

Lesbian, Gay, Bi or Trans Grandchildren

A Grandparent's Response to Coming Out Is Crucial

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Many emotions rise to the surface for both parties when a grandchild "comes out." By revealing his or her identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), they are exposing themselves to a deep vulnerability. It can be uncomfortable to "stay in the closet" and it takes a lot of courage for your grandchild to share his or her sexual orientation and/or gender identity with you. Because sharing this personal information can be uncomfortable, grandparents may or may not be included in the initial coming out—but they will likely get the message eventually.

Responding appropriately is key to preserving the grandparent-grandchild connection and allowing your grandchild to experience life openly at home.

Caring for a Grandchild Who Is Lesbian, Gay, Bi or Trans

Grandparents learn that their grandchild is gay in many ways. It's common for grandparents to not be told at all, but more often than not, they find out on their own.

Young people tend to come out to friends and siblings before even telling their immediate parents. When the parents are told, they are the ones to make the decision on whether to tell the grandparents or not. With long-distance grandparents, it may seem easier to withhold the truth, so some families opt for that route. Other times, LGBT grandchildren want to personally deliver the news to their grandparents. When a grandparent is the first to be told, they must be especially careful of their reactions—it's an honor for their grandchildren to place such trust in them.

Dealing With Your Feelings

It's natural for grandparents to have mixed emotions when they hear that their grandchild is LGBT. Surprise, shock, and disbelief are all common feelings. Even grandparents who are gay themselves or consider themselves very liberal about gender and sexuality may find themselves taken aback.

A common challenge for grandparents is adjusting to a re-imagined future. Although same-sex couples now marry and have families, grandparents may feel disappointed that their traditional family pictures won't look the same.

Those who belong to a religious group that condemns homosexuality are likely to have a harder time with the news. Additionally, they may want to talk to their pastor or spiritual adviser to gain a better understanding of the issue, but this may lead to complications. Grandparents should be aware that rejecting their grandchild is not an option. Rather, their first concern should be to

reassure their grandchild that they are accepted and loved. When LGBT individuals are shut out by their families, it can result in depression, substance abuse, and even suicide.

Finding the Right Words

The words that LGBT individuals long to hear when they come out is some variation of "It's okay, and I love you." Grandparents who can't quite bring themselves to utter the first part of that message must be sure to deliver the second part. Their grandchild hasn't changed, nor has the love in the relationship. While you don't have to provide a stamp of approval, you can be empathetic during this time.

Grandparents can also add something along these lines:

"I may make mistakes, say the wrong thing, ask the wrong questions, or use the wrong terms. But I'm trying to grow in my understanding. Please believe that I love you and I'm working hard to support you."

Avoiding Certain Phrases

Grandparents should never say anything angry, hateful, nor suggest that their grandchild may be confused or going through a phase. Bombarding a grandchild with too many questions can also be overwhelming. Stick to mature questions about their friends and their relationships, and do not ask about their sex life.

If you guessed your grandchild's orientation before being told about it directly, you don't need to tell them. It can be disconcerting for newly-out persons to feel that everyone knew their secret all along.

Similarly, you should ask your grandchild whether you can share this information with friends and family. Some LGBT individuals come out gradually and do not want their orientation shared outside of their chosen circle.

Supporting Your Loved One

Many LGBT individuals will face discrimination during their lives, and some will be the victims of violence. It's okay to express your concern and to talk with them about how to protect themselves.

The ideal situation is for parents and grandparents to work together and support their loved one. In cases where parents withhold acceptance, reassurance from grandparents can fill a critical need. For example, some extreme cases call for the grandparents to provide shelter or financial support. Grandparents should weigh these decisions carefully, as it may result in issues like estrangement from the parents.

When the extended family is aware of a grandchild's sexual orientation or gender identity, grandparents can step in and set the standard for acceptance. For instance, they can let their

grandchild know that family gatherings will be safe places where they will not be teased, bullied, or preached to. It's also important to not tolerate bad behavior from family members.

Finding Educational Resources

Grandparents will likely have questions about what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. For example, they may feel that a person must be either homosexual or heterosexual, and that bisexuality is a cop-out. If your grandchild identifies as bisexual and you aren't sure exactly what that means, you can look for reliable sources to educate yourself.

Similarly, if a grandchild comes out as transgender, learning about the transition is key. Transgender individuals weren't in the public eye until the mid-1950s, and acceptance of transgendered people lags considerably behind the acceptance of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

Grandparents who continue to have trouble accepting a grandchild's sexual orientation or gender identity should not hesitate to get help.

Universities, medical centers, and allied communities can provide educational resources. [PFLAG](#), the organization for family and friends of LGBT individuals, has information that can be downloaded or read online. Additional education can also be beneficial, like talking with a counselor or attending a meeting. You can also reach out to a helpline, like the PFLAG one, for those who are unwilling or unable to attend meetings and provide support between them.

Developing the Relationship

Grandparents and grandchildren can still enjoy doing many of the same things that they did before their grandchild came out. While family traditions and stable relationships are important, it's also important to make LGBT grandchildren feel accepted about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Doing this involves mentioning their identity, if desired, and taking the steps to understand what level of openness works for their grandchild.

As time goes on, grandparents may have the privilege of meeting a grandchild's date or partner. Like parents, grandparents seldom approve of all of the choices their grandchildren make, and they may not like or approve of a partner. These life transitions are normal in any type of family dynamic and should be approached with grace and understanding. With a little effort and openness, grandparents can learn to meet the challenges that come to them and learn how to fully love their LGBT grandchild.