

My teen just told me he or she is gay. What should I do?

If your child tells you they are questioning their sexual identity in one way or another, it may take you by surprise and you may find yourself wondering how best to respond next. How you respond in that first conversation and subsequent conversations is important. You might not know all the answers in that moment, but these are the first things they need to hear from you:

- 1. “Thank you for having the courage to tell me.”** Your teen has been struggling with their feelings and how to tell you for a long time. The fact that they are inviting you into this journey with them has taken immense courage.
- 2. “God loves you.”** Chances are, they are familiar with what the Bible says about homosexuality. They may already be fearing his rejection. This is not the time for theological discussions. This is time to lean into the truths of God’s grace and unconditional love that he gives to all.
- 3. “I love you.”** They need to be reaffirmed in your love for them, too. They need to hear that your love for them is unconditional and that the questions of their sexual identity will not change that.
- 4. “We are family. We want you here.”** What comes next is a very open and honest and often winding journey that will look completely different for every family. What’s important is that you ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions to help you understand where he or she is coming from, and then learn how to journey forward together as a family, both giving and receiving grace.

Below are several resources we think you will find helpful. If you need help, we are here for you.

Recommended reading:

Audio: [Ministry With LGBTQ Teenagers – How To Respond](#) by Mark Oestreicher

Book: [Homosexuality and The Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends](#) by Mark A. Yarhouse, PsyD

Book: [Ministering to Gay Teenagers: Practical Help for Youth Workers and Families](#) by Shawn Harrison

Responding well when your child's sexuality is not what you thought

(by Amy Van Veen from focusonthefamily.ca)

Several times a week, our care and counselling department receives phone calls from parents whose child has just "come out" to them, either identifying as LGBT or revealing the fact that they are struggling with their attractions or sexuality.

Some call and ask how to "fix" their child. Others simply want to know what to do and how to respond. And still others want to love their child but are told by their Christian community that it's unbiblical to do so.

On the other side of that situation, there are children, youth and young adults who are risking rejection, misunderstanding and disappointment in their attempt to invite their mom and dad into their journey.

When Jon first tried broaching the topic of his same-sex attraction with his parents, their immediate barrage of questions left him overwhelmed and scared, unsure of the answers himself. He in turn downplayed his struggles and was forced to carry them alone for several more years¹.

Wesley Hill, a self-proclaimed celibate gay Christian, wrote *Washed and Waiting*, a book detailing his own journey of Christian faithfulness for someone who experiences same-sex attraction. He talks about the feelings of isolation, shame and guilt that plague many gay Christians, writing, "Those who do bring their struggle to the light often confess that for years they kept it under wraps out of fear and shame."

In his book *Understanding Sexual Identity*, psychologist Mark A. Yarhouse details the difference between guilt and shame – and the damage the latter

can do to those who are experiencing a struggle between their attractions or sexuality and their faith:

"When people experience guilt, they understand, 'I should not have done that.' Shame, on the other hand, says to them, 'I should not be that.' Guilt is about what we do that we should not do; shame is feeling bad about who we are. It is 'the emotion resulting from self-condemnation along with the fear of condemnation from others.'

"When people feel shame, they tend to withdraw from and avoid others. They may experience anger or blame others. Unfortunately, the responses of hiding, deflecting, and blaming do not really help alleviate the shame they feel – they perpetuate it."

What can parents do, then, to respond to their child who either identifies a struggle with their sexuality and attraction or identifies as LGBT? And for parents who currently have a broken relationship with their child as a result of this issue, what can they do to rebuild that relationship? Keep reading for practical advice from Christians in counselling and psychology as well as those who have walked this journey themselves.

How to respond when your child comes out to you

This conversation is never an easy one – for the child or for the parent. Caleb Kaltenbach, a pastor and child of gay parents, knows this to be true.

"It's this very moment that has cost people dearly," he writes in his book *Messy Grace*. "It's this very moment that has caused divisions in families and friendships. Why? Because some people don't know how to react, and sometimes the person who has come out interprets the immediate reaction as indicative of how these people really feel. I don't think that's always fair. Most people need time to process really big news. But still the reaction to the big reveal is crucial."

The following will help you as a parent keep this moment from costing your entire relationship with your child.

1. Don't react; do respond.

For Jon, his parents' initial reaction of questions aimed at finding out who or what was to blame for this caused him to clam up and shut down the conversation. Kaltenbach, too, encourages parents to be aware of their facial and verbal reactions. Looking disappointed and/or getting mad will only cause pain for your child in this moment of vulnerability.

2. **Don't preach.**

Karin Gregory, director of counselling at Focus on the Family Canada, tells parents, "Don't preach! If you've raised your child with God's Word, they have already heard what Scripture says about this." Kaltenbach adds to this, noting, "This is not a moment that you need to use to enlighten them. This is a moment to listen."

3. **Don't try to "fix" them.**

Another common response of parents is to suggest counselling, Kaltenbach explains. While counselling is a valuable and helpful tool that everyone can benefit from at some point or another, that's not what your child needs to hear in this moment.

"This is not the moment to try and 'fix' anyone," Kaltenbach writes, "this is the moment to be a good friend, parent, sibling, or whatever your role may be with the other person. Just be there for the person."

4. **Thank them.**

"First, understand this: it takes a lot of courage for friends or family members to share this part of their life with you," Kaltenbach notes, adding, "The best first thing you can say to others when they come out to you is 'Thank you.'"

Thank you for sharing this part of your life with me.

Thank you for thinking enough of me to include me in this.

Thank you for trusting me with this part of your life.

5. Reaffirm your love for them.

When Ann Mobley's son came out to her when he was in his mid-20s, she felt blindsided. He was already in a relationship with the man she thought was his roommate and, through tears, told her he didn't want to keep lying to her.

"I didn't realize at that moment how important my initial response to my son's confession would be," she recalls in her book. "But when I saw the pain so evident on his face, I quickly moved to where he was sitting at the end of the table, put my arms around him, and drew him next to my heart. Struggling to keep my own emotions under control, I assured him, 'Danny, you're my son, and I love you. Nothing is ever going to change that.'"

6. Listen to their story.

It can be tempting to jump to conclusions about your child, which is why it's so important to allow them to share with you their own story. By thanking them and reassuring them of your love, they will be more willing to share where they're at in their own journey. Because of her initial loving response, Mobley and her son were able to have a rich, ever-growing relationship that has since included many conversations about his life, his past and his faith.

There are many variables that will affect the following conversations you have with your child. If they're early in their journey (like Jon) or they're identifying as LGBT and in a relationship (like Ann's son), or if they're wanting to continue in their faith or they've decided to walk away from God, it's important to listen and seek to understand.

According to Yarhouse, the best place to start is with compassion.

"Practically speaking, compassion involves truly seeing and listening to another person," he writes. "It involves trying to see her circumstances through her eyes (empathy). Compassion seeks to

understand. It unpacks a person's story and allows a person's background and experience to 'thicken the plot' in that person's life."

For this first conversation, your response can make all the difference. If your child is early in their journey and is inviting you into it, you can remind yourself that attractions and feelings are different from behaviours. When your child shares with you their struggles with same-sex attractions and their sexuality, you can respond with:

We are honoured to walk with you through this.

We are so glad you're trusting us with this.

We don't know how to travel through this but we'll learn together.

On the other hand, if your child has decided on their LGBT identity, it's important to remember that accepting their truth doesn't mean you abandon your faith. Jon also encourages Christian parents to hold onto their own convictions without pushing those convictions onto their child. Or, as Gregory puts it, "Not one of us can make another be or do or think what they don't want to."

Also, for your child to have arrived at this identity, they will likely have, for some time, been trying to make sense of their attractions and sexuality. "Recognize that they likely have knowledge you don't and invite them to share what they've learned," Jon advises parents. In situations like this, you can respond with:

While my views on behaviour will not change, nothing will change the fact that you are my child and I love you.

I can't support your decision, but I will be there for you and want to learn more about how you reached your decision.

This will not be easy and I hope you'll be patient with us as there will be some things we do right and some things we do wrong, but we don't want to lose our relationship with you.

How to seek healing in a broken relationship

Sadly, some families are feeling the pain of a broken relationship because of a traumatic "coming out" experience.

"Perhaps a daughter came out to you as a lesbian," Kaltenbach writes. "You were shocked, horrified. You immediately became concerned about her relationship with God. There were harsh words on both sides. The rift hasn't closed to this day, but now that you've had some time to think about it, you're reminded of how much you love her, you want to know what's going on in her life, and you want to be of genuine help to her."

What can you do, then, to reach out and recover the relationship?

Jon encourages parents to start with an apology. Even though your view on the topic hasn't changed, you can still apologize for how you responded. When you reach out to them, it's important for you to come with a sincere desire to restore the relationship and learn more about them, not an agenda to change or "fix" them.

You can try saying:

I'm sorry for how I responded. I want to do what we can to restore our relationship. My views haven't changed, but I want to understand your story more and support you better as a person.

"It all comes down to respect," Gregory advises. "Respect of the person and respect of the relationship." And just as it may have taken time for you to come to terms with their initial news, they may also need time to come to terms with your desire for reconciliation.

As Kaltenbach explains, "Sometimes a break with another person is not as permanent as it first seems. If we are patient and persistent and make it known that we're open for reconciliation, sometimes the other person comes back. We can always keep praying."

Receiving and showing grace

For all of us, giving grace and showing God's love is only possible when we've truly understood that grace and love for ourselves. In order to, as

Gregory says, "have the heartbeat of God for our children," we need to first understand God's heartbeat for us. The best thing you can do for your child is to deepen your own relationship with Christ.

For Mobley, this was a crucial part of her relationship with her son and something she encourages other parents to do in their own journeys. "Make it your first priority to strengthen your own personal relationship with God through time in his Word and in prayer," she advises. "You will need his guidance, wisdom, strength, direction from his Word, encouragement, perseverance, and hope for this journey."

As you go forward in relationship with your son or daughter, walking alongside them through this difficult terrain, we want to encourage you that you don't have to go it alone. At Focus on the Family Canada, we have a team dedicated to caring for you and your family, no matter what you may be facing. If you would like to speak to one of our registered Christian counsellors, you can call our team at **1.800.661.9800** (Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. PT) to arrange a free, one-time phone counselling consultation, share a prayer request, or be pointed to resources to help you and your child.