



# Supportive Families, Healthy Children

Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian,  
Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children



SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

“More than anything else, the presence of love makes a home.”

Strengthening Our Families



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with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual &  
Transgender Children

BY

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## FAMILY ACCEPTANCE PROJECT™

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The **Family Acceptance Project** is developing a new evidence-based family approach for care and support of LGBT youth. We are also developing a series of educational, video and assessment materials for families, caregivers and providers. This booklet offers basic information to help parents and caregivers support their LGBT children; to reduce their children's health risks, including depression, suicide, substance abuse and HIV infection; and to promote their well-being.

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

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“The family is ordained of God.”

—The Family: A Proclamation to the World<sup>1</sup>

“No other success can compensate for failure in the home.”

—President David O. McKay<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

*Latter-day Saints believe that “families are forever” and that maintaining strong family bonds, both here and in the eternities, is among our most important and sacred callings. Parents love their children and want the best for them. They have a sincere desire to nurture and protect their children and keep them safe, particularly from anyone who might hurt or harm them. Latter-day Saint President David O. McKay, quoted above, reminds us that: “Parenthood . . . should be held as a sacred obligation. There is something in the depths of the human soul which revolts against neglectful parenthood. God has implanted deep in the souls of parents the truth that they cannot . . . shirk the responsibility to protect childhood and youth” (*Home: The Savior of Civilization*).<sup>3</sup>*

This is true of all homes—Latter-day Saint and otherwise—and it is certainly true of families with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) children.\*

When parents hold their newborn infant, few of them think their child might be gay or transgender. In fact, most parents dream of special times in their child’s future, especially when their child marries and becomes a parent herself—with a heterosexual partner.

\* For information on sexual orientation and gender identity, see pages 20-22.

But many young people and adults are not heterosexual. Research shows that between two and seven percent of adults identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). Studies also show that young people—both gay and heterosexual—first become aware of being romantically and physically attracted to another person at around age ten. As more information has become available about sexual identity, many children and adolescents are becoming aware of their same-gender attraction and sexual orientation at younger ages. Studies show that, on average, LGB young people are identifying as gay during adolescence, regardless of whether they disclose this to others. Moreover, some are aware of these feelings at an earlier age.

### Talk with Your Child

“Our son, Todd, became very withdrawn and quiet in middle school. He had been such a happy boy. We took him for a checkup and the pediatrician said he was fine. But my wife and I knew something was wrong.

I felt that we needed to talk with Todd, to try to understand what he was concerned about. When we asked what was wrong, his eyes filled with tears. He said, ‘Dad, I think I’m gay.’

I wasn’t prepared for that but I knew he needed our support. We told him that we loved him, and we would always be there for him, no matter what. Todd said that the hardest part for him was thinking that we wouldn’t love him anymore if we knew he was gay – that we would reject him, and that God wouldn’t love him.

I realized then how important it is to talk with our children and to really listen. I never thought about having a gay child. My heart sank when I thought how hard things would be for him – and how this would affect our family.

But we love our son. Talking, listening, and reassuring him that we love him and that the Savior and Our Heavenly Father love him were the most important things we could do to start this new journey together.”

—Reed, father of a 15-year old son

When some young people first become aware of their sexual attraction, they may tell a friend, sibling or other family member. **But many don’t tell anyone** because family members, friends, and others have told them that being attracted to the same gender or being gay is shameful and wrong. They learn that people can call them names, can hurt or discriminate against them, and that being gay could embarrass and shame their families. So from an early age, many gay children and adolescents learn to hide their deepest feelings from people they love—and whose love they need the most.

To understand the effect of family reactions to their gay and transgender children, researchers from the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University undertook a major study to provide families with accurate, up-to-date information to support their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children. They were motivated to undertake this study by listening to young people who felt afraid of how their families would respond to their identity or whose families had condemned or rejected them because of it. They had also seen families who supported their LGBT children and wanted to understand the range of family reactions and the impact of these reactions on their children's health and well-being. This study, which included children and families from a range of social and religious backgrounds, including Latter-day Saint families, revealed that parents' attitudes can have a dramatic impact on their gay and transgender children's lives. Below, we discuss the outcome of this research and its implication for families.

When parents and caregivers learn about our study, they want to share it with others. They want other parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters, guardians and foster parents to learn about this research so they can help their gay and transgender children. What those parents and family members realized—and what this research shows—is that families need to create a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment for their children from the time they are born and especially during the period when they first become aware of feelings of attraction—for the same or the opposite gender.

As the Church's *Family Home Evening Resource Book* reminds us, “Children are not just little adults. They go through typical characteristics of growth—intellectually, emotionally, and socially—on their way to becoming adults. When parents realize these things, there is less strain on both parents and children” (*Building a Strong Family, Understanding the Personality Development of Children*).<sup>4</sup>

President Ezra Taft Benson provides guidance to parents on this subject: “Encourage your children to come to you for counsel with their problems and questions by listening to them every day. Discuss with them such important matters as dating, sex, and other matters affecting their growth and development, and do it early enough so they will not obtain information from questionable sources” (*The Honored Place of Woman*).<sup>5</sup>



## What This Booklet Can Tell You

We wrote this booklet to help strengthen families like yours with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children and adolescents. It was written especially to help you create a nurturing and supportive environment so you can help prevent your gay or transgender child's risk for serious physical and emotional problems—both when they are young and as they become adults. The information presented here, which is based on extensive research on families with LGBT children, is new and is just starting to be published in medical and other journals. Because this kind of study has never been done before, specific research on how family acceptance and rejection affects a gay or transgender child's well-being has not been available to parents until now.

The research team studied LGBT adolescents and their families who engaged in a variety of responses—accepting, rejecting or unsure—

toward their LGBT children. They identified more than 100 different behaviors that families and caregivers use to respond to their child's gay or transgender identity. These include such behaviors as telling your child she can't come to a family event because she is lesbian or telling your child that God will punish him because he is gay. Examples of accepting behaviors include expressing affection when your child tells you of his same-sex feelings or welcoming your child's gay or transgender friends into your home. Some may be concerned that their children have gay friends, but a recent Church pamphlet states: "Association with those of the same gender is natural and desirable, so long as you set wise boundaries" (*God Loveth His Children*).<sup>6</sup> For parents who support their gay and transgender children, this means helping them understand that you love them, discussing what risky behavior means, and above all, creating an environment where your child can confide in you and share his or her concerns.

This new research also examined how a wide range of parental behaviors can affect a young person's well-being, including risk for physical and mental health problems. Specifically, it explored how family attitudes affect a gay or transgender young person's risk for depression, suicide, substance abuse, and HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs). In addition, the researchers studied how family behaviors affect a child's self-esteem, life satisfaction, social support, and hope for the future. As the statistics below reveal, how parents relate to their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender child can have a profound effect on that child's and the family's well-being and future happiness.

As a result of what we learned from our study, we can help guide families to understand and better prepare their LGBT children to face challenges both within the family and in society in general. Our research also helps parents and caregivers understand which behaviors increase their children's risk for serious health problems and which behaviors help promote their children's well-being. Our research findings and experience with many families show how to increase your gay or transgender child's self-esteem to promote a positive sense of the future and to help your child become a successful, happy and productive adult. Tragically, by sending rejecting messages, some families drive their gay or transgender children out of the family circle and into high risk environments and behaviors. Our research shows that family rejection is linked with serious health problems in adulthood and contributes to family disruption and homelessness. Many LGBT young people are placed in foster care, run away or are ejected from their homes because of family rejection related to their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Supporting your LGBT child does not mean that parents and other family members must accept behaviors that they consider inappropriate

or against their family's standards; what it does mean is that children who engage in behavior or express an identity that is not approved by the family still need love and acceptance, still need to feel that they are a part of the family, and still need a positive sense of self and hope for the future. As with any behaviors that parents find inappropriate or unacceptable, care should be taken not to send rejecting messages to the child or young person himself. As Elder Dallin Oaks has said, "Surely we are counseled as a body of Church membership to reach out with love and understanding to those 'struggling with these issues [same-gender attraction].' That obligation rests with particular intensity on parents who have children struggling with these issues" (*Same Gender Attraction*).<sup>7</sup> Elder Oaks goes further to include parental compassion even for children who are engaged in behavior parents consider sinful. Even children who go against their parents' advice need love and understanding, and need to feel that they are part of the family.

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

As noted above, this research shows that families, parents, foster parents, caregivers and guardians can have a dramatic impact on their LGBT children's lives—for good or for ill—both in the present and in the future. We found that supportive family reactions promote well-being and help protect LGBT young people from risky behaviors. At the same time, negative family reactions can have a serious impact on a gay or transgender young person's risk for physical and mental health problems. That is, children from families where parents and other family members don't reject or react punitively to their child's identity, don't send negative messages to that child or his LGBT friends, and don't allow anti-gay sentiments to be expressed in the home are much more likely to avoid risky and self-destructive behaviors, are much more likely to lead happier lives and are much more likely to feel a part of the family. With greater family support, they are also more likely to feel connected to the family church and faith community.

Conversely, parents who send rejecting messages, who try to change their child's identity, who prevent their gay and lesbian children from having LGBT friends, or who allow negative comments about LGBT people to be spoken in the home are more likely to have

children who withdraw from the family circle and are at higher risk for serious health problems, such as suicide, substance abuse and HIV infection. Also, without family validation and support to buffer negative reactions from others, these children are more likely to lose their faith or leave the Church as many gay teenagers and adults have done. The vastly different impact on children between these two kinds of parental reactions can be profound.

### **Support Your LGBT Child Even When You Feel Uncomfortable**

“When our daughter, Sarah, was in the Young Women’s Program, she loved the teachers and made friends easily. But when she became a teenager and her friends talked about boys, I noticed that Sarah didn’t say much. After she turned sixteen and started dating, Sarah preferred group rather than single dates. She was a good student and had many friends and interests so I thought she would start dating once she got to college.

After her first semester, when she came home for Thanksgiving, I realized that she only talked about girls, and mostly about one girl in her class. I started to worry that she might not be attracted to boys. As a single mother, I feel an extra burden to be a good parent. I wish I had asked for some advice before I discussed my concerns with her because I didn’t handle it well.

At Christmas, Sarah went to her friend’s house and I realized one of the reasons was that she didn’t feel accepted by me. I’ve been reading a lot of literature and talking with other parents who have gay children and finding some wise counsel from Church leaders about how much I need to tell—and show—her that I love her. She’s coming home for spring break and I’m eager to talk with her and show her how supportive I can be. I want her to know that I love her and will never reject her.”

*—Emily, mother of an 18-year old daughter*



## Family Rejection

Most children, like most adults, have a range of friends and relationships. Many adults have same and opposite-gender friends and have gay and straight friends. The same is true for their children. However, some parents won't allow their children's gay or transgender friends in their home and they may even forbid their children from having LGBT friends because they believe this will prevent their children from being gay. Many parents believe that the best way to help their gay or transgender children thrive as teens and adults is to pressure them to have only heterosexual friends. They may also try to change their child's sexual orientation or gender identity, prevent her from learning about her identity or prevent her from finding LGBT resources to help her develop a positive sense of who she is.

Because parents see these behaviors as loving or caring, they are often surprised and even shocked to learn that their gay children experience these reactions as rejection or abuse. Young people feel that by rejecting their core identity, their parents are rejecting them.

This often leads to family conflict and increases the adolescent's distress, loss of hope, and vulnerability for risky behaviors. Parents think that by trying to prevent their children from learning about or from seeing themselves as gay they are helping their children survive in a world they feel will never accept them. But such well-intentioned behaviors are experienced as rejection by their children and often make 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 hurting their family, being rejected by their family or even being thrown out of their homes. Most children are sensitive to the values their parents teach in the home. If the child comes from a religious home in which his parents believe that homosexuality is wrong or even sinful, the gay or transgender child may feel not only that the family rejects him but that God doesn't love him. As a result, he may feel uncomfortable going to church and participating in other family activities such as family prayer and Family Home Evening. When this happens, parents need to be particularly concerned about their gay and lesbian child's well-being, because he may feel unloved by anyone, including God and Jesus, may feel hopeless and look for acceptance in risky and unsafe environments. When this happens, he may try to hide his identity even more.

Being valued by their parents and family helps children learn to value and care about themselves. Being valued by their extended family and by their family's friends is also important for their self-esteem. Feeling accepted by their congregation can also play a big role in how adolescents feel about themselves. On the other hand, for an adolescent to hear that she is bad or sinful sends a powerful message that she is not a good or worthy person. This affects her ability to love and care for herself, and it increases her risk for depression and suicidal behavior. It also affects her ability to plan for the future. Our research shows that LGBT youth who are rejected by their families are much less likely to want to be parents themselves. Thus, parents who engage in rejecting behaviors with their LGBT children are less likely to see those children form families with children when they become adults.

## Family Rejection Affects Health & Mental Health

Our research shows that LGBT young people who are rejected by their families because of their identity have much lower self-esteem, have fewer people they can turn to for help, and are more isolated than those who are accepted by their families. Also, as noted earlier, these young people are at very high risk for physical and mental health problems when they become young adults.

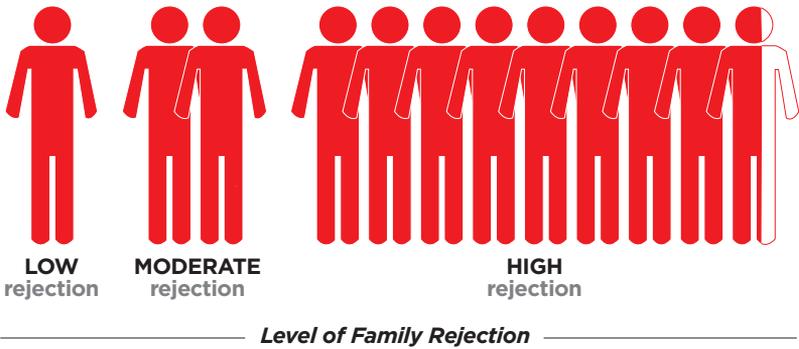
Highly rejected LGBT young people are:

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

—compared with LGBT youth who are not at all or only slightly rejected by their parents and caregivers because of their identity.

## Lifetime Suicide Attempts by Highly Rejected LGBT Young People

(One or more times)



Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

This chart shows the serious impact of high levels of family rejection on LGBT young adults whose parents tried to change them or prevent them from being gay or transgender or who showed their disappointment or shame in having a gay or transgender child in other ways. (See page 12 for a list of rejecting behaviors that are very harmful for LGBT youth.)

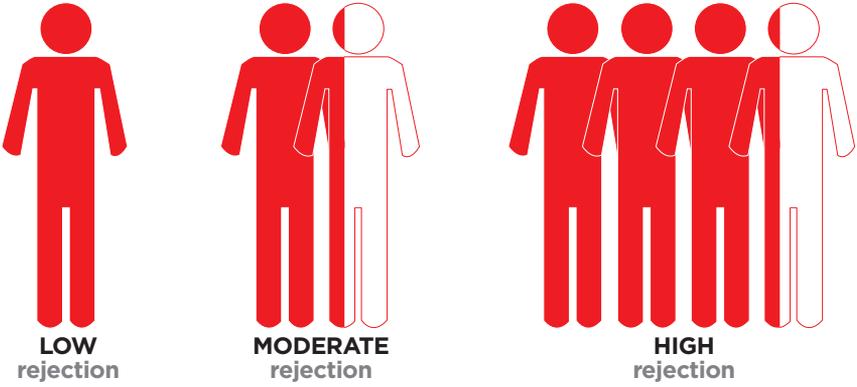
These findings show that LGBT adolescents who have many experiences of rejection are at much higher risk for attempting suicide than those from families that engage in few or no rejecting behaviors (low rejection). LGBT youth from **highly rejecting families** are more than 8 times as likely to try to take their own lives by the time they are young adults. In families that are **moderately rejecting** (have some negative reactions to their gay or transgender child—but also have some positive reactions) those young people are still nearly twice as likely to try to kill themselves.

LGBT young adults who are highly rejected by their parents and caregivers have much poorer health than those who are not rejected by their families. They have more problems with drug use, feel more hopeless and are much less likely to protect themselves from HIV or sexually transmitted diseases, which puts them at higher risk for getting HIV.

While accepting behaviors *promote overall health and significantly help reduce health risks for LGBT youth*, parents and caregivers who are capable of even a little change—being a *little less rejecting* and a *little more supportive*—can make an important difference in reducing their adolescent’s risk for serious health problems, including suicide and HIV.

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## Illegal Drug Use



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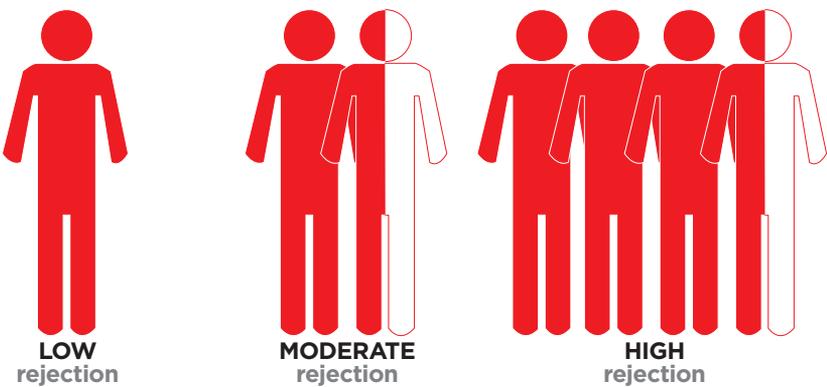
**Level of Family Rejection**

Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

As with risk for suicide, LGBT young people who experience high levels of family rejection are more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs compared with young people from families with little or no rejection. Their use of illegal drugs is greatly reduced in families that are moderately rejecting.

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## Risk for HIV Infection



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**Level of Family Rejection**

Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

LGBT young people from highly rejecting families are more than three times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and for sexually transmitted diseases than young people from families that exhibit little or no rejection.

Their risk is significantly reduced when families are moderately rejecting. So, while it would more helpful if parents stopped expressing rejecting behaviors and engaged in more positive and supportive behaviors, what this research shows is that parents who **decrease** rejecting behaviors can help **reduce** serious health risks for their gay and lesbian children, including family conflict and disruption and homelessness.

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

We found that across social, ethnic and religious groups, families are shocked to learn that attitudes, reactions and behaviors they think will help their children or prevent them from being gay or transgender are actually putting their children at very high risk for physical and mental health problems.

### 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 your child's 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 and resources
- Blaming your child when she is discriminated against or has negative experiences because of her LGBT identity
- Pressuring your child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine
- Telling your child that God will punish him because he is gay or bisexual
- Telling your child that you are ashamed of her or that how she looks or acts will shame the family
- Preventing or not allowing your child to talk about his LGBT identity

© Caitlin Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

These behaviors—such as trying to change their children's identity or trying to keep them away from gay friends—**even if intended to protect their children**—instead, isolate them and make them feel alone, unwanted and unloved. Many youth who experience such rejection actually feel like their parents and family members hate them.

Because of things they have learned or perceive about gay and lesbian people, parents may react with anger, fear, sadness or even disgust when they learn that their child might be gay. Some parents or family members may call their children names, hit them or get into physical fights with them. Others may prevent their children from attending school clubs organized to protect and support LGBT youth, or from reading material

about LGBT identity. Some parents and foster parents may prevent gay and transgender youth from attending family events because of how the youth looks or behaves—which the family experiences as shameful and embarrassing.

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 LGBT friends and resources or preventing a gay or transgender child from attending family events—can be just as harmful as physically abusing an LGBT child. Thus, the behaviors that parents and caregivers may use to try to protect their children from harm actually put them at very high risk for suicide, depression and other health problems.

A list of some of the harmful behaviors that increase your LGBT child's risk for health and mental health problems in adulthood is included in the box on page 12. 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 and concerned that they don't know how to help their LGBT child. They may respond cautiously since they don't want to encourage their child's gay or transgender identity, but they also feel that they don't want to push their child away.

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

#### *Behaviors that Help*

- Talk with and listen respectfully to your child or foster child about her LGBT identity
- Express affection when your child tells you or when you learn that your child is gay or transgender
- Support your child even when you may feel uncomfortable
- Advocate for your child when he is mistreated because of his LGBT identity
- Require that other family members respect your LGBT child
- Tell your child you love her unconditionally
- Welcome your child's LGBT friends to your home
- Support your child's gender expression
- Stand up for your child at school to prevent and address bullying & harassment
- Talk with church leaders and members about supporting LGBT people and welcoming them to church services and activities
- Openly discuss your child's LGBT identity with your child and others
- Believe your LGBT child can have a happy future

© Caitlin Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

Parents often fear that others may try to hurt their gay or transgender child, and fear motivates them to react negatively to their child's LGBT identity—to try to protect their child. 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 child is to love and support that child—to help nurture 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 her learn to value herself can help her deal with discrimination and rejection from others. How you react to your gay or transgender child has a deep and lasting impact on her life. It not only affects her relationship with you and your family, it also affects her health and well-being.

Our research has identified many ways to express support that can help your gay or transgender child and show her that you love her, even if you're uncomfortable with or don't accept her identity. 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 her.

When your child experiences your love and support, she will be reassured that you won't reject her, throw her out of the home or abandon her. This will also help you create the space to talk with your child about things that you experience as 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 one another and grow closer as a family.

# Positive Family Attitudes Help Protect Against Risky Behaviors

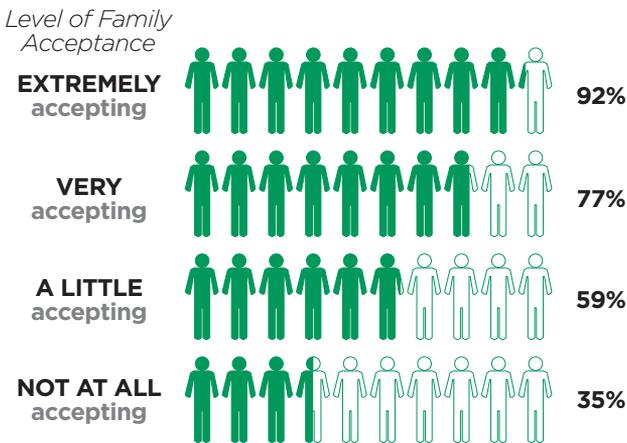
In our study, we spoke with many parents and caregivers who openly accept their gay and transgender children. From the very beginning, when they first learned that their children were gay, bisexual or transgender, they reacted with understanding and affection. They told their children they love them and showed their support in many other ways. For example, they express support by advocating for their LGBT children when they are discriminated against or by welcoming their children's LGBT friends into their home, even when it is difficult or challenging to do so.

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 13.

We found that young adults whose parents and foster parents support their lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity have better overall physical and mental health. They have higher self-esteem and are much less likely to be depressed, to use illegal drugs, or to think about or try to kill themselves. We also found that when LGBT youth are accepted by their families, they are much more likely to believe they will have good lives and become happy, productive adults. In families that are not at all accepting of their adolescent's identity, only about 1 in 3 young people believe they will have a good life as an adult. But in families that are very accepting, almost all LGBT young people believe they will have good lives.

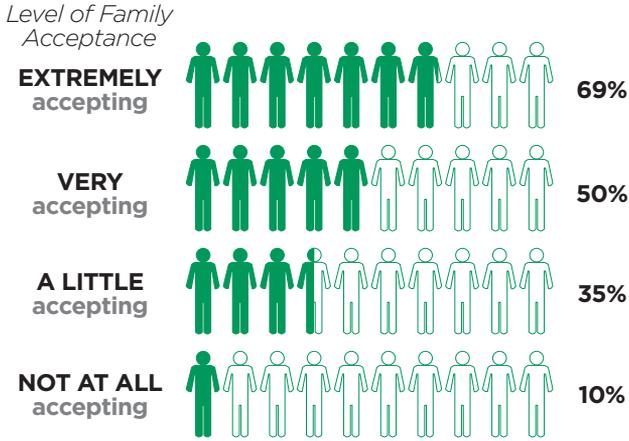
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## Youth Believe They Can Be A Happy LGBT Adult



Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

## Youth Want to Become a Parent



Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

LGBT young people who are accepted and not rejected by their families are much more likely to want to have families themselves. They have much closer relationships with their families and are much more satisfied with their lives than LGBT youth who are not accepted by their families.



## Helping Yourself and Your LGBT Child

Some families may find it very hard to think about accepting a gay or transgender child because these issues make them feel very uncomfortable or may go against their religious or cultural beliefs. Parents may feel less conflicted in supporting their gay or transgender child when they consider the consequences of not doing so. Their focus should be first and foremost on trying to keep their child within the protective care of the family by expressing love, strengthening family bonds and protecting their child from harm. Even if a child does something her parents disapprove of, she still needs love and needs to feel valued, safe and accepted by her family.

We know you love your child and want the best for her. We know you would protect your child from anyone who might try to hurt her. Our research shows that some behaviors —such as preventing your child from having a gay friend or from getting accurate information about her identity—are harmful and increase her risk for suicide and other serious health problems. At the same time, we found that behaviors such as listening with compassion and talking openly with her about her LGBT identity are ways of supporting her.

Start by finding time to talk with your child and invite him to tell you about his experiences and what he is feeling. Ask him how you can support him and what he needs from you to help him. When you talk, don't interrupt —just listen—with patience and compassion—from your heart, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland counsels, “Above all, keep your lines of communication open. Open communication between parents and children is a clear expression of love, and pure love, generously expressed, can transform family ties.”<sup>8</sup>

## Require Respect in the Family for Your LGBT Child

“We were planning a family reunion six months after our daughter, Marianne, told us she was lesbian. With her permission, we shared this information with our extended family. I knew how my brother felt about homosexuality because he often made very negative remarks when gay people were discussed on TV.

I also knew how hard it was for our daughter to hear his comments.

And then we learned that asking family members to respect our lesbian and gay children makes a big difference in how they feel about themselves and in building their self-esteem. We learned that standing up for them in our families actually helps protect them from serious health problems like depression, suicide and substance abuse.

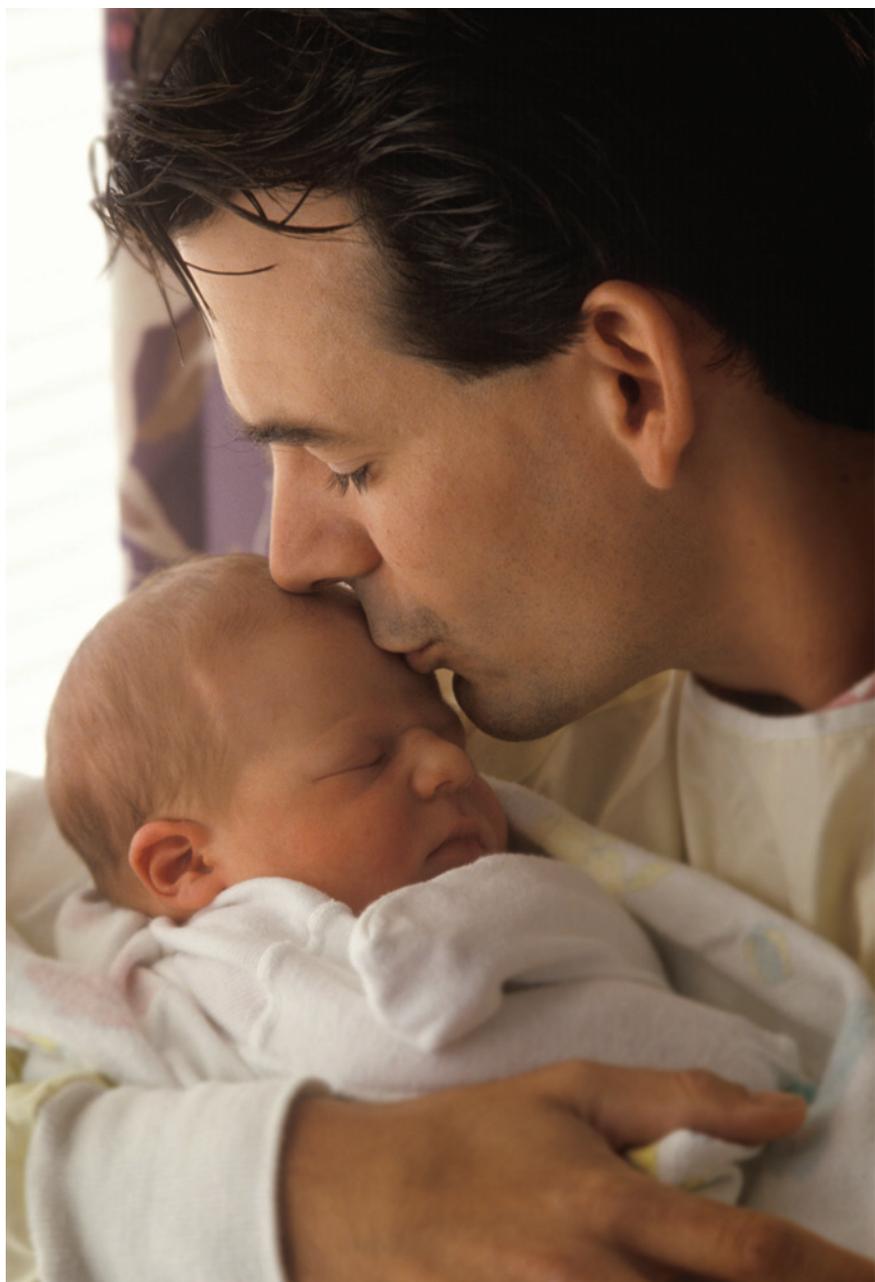
So before the reunion, I told my brother, ‘I don’t want you to say negative things about gay people in front of Marianne. Because she loves you, it’s particularly hurtful for her to hear such things from you. We want you to respect her just like you do our other children.’”

—Marvin, father of an old lesbian daughter

If you are having difficulty, talk with other parents with gay and transgender children about their experiences. Learning about your child’s sexual orientation and gender identity will help you understand and help him. We have learned from many families that in their journey to understand their LGBT children, information and education are key both at the beginning and throughout the process.

## Advocating for Your Child

Just as parents are their children’s first teachers, they are also powerful advocates for their children, particularly when their children have special needs or are being discriminated against or disrespected by others. LGBT young people may be harassed or victimized by others, including peers in school settings. Our research has shown that parental and caregiver advocacy for LGBT youth—such as requiring that others (including other family members) respect them and standing up for them when others treat them badly, hurt or discriminate against them—are supportive family behaviors. These behaviors help reduce their gay and transgender child’s risk for health and mental health problems and help promote their well-being. Advocating for your LGBT child expresses your love



Since we believe that families are forever, how we care for all family members on earth affects our family for eternity...

for her, helps build her self-esteem, and teaches her how to advocate for herself when she becomes an adult.

In addition to requiring that other family members respect your LGBT child, you can play a critical role in helping decrease your LGBT child's risk for harassment in school and helping make schools safe so all students can learn without fear and harassment. Victimization and bullying LGBT youth in schools is widespread and our research has shown that victimization that targets a student based on sexual orientation and gender identity is related to serious health problems in adulthood. In particular, our research has linked school victimization related to a student's gay or transgender identity with depression, suicidal behavior, HIV and sexual health risks in adulthood.

## The Responsibility of Congregations

Just as families can be helpful, supportive and loving to their gay and transgender children and adolescents, so church families can play a special role not only in creating a safe and caring place for LGBT members but also in supporting their families. If congregations reinforce and express these rejecting behaviors, they too contribute to that gay or transgender member's risk for isolation, low self-esteem, depression, drug abuse, sexually transmitted diseases and suicide. Conversely, when church leaders, especially those called to work with youth, help congregations create a supportive church community, then many positive results follow. As Elder Dallin Oaks reminds church members: "All should understand that persons [and their family members] struggling with the burden of same-sex attraction are in special need of the love and encouragement that is a clear responsibility of Church members, who have signified by covenant their willingness 'to bear one another's burdens' (Mosiah 18:8) and so 'fulfill the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2)" (*Same Gender Attraction*).<sup>9</sup>

Church leaders and members can ensure that disrespectful and abusive language and discriminating behavior toward LGBT members is not tolerated in their congregation. They can also do many things to make LGBT adolescents feel at home in the church family, such as inviting them to participate in church activities, giving them opportunities to serve, inviting them into their homes, talking about their identity and expressing love and understanding. As the authors of the LDS book, *Strengthening Our Families*, assert, "More than anything else, the presence of love makes a home. 'Homes are made permanent through love' states President David O. McKay" (*Strengthening Our Families*).<sup>10</sup>

# A Final Word on the Importance of Love

For all families, the greatest challenge is to find balance and integrity as we nurture and raise children. Raising and nurturing LGBT children may be particularly challenging because of parents' backgrounds and beliefs about homosexuality, because of polarizing attitudes in our society, and because of deep-rooted fear and anger toward gay people within some religious communities. In such an environment, it is important for parents to remember the nurturing and healing power of love. As *Strengthening Our Families* notes, "Effective loving is far more than regularly announcing our affection to our children. Effective loving helps the child feel safe, valued and accepted. We cannot nurture effectively unless we have taken the time to discover what is important to the people we are striving to love. 'For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding: for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding' (2 Ne. 31:3). We should follow Heavenly Father's remarkable example and customize our messages and actions of love to the language and understanding of our family members.... Parents do not always feel loving toward their children. But love is more than a feeling. It may be considered a commitment to act in the best interest of another person.... The greatest example of gentleness and compassion for children was Jesus.... [He] was attentive, appreciative, tender, patient, and loving" (*Strengthening Our Families*).<sup>11</sup>

*"When our actions or words discourage someone from taking full advantage of Church membership, we fail them—and the Lord. The Church is made stronger as we include every member and strengthen one another in service and love."*

—Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

# What Does LGBT Mean?

## Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is a central part of every person's identity and is believed to be developed by adolescence. Sexual orientation is comprised of attraction, identity and behavior and focuses on intimate human relationships. Sexual attraction is only one aspect of a person's sexual orientation.

Homosexuality and bisexuality are part of the normal range of human sexual identity. Homosexual and bisexual people are found in diverse cultures both historically and in the present. The words that people use to describe their sexual identity are different in many cultures and languages. Many people who are attracted to and have or desire relationships with people of the same gender may call themselves *gay*. Women who are attracted to and have or desire relationships with other women may call themselves *lesbian*. Those who are attracted to and have or desire relationships with males and females may think of themselves as *bisexual*. Just like heterosexuals, people can know they are lesbian, gay or bisexual without ever being sexually active with another person. This is because sexual orientation relates to human relationships and interpersonal connections with others, not just sexual attraction or behavior.



No one knows what causes homosexuality. But sexual orientation is believed to be related to genetics and human development. **No one**, including parents, can make a child “gay.” Elder Dallin H. Oaks makes the Church’s position clear: “The Church does not have a position on the causes of any of these susceptibilities or inclinations, including those related to same-gender attraction. Those are scientific questions—whether nature or nurture—those are things the Church doesn’t have a position on” (*Same Gender Attraction*).<sup>12</sup> Research shows that young people first start to feel attraction or have their first “crush” on another person on average at about age ten. This age is the same for young people who are heterosexual and those who are gay. Many parents assume that children know they are heterosexual from early childhood. But parents assume—wrongly—that their children have to be adults before they know they are gay. In research from numerous studies, many young people said they knew they were gay in childhood, even before they became adolescents.

## Gender Identity

Everyone also has a gender identity—a deep sense of being male or female—that is very clear by age three. Children learn from others, especially from their families, how girls and boys in their ethnic group and culture are expected to behave.

Some children feel very deeply that their inner sense of being male or female (their “gender identity”) is not the same as their physical body. These children often tell their parents and others that they believe their gender identity does not match their physical body. They are likely to identify as *transgender* once they learn about gender identity, and learn that they are not alone and that there are other people who feel who like

### Support Your Child’s Gender Expression

“We didn’t know what transgender meant when our son was little. We searched for information and prayed for guidance. One day my husband said, “All we’ve ever wanted is for our children to be happy and healthy and to have a good life. Why should being transgender change that?”

We learned that by supporting our son and asking others to respect him we were building feelings of self-worth that would help him cope and thrive as an adult. We found out that by supporting our son even before we understood how best to help him, we strengthened our family and showed him how much we loved him at a time when he was feeling isolated and alone.”

—Karen, mother of a 16-year old transgender youth

they do. Their behavior may also be called *gender variant* or *gender non-conforming*.

Children and adolescents who do not look or behave the way that girls and boys are expected to behave by their families and by society are often ridiculed by others. Both adults and peers may call them names or discriminate against them. They are also at risk for physical abuse and violence, and parents often fear that these children will be hurt by others. Parents, foster parents, families and caregivers can have a very important impact on promoting these children's well-being. This includes helping them learn positive coping skills and how to deal with ridicule and discrimination from others.

Gender non-conforming children who are supported by their families have higher self-esteem and are at lower risk for physical and mental health problems. They also have greater life satisfaction and well-being than those who lack family support or who are rejected by their families.

# Resources from the Family Acceptance Project

We have listed basic information in this booklet about some family reactions that can increase risks for your gay or transgender child. We have also provided information that can help your child, based on our research with LGBT young people and their families. We are developing other publications and materials, including family video stories, to help strengthen families and help parents and caregivers increase support for their LGBT children. As these resources become available, we will share them on our webpage (<http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>), with church, community and national organizations, and with groups in other countries.

Our aim in doing this work is to strengthen families and keep them together, to help parents raise their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children to be happy, healthy and well-adjusted, both as children and as adults.

## We Value Your Feedback

We encourage you to visit our website and to use our materials. Let us know how we can improve them and make them more useful for you and your family—and for your church leaders and congregations. Share our materials with your extended family, friends, family physician, and church leaders; share them also with your child's health and mental health providers, school counselors and teachers.

To send us comments on our materials, contact us at: [fap@sfsu.edu](mailto:fap@sfsu.edu)



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