



## Coming Out to Your Parents: Questions to Think About

For gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth, coming out to parents is a decision with potentially life-altering consequences. While most all youth hope for their parents' acceptance, many fear rejection.

Although many parents do react negatively at first to finding out their child is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, over time most come to accept this fact, especially if the parents receive support in dealing with their own feelings. For youth who are supported and accepted by their parents, coming out can even improve the relationship. Being honest about who they are allows them to be closer to their parents.

For other youth, however, the decision to come out has negative consequences. Some youth are forced to leave home, cut off emotionally and financially. Other parents may become abusive toward their child. In such cases, the family relationship may never recover because of the parents' overwhelmingly negative reaction.

Because of the potential hazards involved in coming out to parents, the following are some questions young people should ask themselves before deciding to come out:

*“ I didn't know what to do because she was crying. She kept saying 'What did I do to deserve this?' She even called the pastor of our church. . . One day, after trying and trying, I finally sat down with my mom and made her understand. Three years have passed and now she's pretty cool.”*

- A SMYAL Youth describing his coming out experience.

### **What is your current relationship with your parents like?**

Do you feel that you have a good relationship with your parents? Have they shown that they will love and accept you even when they are upset with you or disapprove of something you've done? Or do they react harshly when you don't conform to their standards or wishes? If you generally have a warm, positive relationship and have been comfortable talking with them in the past, then it is more likely that your relationship will survive.

### **What are your parents' general reactions to gay\* people?**

Have you heard your parents make positive comments about gay\* people or do they typically put them down or describe them negatively? Do they have friends who are gay? If your parents generally are accepting toward gay or lesbian people, they may be more likely to accept you. Parents who have very rigid moral beliefs and are convinced that homosexuality is sinful or immoral are likely to have more difficulty dealing with your sexual orientation.

### **Do you have other sources of emotional and financial support?**

If your parents' reaction is overwhelmingly negative, are there people you can turn to for emotional support? If you were forced to leave home, do you have a safe place to stay and a source of financial support? If not, and you believe that your parents will react very negatively, it may be safer to wait until you are financially independent and until you have built a network of supportive people who can help you feel good about yourself.

### **SMYAL**

**A Safe Place to Be Who You Are**

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\* We use the term “gay” throughout this document to include people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.



*"Who's David? my mom asked when she picked me up at the train station. She told me she found a letter from him and wanted to know who he was. Never in my life had I been so scared. Should I lie? I thought about it for a second before I finally said . . . David's my boyfriend."*

- A SMYAL Youth describing his coming out experience.

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## **Coming Out to Your Parents (Continued)**

### **Are you certain about and comfortable with your sexual orientation?**

Parents will usually want to know if you are sure about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. If you are feeling confused, this will probably increase your parents' confusion and make them less sure about your judgment. On the other hand, if you are feeling strong and comfortable with yourself, this can help your parents to be more comfortable too.

For those youth who have truly open-minded, understanding parents, coming out even before you have fully accepted yourself may be appropriate. Such parents can lend their support as you struggle to come to terms with your identity.

### **Do you feel prepared to deal with your parents' questions and concerns?**

Your parents may have many questions or fears about what being gay means for you. Most of their information will likely be based on what they have learned from a homophobic society. They may be worried that being gay will put you in danger or make you unable to lead a happy life. If you've done your homework — including reading books about being gay or lesbian — you'll be able to reassure them and tell them where they can get more information and support.

### **What is your reason for coming out now, and is this the best time?**

Think through why you've chosen to come out to your parents now. Hopefully, it's because you want to have a closer, more honest relationship with them. Sharing this reason with your parents may help them to be more accepting. Likewise, try to pick a time when your parents are relaxed, rather than stressed out. If they have recently experienced a major loss, such as the death of a loved one, consider waiting. Most parents who learn that their child is gay feel, at least initially, that they have lost the child they knew. It can be harder for them to get over this "loss" if they are already grieving over other losses.

### **Will you be able to give your parents time to accept this?**

Remember, it may have taken you a long time to accept that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Think about your initial reactions when you first started realizing you were gay. Maybe you denied it, decided it was "just a phase," or felt guilty and wished you could change. Your parents may go through many of the same reactions. While some parents are immediately accepting of their child, others take months or even years before they begin to accept their child's sexual orientation. If you just don't think you can be patient and deal calmly with your parents' feelings of shock, anger, guilt or shame, then this may not be the right time to come out.

### **Is this really your decision?**

Be certain that this is really what you want to do. Don't be pressured into coming out by well-meaning friends or counselors. You are the best judge of how your parents will react, and only you should make this important decision.