



A
PARENT'S
GUIDE TO
COMING OUT

Introduction

Coming out is a lifelong process, and as a queer or trans* person, one is always coming out to their peers, neighbours, co-workers, doctors, and anyone who crosses their paths. When an LGBTQIA+ person feels accepted by the close people in their lives, they may find a great sense of support while coming out.

When they choose to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, LGBTQIA+ teenagers may feel rejected by significant people in their lives, such as their parents. Feelings of disregard, unwantedness, grief, separation, and a grave sense of loss may arise if the child feels like they are not accepted when they come out. The general well-being of the child may suffer as a result of this rejection or invalidation of their self-determined gender identity. LGBTQIA+ youths who are better-equipped to manage distress can often be linked to supportive family environments with high levels of parental support and little conflict.

When they are younger, LGBTQIA+ persons need support and care from their parents, since they may undergo a variety of experiences that can negatively impact their life. For instance, teachers and administrators in high school do nothing to stop the bullying of queer, gender non-conforming (GNC), and trans* kids.

The notion that adolescents are too young to



have an informed sense of their gender identity and sexuality is one that infantilises them and minimises their distress. This also leaves very little room for conversations around their experiences with and of their own bodies. Instead, any kid who appears to be different is bullied at school by their peers and teachers. Along with this, young adults are constantly exposed to derogatory portrayals of queerness and transness in media and popular culture, as well as in religious and cultural contexts. Because of this, trans* and queer youths often develop negative self-image, which can adversely impact how they perceive themselves and their sense of self-worth. Besides, these negative portrayals further the risk of violence and harassment of queer and trans* youths. Studies have suggested that the difficulties that trans* and non-binary youth experience are not intrinsically linked to the way they feel about their gender or their trans* identity but are instead direct and indirect consequences of the negative social contexts in which they live, notably with regard to discrimination, violence, and non-recognition as trans* and non-binary youths.¹

Even though IPC 377 was read down in 2018 and our country has instituted the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, young LGBTQIA+ persons face enormous violence and stigmatisation. In such an invalidating political and social world, it becomes imperative for parents and guardians to support their children.

This can be a very new experience for parents. You might not know the ways in which you can offer support to your own child/children when they come out to them. This guide attempts to offer some tips and tricks that can help you support and understand your queer and/or trans* child.

¹ Pullen Sansfaçon, A., Medico, D., Gelly, M. et al. Blossoming Child, Mourning Parent: A Qualitative Study of Trans Children and Their Parents Navigating Transition. *J Child Fam Stud* 31, 1771–1784 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-02178-w>

1. Affirmation

When your child comes out to you as a queer and/or trans* person, affirm and thank them for sharing the information with you. You may not be aware of all the nuances and terms of the LGBTQIA+ community, but assure your child that you are there for them no matter what and are open to learning about them. The scene from *Heartstopper* where Nick comes out to his mother is a perfect example of this.



(QR code for Heartstopper scene)



2. If your child comes out as GNC or trans*

If your child comes out to you as GNC or trans*, there is a chance that your child has very specific experiences and feelings that are unique to trans* and queer lives.

Sometimes, the child may come out to you but might still be questioning and getting to understand their gender identity or sexuality. In times like this, you can let your child know that you are there for them and that they can take as much time as they need to figure this out. Another way to support your child at a time like this would be to introduce them to people from the community. This would help the child hear different experiences, which might help them develop a sense of their own identity.

Below are some ways in which you can support your child in case they come out to you as trans* or non-binary:

Pronouns and name

The pronouns they use to refer to themselves as well as their name are important identifiers, as well as a representation of their identity. Queer and trans* people often experience gender dysphoria when their chosen names and/or pronouns are not used; the constant reference is a reminder to the child about their imposed identity as opposed to their felt identity. Hence, one must make sure to not misgender and deadname their children.

Not misgendering your child and referring to them using their chosen names and/or pronouns are not only essential to reduce their experience of gender dysphoria but also provides the child with a safe space where they can be themselves. You can ask the child if they prefer specific names and pronouns, and if so, what these are. Make

sure you inculcate the habit of using your child's chosen pronouns and/or name.

Often, names are also gendered. In situations like this, you can ask the child if they would like a name that aligns with their gender identity/expression. Make sure you use the chosen name and not deadname them ('deadname' is the name given to a queer or trans* person when they are born).

Clothes

One of the ways in which a person expresses their gender identity is through their clothes. Clothes can also be a way to explore the kind of presentation an individual feels comfortable in; a child assigned male at birth might want to explore wearing "feminine" clothes, and a child assigned female at birth might want to wear "masculine" clothes.

When raising your child, you may have a vision of how you want them to grow up. However, this vision might not align with what your child wants for themselves. It can be difficult for a parent to accept this change, but for the mental well-being of the child, it is crucial that you respect their autonomy and self-expression.

It is important that you understand that children have autonomy and rights over their own bodies. When this is accepted and assumed in the family, the child can have more space for self-expression. A safe and validating space for self-expression can significantly improve a child's chances at better well-being and better mental health. Ask your child what kind of clothes they want to wear, which section they would like to buy their clothes from, how and if they would like to accessorise or wear makeup, and how they would like to wear their hair. It is important that you do not impose society's expected gender markers on your child. Validation and recognition of the child's lived experience and self-expression can make them feel secure—not just with you, but also with themselves.

Some films

Ma vie en rose (My Life in Pink) (1997): Depicts the life of Ludovic, a transgender girl (assigned male at birth). The film shows bullying, stigma, and parents' struggles to accept their trans* child.

Tomboy (2011): A French drama film written and directed by Céline Sciamma. The narrative centres around Laure, a 10-year-old gender non-conforming child (assigned female at birth) who relocates to a new neighbourhood for the summer break and experiments with how they present themselves, going by the name Mickael.

Bombay Talkies (Sheila Ki Jawani) (2013): Vicky, a 12-year-old boy (Naman Jain), wants to be a Bollywood dancer. However, Vicky's father (Ranvir Shorey) wants his son to participate in sports that are generally associated with "toughness" and "manhood". Vicky is a fan of Katrina Kaif and enjoys dancing to Sheila Ki Jawani. As soon as his parents leave the house, he transforms into "Sheila" and begins dancing. However, he is caught by his parents and chastised for dressing like a woman. Later, Vicky hears a television interview of Katrina Kaif, where she is discussing defying social norms, pursuing one's aspirations in spite of challenges, and sometimes having to keep them a secret. Katrina's remarks give Vicky hope. In a scene from the movie, Vicky's sister expresses her desire to go on a school trip, but their father refuses to pay the Rs. 2,000 fees because he had already paid for Vicky's football training. Vicky's sister is disappointed that her parents put in so much effort into Vicky's football training when it is obvious that Vicky does not enjoy the sport. Moved by this, and realising the unfairness of the situation, Vicky offers to put up a performance to raise money for his sister's trip. They host a small ticketed event in an abandoned garage in the neighbourhood, where Vicky dances to his favourite music.

However, self-expression for queer and trans* youths can also spawn a lot of violence, exclusion, and trauma. This is when you must intervene to address the bullying and harassment of the child. If needed, have a discussion with the child's school and their teachers. There are often institutionalised anti-ragging and bullying policies in place within an educational institute. Acquaint yourself with all the processes that address these concerns.

3. Help them with bullying

Almost all LGBTQIA+ kids have faced bullying in their schools or among their peers. Children occasionally become targets of bullies, be it on the school playground or the local park. Bullies can:

- terrify a child;
- reduce a child's sense of importance;
- affect a child's ability to play;
- cause physical, sexual, or emotional harm; and
- cause persistent issues with mental health.

When a child experiences persistent bullying, their overall mental well-being is gravely affected. Queer and trans* kids are often vulnerable to this abuse as they may present differently. This experience of exclusion can harm their sense of self, and they may develop negative self-image and unhealthy patterns of thoughts and behaviours, which they can carry into adulthood. Bullying may also lead to feelings of pain, disempowerment, persistent irritability, anger flare-ups, or a range of uncomfortable emotions that can take a toll on a child's overall well-being.

All of this can be overwhelming and you may fear for the well-being and safety of your child. However, with good care and support from parents, friends, teachers, and guardians, a child who has experienced bullying can find healing.

Parents can also be cognizant and sensitive to the range of emotions their child is experiencing. You should be perceptive of your child undergoing prolonged periods of low emotions, irritability, and other signs of distress. This identification is very important so that you can extend support according to your child's needs. Distress can look like prolonged periods of low energy, loss of interest, frequent irritability, or a range of emotions that are difficult to sit with. For example, if your child is not able to engage with their favourite hobbies or interests, a check-in can help.

Create a safe space for conversation

When you realise that your child is experiencing bullying, try to have a conversation with them about it. If they open up about their experiences, try to understand the nature of the bullying. Give them care, assure them that they are loved, and create a non-judgemental, safe space where they can share their experiences.

It is important to understand that children seldom talk to their parents if they are untrusting and if feel unsafe or insecure about sharing their feelings with their parents. There may also be times where, despite there being a safe space for conversation, your child may not share their experiences with you. In that case, ask the child if there is anyone in particular that they would like to talk with.

A conversation is the best way to gauge your child's feelings, moods, and experiences in their everyday life. With continued effort, you can establish a safe space for your child. A child may be able to express and



address the difficult emotions that they are experiencing in a trusting manner within a non-judgemental space.

Talk to mental healthcare professionals

Remember, there is no shame in asking for help. Tell your child this too. Let them know that you are willing to support them if they want to talk to a therapist, and open up a space for them to seek therapy.

Get in touch with mental healthcare professionals who are trauma-informed, queer-affirmative, and work with adolescents and children. Psycho-therapeutic work can help your child get back in touch with their resources and focus on developing their internal capacities.

Bullying is systemic

It is also important to understand that bullying is systemic and that the other concerned persons should also take collective action to address bullying in their surroundings. Some of the ways in which bullying can be addressed are:

- Always ask consent. Always ask your child if they want to report the bully. If they agree, you can take the required steps.
- Identify the bully and get in touch with the guardians/parents of the child. Along with this, do reach out to school authorities if the bullying is occurring within the school.
- You can seek accountability from the bully about their actions, but also be kind to the bully, as reflection can be a difficult experience for everyone.
- You can look into the anti-ragging policies instituted in the school and acquaint yourself with them.
- You can always encourage schools and your peer parents to initiate a conversation about bullying in their homes, schools, and other shared spaces.

4. Learning the correct terms and concepts

Remember this: compassion over comprehension. There will be times when you may not fully understand what your child is saying or what their experience is like, and that's all right. Hear them out. Sit with it. You can take your time to process it. You can also ask your child for books and film recommendations as well as information about the community. Basic Wikipedia, Britannica, and YouTube searches can give you comprehensive knowledge about sex, gender, sexuality, queer history, queer culture, and anything you may wish to learn about the community.

Remember, while learning about the community, make sure to refer to artists, filmmakers, YouTubers, writers, bloggers, and authors from within the community. That way, the knowledge and understanding you develop will be authentic and reliable.

There are online resources that can guide you to understand the correct terminologies. Nazariya's booklet on "LGBTQIA+ Terminology" is one among many reliable resources about concepts and terminologies.

In addition to this, you may get in touch with organisations working with LGBTQIA+ persons to understand more about the community. This way, you can learn to care for your child's needs and will be open to new learnings about them.

Gender dysphoria

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines 'gender dysphoria' as a "marked incongruence between their experienced or expressed gender and the one they were assigned at birth". Gender dysphoria often raises feelings of extreme discomfort with the self and the body when gender markers imposed by society are incongruent with one's feelings and expressed gender. Dysphoria is usually triggered when a queer or trans* person is referred to or seen as the gender that they were assigned at birth.

Misgendering

Misgendering occurs when a person addresses or refers to another person with incorrect pronouns. In this context, misgendering a queer or trans* person often means referring to them with the pronouns that they were assigned at birth.

5. To say or not to say

“It’s just a phase.”

It’s not “just a phase”. Sometimes, when children or young adults come out to their parents, they are told that this is just a phase and that it may pass. Do not dismiss your child’s sense of self by saying that “it’s just a phase”.

“We will take you to the doctor. We will fix this.”

Nothing needs to be fixed. When young adults/children come out to you, do not take them to a therapist/doctor/religious practitioner with the intention of curing them. Sexual orientation or gender identity is not a condition to be pathologised; it is just a way that someone feels and perceives themselves and how they choose to show that to the world. Recent scientific knowledge has forced medical associations, including the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, to ascertain that gender identity and sexual orientation are not conditions. “Treating” this causes grave harm to your child, and medical bodies like the National Medical Commission (an apex regulatory body for medical practitioners in India) have banned conversion therapy, directed state bodies to recognise conversion therapy as misconduct, and take actions against practitioners for malpractice. Despite this, conversion therapy continues to take place, as a lot of religious and cultural practices do not fall within the ambit of the legalities of malpractice and misconduct in the same way as they apply to medical practitioners.

“Oh, so you are bi/pan. This means you can still get married.”

Yes, they can. But don’t assume that they will end up in a heterosexual marriage. They may choose to spend the rest of their life in a same-sex relationship. As a parent, all you can do is hope that your child finds fulfilling love in a partner, no matter who they decide to live with. They may also decide to not live with a partner, and as parents/guardians, one must hold space for that as well.

6. How to deal with relatives

Often, queer/trans* children are outed to the family because of their gender presentation, relationships, if they are undergoing transition, etc. Relatives play a major role in reinforcing and imposing gender expectations on the children of the family. During this time, it becomes important that the parents intervene, communicate, and inform the relatives about their child’s gender expression.

However, this may not be enough, as relatives may not have an awareness of gender and sexuality either. It then becomes your responsibility to educate and inform relatives who are unaware of these issues which are so personal to your child. The child’s specific needs must be communicated to the relatives to ensure that they are met.

Sometimes, children themselves may not want to talk about this to their relatives. It is important to ask for the child’s consent as to who in the family they are or are not comfortable sharing this with. This can give the child a sense of security and agency about their own narrative and lived reality.

7. Self-care tips for parents

Hello parents, this guide may have brought about feelings of panic, worry, fear, anxiety about supporting your children, and perhaps a sense of urgency to take actions to protect your child.

We agree that this is all pretty daunting and can be very overwhelming, especially when you are trying to keep up with ways to support your child. But in order to look out for your child, you have to look out for yourself as well. Here are a few things you can do to take care of yourself:

Tip 1: Be kind to yourself. We don't know our children.

Yes, that's right. We don't know our children. They occupy a space where they are constantly evolving as individuals. Know that your child is creating an entire world for and of themselves. It is almost impossible to know everything about them. So, instead of getting worked up about trying to know them fully and understanding them, let's keep space for not knowing and be okay with it. We don't need knowledge to love our kids. We just love them.

Tip 2: They are still the same.

Sometimes, your child coming out to you may make you feel like you have to realign everything you know about them. This may give rise to feelings of loss and instability. You should know that they are still the same person, with the same likes and dislikes, choices, opinions, and personalities, which are ever-evolving and ever-changing like all the rest of the world. Their gender identity is just part of who they are, and one need not look at them only through their gender identity or sexuality. How would you feel if your entire personality was reduced to your gender? So, know that your child is just being who they want to be and that you're making space for that.

Tip 3: Reach out to a community and create a support system for yourself.

Reach out to other parents whose children have come out to them. There are parent support groups that can help you navigate your own feelings and learnings regarding the new experiences you may share with the others. Sweekar is one such parent collective, among many, that offers support to parents whose kids have come out to them. Parent support groups are a very healthy and safe way to explore your own emotions during this time.





Nazariyaqfrg



Nazariya: A Queer Feminist Resource Group



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