



# making sense

Information for parents, families and friends of  
gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people

## Acknowledgments

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**Introduction** from the SSAFE (Same Sex Attracted Friendly Environments) in Schools Program, Family Planning Victoria

When a young person comes out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, parents can experience a range of emotions. It can be a challenging time for many, as we live in a world that often does not accept those who are 'different'. While information and support around these issues can be hard to find, publications such as this one are helping to fill the gap. Projects such as ours also work with schools and organisations across Victoria with a commitment to improving environments for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth.

This booklet is written primarily for parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender young people who live in Victoria. If you are a friend or other relative, or your child is no longer a young person, or you live outside Victoria, you will still find it helpful. It aims to answer some of your questions, and to help you make sense of some concepts and issues that you may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with. It is designed to support you and to help you through the range of emotions you may be feeling. Family Planning Victoria has produced the booklet with the assistance of parents, professionals, other organisations and young people.

It is important to remember you are not alone in this experience. There are communities and networks for your child to connect with, as there are for you. This booklet lists a variety of contact points that you may find useful at some stage. A good place to start may be contacting your local P-FLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) – a social and support organisation for parents, friends and families of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

By reading this booklet you are already taking a step towards understanding and affirming your child's sexuality or gender identity. Just as it takes courage for your child to talk to you about this, it also takes courage for you to continue that conversation in honest and affirming ways. This is an important way of strengthening your relationship with your child, and showing your continued support and love.

**A letter from P-FLAG** (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

I assume that if you are reading this booklet, your son or your daughter has 'come out' to you and has revealed their sexuality or gender identity. If I say to you 'Welcome to the club', or even 'You now belong to an elite group of parents', I am not being facetious. I just want you to know that you are not alone, and that there are quite a few of us who have heard those life-altering, challenging words: 'Mum and Dad, there's something I have to tell you, I'm gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender'. This statement has an air of finality which cannot be denied, and the challenge for us as parents is to match the honesty, courage and love that are the gifts which this non-heterosexual or transgender child is offering us as a part of the 'coming-out' process.

Of course, we will ask 'Why? Why my child? Why did this happen in our family?'. In many cases, following a coming-out, the roles are reversed; and we, the parents – who it is assumed have all the answers – are in reality bewildered, confused and in some cases feeling quite inadequate to deal with this new knowledge about the child we thought we knew through and through. For many of us, our entire knowledge of matters of homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism are a confusion of myths, misinformation and stereotypes – with a good dash of fear and apprehension mixed in.

This booklet will answer many of your questions, calm your fears and allay your worries. It will not be the answer to everything, but it will arm you with irrefutable facts, and you will hear the voices of many who have experienced the same emotions as you may be feeling now. These are people who have worked through many of the issues which you are now confronting, and who have met head-on all the challenges, the negativity with which some people regard gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, the derogatory remarks...along with experiencing the absolute joy which is an integral part of loving someone who is non-heterosexual and/or transgender.

You and your child have embarked upon a new and exciting journey together. Cherish every step that you take. Be open to accepting the changes that will be wrought in your life. Travel together towards true Pride. Believe me, it's a wonderful experience.

**Nan McGregor**  
Hon. President, P-FLAG Vic. Assoc. Inc.



How do you feel  
When your son tells you  
He is gay?  
For a minute the world stands still  
And you say  
'Don't get sick...don't get AIDS'  
And in bed that night  
You feel a bit sick  
'Cause his life will be harder  
Than you want it to be  
And a lot of things make sense  
Little things  
Over the years  
And you think  
'Of course he is,  
Of course he is'  
And because you are his mother  
It has to be alright  
And you feel a deep need to protect him  
Just as strong as the day  
You brought him home from the hospital  
Even stronger  
And you know there are people  
Who will judge  
And condemn  
Like you did once  
And the night seems dark and long  
But in the morning  
The sun is so beautiful  
And strong  
Just like your son  
And your love for him  
Has you rejoice  
Not just accept  
But rejoice in who he is  
And who you are for him  
Because after all  
There is only this  
Love.

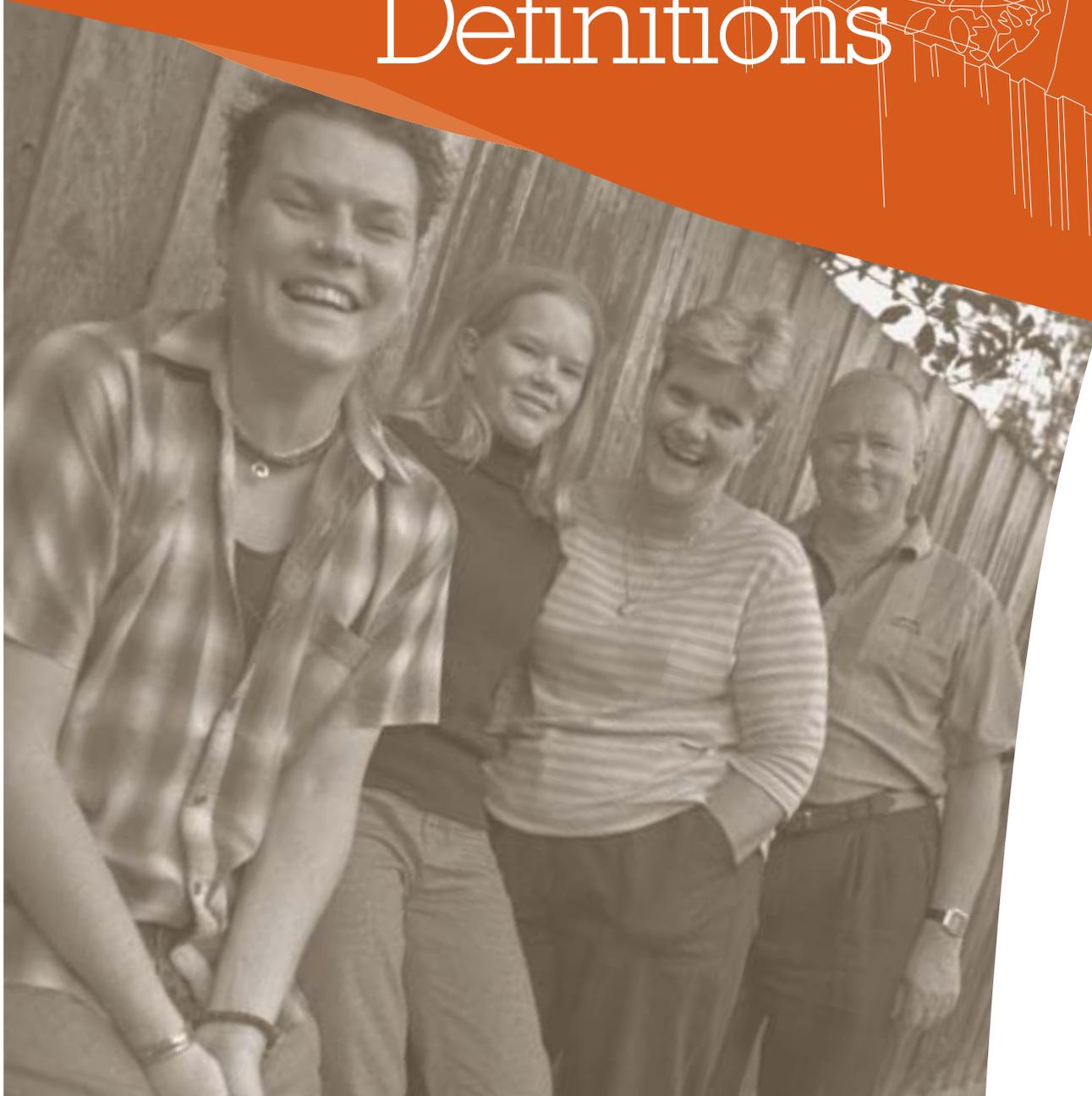
Trish

## How do you feel?

# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Definitions   | 6  |
| Common questions about gay, lesbian,<br>bisexual and transgender people           | 10 |
| Some information about transgenderism<br>and transsexuality                       | 16 |
| Common questions asked by families<br>concerning their loved ones                 | 20 |
| I am worried about my child or loved one  | 24 |
| Families with culturally diverse backgrounds                                      | 28 |
| How can I support my child or loved one?  | 30 |
| How to help your child or loved one if they<br>feel depressed or suicidal         | 32 |
| Will I ever learn to accept my child or<br>loved one's sexuality/gender identity? | 34 |
| Book list   | 36 |
| Further information and referral  | 39 |

# Definitions



Before reading this booklet, you might want to familiarise yourself with some of the terms used.

**Heterosexual:**

People whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for the opposite sex.

**Homosexual:**

People whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for the same sex. Those who feel this way often identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

**Gay:**

People whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for the same sex. In Australia this can mean men or women, although it tends to be used mainly for men.

**Lesbian:**

Women whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for women.

**Bisexual or Bi:**

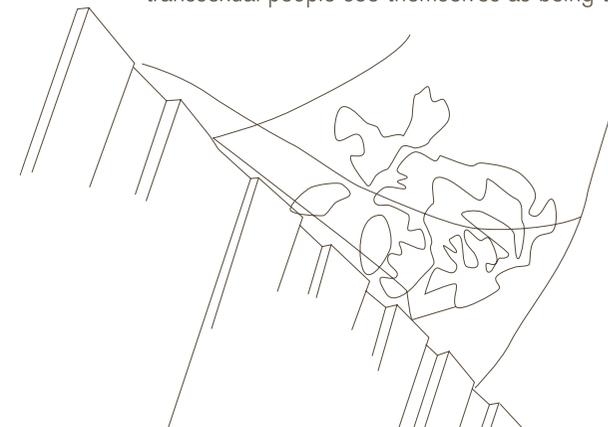
Those whose sexual and romantic feelings are for both men and women.

**Transgender or Trans:**

Those whose gender identity or behaviour falls outside the usual expectations of their gender. This includes people who feel that their anatomical gender is at odds with their inner sense of being 'male' or 'female'. Some trans people feel bi-gendered or 'neither-gendered', challenging the idea that there can only be two genders.

**Transsexual:**

People who are born anatomically male or female but have a profound identification with the opposite gender. Not all transsexual people see themselves as being transgendered.



**Intersex:**

A biological condition where a person is born with physical characteristics and/or sex chromosomes that are not exclusively male or female. An earlier term for intersex was 'hermaphrodite'.

**Straight:**

Another word for heterosexual.

**GLBT and GLBTI:**

Abbreviations for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender; and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex.

**Sexual Orientation and Sexuality:**

The direction of sexual and romantic attractions. Some people's sexual orientation is mainly towards people of the opposite sex; for others it is mainly towards people of the same sex, and for some it is towards either sex.

**Gender:**

The way a person is seen as 'male' or 'female'.

**Gender Identity:**

A person's internal feeling of being female, male, both or neither.

**Homophobia:**

Individual or social ignorance or fear of gay and/or lesbian people. Homophobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence or hatred.

**Biphobia:**

Individual or social ignorance or fear of bisexual people. Biphobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence or hatred.

**Transphobia:**

Individual or social ignorance or fear of transgender or transsexual people. Transphobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence or hatred.

**Coming Out:**

This can mean something different to everyone. It has to do with developing an awareness that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender – which often leads to a desire to be more open with others about sexual or gender identity. People can be 'out' in some parts of their lives but not others. Some people choose to come out and others don't.

**Queer:**

An umbrella term that includes a range of non-heterosexual sexual and gender identities.

This list draws on the definitions published in the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health's *What's the Difference?* report.<sup>1</sup> We support the Committee's view that:

- > definitions concerning gender and sexuality are subject to ongoing debate
- > members of the GLBT community – given the way labels have often been used to pathologise and regulate them – are wary about being labelled
- > GLBT people attach great importance to self-definition.

<sup>1</sup> Ministerial Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health, *What's the difference? Health Issues of Major Concern to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (GLBTI) Victorians*. Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services Division, Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Australia, 2002.

### How many gay, lesbian and bisexual people are there?

Studies have shown that between 8% and 11% of young people in Australia experience same-sex attraction<sup>2</sup> and that 8.6% of Australian men and 15.1% of Australian women experience same-sex attraction at some time in their lives.<sup>3</sup> Results of such surveys vary depending on the comfort levels of people being surveyed. These percentages work out to be roughly one person in every extended family. Sexual and romantic relations between people of the same gender have been found in every known culture and society. They happen in every social, economic, racial, and religious group. People who experience these feelings are represented in all professions: they are our friends, our families and our colleagues. We all know a number of gay, lesbian and bisexual people, but often we may not be aware of it.

### What 'causes' someone to be gay, lesbian or bisexual?

The answer to this question is probably the same as the answer to 'What causes someone to be heterosexual?' Research so far has highlighted only one thing – we do not know what causes anyone's sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people are raised in all kinds of homes, as are heterosexual people. What we do know is that the reasons are complex and multi-faceted.

# Common questions about gay, lesbian bisexual and transgender people



"Once I started to break down the myths around gays, lesbians and bisexuals I began to come to terms with my daughter's bisexuality." Tom

2 Lynne Hillier et al, *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same Sex Attracted Young People*. La Trobe University, Australia, 1998.

3 Smith, A et al, 'Sexual identity, sexual attraction and sexual experience among a representative sample of adults', in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 27 No. 2, 2003.

### Are homosexuality and bisexuality natural?

Yes. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is a natural and normal sexual identity. The Australian Psychological Society believes that homosexuality and bisexuality are normal variants of human sexuality and that attempts to change a person's sexual orientation are rarely appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

In discussions over several years, P-FLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, have discovered that:

- > people are often aware of their sexual orientation at a very early age, whether they be heterosexual or homosexual
- > none of their children were influenced or taught to be lesbian or gay by any other person
- > family fears of children 'catching' homosexuality or being recruited are without scientific foundation, but are, like most fears, generated by feelings of vulnerability
- > in families where homosexual children try to deny their sexuality, serious problems can arise.

### Is transgenderism the same as homosexuality?

No. Transgenderism is about gender identification, which is different from sexual orientation. It is about a person's sense of maleness or femaleness, whereas sexual orientation is about who someone is attracted to.

Transgender (or transsexual) people do not identify with the sex they were born with. This can include feeling as though they were born into the 'wrong' physical body. Confusion about one's gender is a very real issue, but does not necessarily have anything to do with sexuality. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual doesn't mean that a person is transsexual or transgender, and being transsexual or transgender doesn't make someone gay, lesbian or bisexual. There is more about transgenderism in a following section of this booklet.



### Can you identify lesbian, gay and bisexual people by the way they behave and dress?

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people, like everyone, behave in all kinds of ways. Stereotypes and assumptions never fit everyone in a group, and usually arise out of ignorance or prejudice. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people can look and act so much like everyone else that most people assume they are heterosexual. There are also lesbians who act in a very masculine way, and gay men who have very effeminate behaviour, and these variations exist across the whole range of personalities.

### Is it just a phase?

People do experiment with their sexuality or gender identity. However, a young person who has reached the point of telling a parent that they are same-sex attracted or transgender is not usually going through a phase. Usually they have given long and hard thought to understanding and acknowledging their sexual orientation or gender identity. Telling parents or friends that you think you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender involves overcoming some strong negative stereotypes and taking a great risk. Few people take that step prematurely or lightly, so it is important as a parent to accept and understand your child's sexuality or gender identity.

### Do gay, lesbian and bisexual people have more sexual partners than heterosexual people?

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people have the same amount of interest in sexual activity as heterosexual people: neither more nor less. Just like heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals have a diverse range of lifestyles and relationships.

Maintaining relationships can be more difficult for same-sex couples, as our culture does not provide as much support for these relationships. It is possible that some homosexual or bisexual people may change partners more frequently over their lifetimes, as a result of this lack of social acceptance and support.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Collins, Graeme Kane and Prue Drever, 'Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients', in *Psych: The Bulletin of the Australian Psychological Society Ltd.*, Vol. 23 Issue 1, 2001.

### Do gay men abuse children?

Paedophilia and other forms of child abuse occur mainly in the home environment, perpetrated by a family member. Ninety-five per cent of child abuse is carried out by people identifying as heterosexual.<sup>5</sup>

### Is homosexuality a sin?

Most religions and churches have members with a range of views and interpretations of their faith. A number of religious organisations support equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people; and others do not. Reconciling sexual orientation and religious belief can be quite stressful and difficult for many GLBT people and their families. There are a number of groups – some sanctioned and run by religious organisations – that offer support with this issue. The ALSO Foundation lists these on its web site: [www.also.org.au](http://www.also.org.au).

What the Bible says around homosexuality is highly contested and complex, and there are different interpretations. Most people opposing homosexuality quote Leviticus (18.22-23). 'Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind'. What is not quoted by these people is that this section also condemns eating the fat of cattle, sheep and goats, planting one's field with two different sorts of seed, wearing cloth woven from both wool and cotton, and eating rabbits.

Towards the back of this booklet is a list of books on this topic you may wish to read.



### Aren't people either homosexual or heterosexual?

No. Bisexuality challenges the idea that people are either gay or straight, and shows there are other ways of being. We are taught to think in 'black and white', either/or ways, and many people find identities that do not fit into these boxes to be confusing or threatening. However, bisexuality is a valid sexuality and this is well recognised in medical and psychological circles.

### Is bisexuality a transition to being lesbian or gay?

Not necessarily. Many people assume bisexuality is a phase, or the half-way mark to being gay or lesbian. In fact, some gay men and lesbians come out as bisexual first, but many bisexuals remain bisexuals for their whole lives. Bisexuality is a sexual identity in its own right.

### Aren't bisexual people just confused?

There is little understanding and information about bisexuality in our society, and very few organisations specifically address the needs and issues of bisexual people. The confusion a bisexual person may be feeling is often the result of this lack of support, rather than uncertainty about their sexuality. Bisexual people tend to be less visible and can often find themselves marginalised in both the straight and queer communities. When they are in same-sex relationships they may be assumed to be homosexual, and when in opposite-sex relationships they may be assumed to be heterosexual. It is important for you to validate and support the sexuality your child is identifying with, whether it be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

<sup>5</sup> Jenny, C, Roesler, T and Poyer, K, 'Are Children at Risk for Sexual Abuse by Homosexuals?', in *Pediatrics*, Vol. 94 No.1, 1994.

# Some information about transgenderism and transsexuality

"When I gave birth to my youngest child, a daughter, 15 years ago, I would never have dreamed that she would eventually become my son. As 'she' was growing up, I just thought I had a particularly tomboyish little girl with a unique taste for toys and clothes. But I loved 'her' anyway. When behavioural problems surfaced at puberty, around age 12, I thought I was losing my 'daughter' to the wild side of life. But I loved 'her' anyway. When 'she' came out to me as being a 'he', just before his 13th birthday, I loved him anyway. His coming out explained a lot. When he found that I accepted him just as he is, (as did the rest of the family, friends and neighbors), his behavioural problems calmed down.

My child's 'changing gender' – or more to the point, his revealing of his true identity – did not change my feelings towards him. He is the same person as when we all thought he was 'she'. Love and acceptance is the key for a well-adjusted human being, no matter what the gender. I gave birth to him, which meant I chose to be responsible for him until adulthood, come what may – which I love doing, anyway.

I love him: now, always and forever." Susan

Our society supports a very narrow and fixed view of what it means to be a woman or a man, and we learn this from an early age. Some people do not fit these definitions, or do not identify with the gender that was assigned to them at birth. The term 'transgender' describes these people. While gender identity and sexual orientation are different issues, transgender and gay, lesbian or bisexual people experience similar social pressures. And like the parents of gay, lesbian and bisexual children, parents of trans children may experience the same stages of denial, confusion and grief, along with concerns about the safety and well-being of their children.

## Who does 'Transgender' include?

Transgender people include all of the following:

- > pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative transsexuals who generally feel they were born into the wrong physical body
- > people who do not identify exclusively with either gender
- > cross-dressers
- > intersex persons
- > others who feel they do not fit our society's usual expectations of gender behaviour or appearance.

It is important to note that 'transgender' describes several related but distinct groups of people who use a variety of other terms to identify themselves. For example, many transsexuals see themselves as a separate group, and do not want to be included in the umbrella term 'transgendered'. Some post-operative transsexuals no longer see themselves as transsexual. Despite the variations in terminology, most trans people will agree that the way they identify themselves is an important personal right, which should be supported.



### What is gender dysphoria?

This is a psychological term used to describe the feelings of pain, anguish and anxiety that arise from the mis-match between trans people's physical sex and their gender identity, and from societal pressure to conform to the usual gender expectations. To seek relief from these feelings and pressures, trans people may choose to 'transition'.

### What is gender transition?

This is the period during which a transgendered person changes their appearance and/or body to match their internal gender identity. It may or may not involve taking hormones or undergoing surgery. Because gender is so outwardly visible, trans people who are transitioning may be very vulnerable to discrimination, and will have a particularly strong need for the support of family and friends. Hormonal therapy can take from several months to many years to effect the physical changes that will produce a passable appearance. There are some trans people who may never pass completely.<sup>6</sup>

### Is transgenderism a form of mental illness?

Conventional medical diagnosis recognises several kinds of psychiatric disorders relating to gender, such as 'gender identity disorder', 'gender dysphoria' and 'transsexualism'. Many differently gendered people believe strongly that the expression of their right to make their own gender choice is not an illness, but is instead the sign of a mature, thoughtful and intelligent adult.

Because a medical diagnosis is necessary in order to receive medical benefits, trans people must often accept a psychiatric label in order to undergo funded treatment. This can mean that not only must they develop skills to cope with our society's stigma of being transgendered, but also to cope with the stigma associated with having a mental illness.



### Can transgender people be same-sex attracted?

Yes. Just like the rest of the population, there is a range of sexual orientations within the transgender community.

### How do I address a transgender person?

This is typically one of the first questions people ask. There are many variations in the ways trans people wish to be seen or addressed. The answer is: ask the person how they want to be addressed, and how they want their gender identity to be described.

### What is the legal status of transgender people?

It is certainly not illegal to be transgendered or transsexual, but our laws vary when it comes to recognising a person's choice to live as 'the other gender'. From time to time test cases take place, a recent example being a Family Court decision allowing a post-operative female-to-male transsexual to legally marry. In Victoria, current practice is that a Victorian Birth Certificate cannot be changed, although other records, such as VicRoads records, can be. Victorian Drivers' Licenses do not state sex, and the motor vehicle registry will change its records if an individual provides a letter from their doctor. Sex on a person's passport can also be changed if a change-of-name registration and letter from a doctor is provided.<sup>7</sup>

#### For more information:

View the full version of *Our Trans Children*, produced by the Transgender Special Outreach Network of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (USA) online at [www.youth-guard.org/P-FLAG-t-net/booklet.html](http://www.youth-guard.org/P-FLAG-t-net/booklet.html).

Also see *The Good Tranny Guide*, a web site listing support groups, trans friendly businesses, and giving medical and legal information, at [www.tgfolk.net/sites/gtg/index.html](http://www.tgfolk.net/sites/gtg/index.html).

Another good resource is T-Net – P-FLAG Transgender Network (USA), at [www.youth-guard.org/P-FLAG-t-net/](http://www.youth-guard.org/P-FLAG-t-net/).

<sup>6</sup> Text adapted from *Our Trans Children*, 3rd edition. Transgender Special Outreach Network of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, USA, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> *Over the Rainbow: A Guide to the Law for Lesbians and Gay Men in Victoria*, 2nd edition. Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby and Law Institute of Victoria, Australia, 2002.



## Common questions asked by families concerning their loved ones

"Getting [my son's] homosexuality out in the open was a tremendous relief for both of us and our relationship has deepened to a very intimate level. Our communication is now very open and honest." Teresa

### Why did they have to tell me?

Some families feel they would be happier not knowing. They start to recall the time before they knew as 'problem free', remembering an ideal situation rather than the reality. Sometimes people try to deny what is happening by rejecting what they hear, by shutting down; or by not registering the impact of what they're being told.

Parents and families may feel resentment towards their child or loved one's sexuality or gender identity. This feeling is sometimes based on the belief that to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender was a conscious decision. In fact, the main decision most gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have to make is not whether to be GLBT, but whether to be honest about who they are. Hiding imposes a tremendous burden. A large part of their life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole person. It's important to recognise the fact that your child told you as a sign of their love for you, and their need for your support and understanding.

### Why didn't they tell us before?

Your child or loved one has probably been thinking this through for months, even years. This does not mean a lack of trust or love, and neither is it a reflection on your relationship. If you are a parent it can be painful to realise that you don't know your child as well as you thought you did, and that you have been excluded from a part of their life. To some extent, this is true in all parenting relationships, regardless of sexuality or gender identity.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people often recognise at an early age that they feel 'different', but it may take years before they can put a name to it. It is often not until then that they consider telling someone. Even though you may feel some sadness for not having been able to help your child or loved one through that period, or that the outcome might have been different if you'd known earlier, understand that your child or loved one probably could not have told you any sooner. Their doing so took a lot of courage and is now an invitation to a more open and honest relationship.

### What did we do wrong?

Parents and family members sometimes experience feelings of guilt when they first find out. However, there is no evidence that different parenting styles or family situations have any influence on the development of sexual orientation or gender identity. What families can provide is an environment in which young people can understand themselves and strive to reach their full potential. Blaming yourself rests on the assumption that there is something wrong with your child's sexuality or gender identity, and this is not the case.

"Both my husband and I were pretty devastated; I know I was frightened for our son and for us. All the negatives came to the fore – discrimination, violence, male prostitution, religion frowning on it, friends might reject us, etc." Lesley

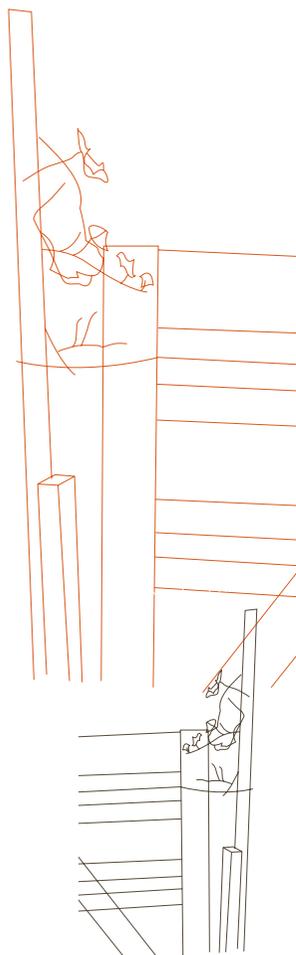
### Why am I uncomfortable with my child or loved one's sexuality/gender identity?

Our culture sends us messages about many things, including sexuality and gender identity. The negative messages and myths we have learned are very strong and not easy to dismiss. Homophobia and transphobia are strong parts of our culture, and are similar to many other forms of discrimination and prejudice. As long as they exist in our society, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and their families may have very legitimate fears and concerns. Developing a better understanding of your child or loved one, and becoming more familiar with the issues, will help reduce your discomfort, as well as reducing the impact of any discrimination they may face.

### Could a counsellor or therapist be helpful?

A counsellor or therapist trained in this area may provide support for you and your family while you are coming to terms with your child or loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity. You may want to talk about your own feelings and how to work through them; or to get help to enable you and your child or loved one to communicate clearly through this period.

Consulting a counsellor or therapist in the hope of changing your child or loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity has little value. Homosexuality is not a disease or illness, and so is not something to be 'cured'. Young people who have acknowledged their same-sex attraction can experience feelings of depression and fear, and may need help with self-acceptance. Services that can provide information and advice are listed at the back of this booklet.



"We were frightened that our son would be judged; we were frightened that we would be judged." Bill\*

### Should we tell the family, neighbors, and friends?

Just as 'coming out' can be difficult for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person, it can be equally hard for parents and families. Sometimes parents and family members worry about other people finding out. It can be difficult when questions such as 'Has he got a girlfriend?' or 'When is she going to get married?' are asked. This is a reflection of our society's assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural sexuality. It is a good idea to discuss with your child or loved one what can be said, and to whom. It is their life you are discussing and it is respectful for them to be involved in any decision.

Parents and families have found that their fears are often far worse than the reality. Some do not tell their extended family for a long time, only to have them respond, 'We knew that quite a while ago'. It is often easier to make the decision about who, how and when you tell once you understand more about sexual orientation. There are some resources listed at the back of this booklet that may be helpful to you.

### We have accepted the situation, but why must they flaunt it?

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people who reveal their sexuality are sometimes accused of 'flaunting' their identity. 'Flaunting it' has many different interpretations. Heterosexual couples can be seen as 'flaunting it' every day, in public places, in the media, in the images that surround us all the time. If you feel that affectionate behaviour should be a private thing for some, then maybe this should apply to everyone. All people have the right to express their sexuality providing it does not impinge on the rights of others.

On the other hand, many gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people censor their own behaviour because they fear negative public reactions, and you might share those fears. But it is worth considering that some things never change until people challenge them, and that the decision to 'come out' publicly is generally a great relief for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person.

\* From *Our Sons and Daughters: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People*. P-FLAG Washington USA, 1995.



# I am worried about my child or loved one

"The hardest thing to cope with is thinking they will find life so much harder." Susan

## **Will they be rejected, have trouble finding or keeping a job, or be physically attacked?**

Our society often discriminates and is sometimes violent towards people who are seen to be different. However, attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have definitely changed for the better in recent times. A growing number of groups are working towards change or assisting those who have difficulties. There is also policy and legislation in place in Victoria that protects against discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender identity.

It is important to realise that many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have grown to fulfill their dreams and have become very successful and respected people in the community. As a society we may have a long way to go, but giving your child or loved one support and love will go a long way towards making their journey easier.

## **Will my child or loved one be lonely in their old age if they do not have a family of their own?**

Spouses die, marriages break up, children often live far away, and many couples do not have children at all. People of all sexualities and gender identities have to adjust to loneliness when they are old. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people do develop long-lasting relationships and friendships. Their relationships are characterised by the same depth of emotion and commitment as more socially accepted family and relationship types. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people can and do have children of their own, and some foster children.

## **Will my child or loved one get into trouble with the law?**

It is not illegal to feel attracted to or fall in love with someone of the same sex.

As the law stands in Victoria:

- > it is legal for couples of the same gender to show affection in public, just as it is legal for heterosexual couples to do so
- > it is illegal to have sex in a public place, regardless of whether it is between a man and a woman, or between people of the same gender.

In Victoria, the laws around under-age sex and age of consent are the same for both men and women, and for both heterosexual and gay sex. If a child is:

- > under 10 – no-one is allowed to have sex with the child, even if they consent
- > between 10 and 16 – a person is not allowed to have sex with the child if they are more than two years older, even with consent, unless they had reason to believe the child was over 16
- > age 16 or 17 – a person is not allowed to have sex with a child of this age if they are under their care, supervision or authority, even with consent. Consent is only a defense if they believed the child was 18 or older at the time.

Keep in mind that being gay, lesbian or bisexual does not necessarily mean that a young person is sexually active.

**"I'd say that reading and learning about sexual orientation is what helped me most...the more I learned the angrier I got, and the more I wanted to change society instead of my son." Sandy\***

### **Is it illegal to discriminate against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people?**

Yes, it is illegal. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people still face discrimination and harassment in a variety of situations. State and Federal legislation make discrimination and harassment unlawful in certain areas and on certain grounds. The Equal Opportunity Act 1995 (Vic.) and the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (C'wealth) both prohibit sexual harassment and discrimination in the following areas:

- > employment and paid work
- > education
- > provision of goods and services
- > accommodation
- > sport
- > Local Government
- > clubs and community service organisations.

In addition, Victoria's Equal Opportunity Act was amended in 2000 to make it unlawful to discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. For more information you can contact the Equal Opportunity Commission – contact details are listed at the back of this book.

\* From *Our Sons and Daughters: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People*. P-FLAG Washington USA, 1995.

### **What are schools doing to address the issues of sexual and gender diversity?**

Many schools across Victoria are working towards making their environments safer and more inclusive of same-sex attracted and transgender students. Approaches include addressing sexual and gender diversity in the classroom curriculum; responding to negative school-based incidents such as bullying; changing language and teaching material that assumes all students are heterosexual; and ensuring that school policies recognise difference, and forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity Act of 1995 applies to schools. This Act prohibits direct and indirect sexual harassment and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (perceived or otherwise). The Equal Opportunity Commission states that: 'inaction may also amount to implicit authorisation or encouragement of discrimination or sexual harassment. This means that a teacher or principal who 'turns a blind eye' to discrimination or sexual harassment by students may be liable on the basis of authorising or assisting discrimination.<sup>18</sup> The school your child attends is obliged by law to ensure its environments are free from discrimination and harassment.

### **What about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs)?**

People in all communities are affected by HIV/AIDS, regardless of their culture or sexuality. Every parent and family needs to be aware of HIV/AIDS. It is important to understand how HIV, STIs and other blood-borne viruses (BBVs) are transmitted and how to look after ourselves and our loved ones.

HIV is not a gay men's disease. It does not discriminate – people do. No virus is smart enough to know a person's sexuality. It is the activities that people practice that put them at risk of catching or passing on HIV.

HIV is present in semen, blood and breast milk. It can be transmitted through unprotected sex (having sex without condoms), sharing injecting equipment, or from mother to child during pregnancy, during childbirth or through breast milk. Practising safe sex, using new injecting equipment, and not breastfeeding if you are HIV positive are the safest ways to protect against the spread of HIV, STIs and other BBVs.

If a relative or friend has HIV or AIDS, love and support are really important. They should know that they are not alone. At the back of this booklet you will find a list of organisations you can contact for advice, counselling or support with this issue.

<sup>18</sup> *Rights and Responsibilities under the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995*. Equal Opportunity Commission, Victoria, Australia, 1996.



# Families with culturally diverse backgrounds

"I came to Australia about 25 years ago. I have four children – two girls and two boys. I always knew that one of my sons was a little bit different from any other boys. He tended to like to play with girls more and liked lots of pretty things. I accepted him. When my son was around 22, I told him that 'I don't care who you are involved with but please don't bring any trouble home. I love you. You are my son.' Thai culture and religions taught us to accept 'differences'. Inner peace is the thing that we aim to achieve in our lives." Somesee

Photo reproduced with permission from the Victorian Aids Council

We all have a cultural background. Our society is made up of many cultures and every culture includes many kinds of people and ideas. Therefore, it is impossible to generalise across a whole cultural group.

In every cultural group there are likely to be some members who view homosexuality and transgenderism in negative ways. However, it is just as likely that there will be other members who are positive and supportive. Cultural background will always have an effect on a young person's experience of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Similarly, it will impact on parents and family, who may find it difficult to accept their child's sexuality or gender identity.<sup>9</sup>

'Coming out', or coming to terms with a loved one's sexuality or gender identity, can be hard, and parents and families often feel isolated during this time. People who share similar cultural backgrounds may be able to share experiences and perspectives that are of particular relevance. It can be helpful to talk to and gain support from people that you feel a sense of connection with. It can also help to know your children are able to connect with others experiencing some of the same issues. There are a number of social and support groups available for gay men, lesbians and bisexuals from different cultural and national backgrounds. Some of these groups are open for parents too, or can provide support and information for parents.

#### **Greek Lesbian Social/Support Group**

Social and support  
Tel: 0407 339 912  
Email: greek\_lesbians@hotmail.com

#### **Greek and Gay**

Social and support group  
Tel: VAC, (03) 9865 6700  
Email: greek\_gay@hotmail.com  
www.greekandgay.com

#### **Italian and Gay**

Social and support group  
Tel: VAC, (03) 9865 6700  
Email: italian\_gay@hotmail.com

#### **Gay Asian Proud**

Social, support and educational workshop  
Tel: VAC, (03) 9865 6700  
Email: gap@vic aids.asn.au  
www.vic aids.asn.au

#### **Arab and Gay/Lesbian**

Social and support group  
Tel: VAC, (03) 9865 6700  
www.gavic.20m.com

#### **Polish and Gay**

Social and support group  
Email: gaypole@yahoo.com.au

#### **Yellow Kitties**

Social and support group for Asian lesbians, friends and parents  
Tel: 0418 363 513  
Email: yellowkitties@hotmail.com

<sup>9</sup> Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli is an Australian academic who has written widely around such themes. Her book, *Someone You Know: A Friend's Farewell* (Wakefield Press) contains sections that speak of the support that her parents demonstrated for her GLBT friends.



# How can I support my child or loved one?

“It’s really important to talk about it, to know that you’re not alone and that there are other people who have had this experience and are dealing with it in a positive way. And the benefit is that you establish a good relationship with your child. Parents want to parent. They don’t want to be isolated from their kid.” Shirley\*

Whether your child or loved one is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or unsure, you have taken the first step to supporting them by reading this booklet. You have opened yourself to new information, and hopefully you are now better informed. You can support your child or loved one by educating yourself as much as possible about sexuality or gender identity.

Young people know that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are marginalised by society. Many children learn negative words for GLBT people, often before they reach the kindergarten playground. They may assume that all the people they know are heterosexual; and they may have no idea that some of the respected adults around them are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

As a result, many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people feel profoundly isolated. ‘Surely I am the only person like this’ is a common sentiment. Unfortunately, some GLBT young people are viciously harassed and abused.

Whether or not they are labelled by others, these young people often:

- > fear being discovered and expect rejection
- > guard their feelings carefully in order to be accepted (or merely to survive)
- > have few opportunities to openly date, flirt or engage in sexual experimentation like other teenagers
- > lack accurate information about their feelings and experiences.

## Risk of depression and suicide

The vast majority of GLBT young people are not depressed or suicidal. However, Australian research has identified that same-sex attracted young people may be up to six times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population.<sup>10</sup> These figures are believed to be even higher for young people with gender identity issues.

A young person’s sexual or gender identity does not in and of itself cause them to feel depressed or suicidal. What does impact negatively on their well-being is the experience of growing up ‘different’ in a society that often rejects difference, and that expects everyone to be heterosexual. Education about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people is an important step towards supporting young people and preventing depression and suicide. Young GLBT people need the following kinds of support, to develop good self-esteem and skills to deal with what can sometimes be a hostile environment:

- > supportive opportunities to socialise with one another
- > resources that specifically address their concerns
- > sensitive, non-judgmental support as they come to understand themselves.

There are services and programs throughout Victoria that provide support for same-sex attracted and transgender people. Contact the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard (see the back of this booklet) for details of services in your local area.

\* From *Our Sons and Daughters: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People*. P-FLAG Washington USA, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Dyson et al, *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell: Hidden in the Crowd. Documenting the Links Between Sexuality and Suicidal Behaviours Among Young People*. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Australia, 2003.



# How to help your child or loved one if they feel depressed or suicidal

If you feel that your child, loved one or anyone you know may be feeling depressed or suicidal, it is important to seek professional help. The following services offer crisis counselling:

**Lifeline:**

24 hour counselling  
Tel: 13 11 14

**Care Ring/Crisis Line:**

24 hour crisis counselling  
Tel: 13 61 69

**Kids' Helpline:**

24 hour anonymous crisis counselling  
Tel: 1800 551 800

**Parentline:**

Mon-Fri 8am-midnight,  
Sat-Sun 10am-10pm  
Tel: 13 22 89

**Suicide Helpline:**

24 hour crisis counselling  
Tel: 1300 651 251



As well as seeking professional advice and support, keep in mind the following suggestions.

- > If a loved one is feeling depressed and lost, don't be afraid to ask them whether they have had thoughts of hurting themselves. Ask in a non-judgmental way, and be prepared for the answer.
- > Listen openly and calmly. If they are thinking about suicide, don't be afraid to talk about suicide or the problems that have caused them to feel this way. Problems don't get worse by talking about them.
- > Show that you care. If they confide in you that they have been thinking about suicide, tell and show them how much you care.
- > Don't agree to keep suicidal thoughts a secret. Make sure the person goes to see a professional, who will be able to assess the risk of suicide.
- > Take notice of threats. Try not to change the subject, even if you're scared. Changing the subject can make it seem as though you don't care.
- > Don't try to solve their problems as soon as they share them. When a person is depressed, or thinking about suicide, the problems look major and unsolvable right now. They may just want to share them with someone at this stage.
- > Don't tell them they're selfish to consider suicide when their life is so good, or that suicide is the easy way out. This will make them feel guilty as well as depressed.
- > Have on hand the telephone numbers for services and crisis lines that have trained counsellors available. A good way to help someone who is feeling suicidal is to encourage them to contact a crisis line, or you can call them yourself for advice.

Your doctor or your local Community Health Centre can also help with depression or make suggestions about other services you could access.



# Will I ever learn to accept my child or loved one's sexuality/ gender identity?

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to listen to other parents.

"Having a gay brother and son opened the door to a whole new world that I was so ignorant about, and having been privy to it, I can't imagine my life without it. I have never before experienced such a sense of community. I am warmly welcomed in it and I absolutely love being a part of it. This privilege has added a richness, depth and spirit to the tapestry of my life. I am touched and awed by the inspirational courage, raw honesty and generosity of spirit that I have witnessed." Teresa



"I hit a point where I was feeling sad and thinking what would I say when people asked 'How's Gary?'. And then it occurred to me: Gary's fine. I'm the one who's not. And once I reached that point, it was easier. As we met Gary's friends we found them to be wonderful people and realised he's part of a pretty terrific community." Sam

"I think the turning point for me was when I read more about it, and read that most kids who can accept their sexuality say they feel calmer, happier and more confident. And of course that's what I wanted for my child, and I sure didn't want to be what was standing in the way of that." Peter\*

"I have to tell you, there are so many pluses now. You begin to recognise what an incredible child you have – to share this with you and to want you to be part of their lives. The trust that's been placed in your hands, and the guts it took to do that, is amazing." Frank\*

"We know our son will face some discrimination, and he has had abuse from strangers. But the other negativity has gone, friends have not rejected us, and I accept that homosexuality is a normal part of my life." Lesley

"After the initial shock had worn off I was overcome by a great sadness...I finally realised that rather than feeling sorry for my son, it was myself I was feeling sorry for, as he was not going to have the life that I had mapped out for him. I realised that I should be happy for him, as he was so much more relaxed, and now finally had a happy social life with so many new friends." Jeff

\* From *Our Sons and Daughters: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People*. P-FLAG Washington USA, 1995.

## For parents, friends and families of gay, lesbian and bisexual children

*Family Secrets: Gay Sons – A Mother's Story*  
Jean M Baker. Haworth Press, 1997

*How Homophobia Hurts Children: Nurturing Diversity at Home and at School*  
Jean Baker. Harrington Park Press, 2002

*Straight Parents, Gay Children: Keeping Families Together*  
Robert A Bernstein. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995

*Straight Parents, Gay Children: Inspiring Families to Live Honestly and with Pride*  
Robert Bernstein. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003

*Family Outing*  
Chastity Bono. Little, Brown and Company, 1999

*Adolescence: A Guide For Parents*  
Michael Carr-Gregg and Erin Shale. Shale Finch Publishing, 2002

*Loving Someone Gay*  
D Clark. Celestial Arts, 1997

*Our Daughter Martha: A Family Struggles with Coming Out*  
Marcy Clements Henrickson. Pilgrim Press, 2001

*A Mother Looks at the Gay Child*  
Jesse Davis. New Falcon Publications, 1997

*Love, Ellen: A Mother/Daughter Journey*  
Betty Degeneres. Quill, 2000

*Now That You Know*  
Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward. Harvest Books, 1998

*Not Like Other Boys: Growing Up Gay – A Mother and Son Look Back*  
Marlene Fanta Shyer and Christopher Shyer, Alyson Books, 1997

*Coming Out, Coming Home*  
Joan Golding and Peter Wood. Spectrum, 1998

*Out of the Twilight: Fathers of Gay Men Speak*  
Andrew Gottlieb. Haworth Press, 2000

*Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences*  
Griffen et al. St Martin's Press, 1997

*Is it a Choice?*  
Eric Marcus. Harper San Francisco, 1999

*What if Someone I Know Is Gay?*  
Eric Marcus. Price Stern Sloan Publications, 2001

*My Child is Gay*  
Bryce McDougall (ed). Independent Publishers Group, 1998

*Different Daughters: A Book by Mothers of Lesbians*  
Louise Rafkin (ed). Cleis Press, 2001

*Out of the Closet, Into Our Hearts: Celebrating Our Gay/Lesbian Family Members*  
Laura Siegel and Nancy Lamkin Olson. Leyland Publications, 2001

*Coming Out As Parents: You and Your Homosexual Child*  
David K Switzer. Westminster John Knox Press, 1997

*Friends and Family: True Stories of Gay America's Straight Allies*  
Dan Woog. Alyson Books, 1999

## For parents of transgender children

*Trans Forming Families*  
Mary Boenke. Walter Trook, 1999

*He's My Daughter: A Mother's Journey to Acceptance*  
Eve Langley. Indra Publishing, 2002

## Religion

*Homosexuality and Religion*  
Richard Hasbury (ed). Harrington Park, 1990

*What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*  
Daniel A Helminiak. Alamo Square Press, 2000

*Is the Homosexual My Neighbour? A Positive Christian Response*  
Letha Scanzoni and Virginia R Mollenkott. Harper San Francisco, 1994

*The New Testament and Homosexuality*  
Robin Scroggs. Fortress Press, 1984

*Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*  
John Shelby Spong. Harper Collins Publishers, 1990

*Why Christianity Must Change or Die*  
John Shelby Spong. Harper San Francisco, 1998

*This Remarkable Gift: Being Gay and Catholic*  
Morris Shinnick. Allen & Unwin, 1997

## For GLBT young people

There are many fiction and non-fiction texts available for young gay, lesbian, bi and trans people. Here are just a few:

### *Free Your Mind*

Ellen Bass and Kate Kaufman. Harper Collins, 1996

### *Girls Talk: Young Women Speak Their Hearts and Minds*

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (ed), Finch Publishing, 2002

### *Two Weeks with the Queen*

Morris Gleitzman. Philomel Books, 1989

### *Two Teenagers in Twenty*

Ann Heron (ed). Alyson Books, 1994

### *Ready or Not*

Mark Macleod. Random House, 1996

### *Boy's Stuff*

Wayne Martino and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (eds).

Allen & Unwin, 2002

### *What Are Ya?*

Jenny Pausacker. Spinifex Press, 1995

### *Inside Out: Australian Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People Write About Their Lives*

Erin Shale (ed). Bookman Press, 1999

### *Outing Yourself*

Michelangelo Signorile. Random House Value Publications, 1995

Many of these books and other resources are available from P-FLAG or through your local library or book store.

#### **Recommended book stores:**

**Hares & Hyenas** – 135 Commercial Road, South Yarra.

Tel: (03) 9824 0110

**Readings** – stores in Carlton, Malvern, Hawthorn and Port Melbourne. Tel: (03) 9347 6633

**Borders** – stores in South Yarra, Knox and Chadstone. Tel: (03) 9824 2299

**Options – Family Planning Victoria Bookshop**

901 Whitehorse Road, Box Hill. Tel: (03) 9257 0146

## Further information and referral

The following list includes contact details for a number of community and referral organisations. Even if you are living outside the Melbourne metropolitan area, many of these organisations should be able to refer you to services in your area.

### **Telephone Counselling and Crisis Services**

**Lifeline** – 24 hour counselling. Tel: 13 11 14

**Care Ring/Crisis Line** – 24 hour crisis counselling. Tel: 13 61 69

**Kids' Helpline** – 24 hour anonymous crisis counselling. Tel: 1800 551 800

**Parentline** – Mon-Fri 8am-midnight, Sat-Sun 10am-10pm. Tel: 13 22 89

**Suicide Helpline** – 24 hour crisis counselling: Tel: 1300 651 251

### **P-FLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)**

P-FLAG is a social support group for families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Many people find it very helpful to talk to others who have experienced the same issues and feelings. P-FLAG meets monthly.

Tel: (03) 9827 8408

Email: p\_flagvic@hotmail.com

www.P-FLAG.org.au

### **Gay and Lesbian Switchboard**

Provides free and confidential telephone counselling, referral and information by trained gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender volunteers.

Tel: (03) 9827 8544 or 1800 184 527 (freecall)

Hours: 6-10pm six days, and 2-10pm Wednesdays

### **ALSO Foundation**

Provides leadership and support for Victoria's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities to help them to grow and develop.

Tel: (03) 9827 4999

www.also.org.au

### **The Action Centre, Family Planning Victoria**

Provides sexual health services plus specific programs and counselling for GLBT youth.

Tel: (03) 9654 4766, 1800 013 952 (freecall)

### **Victorian AIDS Council**

Provides confidential counselling to individuals, couples or groups.  
For people affected by HIV/AIDs, and the GLBTI community.  
Tel: (03) 9865 6700, 1800 134 840 (freecall)

### **Bisexual Network Victoria: Bi Pride and Bi-Vic**

Email: Hamish@bi.org.au or Vanessa@bi.org.au  
www.bi.org.au/bpa or www.bi-victoria.org

### **Minus 18**

Social events for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth.  
Email: info@minus18.org  
www.minus18.org

## **Transgender social and support organisations**

### **Transgender Liberation and Care (TLC)**

Self-help group for the transgender community.  
Tel: (03) 9517 1237  
www.translib.org.au

### **Transgender Victoria**

Broad-based community group acting on behalf of all transgender people.  
Tel: (03) 9517 6133  
www.home.vicnet.net.au/~victrans/

### **Seahorse Club of Victoria**

Transgender and transsexual social and support group.  
Tel: (03) 9513 8222  
www.home.vicnet.net.au/~seahorse/

## **Organisations providing advice, counselling or support regarding HIV/AIDS**

### **AIDSline**

Tel: (03) 9347 6099, 1800 133 392

### **Victorian AIDS Council**

Tel: (03) 9865 6700, 1800 134 840

### **Positive Living Centre**

Tel: (03) 9863 0444, 1800 134 840

### **Fresh (positive young people)**

Tel: (03) 9863 0444, 1800 134 840

### **Action Centre/Family Planning Victoria**

Tel: (03) 9654 4766, 1800 013 952

### **Melbourne Sexual Health Centre**

Tel: (03) 9347 0244, 1800 032 017

### **Positive Women Victoria**

Tel: (03) 9276 6918

## **Equal Opportunity Commission**

Tel: (03) 9281 7100, 1800 134 142 (regional)  
www.eoc.vic.gov.au



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