

# "I'M GAY."

For teens, discovering and sometimes declaring their sexual identity is an important part of becoming an adult. But for young people who aren't straight, there can be added challenges if they feel they're not conforming to a more traditional heterosexual role.

## SCENARIO | Your teenager comes out to you.

Your teen may have had an idea about his sexuality for several years, but now that he's more secure in his identity, he feels ready to tell you.

Less stigma and more openness around LGBTQ+ issues today mean that young people are coming out earlier than ever; in the last two

decades, the average age has fallen from 20 years old to around 16. This can be a socially vulnerable time for your teen, so it's important to keep an eye on his mental health. Supporting your teen's feelings will help make his adolescent years as secure as possible.

### WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING

**You may wonder** if your son is going through a phase of experimentation or whether he's certain about his choice. You may worry he might be affected by discrimination or homophobia or worry how other family members might react. If you didn't suspect he wasn't straight, you may wonder how you missed the signs.

### WHAT HE MIGHT BE THINKING

• **Your teen might be worried** about how you'll react, especially if you've ever said anything that made him think you disapprove of same-sex couples.

• **If he's been trying to hide** his sexuality, telling you will feel like a relief. If he hasn't told others yet, he may see coming out to you as a decisive first step in being able to declare his sexuality openly to the world.

• **Even if he believes** you'll be supportive, he may worry about how older, more conservative members of the family, such as grandparents, might react.

• **Almost all male gay students** say they have heard the word "gay" used as a put-down, sometimes as a way for other boys to assert heterosexual masculinity. For this reason, he may be more nervous about coming out to his peers than to you.

#### SEE RELATED TOPICS

Sex and contraception: pp.110–111  
Sexuality and gender: pp.120–121

## HOW YOU COULD RESPOND

### In the moment

#### Be accepting

Thank him for telling you. He'll remember this moment for the rest of his life, so be clear you're supportive and that you love him. Don't talk too much. Listen and remember that he's still the same person. If you think he'd like it, offer a sign of physical affection.

#### Make this moment his

Even if you feel surprised at his news and need some time to adjust your thoughts about his future, make sure that he doesn't sense this. Ensure that this remains your teen's moment and make it clear from the outset that you support him unconditionally.

### In the long term

#### Keep talking about healthy sex

If you're heterosexual, you may feel unqualified to talk about gay sex. But the principles of safe sex, consent, and good relationships still apply. Stress the importance of wearing condoms to prevent STIs.

#### Talk to family members

Once you think your teen is ready, ask him when he wants to tell others in the family. How would he like to handle sharing his news with siblings and other family members? Support him during this process and help answer any questions they may have.

#### Create a safe haven

Homophobic bullying is the most common kind in schools, according to research, with name-calling such as "queer," "faggot," or "gay" common. Acknowledge that bullying, both verbal and sometimes physical, is

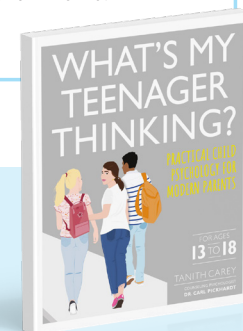
a concern for your teen. Make sure that he has a consistently supportive environment at home and feels like he has a safe place to be and to bring his friends.

#### Be positive about LGBTQ+ issues

He'll be assessing how you really feel about him being gay. Talk positively about LGBTQ+ role models. Ask him what he'd like you to understand about his sexuality and if there are any films or books he identifies with that would help you get his feelings.

#### Respect his relationships

You may have had to adjust your mindset about your teen, but understand that love is love, and look forward to your teen enjoying a fulfilling and loving relationship. Accept any future partner he may have and be excited that your child is introducing you to someone so important in his life.



# SEXUALITY AND GENDER

We tend to assume that our children will remain the gender given to them at birth—either a boy or a girl. However, if your child doesn't identify with their birth gender, it's important to be supportive.

It's now recognized that gender is a spectrum, with many variations, and so is sexuality. So it's helpful for parents to think beyond binary concepts, such as "man" or "woman," "gay" or "straight."

You may need to adjust to seeing your child differently if they decide not to live as their birth gender. Appreciate their bravery and ensure that your unconditional love lets them know they are the same child to you.



## WORKING THINGS OUT

### 8 key principles

1

#### Listen and accept

Rejecting how your teen feels about their sexuality or gender can contribute to anxiety and depression. Even if their choice is a surprise, respect their views.

2

#### Ask about meaning

There's a long and expanding list of how people now describe gender and sexuality. If your teen has chosen new self-defining words, ask for their personal definition. This will tell you a lot about their thinking.

3

#### Understand the pieces of the puzzle

Your teen has their biological sex (their sex organs at birth), their gender identity (what gender they feel), their gender expression (how feminine or masculine they want to appear), and their sexual orientation. Think of all of these as elements that add up to who they are.

4

#### Take time to adjust privately

If your teen identifies as a different gender, you may feel a sense of loss for the path you thought they would take. Give yourself time to adjust, and seek support if necessary.

5

#### Examine your beliefs

Where did your ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman come from? Consider how stereotypes are restrictive. Seeing how we're socialized to perform specific societal roles can help you understand their thinking.

6

#### Respect pronouns

Even if your teen changes their mind, it feels important to them that you respect how they want to be addressed now, whether it's "he," "she," or "they." This shows you're prepared to accept whoever they decide to be.

7

#### Stay connected

Those who don't fit into traditional gender roles are more likely to experience social cruelty. If your child is LGBTQ+, be vigilant. Watch out for low mood, anxiety, and withdrawal.

8

#### Set family values

Whoever your teen decides to be, make equality a family value. They're still your child, and your unconditional love is critical to their self-acceptance.



## ! TAILORED ADVICE

### Age by age

**13–14**

YEAR-OLDS

#### Be open-minded

Teens compare themselves a lot now and can be acutely aware of veering from gender "norms." Avoid sexual stereotyping.

#### Don't assume

As your teen enters the dating scene, avoid making assumptions about who they might be attracted to.

**15–16**

YEAR-OLDS

#### Don't say it's just a phase

Teens may be more open now. If your teen comes out to you, be respectful of their identity.

#### Keep a sense of routine

With brain rewiring and hormonal changes, all teens seek out identities now. For your child, that search may be more challenging. Make your home a safe haven where they feel understood.

**17–18**

YEAR-OLDS

#### Support self-expression

With your teen's more assured self-expression, support choices in hair, clothes, or décor.

#### Accept bisexuality

If your teen starts to explore feelings for more than one gender, recognize this identity as real and valid.

