



# Health

## Tips for Parents of LGBTQ Youth

### Reviewed By:

Renata Sanders, M.D., M.P.H., Sc.M. (<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org><https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/profiles/results/directory/profile/0019220/renata-sanders>)

### Reviewed By:

Errol Lamont Fields, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D. (<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org><https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/profiles/results/directory/profile/1598932/errol-fields>)

All parents want what's best for their kids. But providing support isn't always easy — especially if you are the parent of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) child. In many ways no different from their peers, LGBTQ youth face some unique challenges that parents often feel unprepared to tackle. To help, Johns Hopkins pediatricians and adolescent medicine specialists <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org><https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/profiles/results/directory/profile/0019220/renata-sanders> and <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org><https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/profiles/results/directory/profile/1598932/errol-fields> share steps you can take to keep your kid happy and healthy.

## Let them know they are loved

For many LGBTQ youth, breaking the news to mom and dad is the scariest part of coming out. “Time and time again, we hear the same thing from patients: ‘Once my parents are behind me, I can handle anything else the world throws at me,’” Dr. Fields explains. “You’re their anchor, and your acceptance is key. In fact, research shows that LGBTQ adolescents who are supported by their families grow up to be happier and healthier adults.”

You don’t need to be an expert in all things LGBTQ to let them know you care. “There’s no right or wrong way to express love,” reminds Dr. Sanders. “Just be present and be open.” Even if you’re not sure what to say, something as simple as, “I’m here for you. I love you, and I will support you no matter what” can mean the world to your child.

# Encourage dialogue

As you're likely well aware, getting your kids to open up can feel impossible. Dr. Sanders and Dr. Fields say the best way to do this is to build trust and start small. "Be curious about their life," advises Dr. Sanders. Get to know their friends and what they like to do. Ask them how their day went and if they learned anything interesting in school. If it's like pulling teeth at times, don't be discouraged. Children really do want to be able to talk to parents about what's going on in their lives.

These conversations may seem like no-brainers, but staying connected to your child's world makes it easier for them to approach you with bigger, more complex issues, like sexuality. The more you communicate with your child, the more comfortable they'll feel.

## How to Get Them Talking

You can't always rely on your children to initiate these exchanges, though. When you feel something needs to be discussed, try being less direct. "Adolescents often have a hard time talking about themselves. Instead, bring up their friends or characters you encounter while watching age-appropriate movies or television together," suggests Dr. Sanders.

Today's media provide plenty of teachable moments for parents to seize. While it may seem less personal, it is an opportunity to broach sensitive topics in a way that's not so scary. For instance, if a movie has a bisexual character, spark a conversation by saying, "The character in this show is attracted to boys and girls. That's OK with me. What do you think?"

## Learn the facts

"When we speak with parents, we hear a lot of misconceptions about gender and sexual orientation," says Sanders. Empower your parenting with what experts know:

- **It's not "just a phase."** Embrace — don't dismiss — their evolving sense of self.
- **There is no "cure."** It's not something that needs to be fixed.
- **Don't look for blame.** Instead, celebrate your child and all that they are.

## Stay involved with the school

Kids spend almost as much time in the classroom as they do at home. Here's what you can do to make sure they feel comfortable there, too.

- **Advocate for a gay-straight alliance (GSA)**, which has been shown to make schools safer and boost academic performance among LGBTQ students.

- **Maintain frequent contact with teachers.** That way, you'll know when issues arise.
- **Push for more inclusive sex education.** Very few states allow schools to provide LGBTQ students with the information they need to be safe and healthy. Be aware of these knowledge gaps so that you can fill them yourself.
- **Above all, don't hesitate to speak up.** "Parents forget that they have a huge voice in the school system. You do have power," Dr. Sanders emphasizes. "If there's a problem and the school isn't taking your concerns seriously, go to the principal or even the school board."

## Look out for signs of bullying

Bullying is a problem for many students, but LGBTQ youth in particular are often targeted for being different. If you see these signs, reach out to a teacher, guidance counselor or school administrator:

- Behavior change (e.g., your outgoing, sociable child is now withdrawn)
- Discipline or behavioral problems in school
- Declining grades
- Unexplained absences
- Sudden shifts in who's a friend and who's not
- Engagement in risk behavior (e.g., drug use, new sexual partner) that is out of character for your child

## Take a team approach

Providing support can be challenging at times. It's OK to be stressed, confused or surprised — but don't pull back when you're needed most. "Some parents feel so overwhelmed that they just throw up their hands and say, 'I can't do it.' It's a lot for parents to process, but don't leave your kid in the lurch," urges Dr. Sanders.

"Remember, your child is having more difficulty with this than you are," says Dr. Fields, "and your duty as a parent comes first." If you're struggling, reach out for help. Team up with a pediatrician, a counselor at school, close family members and even community organizations — for example, [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays \(PFLAG\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.pflag.org/) (<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.pflag.org/>) — if you're having trouble going it alone.

## Ensure they form healthy relationships

As kids become teens, it's OK for them to develop interest in other boys and girls their age. "Dating is daunting for most parents — especially parents of LGBTQ youth — but it's an important part of adolescent development for all children," assures Dr. Fields. To keep them safe, be involved and stay connected. "By encouraging your kid to date in a way that's healthy and age-appropriate, you send a powerful message: LGBTQ relationships are normal, and there's nothing to hide or be ashamed of," explains Dr. Fields.

## Stay on top of social media

Because they're often discouraged from being open about their sexual orientation and gender identity, some LGBTQ individuals rely on social media and phone applications to meet others. Many social platforms and apps provide LGBTQ youth an inclusive space to connect with friends and allies, but some (especially dating apps) include content that is inappropriate for teens. Monitor what they're doing on their devices and talk to them about phone and social media use, recommends Dr. Fields.

"More importantly," says Dr. Fields, "understand that kids turn to these apps if they feel like they don't have anyone to talk to. Be available so that your child doesn't need to look elsewhere for guidance and support."

## Additional Resources

- [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays \(PFLAG\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.pflag.org/) (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.pflag.org/)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: LGBT Youth](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttp://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm) (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttp://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm)
- [LGBT Resources at Johns Hopkins Medicine](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/lgbt-resources/) (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/lgbt-resources/)

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