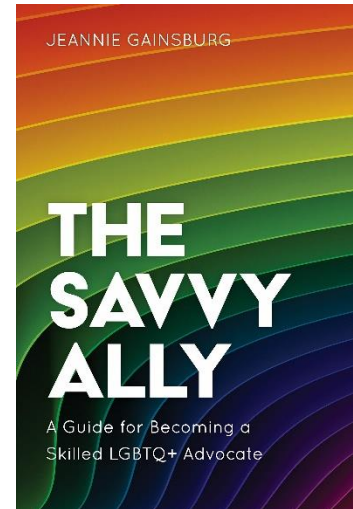


Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Child

(Sections of this handout were taken from *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*)

This handout was created for parents of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus so much more!) children and for parents who want to create an inclusive environment in their homes regardless of their children's orientation and gender. It offers suggestions for creating an inclusive environment, tips for showing support for your children, best practices for respectfully communicating with your LGBTQ+ child, and parenting resources.



Creating an LGBTQ+ Inclusive Environment and Building Trust

Many children have a sense of who they are attracted to by the age of 12 or 13 and many have a stable sense of their gender identity by age 5. LGBTQ+ children are likely to be watching and listening for signs that their family members and friends are LGBTQ+ supportive. Below are some suggestions for establishing an LGBTQ+ inclusive and supportive environment. If your child is LGBTQ+ you will be modeling respect and opening the door for them to share their identity with you. If your child is not LGBTQ+, what a powerful message you will be giving them about dignity and respect for all!

- 1) **Tell your child you love them.** Tell them over and over and over.
- 2) **Choose LGBTQ+-themed books and movies.** Read books to your young child about all kinds of people and families, and where all types of gender roles and expressions are represented. Get “caught” reading an LGBTQ+ themed book yourself or watching an LGBTQ+ themed movie to help stimulate conversations about diversity and inclusion.
- 3) **Take a stand.** LGBTQ+ issues are in the news now more than ever before. Strike up a conversation the next time a news story covers something LGBTQ+ related and express your support.
- 4) **Show your pride.** Grab a rainbow flag and go to the annual Pride Parade or Pride Festival!
- 5) **Un-gender your language. Un-gender your language.** Don't assume gender or orientations when you talk with students (or anyone for that matter). Ask, “Do you have a date for the dance?” or “Are you going to the movie with anyone special?” Use *friends*, *folks*, or *team*, instead of *dudes*, *ladies*, or *guys*.

Responding When Your Child Comes Out to You

Whether or not it feels like a big deal to you, coming out to parents is typically a *really* big deal for a child. If your child comes out to you give yourself a pat on the back. It likely means that you have successfully indicated that you are a safe and LGBTQ+ supportive person. Below are some suggestions for responding after the big reveal.

Don't ...

Ask if your child is sure or imply that it might just be a phase. Even if you truly think that this might just be a phase, stating it is unlikely to be received well or help your child. For now, it's their reality and it should be respected. Simply support them as they navigate their journey of self-understanding.

Ask when they "decided" to be LGBTQ+. Just as straight or cisgender people (i.e., people who are not transgender) didn't choose or decide to be straight or cisgender, LGBTQ+ people didn't choose their identities. The only thing your child is choosing is to live and love authentically.

Tell your child that you already knew (even if you did). You may be pleased by your expert sleuthing but keep it to yourself. Hearing that you already knew may make your child feel foolish or cowardly for waiting so long, diminish the importance of the information they want to share with you, cause them to wonder what they did to make it so obvious, and make them worry that others can also tell.

Do ...

Say "thank you." It is a compliment when someone comes out to you. You might say, "Thank you for trusting me enough to let me know," or "Thank you for caring so much about our relationship."

Listen. Let your child take the lead on what they want to talk about. They may, in fact, not want to talk about anything. It may just be a huge relief to tell you and know that they are supported. If there is an awkward silence you could throw in one or two of these comments: "I'm so glad you can be yourself around me," "I want you to know that I'm here for you," or "This calls for a celebration! Should I bake a cake?"

Ask them how you can best support them. Your child is your best guide to understanding what they need from you. They may have books they want you to read, terms they want you to understand, and even a new name and new pronouns they may ask you to use.

Keep confidentiality in mind. Never out your child to others unless they ask you to. If it doesn't come up naturally in the conversation, you may want to ask about your child's plans for telling others. See if there's anything they would like you to do to help. If your child is asking you to use a new name and new pronouns, it will be critical to discuss when and where the new name and pronouns should be used. Clarifying how your child would like you to navigate the use of a new name and pronouns will show how committed you are to supporting them and keeping them safe.

Tips for Understanding and Communicating Respectfully With Your LGBTQ+ Child

Mirror your child's language. Listen to how your child identifies, the terms they use, and the way they talk about people who are important to them, then mirror that language. If your daughter identifies as queer, don't refer to her as a lesbian, use her language. Have conversations with your child about the terms you should be using, what they mean to your child, and how you can be the most respectful in your language when speaking with your child and with others.

Avoid trying to figure out why. Your child is not LGBTQ+ because of that time you let them paint their fingernails or allowed them to cut their hair really short. No one knows why some people are straight and others aren't. There is no data on why some people are cisgender and others are transgender. Resist the temptation to blame anything or anyone for your child's LGBTQ+ identity. Not only is there no causal evidence but blaming implies that your child is somehow defective. Not cool.

Try not to confuse orientation and gender. Orientation is who we are attracted to. Gender is who we are. They are completely different things. In other words, if your son has come out as gay, it doesn't mean that he really wants to be a woman. If your daughter has come out as transgender, you have no idea what her orientation is unless she tells you.

Don't get caught up in stereotypes and preconceived notions. A great deal of our impressions and understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals come from the media, where LGBTQ+ people are often portrayed in very stereotypical ways. Try not to get caught up in preconceived ideas of what being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender means and looks like. Your lesbian daughter may love makeup. Your transgender son may hate sports. Allow your child the freedom to express themselves however they want and engage in activities of their choosing.

Use the GTQ identities as adjectives. Many people think the words *gay*, *transgender*, and *queer* are nouns, but they're adjectives. Saying "the gays" is offensive. Please say "gay men" instead. A person is not "a transgender," they are "a transgender individual."

Remember that orientation and sexual behaviors are different. Just because your child has come out as *gay*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual*, it doesn't mean that they are necessarily having sex. Think about how old you were when you first knew whom you were attracted to. It's common for people to know whom they are attracted to long before they engage in any sexual activity.

Use the "Switch It" Technique. Not sure how to talk with your LGBTQ+ child about relationships and sex? Your interactions should be no different than they would be with a non-LGBTQ+ child. Do talk with your LGBTQ+ child about healthy relationships, safety, and access to appropriate care. Don't ask your LGBTQ+ child intimate sexual questions that you wouldn't ask a non-LGBTQ+ child.

Pop Quiz

You've just finished reading this handout and you think you may have messed up during a conversation with your child. You should (check all that apply):

- A. Turn in your parenting card. You are obviously a terrible parent.
- B. Forgive yourself. We didn't learn this stuff in high school.
- C. Talk with your child and offer an apology.
- D. Say the things now that didn't get said before.

Answer: B, C, and D

You are not a terrible parent. Please forgive yourself if you didn't get it right the first time. Do go back and start over. There are no expiration dates on apologies. You might say something like, "Remember when you came out to me last fall, and I said, '_____'? Can we start over? What I should have said was..."

Parenting Resources for Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Child

Family Acceptance Project: A research-based, culturally grounded approach to help ethnically, socially, and religiously diverse families to support their LGBTQ+ children and youth at: <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>

Gainsburg, Jeannie. *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, March 2020.

Loving Families: Online support, education, and links to local groups offered by PFLAG, the nation's oldest and largest organization for parents, families, and allies of LGBTQ+ people at: <https://pflag.org/loving-families>

My Kid is Gay: Education, support, and resources for the parents of LGBTQ+ youth at www.mykidisgay.com

Owens-Reid, Dannielle and Russo, Kristin. *This Is a Book for Parents of Gay Kids*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, September 9, 2014.

Savvy Ally Action: Free handouts and videos on how to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ communities at: www.savvyallyaction.com

