

Supportive Families, Healthy Children

Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual & Transgender Children



SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

“You have to start with the family.”

Now we know how harmful it is for gay kids not to be accepted, not to be loved, and to be victimized. The more we talk about it, and the more people embrace their gay children and form families where they are accepted and loved—and not discriminated—they will thrive, the kids will thrive.”

LEONORA, MOTHER OF A LESBIAN DAUGHTER,
WITH 2 GRANDCHILDREN



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BY

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FUNDED BY

The California Endowment

2009

Supporting Our Work

The Family Acceptance Project™ is funded by foundations and individual donors. Contributions are tax-deductible. Donors can contribute by mail or online. For information on making a contribution, visit our webpage at: <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/donations>, or send us an e-mail at: fap@sfsu.edu

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Design	Mike Heffner, www.202design.com
Photography	Cover photo, and photo, page 17: Tracy Stephens, www.littlebeanonline.com ; Inside front cover photo, and photo, page 11: Fotosearch.com ; All other photos: iStockphoto.com

The **Family Acceptance Project™** is developing a new family model to increase family support, decrease risk and promote the well-being of LGBT children and youth, based on our research. We are developing a series of written and visual materials for families, caregivers and providers. This booklet offers basic information to help parents and caregivers support their LGBT children, to reduce their risk for depression, suicide, substance abuse and HIV infection and to promote their well-being. It is available in English, Spanish and Chinese.

For additional information, visit our webpage at <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu> or write to us at fap@sfsu.edu

FUNDED BY THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

We are grateful to our funder and to the many LGBT adolescents, families and young adults who shared their lives with us to help other families learn how to support their LGBT children.

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Citation:

Ryan, C. Supportive families, healthy children: Helping families with lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender children. San Francisco, CA: Family Acceptance Project, Marian Wright Edelman Institute, San Francisco State University, 2009.

Introduction

Families love their children and want the best for them.

They want to protect their children and keep them from harm, and from anyone who might hurt their child or adolescent.

When parents hold their newborn infant, few of them think their child might be gay or transgender. In fact, many parents dream of special times in their child's future, especially of their wedding and when their children become parents themselves – with heterosexual partners.

But many young people and adults are not heterosexual. Research shows that between 2-7% of adults are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). Studies also show that young people – both gay and heterosexual – first become aware of being sexually attracted to another person at around age 10.

As more information has become available about homosexuality, it has been easier for many children and adolescents to realize that they are gay at younger ages.

In our study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adolescents and families, we found that the average age that youth realized they were gay was a little over age 13. Many of them knew they were gay at even younger ages – such as age 7 or 9. And some of them told their parents or other family members.

But many of them didn't tell anyone because by then most had learned that being gay was shameful and wrong from family, friends and other people in their community. They learned that gay people were called names, could be discriminated against and hurt by others, and they could embarrass and shame their families. So from an early age, many gay children and adolescents learn how to hide their deepest feelings from people they love.

Support Your Child's LGBT Identity Even When You Feel Uncomfortable

“When we hold our baby in the nursery for the first time, no one tells us that our baby might be gay. By the time we know who our children are, we may have hurt them in many ways.

No one teaches us how to help and protect our gay or transgender children. We may think we can help by trying to change them - but we need to love them for who they are.”

—*Erica, mother of a 14-year-old transgender youth*

The parents and family members in our study – parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters, guardians and foster parents — like you – told us that **all** parents and families should learn about our study. They want other parents and caregivers to learn about our research to help their gay and transgender children from early childhood – long before they realize that their child might be gay or transgender. What those parents and family members realized – and what our research has shown – is that families need to create a nurturing and supportive environment long before they know who their children will become.

What This Booklet Can Tell You

This booklet was written for families like yours to help strengthen families and foster families with gay and transgender children and adolescents. And to help you provide support and to decrease your gay or transgender child’s risk for serious health and mental health problems in adulthood. The information in this booklet comes from research we did with families with LGBT adolescents and young adults.

Talk with Your Child

“Darnell came up to me and said, ‘Mommy, I like boys.’ At first I didn’t pay much attention. I wasn’t sure what he meant. A couple of weeks later, he said it again: ‘I like boys. You know, like you like Daddy.’ I said ‘Darnell, we’re going to read Scripture.’ So I picked up the Bible and read him a passage.

I did that every time he tried to talk with me, and then I realized that his eyes were just looking off. He didn’t understand what I was saying, but he knew I wasn’t listening. So then I asked him to talk with me and tell me what he felt. I was really afraid of what he was saying, but he is my little boy. And I love him.”

—Keisha, mother of a 7-year-old son

This research is new and is just starting to be published in medical journals. This kind of study has never been done before. So information on how family acceptance and rejection affects a gay child’s well-being has not been available before now.

We studied LGBT adolescents and their families who were accepting, unsure or conflicted and rejecting of their child’s gay or transgender identity. Our research identified more than 100 behaviors that families and caregivers use to respond to their child’s gay or transgender identity. This includes behaviors such as telling your child he or she can’t come to a family event because they are gay or lesbian, or welcoming your child’s gay or transgender friends to your home.



Then we studied how each of these behaviors that families use to react to their child's gay or transgender identity affects the young person's risk for health and mental health concerns. We studied how each of these family behaviors affects a gay or transgender young person's risk for depression, suicide, substance abuse, HIV and STDs. And we studied how these family behaviors affect their self-esteem, sense of the future, life satisfaction and social support.

Now we can show families how to support gay and transgender children. We can also tell parents and caregivers which behaviors can increase your child's risk for suicide, drug abuse and HIV. We can show you how to increase your gay or transgender child's self-esteem. This will help your child have a positive sense of the future and become a successful, happy and productive adult.

We wrote this guide for families like yours to give you the basic information you need to help support your gay or transgender child. We will also develop more resources for families and providers. These will help decrease your gay or transgender child's risk for health problems and help promote their well-being.

What Our Research Shows: How Parents' Reactions Affect Their LGBT Children

Our research shows that families, parents, foster parents, caregivers and guardians can have a very dramatic impact on their LGBT children. We found that family acceptance promotes well-being and helps protect LGBT young people against risk. And family rejection has a serious impact on a gay or transgender young person's risk for health and mental health problems.

Family Rejection

Many parents believe that the best way to help their gay or transgender children thrive as adults is to help them try to fit in with their heterosexual peers. This may mean trying to change their child's sexual orientation or gender identity. It also often means preventing them from learning about homosexuality or from finding gay or transgender resources to help them develop a positive sense of the future as a gay or transgender adult.

Because parents see these behaviors as loving or caring for their gay children, they are often surprised and shocked to learn that their gay children experience these behaviors as rejection or abuse. Young people feel that by rejecting their gay or transgender identity – a very core part of *who* they are as a person – their parents are rejecting *all* of who they are. Instead, these very different ideas about how best to help their gay children lead to family conflict and increase the adolescent's distress and loss of hope. Parents think they are helping their children survive in a world they feel will never accept them by trying to prevent them from learning about or from being gay. But adolescents feel as if their parents don't love them, are ashamed of them or even hate them.

Many gay and transgender youth feel like they have to hide who they are to avoid being rejected, thrown out of their home, or hurting their parents and other family members – who believe that homosexuality is wrong and even sinful. But hiding has a cost. It undermines a gay or transgender adolescent's self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Being valued by their parents and family helps children learn to value and care about themselves. But hearing that they are bad or sinful sends a deep message that they are not a good person. This affects their ability to



love themselves and care for themselves. And it increases risky behaviors, including risk for HIV, substance abuse and other negative behaviors. It also affects their ability to plan for the future. Youth who are rejected may do poorly in school. And they are much less likely to want to have a family or to be parents themselves.

Family Rejection Affects Health & Mental Health

Our research shows that gay and transgender youth who were rejected by their families because of their identity had much lower self-esteem. They had fewer people they could turn to for help. And they were more isolated than youth who were accepted by their families.

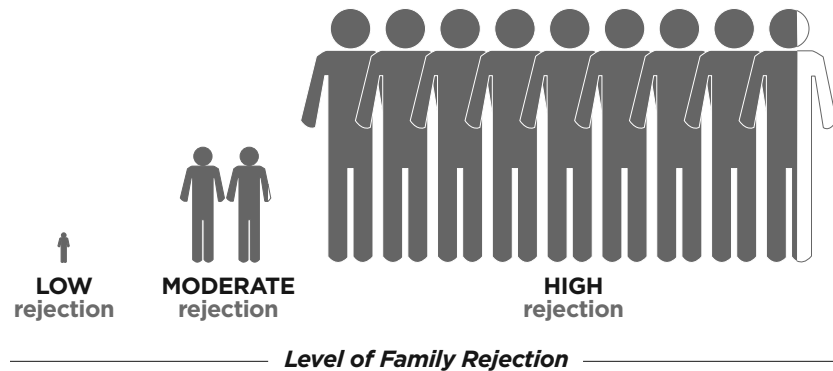
Gay and transgender teens who were highly rejected by their parents and caregivers were at very high risk for health and mental health problems when they become young adults (ages 21-25). Highly rejected young people were:

- n **More than 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide**
- n **Nearly 6 times as likely to report high levels of depression**
- n **More than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs, and**
- n **More than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases**

compared with gay and transgender young adults who were not at all or only rejected a little by their parents and caregivers – because of their gay or transgender identity.

Lifetime Suicide Attempts for Highly Rejected LGBT Young People

(One or more times)



Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

This drawing shows the serious impact of high levels of family rejection on gay or transgender young adults whose parents tried to change who they were. Their parents or caregivers tried to prevent them from being gay or transgender. Or they showed their disappointment or shame in having a gay or transgender child in other ways. (See page 8 for a list of rejecting behaviors that are very harmful for LGBT youth.)

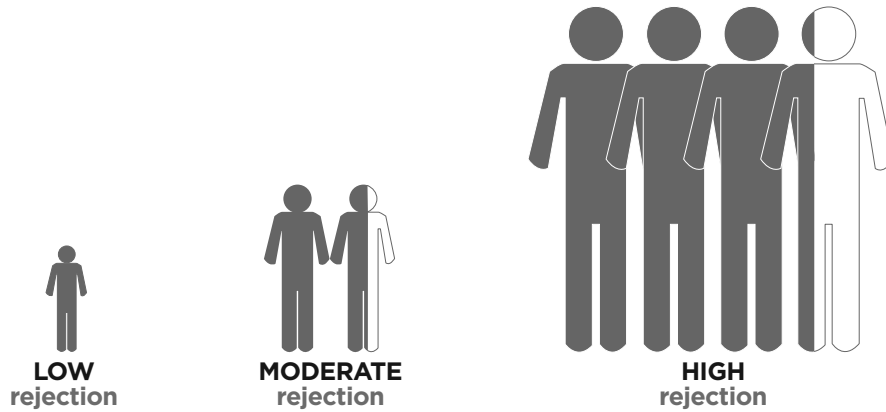
In this drawing, you can see that gay and transgender adolescents who had many experiences of rejection were at much higher risk for trying to commit suicide than in families that were only a little rejecting or not at all rejecting (low rejection). Gay and transgender youth from **highly rejecting** families were more than 8 times as likely to try to take their own lives by the time they were young adults. In families that were **moderately rejecting** (had some negative reactions to their gay or transgender child – but also had some positive reactions) those young people were only about twice as likely to try to kill themselves.

Gay and transgender young adults who were highly rejected by their parents and caregivers had poorer health than other gay or transgender young people who were not rejected by their families. They had more problems with drug use. They felt more hopeless. And they were much less likely to protect themselves from HIV or sexually transmitted diseases. This puts them at higher risk for getting HIV and AIDS.

For parents and caregivers, a little change – being a **little less rejecting** and a **little more accepting** – can make an important difference in reducing a young person's risk for serious health problems, including suicide and HIV.

As with risk for suicide, gay and transgender young people with high levels of family rejection were more than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs compared with young people from families with little or no rejection. Their use of illegal drugs is cut in half when families are moderately rejecting.

Illegal Drug Use

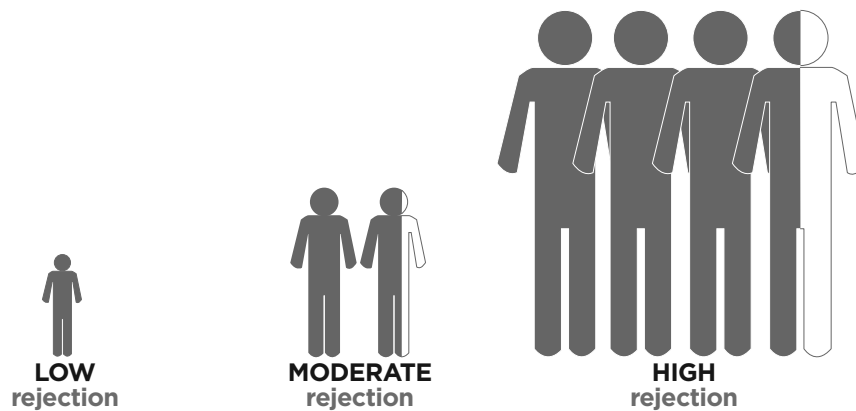


Level of Family Rejection

Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

LGBT young people from highly rejecting families are more than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and for sexually transmitted diseases than young people from families that were not rejecting. Their risk is cut in half when families are moderately rejecting.

Risk for HIV Infection



Level of Family Rejection

Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

Family Responses to Learning How Their Behavior Affects Their Child's Risk

We found that families from all ethnic groups were shocked to learn that reactions they thought would help or would protect their children from being gay or transgender – instead put their children at very high risk for health and mental health problems.

These behaviors – such as trying to change their children's identity or trying to keep them away from gay friends to protect them – instead, isolated their children and made them feel alone and unwanted. Many youth who are rejected actually feel like their parents and family members hate them.

Parents may react with anger, fear, sadness or disgust when they learn that their child is gay or transgender. Some parents or family members may call

Some Family Behaviors that Increase Your LGBT Child's Risk for Health & Mental Health Problems

Behaviors to Avoid

- Hitting, slapping or physically hurting your child because of their LGBT identity
- Verbal harassment or name-calling because of your child's LGBT identity
- Excluding LGBT youth from family and family activities
- Blocking access to LGBT friends, events & resources
- Blaming your child when they are discriminated against because of their LGBT identity
- Pressuring your child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine
- Telling your child that God will punish them because they are gay
- Telling your child that you are ashamed of them or that how they look or act will shame the family
- Making your child keep their LGBT identity a secret in the family and not letting them talk about it

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their children names or get into physical fights with them. Others may prevent their children from attending support groups for gay and transgender youth, or from learning about their gay or transgender identity. Or parents and foster parents may prevent them from attending family events because how the gay or transgender youth looks or behaves is shameful and embarrassing to them.

Our research identified many behaviors that parents and caregivers use to reject their child's gay or transgender identity. We found that some of these rejecting behaviors – such as blocking access to gay friends and resources or preventing a gay youth from attending family events – were just as harmful as physically beating a gay or transgender child. Instead, these behaviors that parents and caregivers may use to try to protect their children from harm put them at very high risk for suicide, depression and other health problems. A list of harmful behaviors that increase your gay or transgender

child's risk for health and mental health problems in adulthood is included in the box on page 8. These behaviors should always be avoided.

Uncertainty and Concern

Many parents feel conflicted when they learn that their child is gay. They are unsure how to react. They may feel disappointed, concerned and don't know how to help their gay or transgender child. They may respond cautiously since they don't want to encourage their child's gay or transgender identity, but they also don't want to push their child away.

Parents often fear that others may try to hurt their gay or transgender children. And fear motivates many parents to react negatively to their children's LGBT identity – to try to protect their children. Fear motivates many parents, foster parents and caregivers to try to discourage or change their child's gay or transgender identity.

The most important way that parents, families and foster families can help their gay or transgender children is to support that child. This helps their LGBT child develop a deep sense of self-worth and self-esteem. For many families, this may not seem possible – at first. But building a child's inner strength by helping them learn to value themselves can help your gay or transgender child deal with discrimination and rejection from others. How you react to your gay or transgender children has a deep and lasting impact on their lives. It affects your relationship with your child and your family. And our research shows that your reactions affect your child's health and well-being.

Our research has identified many ways to express support that can help your gay or transgender child and show them that you love them, even if

Some Family Behaviors that Reduce Your LGBT Child's Risk for Health & Mental Health Problems & Help Promote Their Well-Being

Behaviors that Help

- Talk with your child or foster child about their LGBT identity
- Express affection when your child tells you or when you learn that your child is gay or transgender
- Support your child's LGBT identity even though you may feel uncomfortable
- Advocate for your child when he or she is mistreated because of their LGBT identity
- Require that other family members respect your LGBT child
- Bring your child to LGBT organizations or events
- Talk with clergy and help your faith community to support LGBT people
- Connect your child with an LGBT adult role model to show them options for the future
- Welcome your child's LGBT friends & partners to your home
- Support your child's gender expression
- Believe your child can have a happy future as an LGBT adult

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you disagree with their being gay or transgender. We tell parents and caregivers to be honest about their feelings, because children know how their parents really feel. If you are conflicted about having a gay or transgender child, be honest with your child about your feelings and concerns. And **be sure** to tell your child that you love them.

Knowing that you love your child will reassure them that you won't reject them, and though you may feel disappointed or upset, you will not throw them out of the home or abandon them. This will also help you create the space to communicate and to talk with your child about things that are difficult or shameful. Talking with your child and sharing your feelings and experiences will help you and your child – and your family – stay connected with each other and grow together as a family.

Family Acceptance Helps Protect Against Risky Behaviors

In our study, we spoke with many parents and caregivers who openly accepted their gay or transgender children. From the very beginning, when they first learned that their children were gay or transgender, these parents and foster parents reacted with affection. They told their children they loved them, and showed their care in many other ways. For example, they expressed support by advocating for their LGBT children

Connect Your Child with LGBT Resources

“We found out our son was gay when he was in middle school. I reached out to get as much information as I could. We took him to gay events so he could see other gay people leading regular lives.

Later, we met older Asian gay men in their 50s and 60s who spoke with great pain about having to live a lie, and never being able to be honest about who they were with their parents. One finally told his mother he was gay and she said, ‘This is the worst day of my life.’

My wife and I support our son 110%. And this means that we have to speak out and tell other parents that we need to be proud of our gay kids.”

—John, father of 15-year-old gay son

when they were discriminated against, or by welcoming their child's gay or transgender friends into their home. Or they asked their child to talk about being gay or transgender in a way that felt supportive to their child.

A list of supportive behaviors that decrease your LGBT child's risk for health and mental health problems in adulthood and promote their well-being is included in the box on page 9.

We found that young adults whose parents and foster parents supported their gay or transgender identity had better overall health, and mental health. They had higher self-esteem and were much less likely to be depressed, to use illegal drugs, or to think about or try to kill themselves.