

STRONG FAMILY ALLIANCE

SAVING LIVES. PRESERVING FAMILIES.

10 Tips for Supporting an LGBTQ Child

When an LGBTQ child comes out, parent reactions may vary from acceptance, to shock, to worry and concern. However, what very few parents know is how pivotal their reactions are to the future health and safety of their child.

Dr. Caitlin Ryan, who runs the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University, puts it succinctly. “This moment of coming out to parents is a crossroads in the life of an LGBTQ person and the parent response is a major predictor for the child’s future drug use, homelessness and suicide attempts.” Statistics from her research show parent rejection can increase suicide attempts up to eight fold and illegal drug use three fold as well as increasing risks of depression and homelessness.

Even parents that want to help their child are sometimes unsure what actions to take. It’s important to know there are many positive steps, but even more important is making sure the steps you take match your child’s needs and desires. These tips for actions fall into two groups, actions you can do independently and actions you should talk over and coordinate with your child.

Independent Actions: Coming out as an ally or supportive person.

Independent actions are ways parents can speak and act that let the community and their child know they hold an inclusive view of LGBTQ people. These are ways to show support, be an ally, and help any LGBTQ person know you are a safe person to talk to. These steps also become a way to change the community around you as well.

#1 – Be a Non-participant

Refuse to participate in subtle or overt LGBTQ disparagement. -- Do not use negative language, tease, or make disrespectful jokes. If you are around a disparaging conversation, disengage, change the subject or walk away.

#2 Show an Inclusive Attitude

Make proactive efforts to discuss LGBTQ people and ideas -- Avoid silence because silence makes LGBTQ topics seem taboo. Find opportunities to talk about LGBT people or issues in positive ways. Talk about LGBTQ individuals you know and what you admire about them (co-workers, friends, relatives, celebrities, etc.). Bring up news stories or current events around LGBTQ issues such as gay marriage, bathroom bills, discrimination, health issues, news items,

etc. Take time to comment on celebrities, politicians, or advocates who are or who support LGBTQ and why that matters.

#3. Engage in Outreach

Establish relationships with the LGBTQ community in your sphere -- You can extend invitations to shared activities, asking someone to join a league or group activity (sports, music, gardening, cooking etc.) or inviting a neighbor and partner to dinner or a movie. Make a special effort to encourage LGBTQ youth you encounter through sports, friendships, and school.

#4. Grow Your Knowledge

Learn all you can -- Get factual information, resources and suggestions from supportive websites such as strongfamilyalliance.org, which offers basic information and pointers to extensive [Resources](#) for books, videos, blogs and articles. Seek out stories to better understand parent and LGBTQ experiences in [Family Stories](#), books or in the excellent documentary, [Anyone and Everyone](#).

#5. Take a Stand

Confront other's negative word/actions -- It's important to object to derogatory comments or jokes ("That's a hurtful comment," or "that's not funny"). Similarly you may need to counter someone's negative comments and discuss your disapproval with your child. Point out negative, biased, or stereotypical roles, statements, or behavior in the media and have a discussion.

Be a public advocate -- Donate to organizations that promote LGBTQ rights, vote for inclusive public office holders, and encourage your place of worship to support LGBTQ members. You can also participate in supportive events in your area.

Coordinated Actions: Keeping pace as your child becomes more open.

These actions depend on three things:

1. How open your child is
2. How open they feel you should be as a parent
3. How accepting your community is

Recent surveys of LGBTQ youth by GLSEN and the Human Rights Campaign report that 42% say the community they live in is not accepting. In addition, 66% experienced LGBTQ-related discrimination at school and one-third of those surveyed missed at least one school day in the last month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable.

Statistics like these mean you need to communicate with your child how best to help. Questions such as asking permission before telling friends or relatives or a simple "how can I help?" are

important and keep communication open. Telling friends, family, or anyone you know that your child identifies as LGBTQ must parallel your child's decisions about who knows what and when. They may choose to tell some people and not others. It can take years for someone to be fully out or that may never happen. Be guided by your child.

If you and your child are in sync, being more open is a way to support your child, find support yourself, and become an advocate. Here are some suggestions how to keep pace with your child, depending on how open your child wants to be.

#6. Child Is Only Out To You

At this level your actions are mostly those of an ally but there are three important additions:

Respect their confidential information -- However emotional you are, respect your child's privacy. Don't blurt out news they are not ready to share. Take time to find your balance and gather helpful information.

Find your own confidential & supportive space -- It's important to find your own support and not to lay your worries on your child. There are many ways to find balance and information. You can connect with a support group such as [PFLAG](#) or the many affirming [faith based resources](#). It can be very helpful to work with an affirming therapist or talk with accepting clergy. Books on the experiences of other parents and families can be very valuable. You can also post your anonymous story on our website at [Family Stories](#) or journal as a way of thinking through your reactions and concern.

Help your child connect with positive LGBTQ resources -- Isolation can breed despair and it's important to help your child find positive information and connections. There are many online resources available from [PFLAG](#), [GSLEN](#), the [Human Rights Campaign](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control](#) that provide information for both LGBTQ youth and their parents. Look for local resources that might provide friendships or connections for your child such as [GSA Clubs](#) or other youth-focused groups or summer camps.

#7. Child Has Told A Trusted Few

Keep pace and ask how you can help -- Don't ask your child to stretch and don't hold them back. Sometimes a child may want help with day to day situations and other times not. It's important to ask so the child has a say and can stay in control.

Ask permission if you want to tell someone -- For someone your child knows well, such as a relative or close friend, it's essential your child agrees. It's their relationship too. Help your child tell someone else if your child asks for your help. You may be part of the conversation or you may be sent as a messenger. Bear in mind a disclosure may not be necessary for many family and friends.

Keep communication flowing and help life stay normal -- Ask ordinary questions about life, school, work, and friends. Work to maintain normal conversations and don't make everything about being LGBTQ.

If a school or community is not accepting, it can be important to help a child find activities where they excel. Club activities from debate to sports, extra-curricular activities like service groups, scouting, or arts groups, or a special hobby can be an area for success and relaxation that helps counterbalance other stresses. If possible, find recreation you can enjoy with your child as well.

#8. Child Is Out to Some Family Or Friends

Be a welcoming home -- Make your home a comfortable place to invite your child's friends. This could range from hosting a meeting, homework session or team barbeque to simply providing popcorn as they watch a game or movie on TV. This helps you get to know their friends and can offer a safe place for activities.

Find your comfort zone -- Practice talking about this change until you have the words comfortably down. Journal or talk aloud in the car to help get comfortable with language, terms and things to say. It may help to talk with your child about how to answer questions. Find out how they answer and parallel them. Find positive, affirming ways to answer if someone asks or implies something negative. It's important to act as an ally.

Be a buffer if needed -- Stay calm but positive if someone else such as a relative is emotional or critical. Intervene if someone starts to grill your child. You may want to help your child be realistic that others may talk or gossip. That may be good or bad – take your cue from your child.

#9. Child Is Progressively Open

Grow with your child -- Gradually become more open as your child is more open. You can be a safe place for your child to unpack a negative experience and being a good listener is an excellent way to show support and find out about changes.

Be ready for dating and relationships -- Try to apply consistent guidelines about dating, especially if other children are in the home. This means typical curfews, activities and boundaries are still appropriate. As they begin dating, there may be open affection. To keep perspective, it can to ask yourself "if they were an opposite sex couple would this bother me?" Bear in mind that if your child's date is not open to their own family, it may not be safe for them to be. Allow them to manage their own family situation.

Make your home a destination -- This will help you get to know your child's friends. Even more, you may become a friend to other young people whose families may be rejecting. An accepting adult can be a welcome experience for youth.

#10. Both You and Your Child Are Out

Advocate -- Join one of the many support and advocacy groups. Speak for LGBTQ rights and be a public voice when possible.

Help other families and youth -- You can help change the environment for your child and others. Support or help your school start a [GSA](#) Club and recommend [GLSEN](#) resources to teachers and school counselors. Reach out to parents with a child coming out and be a support. Help them find resources and information.

Overall, when parents support their LGBTQ child in ways that fit their situation, they help keep their child safe and their family strong. One final important thing parents can do: help your child envision a happy and positive future. Being their optimist and encourager can help them envision good opportunities ahead.

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