

Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual

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The teenage years can bring lots of change for children and parents. Young people are working out who they are and dealing with relationships and sexuality. For some, working out their feelings towards others and whether they are gay, lesbian or bisexual might be an extra pressure to deal with.

All children and young people want to feel accepted and that they belong regardless of their sexuality. It is important that parents help them work things out in a safe and supportive environment where they feel valued and loved for who they are.

This guide focusses on young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. The term 'same-sex attracted' is used to refer to all of these. Transgender or intersex matters are not the focus of this Guide as the issues can be quite different.



Young people and sexuality

Moving from childhood into adolescence is a time of great change for young people and their families. Changes in the brain and hormones bring about many physical, sexual and emotional changes. Exploring sexuality and how they feel about others is one of the things young people work out during this time.

The concept of who we are develops from early childhood. If your young person tells you they are same-sex

attracted it is likely they have thought about it for a long time.

Some say they have known all their lives. In the teenage years many work out what they are going to do about it. Some teenagers struggle with fear and confusion before they are even able to admit it to themselves. Your young person is not likely to tell you they are same-sex attracted and risk your rejection if they are not sure.



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When your child 'comes out' to you

Each parent has their own way of reacting when their child discusses their sexuality or 'comes out' as same-sex attracted. For some it is no big deal. It is just a part of who their child is.

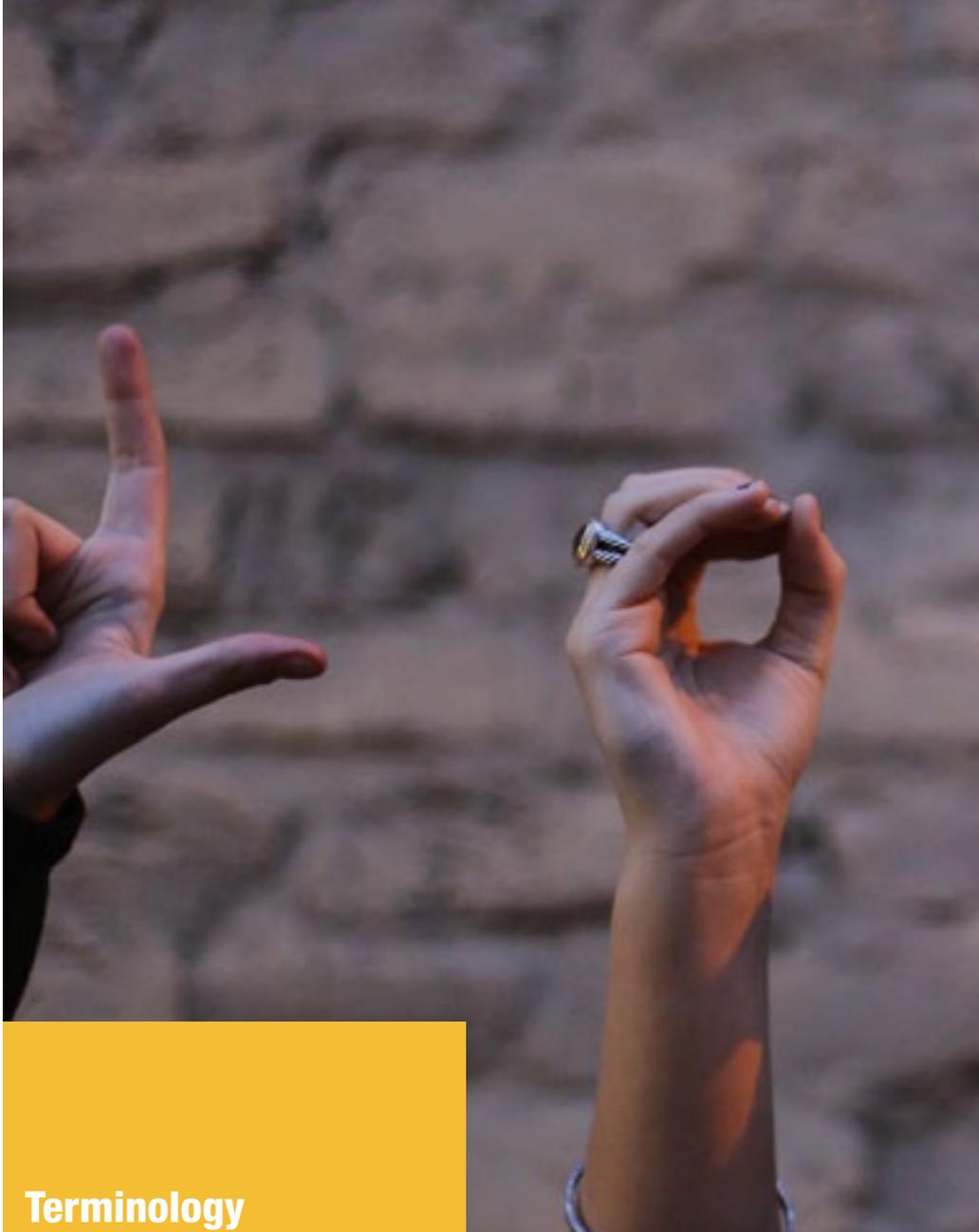
Some parents may have wondered about it and be pleased they can now talk openly. Others might need time to adjust, but are happy their young person trusts them enough to share this part of themselves.

Some parents might feel shocked, confused, disappointed, guilty or angry. It may challenge their values and beliefs, especially some religious or cultural beliefs. They might feel embarrassed and anxious about the reactions of family members or friends.

Sometimes parents feel the hopes and dreams they held for their child are now lost — to see them in a happy relationship with their own family. However, many parents come to realise their young person can live a full life no different from their other children, including having a successful career, a committed relationship and children if that is what they want.

Some parents choose not to accept their young person's sexuality and this can lead to a break in family relationships that is hurtful for everyone.

While having a same-sex attracted child can seem daunting at first, many parents find great acceptance and support in the community. Life may be different but it can be just as full of the many joys of parenting.



Terminology

There are many terms used to describe sex, gender, sexuality and identity. It can help to ask your young person how they describe themselves and what terms they would like you to use.

Some common terms include:

- **Bisexual** — a person attracted to both men and women, not always equally or at the same time
- **Coming out** — telling others your sexual orientation. This is a life-long process, not a single event
- **Gay** — someone who identifies as a man and is attracted to other men. 'Gay' is also used at times to refer to anyone in the LGBTIQI community.
- **Gender identity** — the inner sense a person has of being male, female, neither or both. This may be different from the sex they were assigned at birth
- **Heterosexual, straight** — someone attracted to people of the opposite sex or gender
- **Homosexual, same-sex attracted** — someone attracted to people of the same sex or gender
- **Intersex** — a person born with physical sex characteristics that don't fit medical or social norms for female or male bodies. They may identify as male, female or neither
- **Lesbian** — someone who identifies as a woman and is attracted to other women



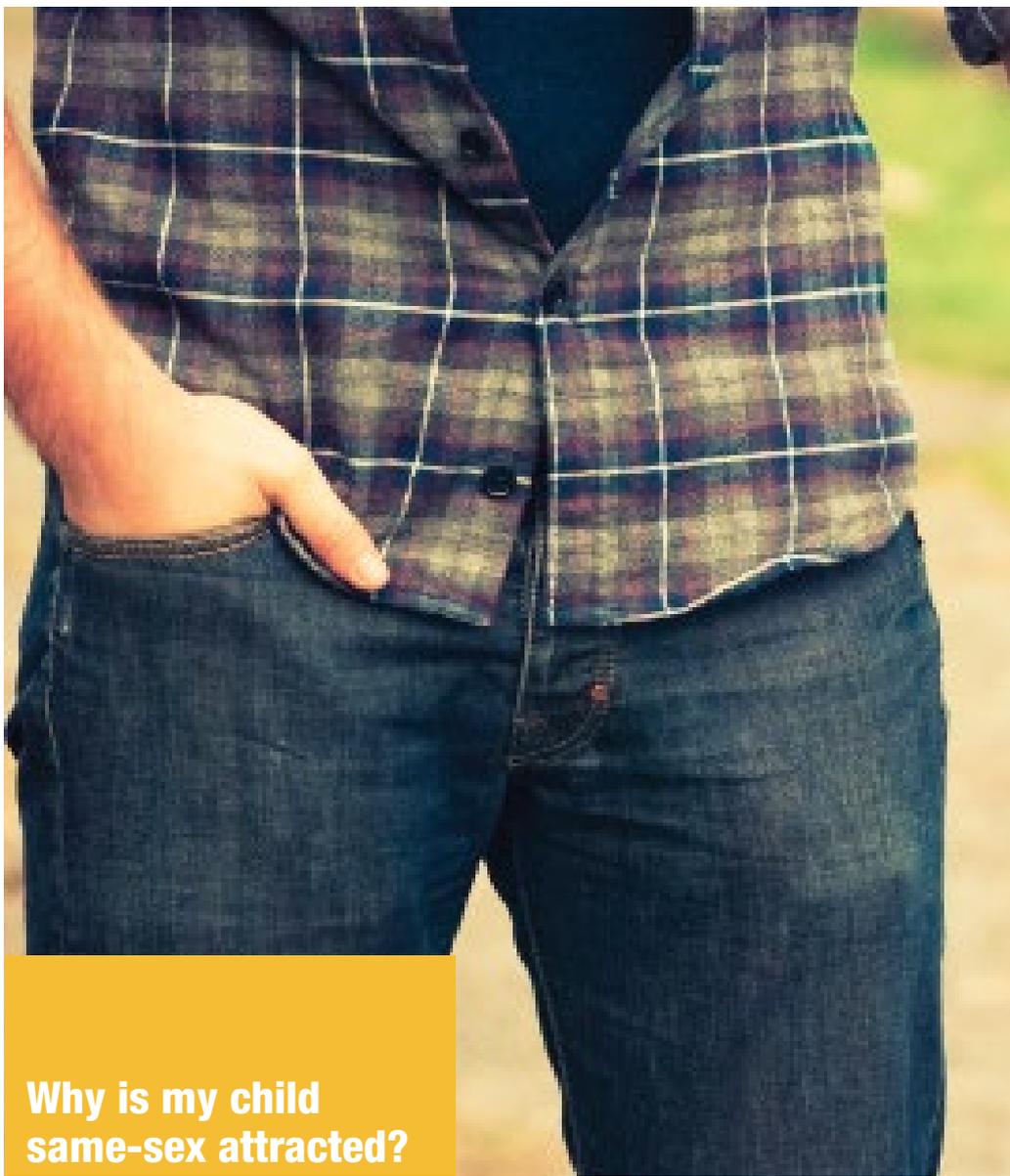
How parents can respond

When your young person tells you they are same-sex attracted, the most important thing is to make sure they know you love them. Tell them you're proud they trust you enough to be honest with you. It also helps to:

- keep an open heart and mind. Be willing to listen, even if you feel uncomfortable. It may be hard to hear what they say but it is also hard for them to tell you
- not react if you have strong negative feelings. Let them know you need time to think. Agree to talk again later. When you are ready, share your thoughts and concerns with them. The more open you are, the easier it will be for both of you
- have many conversations over time. Be patient with yourself and others. It can take time to deal with the many fears and myths that society has about same-sex attracted people
- find out more. This will help you understand what is happening for your young person and give you things to discuss with them
- get support from people who understand what you are going through
- take care of your physical and emotional needs by letting others be there for you. Some parents focus on the needs of their young person and neglect their own.

- **LGBTQI** — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex
- **Queer** — a broad term for people who don't identify as heterosexual, with gender stereotypes or with the gender they were assigned at birth
- **Sexual identity** — an integral part of who we are, what we believe, how we feel and how we respond to others
- **Sexual orientation** — a person's emotional, physical and sexual attraction to others
- **Transgender** — a person whose assigned sex at birth does not match their internal gender identity. Being transgender does not determine who you are attracted to.

The best thing to say when your child talks about their sexuality or comes out to you is 'I love you'. They need your love, respect and understanding now more than ever.



Why is my child same-sex attracted?

Parents often ask why their young person is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

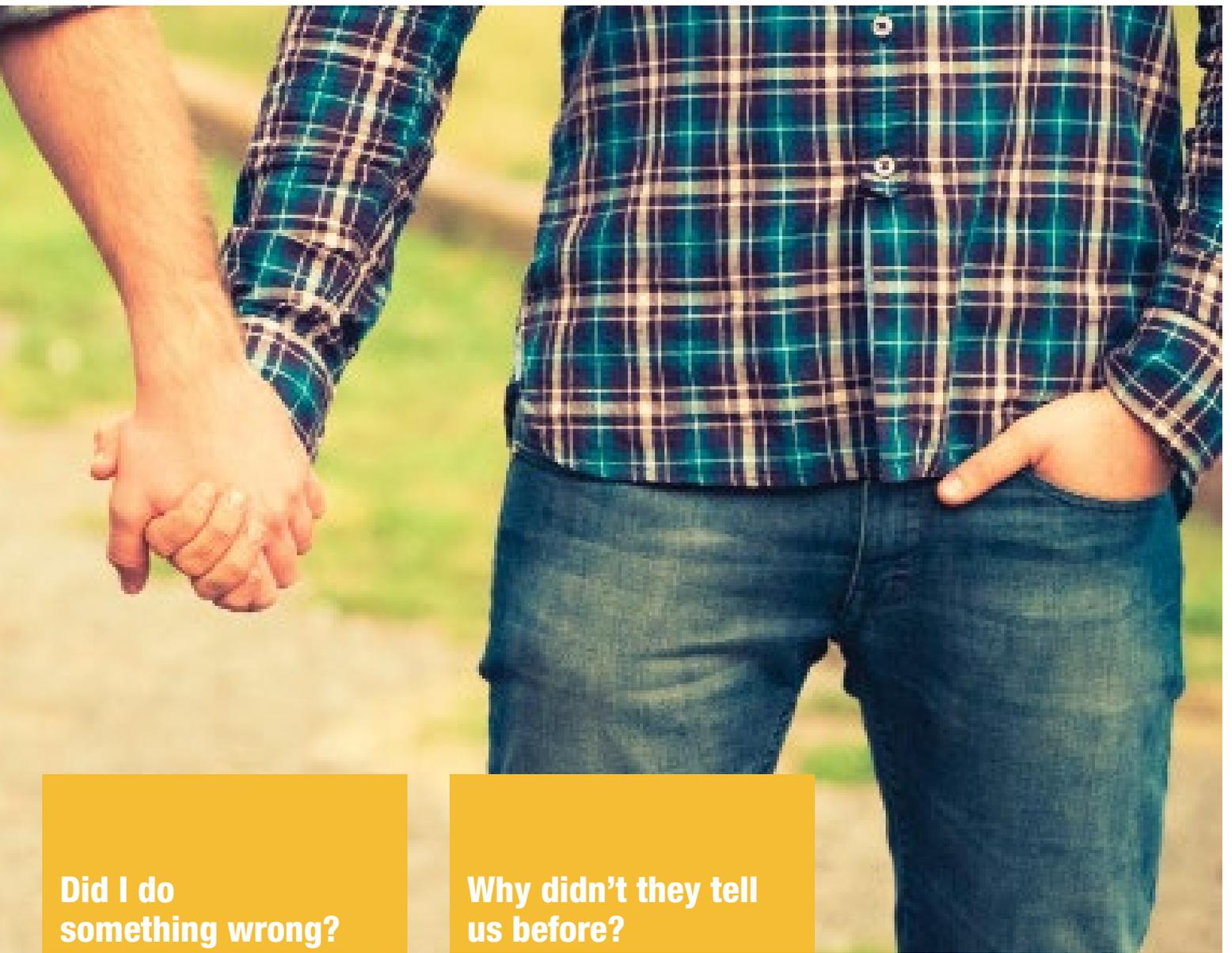
Are they rebelling? Are they trying to hurt you? Are they influenced by others? Can it be changed or 'cured' by a doctor or psychiatrist?

There have been many studies to find out what causes people to be same-sex attracted but there is no clear answer. Throughout history there have always been homosexual people whether it was accepted by society at the time, or not. It is now widely accepted by the medical and psychological professions as a variation of human sexuality and not something that needs to be treated or changed.

Our sexuality is what feels right and normal for us even if it is different from how others express these things.

If you ask a heterosexual person if they chose to be 'straight' they would likely say 'no, I was born this way — it's just the way I am and I couldn't be anything else'.

This is the same for people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. With the prejudice and discrimination that can come with being same-sex attracted most people would not be on this path if it didn't feel right for them.



Did I do something wrong?

Many parents worry they did something wrong and may be 'to blame' for their young person's sexuality. However, there is no evidence that parenting styles or family situations determine sexuality.

If it was about parenting style then other children in the family would be same-sex attracted as well.

Why didn't they tell us before?

You may feel hurt, angry or guilty because your young person didn't tell you before.

It is important to realise they probably couldn't have told you any sooner. They may have experienced negative attitudes, been harassed or bullied, rejected by their friends or seen this happen to others.

Your rejection might be too much to risk. It says something about your relationship that they have shared this with you now. It shows they want to be honest with you and include you in all parts of their life.

Sometimes young people tell their parents in an angry or accusing way because they are stressed and anxious about the reaction. They may worry about hurting you, or feel guilty about ruining your hopes and dreams for them.

To tell a parent you're lesbian, gay or bisexual takes great courage. Once said, it can't be taken back. They know it could change how you feel about them. They might worry they will lose your love.

Being supportive

Studies show that when a parent is supportive it can make their young person's 'coming out' a lot easier and help them be confident and resilient. They are likely to have better physical and mental health now and in the future.

It can strengthen your relationship if you find out what is happening for your young person and how you can support them, just as you would with any other issue. You could ask:

- how they are feeling
- what it's like for them to talk about this
- who else they have told and what sort of reaction they got
- what support they need. Some might be confident about their sexuality while others may be very anxious and worried.

Young people who are rejected by their parents have higher rates of mental and physical health problems including risk-taking behaviour, drug use, self-harm, depression and suicide attempts. They are also at higher risk of homelessness if parents tell them to leave, or the stress and conflict becomes too great and they move out without support.

Creating a safe home

Parents can help by creating a safe home where everyone feels respected and that they belong, regardless of sexuality, by:

- speaking respectfully about sexual diversity from when children are young. Many young people say they knew from a young age they were different. Children will listen to your words and attitudes to know whether they can talk to you about how they feel
- balancing negative comments with positive messages. Even flippant sayings like 'it's so gay' can send a negative message about being same-sex attracted. We don't say things like 'it's so straight'
- fostering acceptance by showing your family and friends you respect your young person. Don't allow homophobic talk or behaviour
- teaching that prejudice is about stereotypes and myths and nothing to do with who people really are
- helping young people think about what they can do if they experience bullying or discrimination. Help them build resilience and confidence
- making sure they have information that keeps them safe in both the online and offline worlds.

Telling others

Everyone handles telling others in their own way. Your young person might not want to tell anyone else, or they may be happy for everyone to know. If they decide to tell others, it can take time as they will have many different relationships in their life. They may want you to tell other family members, or they might want to do it themselves. It is important to respect their wishes. They need to feel safe about their choice to tell or not, and to trust that others won't take away their right to privacy.

Many people assume everyone is heterosexual. Every day your young person might have to decide how to answer questions about their personal life.

Community attitudes and laws

Community attitudes have changed over time to become more accepting and respectful of same-sex attracted people. This is reflected in many of our laws. There are laws to protect same-sex attracted people from harassment and discrimination. Same-sex couples in a domestic relationship now have the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples – with the exception of being able to marry. Laws about adopting children and methods for conceiving vary across states and territories.



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Homophobia and bullying

Despite changes in our laws and community attitudes, prejudice, rejection and bullying make life hard for same-sex attracted people. Young people who are same-sex attracted, or are thought to be, are three times more likely to be bullied or abused at school, work and in social situations. Even if your young person is not verbally or physically harassed, they will have heard negative comments and harsh attitudes towards homosexual people.

Homophobic bullying in schools has increased over time, with cyber bullying making it easier to involve lots of people. Many same-sex attracted young people miss school which puts them at risk of not doing well or not completing their education. They might not speak up as they don't want to 'come out' to school staff, or are worried about confidentiality.

If your young person tells you about bullying, act early. Let them know it is your job to make sure they are safe. Talk with them about the best way you can do this. Even though they might be worried about you contacting the school, the school has a responsibility to prevent bullying. You don't need to disclose your young person's sexuality when reporting bullying to the school.

Negative stereotypes, bullying and discrimination can cause harm to young people trying to work out who they are.

Getting support

It is important to be around people who support you and your child. You could:

- contact a service or support group below. Many parents have been through the same thing and can offer words of wisdom and support
- consider whether you want to spend time with any friends, social groups, clubs or other organisations that are not respectful or supportive.

Support and information

ACTQueer a confidential, free email list for LGBTQ people in the ACT and region. It encourages and supports access to, and participation in, the diverse range of social and community activities available in Canberra. Email actqueer-owner@yahoo.com

Reach Out provides useful information if you are about to tell someone you are gay, lesbian or bisexual. www.reachout.com

SpringOut Canberra's queer pride festival celebrates the diversity of the local LGBTI community. www.springout.com.au



This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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