

How to Support Your Gay Child

Straight-from-the-heart advice for parents and grandparents who want to do the right thing.

by Joan Garry, **AARP**, March 31, 2011 | Comments: 5

My partner Eileen and I have been together for 30 years. We have three kids and have lived in the suburbs of New Jersey since forever. In our town, we are the gay "go-to" people — especially for parents and grandparents of gay kids. Even though some of those moms, dads and grandparents may be having a hard time dealing with it, most of them want to do the right thing; they're just not sure how. These are the concerns we hear frequently:

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All your child or grandchild needs is support.

"I'm not sure how to react." Being openly gay may be the most courageous choice your son, daughter, grandson or granddaughter will ever make. It is a decision to live with integrity. When you are erasing the picture of the wedding cake with a husband and wife on top from your hard drive, remember that. It takes guts. Admire them as people.

Try your best to remember that when you find yourself tempted to drive down Pity Party Lane.

"I don't know how to tell friends and family about my gay kid or grandkid." Present it like a five-alarm blaze and it will be received that way. Your comfort with the topic will set the tone. And don't think for a minute that your friends and neighbors aren't in the same boat. With more people living openly, it seems that nearly everyone knows someone gay. Strike that. Nearly everyone knows and likes/loves someone gay. And take it from me, never assume a friend or relative will be narrow-minded. I'm here to tell you: I've done it and it's not nice and it's unfair.

"Sometimes it's hard for me." I believe that kids want their parents to be honest with them. That was the approach I took when my 16-year-old daughter got a nose ring. "Don't you like it?" she asked me. "No, actually, I don't." I could have gone with "I love it; I think I'll get me one for Christmas." But I chose honesty. Choose it here, too. After all, your kid did! It really is OK to say, "This may be hard for me" or "Grandma's going to need an extra martini tonight."

"My son is bringing a date to Thanksgiving. I may have a bird." In some ways, it is just as weird when your daughter brings home a boyfriend for the first time. You are hardwired to turn into an awkward idiot. Extended family get-togethers add another layer of nosiness: "Is he a friend or a *friend friend*?" Get input from your kid on how to handle such kitchen buzz. And if your strategy can include some humor, all the better.

"Now that I know my kid is gay, I'm concerned about same-sex sleepovers." Be a good parent. You don't get some special dispensation because you are traveling in uncharted waters. Don't be shy, ask the question: "What kind of sleepover is this?" If the idea of your daughter sleeping with her boyfriend under your own roof at the age of 16 sets off every bad parenting bell in the universe for you, hold your gay son or daughter to the same standards.

"I want to be sooo supportive — I've even got the date for Pride Parade on my calendar!" I joke with my partner about a teen we know. We're sure he would come out if only he didn't think his mom hadn't already submitted her résumé for an open position at [PFLAG](#), which stands for Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Exuberance can be well intentioned, but teenagers kind of hate it in general.

"I was just settling into the gay thing and now she tells me she likes a boy." Teenagers are unpredictable and live in the world in a much more fluid way than we did at their age. I recently checked in with a friend about her gay high school senior. "How's she doing?" "Oh, I didn't tell you?" She put her head in her hands. "She's straight now." Sexuality is a pretty darned complex issue for teens to tackle. Just fasten your seatbelt and make sure your kid knows you are along for the ride.

"I really want him to meet some other nice gay people." It's time for a quick math lesson. Let's say it's a high school class of 250 kids. Let's assume 1 in 10 is gay. That's two dozen gay kids (25 less your own). Assume not all of them are out. Your kid is fishing in a very small pond. Gently nudge toward other ponds. Not just the Gay-Straight

Alliance, although this is a great start. What about volunteering for a gay teen hotline or homeless shelter? There are options galore.

"My fear for her safety keeps me up at night." So no one is likely to harass Neil Patrick Harris or Cynthia Nixon and their partners and new babies. But don't think for one solitary moment that your child or grandchild won't be a target tomorrow or a year from now. Yes, gay people are more visible than ever before. But it is equally true that homophobia runs rampant and deep in this country. Help them think through and prepare for this. Traveling is a big area of concern. Remember: Your job as a parent or grandparent is to advocate for your kid every step of the way. Gay kids need lots of it.

"I just want him to be happy." This is the best comment of all. Isn't this what we all want for our kids? I remember coming out like it was yesterday (it so wasn't). My father's first words were powerful and instinctual: "I always thought this was a tough row to hoe and I will not make it any tougher. I want you to be happy." Now, later that day, he expressed concern that St. Peter's pearly gates would be closed unto me. But at least he was honest. And yes, it got better. Because time (and love) were on our side.

There is one common theme in all the advice I offer. We want our kids to talk to us, to be honest, to live with integrity. Coming out and living openly is all of that. Congratulations. You raised a great kid. Now it's your turn. Great kids need great parents. Be honest, supportive and open. Be a fierce advocate. **And stop worrying that they won't be happy.** Start assuming they will be.

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