straight parents. You can say that you are in a relationship and that growing up in a gay family allowed you to be open to falling in love with anyone. We encourage you to use your answer to this question as an opportunity to dispel the myth that LGBT parents somehow “create” LGBT children or “contaminate” their children, and the assumption that being LGBT is less desirable then being straight.

A few sample answers:
• I don't believe that sexuality (a person's actual sexual orientation) is a choice. I feel that it’s something that you are born with, but I think that growing up with gay or lesbian parents does have an effect on whether a person is able to accept his or her sexual orientation.
• I identify as heterosexual, and so does my younger brother. I knew from a young age that I was attracted to guys, and my parents were supportive of that, just as they would have been supportive if I'd been attracted to women instead. I think both gay and straight parents should be non-judgmental and just allow their children to discover their own sexuality naturally. I don't think it's possible to change anyone's sexual orientation, so being non-supportive just leads to a strained relationship with your child. It won't have any effect on his or her ultimate orientation though.
• I am not going to answer that question and let me explain why—if I tell you that I identify as an LGBT person, the assumption will be made that my parents somehow made or influenced me to be gay. However, if I tell you that I am straight—it somehow reinforces the notion that straight equals more normal than other types of sexual orientations or gender identities because people will be “relieved” to know that my parents haven't influenced my own sexuality.
• Because I was raised in an open-minded, supportive family I know that no matter how I identify or who I fall in love with my parents will be behind me.
• I identify as queer but I think I would identify the same way no matter who my parents are.

Does your parent’s lifestyle bother you?
RESPONSE IDEAS: If you hear the word lifestyle, before answering the question try to counteract the homophobic notion of a gay lifestyle. Example: Actually I don’t think about my parents sexuality in terms of a lifestyle; it’s just our life. Or my parents’ lifestyle is to be a caring, supportive parent. Their sexual orientation has nothing to do with that.

If your parents are gay- how were you born?
RESPONSE IDEAS: The age of your audience will affect how to deal with these questions. Feel free to be honest though and explain about donor insemination, adoption, that your parent/s were married or in
an opposite-sex union when you were born or any other way that your family came to be.

The most challenging of these discussions can be around explaining donor insemination to younger audiences. Stick to the basics- in order to create a baby, lesbian women might go to a doctor or get help from a friend in order to create their child.

What about the fact that the bible says it’s wrong to be gay?
RESPONSE IDEAS: Whenever possible, AVOID getting into a religious or theological debate with folks about LGBT issues. But you can speak from your heart: If you were raised in any religion you can share, “Well I grew up in a Church that taught me to love all people…”

If you weren’t raised in a religious context, or you are not a religious person, you can also explain this fact and share that even without a specific religion, your family has taught you certain morals and values and how those relate to your experience of having an LGBT parent.

If you have two moms, how do you tell them apart/ what do you call them?
RESPONSE IDEAS: Obviously this is a ridiculous question, but actually a fairly common one. Most people aren’t really asking how kids physically tell their parents apart – they are curious about the labels we give our parents (some people can’t think of calling their mother anything but “mom,” so they wonder if having two “moms” causes confusion, for example, when yelling from your room: “MOM!”). Just explain how it works in your family.

Which one of your parents is the man/woman?
RESPONSE IDEAS: I have two loving parents who support and respect me. They each take on different aspects of the roles that might be assumed because of gender roles in a straight family. You can use examples such as one parent does the grocery shopping, one does the laundry, both parents cook, both take care of us, and both work. Try not to re-affirm societal gender roles. Instead, share stories or experiences that show that any person can fill roles that society stereotypically assumes to be male or female and how that happens in your own family.

Do you see your parents having sex? Do they try and hit on you?
RESPOND firmly with questions like this because they are based on the stereotype that if someone is gay that it has everything to do with SEX and nothing else. Explain that your parents are your parents. That they do parent things. Like take care of you when you are sick and nag you about doing your homework.
Make it clear that no one would expect this behavior from their parents and that being gay doesn’t change the fact that all parents are first and foremost parents.

Do you feel like you lack male-female role models because you have same-sex coupled parents?

RESPONSE IDEAS: This is a common assumption by folks- that if you have two moms you must not have any male role models. Explain from your own experience why this is or isn’t true. Point out that having straight parents doesn’t mean anything about who the role models are in your life. Role models are often teachers, extended family, mentors, neighbors, etc.

Do your parents pressure you to be gay?
RESPONSE IDEAS: Answers for this question will often be similar to the suggestions put forth under the “Are you gay?” section. Reinforce that your parents want you to be happy and to be yourself.

Do you ever wish you had a normal family?
RESPONSE IDEAS: We do not want to reinforce the idea that somehow our families are less than normal, just because we have one or more LGBT parent/s. Challenge the questioner’s use of the word “normal.” Some youth will explain that their family is the only family they have known- so they have no sense of what it would be like to have a different family. Tell them that your family is normal! Or give your own definition for what a “normal” family might be (eat meals together, walk your pets, support one another, love one another) and explain how your own family fits that definition. You can also talk about what makes your family unique and what you appreciate about your family. Every family is different and special – this has nothing to do with the sexual orientations or gender identities of the parents of that family.

Do you think it was unfair of your parents to come out since you have faced discrimination and harassment?
RESPONSE IDEAS: You can definitely share your true experiences with any type of teasing or discrimination. But you can also use this question to reinforce that the problem is actually homophobia and transphobia. For example, “we live in a world where homophobia and transphobia creates situations where kids like myself might face bullying or harassment. The sad truth is that kids get made fun of for all sorts of reasons- because they are too smart, too short, too fat, the wrong religion, etc. The problem isn’t my parents, but that the actions of bullies are tolerated by schools and communities.”

Is it weird to have a parent who wants to be a man/woman?
For folks with transgender parents, talk about how their gender identity should be recognized and respected. You can talk honestly about how your parent’s transition affected you or how you dealt with it.

Common Questions from LGBT Audiences: (NOTE: these aren’t that tricky- just know that they are commonly asked questions and be prepared to address these topics if you are presenting to an LGBT parent or prospective parent audience):
- What do you wish your parents had done differently?
- What’s the hardest thing you have faced?
- What is the climate like in your school?
- Do you think parents should be involved in their children’s school/s even if the child doesn’t want them to be?
- How important is it for you to know other kids with LGBT parents?
- What’s one thing every LGBT parent should know?
that transition in terms of using different names, pronouns etc. For folks with LGB parents, you should educate that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual is not connected to a person’s gender identity and that (for example) a butch woman can express herself in a butch way but still does not want to be a woman.

Media Literacy for COLAGErs

Everyday, there are stories in the news that shape political decisions, public opinion and laws that affect YOUR life.

Media influences the way the public thinks, votes and acts toward youth and adults with LGBT parents.

What do we mean by the “media”?

Media are all our mediums of communicating information, like television, movies, the internet, radio, newspapers, leaflets, billboards, books, conversation and more.

Why is the media so important to us?

… Because news influences public opinion and policy about youth with LGBT parents,

… Because folks view the news they get from print media and television as fact and assume it’s accurate and balanced, even when it isn’t,

… Because news media is supposed to serve the “public interest,” but often serve corporate interests instead,

… Children spend more time watching television than any other activity except sleeping. By age 18, the average American teenager will have spent more time watching television – 25,000 hours - than learning in the classroom. (American Academy of Pediatrics),

… Because youth with LGBT parents are underrepresented in the media,

… Because media is an important outlet for raising awareness about the true experiences of youth with LGBT parents, and

… When youth with LGBT parents are able to share their experiences and use their voices in the media, change happens!
Messaging

In the context of doing media activism, *messaging* refers to having a sense of the key points you want to convey through your interview. By incorporating sound bites or referring to lists of talking points about a certain topic you can make sure that you clearly communicate the message that you want readers to get from you.

What is a Sound Bite? While most interviews—regardless of their medium—will be edited in some fashion, you can still ensure your messages get to the audience by shaping the main ideas into sound bites. Sound bites are short, memorable sentences that stand on their own and convey to the audience your organization’s views on an issue. Think about what you see and hear every day in the media about any issue—short, simple and memorable phrases that get the point across quickly and effectively. By preparing sound bites in advance—and practicing them—your ability to effectively reach the audience increases greatly.

How to have an effective Sound Bite

- **KISS- Keep It Short and Simple.** Create short, punctuated sentences that grab the attention of the interviewer and the audience. If we begin to ramble, or our message is too long and complicated, we run the risk of losing our audience’s interest.
- **Personalize the issues**—People respond to an individual’s personal story, especially when dealing with issues as personal as those affecting the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Let your passion for the issue show in your sound bite—if you demonstrate that you care, the audience will see their need to care.
- **Be clear about your goals**—Pick your stories and arguments that best illustrate the point you want to make ahead of time. Start your interview with your best sound bites and arguments (especially in edited television interviews, media professionals will take the first useable, effective quote due to tight deadlines)
- **Use a convincing argument**—Data can be a powerful tool to convince the audience of your message, just be sure that you can back it up. Aim to have your sound bite present the problem, and when possible suggest a solution.
- **Adapt your sound bite for the specific circumstance.** Know which audience you are addressing and tailor your message to them.
- **Try to keep your sound bites positive**—don’t fall into the trap of repeating a reporter’s negative phrasing or terminology. Rephrase your sound bites to reflect a positive position.

Examples of COLAGEr Sound Bites

*The problem isn’t that I have a lesbian mom. The problem is that I live in a homophobic society so that I am vulnerable to harassment in my community and discrimination from my government.*

*My parents love and support me the way that all capable parents should love and support their children. My parents and my family deserve the same rights and responsibilities given to all capable parents.*
I wish that people knew that the only difference between my family and theirs is that I happen to have a gay dad. And because of that experience I feel really open to the many differences and diversity of people and families.

Please support marriage equality by voting against this homophobic attack. This amendment isn’t about protecting marriage or families because it would literally strip MY family of rights and I and the thousands of other children who, like me, have LGBT parents. We deserve to be protected equally by our government.

Talking Points
Talking Points are easy-to-reference lists of different opinions or statements (or sound bites) that are useful when doing public speaking or media work on a specific topic. These can be the basis for you to choose a sound bite for each particular media appearance or interview. COLAGE has several talking points resources available to help you frame your speeches and answers when doing activism. If you would like help developing your talking points or sound bites or want a copy of one of COLAGE’s Talking Point resources, contact us at 415-861-5437.
The Do’s and Don’ts of Media Interviews

Doing education and activism through media advocacy is an important tool that's been used by people with LGBT parents to raise awareness and demand social justice. When doing an interview with the media you should remember all the public speaking tips and commonly asked questions laid out in this guide. But in the case of a media interview, there are even more things to keep in mind—these quick tips will introduce just a few of the major “do’s and “dons” of media activism.

DO

1. Ask if they are on deadline and respond to journalists emails or calls in a timely manner.
2. Use mainstream language (Avoid using slang and acronyms such as COLAGE, queerspawn, bothie, etc. and if you use such phrases, explain them.)
3. Be yourself.
4. Do advocate for yourself that the interview take place at a time and place that is comfortable and easy for you, but keep in mind the scheduling and location needs of the journalist.
5. Deliver your story in a conversational style- use as many personal stories as possible
6. Ask for clarification if you don’t understand a question.
7. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you” or you can refer them to COLAGE.
8. Consider that anything and everything you say will be “on the record.”
9. Call after the story has run to offer feedback, suggestions, and additional information for future stories. By being a reliable source, you may ensure that the writer will contact you for future media opportunities and rely on COLAGE as a credible media source.
10. Consider the media interview not just as an opportunity to answer questions but also as a chance to convey your message.

DON’T

1. Don’t feel pressured to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with.
2. Don’t be a celebrity- you are using the media to make a point and be heard- it’s not an opportunity to hog the limelight.
3. Don’t cuss.
4. Don’t get angry.
5. Don’t lie, exaggerate or estimate any statistics or stories.
6. Don’t just say the issue is important- show it through personal experiences and stories.
7. Don’t say “no comment.” Instead, if you are not going to answer a question, explain why.
8. Don’t expect that the journalist will tell just your side of the story.
9. Don’t ask to see the written copy of an interview until it is printed—this is not standard practice in a majority of journalistic circles.. Most reporters would be offended by any requests to “preview” their work.
10. Don’t say anything you wouldn’t want to see in print. If you do make a mistake, you can ask the journalist to strike that piece of your interview although there is no guarantee that they will.
Smile, you’re on camera! Tips for Being on Television

Television, in this day and age, is one of the most powerful forms of media, reaching the most people. When you are going to be on TV keep these additional tips in minds:

- **Fashion Tips:** Wear bright but solid colors. Avoid wearing all white or all black. Pull your hair back if you have a tendency to play with it. Wear simple jewelry. Remove any bulky or distracting items from your pockets. You should feel good about how you look, but also comfortable. Remove any buttons or pins, and avoid shirts with words on them as they will often be cut off by the camera.

- **Use natural hand gestures that are not distracting.** Well-placed gestures will emphasize your point. But be careful not to go over board as it will be even more noticeable on television. Do not put yours hands in your pockets- it will make your slouch. Watch broadcasts of clergy giving sermons or reporters on the news to pick up pointers!

- **Nervous twitches will be magnified on television.** Every blink, “um” and “like” will be distracting. Try to relax and breath to remain composed and poised.

- **If you make a mistake, stop and start over- unless it is live TV.** If it is being taped, just do another take if you stumble.

- **If you are sitting down for the interview, remember to sit up straight in your seat.** Slumping down or leaning back in your seat will be less visually pleasing for the audience to view.

- **Add as much of your own personality to the interview as possible.** Try to be expressive in your eyes as the audience will be drawn mostly to your face and eyes.

- **Do not look at the camera.** Look at the reporter to aim for a more conversational tone.

- **Do not be distracted by the reporter or the crew.** Even if the reporter is looking at their watch or a camera-person is dropping things behind you- stay focused on communicating your message.

- **Remember- the viewing audience is the target- not the journalist, crew or reporter.** Therefore do not address the reporter personally.
Letters to the Editor

Why write a Letter to the Editor?

One of the easiest ways for making your voice heard is the local newspaper/s in your community or your favorite magazines. Every newspaper has a Letters to the Editor section in which anyone (including you!) can submit their response to articles, or opinions of current events. The letters to the editor section of your local paper is an ideal forum for sharing your opinion and story with the local community, prompting discussion, or drawing attention to an event or issue. In addition, it is one of the first pages many elected officials turn to. Letters to the editor show that an issue is of concern to the community and are excellent tools for education. Here are a few guidelines for getting your letter to the editor printed.

Tips for writing a letter

- **Localize your letter** -- explain how pieces of legislation, events in the community, incidents of homophobia, etc. affect you or people you know in your community. Include examples of discrimination you or others have faced and personal information about your family background.
- **Make your letter timely** - if the newspaper has recently printed a story or column about an issue affecting youth with LGBT parents, you can reference the article and use it as a springboard for your letter. If you are not addressing a specific article, editorial or letter that recently appeared in the paper you are writing to, then try to tie the issue you want to write about to a recent or upcoming event.
- **Personalize the letter**- The best letters will be attention getting and moving.
- **Keep your letter short** and to the point – 150 – 200 words and no more than three paragraphs.
- **Your letter should carry** its most important message in the first paragraph.
- **Include your name**, address, signature and daytime phone number. Editors like to call to confirm that the letter was actually written by the person whose name appears on the letter. Check the letter specifications of the newspaper to which you are writing to see if they have any other requirements.
- **Limit the number of points** you make, and stay on the same subject.
- **Write to different sections of the paper when appropriate**. Sometimes the issue you want to address is relevant to the lifestyle, book review or other section of the paper. An increasing number of broadcast news programs (60 Minutes, All Things Considered, etc.) also solicit and broadcast "letters to the editor." Don't forget these outlets.

Don't be disappointed if your letter does not get printed. Newspapers get many letters every day and can't print all of them. Most papers won't print the same writers over and over again. Therefore, if you have had a letter published recently, encourage a friend or co-worker to write one on a similar topic.

Don't be afraid to ask for action -- tell readers what you want them to do. This includes your elected representatives; you can be sure they read the letters to the editor.
COLAGE is ready and willing to proofread your letter and to offer feedback and comments. You can e-mail a draft of your letter to COLAGE. Be sure to include the name and state of the newspaper that you are planning to submit the letter to.

Find local newspapers in your area

You can go to http://capwiz.com/hrc/dbq/media/ to search for local newspapers in your area. It is a good idea to confirm with the newspaper directly at what e-mail or snail mail address they accept letters to the editor.

Sample Letters to the Editor

Sample letter #1: From COLAGE Speak Out Member Melanie Jones to The Lantern, Ohio State University Newspaper

Children of gays not so confused
The Lantern; Issue date: 11/3/04
John Scott was quoted in the Lantern on Friday, October 29th ("Campus Debaters Tackle Issue 1") as saying that if Issue 1 doesn't pass, it will "cause a great deal of confusion with children of same-sex parents." Huh? As the daughter of a lesbian, the only thing in life that I find confusing is the thought process of people like Mr. Scott. Research has shown the children of gay parents are as well adjusted and successful as children of straight parents. In fact, the only time in my life that I have felt confusion over my mother's orientation (and her partner, the woman whom I affectionately call my Step-Butch) is when I encountered ignorant, homophobic attitudes as I go about my life. Perhaps Mr. Scott should give a second thought to making assertions about children of gays and lesbians after he's done a bit of research.

Melanie Jones
Graduate student

Sample letter #2: To respond to proposed anti-gay marriage amendments.

The proposed gay marriage ban and denial of existing domestic partner rights amendment to the {name of your state} constitution is unimaginable in a state like ours (Refer to article that mentions the amendment). As the son/daughter of two loving parents who happen to be a same-sex couple, I personally feel attacked when legislation such as this amendment are proposed.

This amendment, if passed, would devastate the 30,000-plus registered domestic partner families, including mine, in this state. In addition, the amendment seeks to rescind hospital visitation rights, health insurance, inheritance rights and family medical leave to LGBT families. I do not understand why having an LGBT family makes it okay for me to be less protected than my peers who have straight headed families.
I ask all residents of {name of your state} to take a strong stance against this proposed legislation. This amendment isn’t about protecting marriage or families because it would literally strip MY family of rights. I and the thousands of other children like me who have LGBT parents deserve to be protected equally by the state of {name of your state}.

Sincerely,
NAME, AGE, CITY

Sample letter #3: From COLAGE Speak Out Member, Laurie Cicotello to USA Today. June 12th, 2006

When my parents married 37 years ago, their wedding vows read, "Let no one rend asunder" their marriage and, yet, many legislators keep trying.

When my transgendered parent transitioned more than 20 years ago, my folks stayed together as a same-sex couple. My parents are in a race against time to stop lawmakers from annulling their marriage.

If people really want to save "traditional marriage," why not outlaw no-fault divorce laws that make it possible for people to walk away from marriages even before the ink is dry on their marriage licenses?

Instead, Americans listen complacently to the thrice-married Rush Limbaugh say we are evil and immoral for fighting for non-traditional marriages and families.

If people are defined solely by their ability to have children, then outlaw marriage between anyone incapable of bearing children, such as senior citizens and infertile couples.

As an adult, let me assure you, I am not worse off for growing up in my non-traditional family. I have high moral values. I am an upstanding citizen, and I am an award-winning journalist.

But I guess I’m going to hell simply for honoring my parents. My bad.

Millions of children are much more damaged in so-called traditional families in which divorce wreaks havoc and where love isn’t always apparent.

Help my parents keep the wedding vow they took so many years ago: "Let no one rend asunder" their marriage simply because one partner changed.

Laurie Cicotello, Hastings, Neb.

Tell COLAGE if your letter is published!

If your letter is published, please send us a copy! We love to highlight media featuring youth and adults with LGBT parents on our website, on our Net News list, and/or in our media archive. You can e-mail a copy to carlos@colage.org, send via fax at (415) 255-8345, or snail mail to:

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Make Your Own Media!

Whether its writing a book, making a movie, or scripting a play, COLAGErs have long used creative mediums to express themselves. Pick up a camera and start documenting your life, grab a pen and start composing a memoir, or use the internet to create a website or blog. When youth and adults with LGBT parents make our own media, we have the most control over the stories, experiences and opinions that we put out in the world.

If there is something you would like to see in the media- make it happen. COLAGErs have created on-line blogs, written books or made documentary films about having LGBT parents. If you are an artist, filmmaker, writer or internet whiz, please let COLAGE know- we love hearing about and showcasing the creative work of COLAGE media-makers with our members and on our website.

JUST A FEW EXAMPLES OF COLAGER-MADE MEDIA:

RADIO: Queerspawn Diaries. Frustrated by the conversations they heard in the mainstream media about LGBT families, Nava EtShalom and Chana Joffe-Walt created this independent audio documentary project about young adults with LGBT parents to address a lack of self-produced narratives by and about kids of queer families. To learn more about this project and listen to excerpts, visit www.queerspawn.org.

BOOKS: Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell it Like It Is. Abigail Garner, creator of the website www.familieslikemine.org is the adult daughter of a gay dad and writes extensively about kids of LGBT parents.

BLOGS: Queerspawn Community. www.queerspawn.com is a recently started blog dedicated to the experiences and voices of people with LGBT parents created by Kate Ranson-Walsh, the adult daughter of a gay dad and a straight mom. Toilet Paper Online. http://www.toiletpaperonline.com/ Noel Black, an adult COLAGEr, edits this online blog which often talks explicitly about his experiences of having a lesbian mom and a gay dad. Additionally you can check out Oversampled http://www.oversampled.net/ which is a collection of blogs written by people with LGBT parents.

WEBSITES: Sol’s Pages. Just one example of a website by and about a COLAGEr activist. While she's best known for her activism on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families, Sol has been a community leader in speaking out on behalf of countless other issues--including racial justice, civil liberties, peace, and eco-justice, to name a few. Her website details her involvement in social justice activism and includes speeches and articles written by Sol. http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/6502/. Marina Gatto, Equality for All is another example of a COLAGEr website- www.marinagatto.com.

MOVIES: Our House is a documentary made by adult COLAGEr Meema Spadola. She profiles five families with gay or lesbian parents and explores what it’s like to grow up with gay or lesbian parents. http://www.frif.com/new2004/our.html
Youth Lobbying Guide

Lobbying at the State Level for Your Rights.
The state level is often the single most powerful and important level in youth rights. Currently, states are
the battleground for the debates and attacks on same-sex marriage, domestic partnership and other
means of allowing LGBT couples and families to protect their relationships. Lobbying enables young
people to be involved in politics, influencing decisions that affect their lives, and giving them a voice, even
when they don’t have a vote.

Lobbying is the name given to a process of seeking support from decision-makers when you are trying to
influence a particular course of action. Sometimes you may need to lobby in response to an issue already
in the news, for example, a piece of legislation affecting LGBT families, or trying to put an issue you feel is
important into the spotlight, such as the need for better safe schools protections for students with LGBT
parents in your state.

Connect to your local or state LGBT Advocacy Group
It’s very likely that there is already a group of activists in your state who are working on issues of
importance to youth with LGBT parents and the LGBT community. Contact COLAGE and we will connect
you to activists who are working on the ground in your area who may have lobby days or press
conferences already planned!

Form a list of your legislators.
Form a list of the State legislators who represent your districts, plus folks such as your Senators and
Representatives at the national level. Inform yourself about which of your elected officials have been
allies to LGBT family rights in the past, perhaps as the authors of bills that promoted equality for LGBT
people and families. (Also be aware of those officials who introduced homophobic bills). New legislators
can also be valuable allies - as they will be wanting to show to their constituency that they do indeed
represent them.
Getting a list of your legislators should not be that hard – These websites are just a few that will help you
locate who your elected officials are:
http://colage.org/programs/advocacy/resources.htm

Make a list of potential candidates for the issues.
Once you have a list of legislators, you should start to make a list of the ones that might support what you
are trying to get done. What party is the legislator from? What political leanings has he got? Which ones
have expressed themselves in favor of the issue you want to tackle?

Set your goal
It is important to identify what you want to achieve and why it is important, before you start. Work out a
realistic timetable, achievable targets and sensible deadlines. If you are opposing something, try to think
up some positive, practical alternatives; this makes it easier for decision-makers to support you.

Research your issue
You need to research your issue thoroughly to ensure that you have evidence or facts to support your
case. You have to demonstrate that you have made an effort to find out as much as you can or people
might not take much notice of your opinions. Also, you need to ensure that your evidence and facts are
correct.
Meeting your elected representative

Before the meeting

☐ Decide exactly what you want to get out of it and who is going to say what.

☐ **Review** the bills or pieces of legislation that you want to specifically address with your representatives.

☐ **Be on time, but be prepared** that elected representatives have busy schedules and might be late.

☐ Have a general idea of the order you want to present your points in, but don’t worry too much if it changes this often happens in meetings.

☐ Nominate someone to take brief notes of the meeting; in particular, **record any commitments** they make to help you and your cause. Make sure you pick up business cards from any officials or their staff that you meet so that you can do proper follow-up.

☐ Give your local media plenty of notice when meeting your elected representative – it could be an ideal photo opportunity and an excellent opportunity to get your point across.

☐ Have a **short briefing session** before you go, to remind yourselves of the details and go over anything you are unsure about.

☐ Don’t be upset if you are meeting with legislative staff members instead of your actual legislator. Staffers are important advisors to your elected officials on policy matters.

During the meeting – face to face

☐ **Start with introductions**. Make sure that anyone who is from the legislator’s district makes that clear. Legislators pay more attention to constituents (people who live or work in their district).

☐ **Keep the meeting brief and to the point** (no more than half an hour), although they might allow the meeting to go on longer if they are interested.

☐ Remember to **use real-life examples** to illustrate your points; personal stories that demonstrate why legislation is good or bad will be really effective.

☐ Remember that **YOU ARE THE EXPERT**. On the experiences and needs of youth with LGBT parents, you can speak with confidence!

☐ If the elected official is supportive of one of your issues or has demonstrated support in the past, be sure to **acknowledge your appreciation** during your visit.

☐ **Take notes** so that you can follow-up afterwards.

☐ **Don’t worry if you are asked a question and you don’t know the answer**. Tell them you will find out and get back to them.

☐ **Be open to counter-arguments or negative reactions to your issue**, but don’t get stuck on them. Don’t be argumentative or confrontational. While your visit may not earn the explicit support of your legislator, your visit could prevent them from being an active opponent or open their mind to set the stage for future support.

☐ **Do not be afraid to ask for specific commitments from your representative**– ask if you can expect their support on the bill you want to pass or for their sponsorship of legislation you support.
Whatever happens, try to end the meeting on a positive note, summarizing the commitments that have been made to you and your cause, clarifying when you can expect to hear back and thanking them for their time.

After the meeting
- Follow up the meeting with a thank you letter and act on any promises you have made to them.
- Keep them informed of your progress and achievements – as you get more coverage and success, they may become more interested in supporting you.
COLAGE Visibility Resources

Another great way to raise awareness in your school or community is to use the Visibility Resources offered by COLAGE. Each was developed by youth with LGBT parents as a tool for creating change through education, discussion and awareness.

**Respect All Families Poster Series**
Created by youth with LGBT parents, this series of two posters is a perfect tool for spreading a message of acceptance and tolerance in any setting.

**That’s So Gay: Portraits of Youth with LGBT Parents**
The first exhibit of its kind, That’s So Gay includes images, text, and art by youth with LGBT parents that attempt to provide a glimpse into the lives and experiences of children of queer families. In addition, the photo-text portion of the exhibit is available on CD so that anyone can easily print out a gallery of impactful images that share the experiences of youth with LGBT parents.

**Focus on MY Family: A Queerspawn Anthology**
Featuring poetry, art, essays, fiction and photography by youth with LGBT parents, Focus on MY Family highlights diverse voices of COLAGE youth and directly confronts the mean-spirited rhetoric of organizations such as Focus on the Family which attack and demean our families and experiences and is an excellent tool for sparking dialogue.

**In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBT Parents**
In a time when LGBT families are debated and attacked in the media, courts and Congress, from school houses to state houses across the country, five young people give you a chance to walk in their shoes – to hear their own views on marriage, making change, and what it means to be a family. In My Shoes is a 31 minute documentary produced by and about youth with LGBT parents.

Each of these amazing visibility tools is accompanied by a complete action and discussion guide to make it easy for any youth or adult to create programming, curriculum, events, or activities to educate along with the resources. To learn more visit [http://colage.org/programs/youth/ylap.htm](http://colage.org/programs/youth/ylap.htm) or contact COLAGE.

**MYTH Smashers!**
The newest COLAGE Visibility Tool, this play was created by YLAP and Fringe Benefits to be used in middle schools to bust some common myths and stereotypes about youth with LGB and/or T parents. To learn about bringing MYTH Smashers to your middle school or to host a production of the show in your community, contact Carlos Uribe, COLAGE National Program Director at [carlos@colage.org](mailto:carlos@colage.org).
Peer Education Workshops

You can use the COLAGE Visibility Resources as a basis to do educational presentations in your school or at other schools in your district. Educating your peers about LGBT families is a great way to raise awareness and make schools safer for youth with LGBT parents as well as affecting the overall climate for LGBT students and other affected by homophobia.

* Ahead of Time:

Consider attending a formal training or get informal support. COLAGE is happy to offer programmatic and technical support to any activists who want to do peer education in their schools and communities. Contact us and tell us about what you are planning and how we can help! COLAGE also offers workshops on school activism at a majority of the events we offer around the country. Additionally there may be organizations in your community such as a chapter of GLSEN (www.glsen.org) or the Gay Straight Alliance Network (www.gsanetwork.org) that is offering a training in your community.

Figure out what you need to do to get the workshop(s) approved by the school. If your school has GSA, the club’s advisor will be a great ally. Talk to them or meet with administrators and/or other faculty members who can give their approval. Present them with a potential workshop agenda and be able to tell them why you think this is an important thing to do.

Find a teacher. Find a teacher that is supportive and who thinks their class would be receptive to your presentation. This may be a teacher who attends GSA meetings or one you know is supportive in other ways. Often, health teachers and social studies teachers are interested in having this topic discussed in their class. Talk with them about how they can support you and discuss how they will handle any disruptions or negative comments from students.

Assess the climate of the classroom. Talk with the teacher or give a pre-workshop survey to find out what students already know, what they have misconceptions about, and what they want to learn.

Practice!
In the Classroom:

**Draw connections.**
Try to draw connections between your workshop and what the teacher is teaching.

**Invite an administrator or another teacher.**
Invite a supportive Administrator to see your workshop if you'd like to do it in other classes. Also other teachers might like to see what you propose doing in their classes, so feel free to invite them.

**Make it clear that you do not speak for everyone.**
Often in educational workshops, the audience will take what you say as representing the entire community of youth with LGBT parents. However, you are only responsible for representing yourself. Make this disclaimer known at the beginning of the workshop. You can only speak from your personal experience. (Use "I" statements.)

**Define and clarify the terms you use.**
Not everyone will be as versed as you in LGBTQ issues and language. You should define the terms you use, such as "sexual orientation" or "gender identity," to make sure that everyone understands what you mean. If you decide to use words such as "queerspawn" or "dyke," you should also discuss what they mean to you and why you are choosing to use them when others may not.

**Not everyone will agree with you.**
The entire reason you are doing a peer education workshop is to increase awareness. People will disagree with you, and that's okay as long as they are not disruptive to the workshop. Be accepting of others' beliefs.

**Stick to your purpose.**
You are there to do an anti-homophobia workshop, not a sex education workshop. Unfortunately, for many people the instant you mention "gay," they think sex. If they ask you questions about your parents or LGBT people that make you uncomfortable or veer from your purpose, you do not have to answer them. An anti-homophobia workshop is about making schools safer - free from harassment and violence.

**Be Honest.**
Above all else be honest about what you know. If you don't know an answer, that is okay, tell them that you don't know.

**Afterward:**

**Learn from your evaluations.**
Make sure you give folks enough time to fill them out, and be open to constructive criticism. Don't let the overly negative ones get you down, though. You can't please everyone, and students may have good suggestions for how you can improve your presentation the next time.

* * NOTE: Much of this useful information about Peer Education was taken a resource developed by the GSA Network. ([www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)).
COLAGE Speak OUT Application

Are you ready to start using your voice and your experiences to make change at local, state and national levels? Then it’s time for you to join the COLAGE Speak OUT Program. It’s Easy! Just fill out this application and return it to COLAGE and we’ll sign you up to be part of our national network of youth and adults with LGBT parents who raise visibility and impact laws through activism.

Resolve to make a difference in the lives of other children, youth and adults with LGBT parents by becoming a member of Speak Out. To join fill out the COLAGE Speak Out Survey today and mail or email to COLAGE. Or contact Carlos Uribe, COLAGE Program Director at carlos@colage.org or 415-861-5437 x102 for more information.

Name:
Birthdate:
Address (Street, City, State, Zip):
Email:
Phone Number:
Tell us about your family:
Why do you want to join the COLAGE Speak Out program?
Why do you think you will be a good spokesperson for others with LGBT parents?
OPTIONAL: Race:
Optional: Gender/Gender Identity:
Optional: Sexual Orientation: