

RESPECT AND SELF-ESTEEM

Talking about sexual orientation and gender identity with our kids



Coalition des familles
homoparentales
LGBT Family Coalition





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Talking about sexual orientation and gender identity with our kids

This guide was created in response to a demand from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) parents seeking advice on how best to communicate their sexual orientation and/or gender identity¹ to their children. Most of these people expressed a common dilemma : wanting what is best for their children, valuing honesty as an important family value, and at the same time fearing the worst from our all too often prejudiced society.

¹ The feeling of being a man or a woman in all its aspects is described as “gender identity”. Its meaning is much larger than biological identity. Gender identity also refers to the psychological, social and legal aspects of being male or female.



The fears take two possible scenarios, neither one creating a comfortable environment for talking openly about sexual orientation and/or gender identity. A widely spread fear is that once we tell our children clearly that we are gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans they may then share that information with others and become victims themselves of homophobic or transphobic remarks or abuse. The other scenario is that our older children have already been indoctrinated by homophobia and transphobia in our society and will judge us to the detriment of our parent/child relationship.

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So how do we provide the best for our children, model honesty, and avoid these potential outcomes? This guide is a brief summary of the literature available on the subject. We are not pretending to have all the answers to very complex and personal issues. Every family is unique and has to create solutions that work for them.

Transsexual/ transgendered (ts/tg) parents and their children deal with issues that have elements in common with those faced by lgb parents and their kids, and yet they also face different challenges. Some transsexual parents are gay, lesbian or bisexual and thus may be subject to homophobia. Others are heterosexual. For this reason we will address some of the distinctive transsexual parenting issues in a separate section of this brochure, while speaking about trans parents together with lgb parents whenever their realities overlap.

This guide was written to offer you some tools and some points to reflect upon in support of your (and your children's) coming out process. It may also remind you why you are reading this guide in the first place. It is because you care for your children and respect yourself that you are seeking resources to do what is right for the whole family.



The Chicken or the Egg?

Which came first? Did you know you were lesbian or gay before you had children? Were your children conceived in a heterosexual relationship before you discovered you were gay or lesbian? Did you adopt or are you a foster parent? Are you bisexual and your children were conceived when you were with an opposite sex partner? Were your children conceived while you were single, as a family project in a lesbian or gay relationship, or are you co-parenting with a friend? Did you transition before your kids were born or after? Are you in a relationship with a person of the same sex who is already a parent?



There are endless ways of starting a family, of being a family, and of being “out” in a family. The challenges and reasons for being “out” will vary depending on the history and reality of your family. Some of the following subjects will not pertain to you depending on your situation. This guide was written with the intention of addressing questions for many different family structures.





Parents have less choice about being open about their sexual orientation.

Lesbians, gays and bisexuals *without* children have some choice in deciding when and with whom they will come out. They may feel that they are completely out of the closet and suffer no homophobia in their daily lives. Maybe the whole family knows. Or most people at work probably know, but it isn't discussed. Some might feel that their sexual orientation is personal and private and can pick and choose who they share this information with. When we really look at how we behave, we see layers and layers of half-truths, omissions, and white lies. We subconsciously and innocently create protective mechanisms to shelter ourselves (and others) from potential discomfort. Our way of presenting ourselves without revealing our sexual identity doesn't hurt anyone and can even preserve our sense of privacy. Many lesbians, gays and bisexuals live happily in this grey zone until one day children come into their lives.

A lesbian or gay parent does not have the same kind of choices. Nor do bisexual parents with same-sex partners. Our children make it difficult to stay in the closet in many ways. Sometimes children "out" us by speaking openly about their family situation. Other times we are stuck in an awkward situation when people, presuming heterosexuality, pose the most ordinary questions about our family. The little white lies that get you through your day are now being witnessed by an innocent and impressionable insider. Our children are watching and listening to our every move, especially when it comes to something as tricky as



talking about homosexuality or bisexuality. An adult with a child is also often presumed to be heterosexual. No matter what your haircut or your style of clothing, you are in a world of parents who are primarily heterosexual and who cannot yet imagine a lesbian mother, a gay dad or a parent who is bisexual.

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Parents are also targets of constant questions such as : “ does he look like his father ”, “ is your husband helping you around the house ”, “ she has your wife’s temperament ”. Or to the child : “ your mommy and daddy must be so proud of you. ” You may have been out to everyone in your community that is important to you, but does the older woman who walks her dog in front of your house (and who adores little children – go figure) know ?

Where once we may have maneuvered our way out of an honest answer by being vague or changing the subject, are we ready to make that same decision in front of our children ?

“ No one outside our close community has to know ”

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The following are some everyday examples of how we *cannot* easily stay in the closet with children : When our children bring friends home after school or for sleepovers; When we take turns bringing our children to and from school; When we are sick and our partner brings our child to swim class; When we sign the kids up for school or day care and they ask for both parent's names; When our children yell out to us in a shopping mall “ not you daddy, I want *papa!* ”; When we sign up for pre-natal classes and both future moms attend. The list goes on endlessly.



Being single doesn't get you off the hook.

Single parents may find this a little easier, although the isolation of never being seen as who we really are can increase the isolation already experienced by many single parents. Families in which both biological parents are known to the child may provide a certain comfort zone. One can refer to the child's father or mother without exposing anyone's sexual orientation or couple status, or even implying that you live separately from the other biological parent. For many who are single, however, it is a matter of integrity and honesty to present a truthful image both to one's child and to those that you both come in contact with in your everyday lives. Also, if you do have a same-sex

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partner later in your life, these half lies or omissions may become hurtful to your partner and damaging to your relationship. You might even damage the potential for your partner to form a strong and loving bond with your child. Convenient lies also teach shame and secrecy to our children. Being out with our children and with the community is a question of living honestly for our children. If we want to teach values of integrity, pride and openness we have to start by modeling those values.

Be proud of yourself and comfortable with your sexual orientation/gender identity.

Some LGBT people are not completely comfortable with their sexual orientation/gender identity. Maybe they have come to realize they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual later in life, or maybe their background has taught them that who they are is wrong. There can be a lot of shame or guilt that their sexual orientation/gender identity is the cause of personal or family problems. So often, there is simply a lack of positive role models. As adults, our children need to know that we are emotionally solid because *they* are not yet emotionally mature. Our children may have strong reactions that have more to do with their own insecurities about life, in general, than about their love for us. It is important to feel positive and confident about your sexual orientation/gender identity before you explain it to your children. If you feel vulnerable and insecure, your children may make you suffer unnecessary pains. Your negative feelings about your identity will also come through and make it that much harder for your children to accept it. Being proud of who you are will make you a better coach for your children's lesson on personal pride.

Pride is not necessarily something that comes naturally, but rather something that develops over time. There isn't a fixed recipe on how to feel good about one's sexual orientation/gender identity. Usually it is the result of a combination of positive experiences in one's personal

life and a feeling of acceptance in our everyday communities, both LGBT and at-large. Joining community, meeting people, entering into relationships, discussing, reading, thinking about how far you've come, perhaps even going into therapy, can all help in this journey toward self acceptance, breaking the isolation, and integrating your identity as a parent and as a sexual being. At the end of this guide we have listed a number of resources that can serve as starting points.

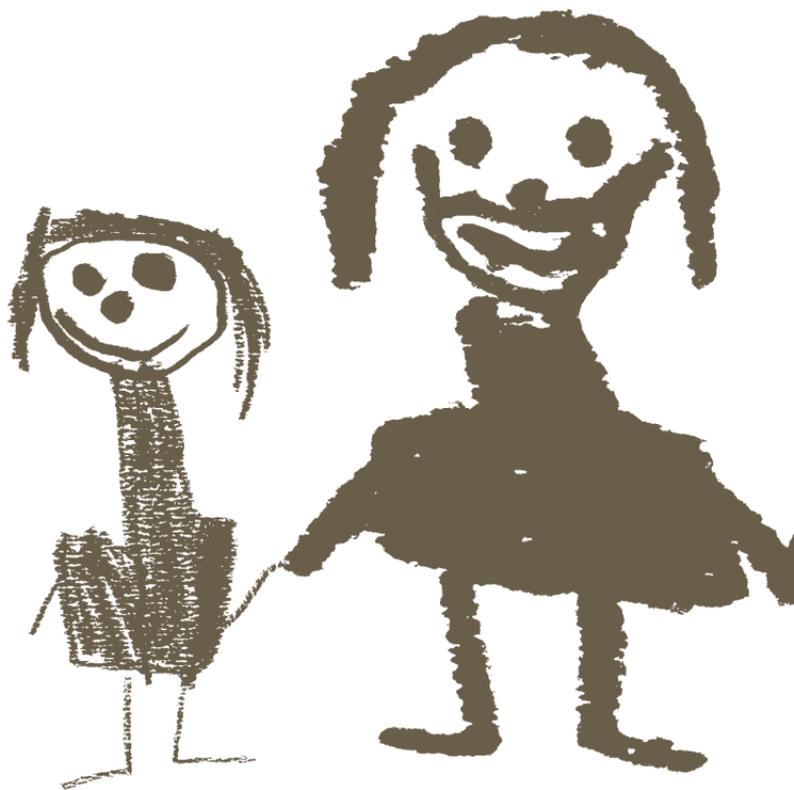
Talk to your children about being lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans, but also **listen**.

Listening not only to what your children say, but how they say it, will let you know how they are dealing with it. When your children ask a question there are always two possibilities as to why they are asking it. One is that they want information. The other is that they are looking for emotional reassurance. A good rule of thumb is to assume that your children want both and so you should provide both. Be prepared to hear their experiences without finding solutions or trying to fix everything. Listening means not talking, and not being on the defensive, and not arguing or trying to convince anyone of anything. Your children will mostly need an ally and a good ear as they work things out for themselves and with their peers.

Some parents will discover their sexual orientation or gender identity and decide to act upon it only years after their children are born. Other children have been brought up with same-sex or ts/tg parents from the beginning or from their earliest memories. Regardless of the children's age and knowledge about sexual orientation and gender, kids will continue to have questions (increasingly sophisticated as they get older), and will go through different phases of comfort and discomfort with our sexual orientation/gender identity. Throughout it all they need to know that we are there to listen to them, to support them and to respect the fact that even if they are heterosexual and conform to conventional gender expectations, homophobia and transphobia can be just as hurtful to them as it is to LGBT people.



Sympathize with what they
are going through.



As parents we often wish to make life easier for our children and we want them to be perpetually happy. A more helpful support for our children, however, is a sympathetic ear. We cannot change our sexual orientation or gender to make their social lives easier. Happy moments are wonderful and enriching, but hard emotional lessons are also valuable and long lasting. Strength and self-esteem



are gained through experiences that challenge us to stand up for what we believe in. When we are confident and patient with our children's issues and do not try and rescue them, they learn to ask for help when needed, and solve their problems with our support. In the long run, children will appreciate the benefits of having parents who are true to themselves.

Make sure your children know other children with gay dads, lesbian moms, trans or bisexual parents, whenever possible.

LGBT parents often place an emphasis on diversity and respect for all people. The LGBT community can be there for you and your children through different stages of development. The Lesbian Mother's Association of Quebec, for example, meets regularly in the Montreal area for bilingual activities for lesbian parents and their children. Other resources are listed at the end of this guide. These activities

No matter what part of Quebec you live in, chances are you are not alone.

offer a social and political network for parents as well as a group of young people who are all dealing with having LGBT parents. If there are no LGBT parents that you know of in your community, you can order books or videos with LGBT models. Or you can even create your own community by organising a get-together or family-oriented event. No matter what part of Quebec you live in, chances are you are not alone.

Be proud of the lessons you are teaching your children.

Having a parent who respects herself/himself and is not afraid to appear different is an excellent model for a developing child. You will be teaching your children to appreciate differences in others and not to judge others. You will also be showing them how a person can be happy without conforming to the norm. Chances are, our children will be confronted with peer pressure or hard social decisions in their personal lives. Our example and our openness will help them find their way. They may also feel more comfortable sharing these challenges with us, because they know that we also have to cope with similar issues because of who we are. Diversity, tolerance, acceptance, pride, individuality. These are the lessons our children learn just by living with us!



Advantages of being raised by LGBT parent(s): your children will have, as a parent, someone who is true to herself or himself regardless of what others think. Your children will see that you demand respect. Your children will be given a model of self-respect and strength in the face of prejudice. Your children will learn that people can live as they please and that being different is not bad, as long as they respect others. Your children will learn that there are many different kinds of people and that being who you are is what matters most.

Integrate diversity into your daily life.

Introduce your children to people that are different from you through discussion, and in person. If you feel your school age children are too bombarded with homophobia, transphobia, bi-phobia and are not ready to digest the idea of having an LGBT parent, you may wish to start by opening their minds to what it is like to be considered different. Use examples of race or religious differences when discussing discrimination and prejudice. Discuss racism and sexism, harassment and power dynamics. Or bring it closer to their daily reality and discuss bullying and taxation, name calling and intimidation. If most of your friends and family are from a similar background as you and your children, consider attending public events, watching movies, and going to community centres to meet people with different life experiences. You may also use a more inclusive language including LGBT people as a normal reality (example : John from work went to the beach with his partner on the weekend and brought us all these shells).



Correct myths and insinuations clearly.

Ask your children if they know what “lesbian” “gay” “bisexual” and/or “transsexual/transgendered” mean. Don’t be satisfied with “yeah, I know”. They may have heard the words a lot but only in a negative and derogatory manner. Confirm with them their understanding by redefining it in your terms. Your answer may be slightly different depending on their age, but love, honesty and personal integrity must be at the crux of your description. (Ex. : gay means two men who love each other, lesbian means two women who love each other, bisexual means a person who can fall in love with a man or a woman, trans means someone who’s feeling of being a boy or a girl doesn’t match with his or her body parts). For older children they may argue that sexual orientation or gender identity is a choice, or they may say that it is perverted or disgusting. Be prepared to hear these things without taking offence. If school has been their only source of information on LGBT people, your kids have probably not been given examples of healthy, happy, and loving LGBT people and so they need to adjust what they have heard with reality. You do not need to defend your sexual orientation or gender identity. You are a lesbian woman or a gay man, you identify as male or female, just as your hair is brown, and the rest is not up for debate.

There are many myths and stereotypes regarding LGBT parenting.

Some of the most commonly heard are :

- ❶ Children who grow up with same-sex parents are missing role models of the opposite gender.
- ❷ Women parenting alone are not authoritarian enough to discipline children. You need a man to get kids to behave.
- ❸ Gay men are pedophiles.
- ❹ A child's bond with his/her father can never be as strong as the bond with his/her mother.
- ❺ Children of bisexuals will have too many people in their lives and so will be mixed up.
- ❻ The children of transsexuals will be confused in their own gender identity because their parents are "freaks".
- ❼ Children of gays and lesbians will end up being homosexual.
- ❽ LGBT people are too selfish and/or sick to raise children.
- ❾ Kids of LGBT people will be teased so much that their childhoods will be miserable.



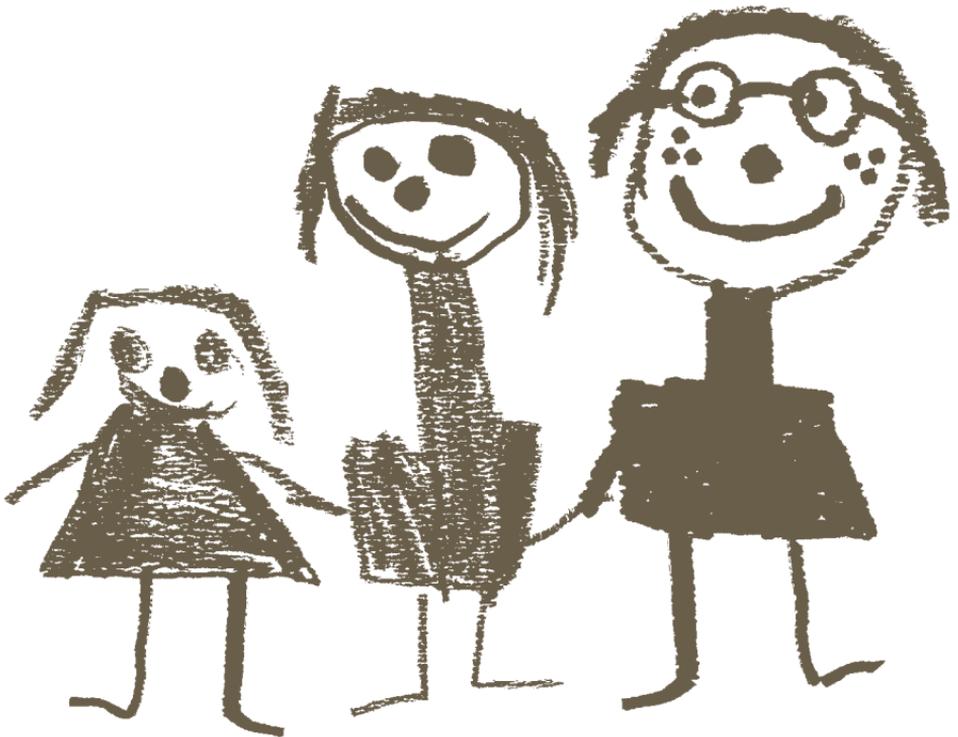
Researchers have studied these ideas, in great detail, over the past 20 years, in order to understand if they were in fact true, or simply based in popular myth. To deal with their conclusions would fill many pamphlets like this one. Suffice it to say, the literature has shown that our children do just as well as the children of heterosexuals. Children of LGBT parents have neither more, nor less problems than the children of heterosexuals. If you are curious, you might want to look at the research that has been done on our families in order to assure yourself, as well as to have answers at hand when confronted with prejudice. The well-being of our families has also been established by a number of professional associations including : *Canadian Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Anthropological Association, American Bar Association, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychoanalytic Association, American Psychological Association, Child Welfare League of America, National Association of Social Workers, North American Council on Adoptable Children.*

Teach your children that people who discriminate are the ones that need help.

When you are a child it feels as though the kids doing the teasing are somehow right, and that those being teased are wrong. Social status and popularity are vital to survival. It can be a long and difficult task to teach our children that the kids that pick on them because of their LGBT parents are just ill-informed. Help your children find friends that don't have a problem with it, and guide them to value true friendship over mass popularity. The kids that are doing the teasing are the kids that just don't understand yet. Also, it may help our kids to know that often the kids that tease or bully are the ones who get bullied in other situations...even within their own families.



Stages of development and the acceptance process.



Preschoolers most pressing need is to know that they are loved and that they can count on their parents to help them with their basic needs. They are not able to think in the abstract as of yet. Keep explanations concrete and simple without a lot of emotional complexity. Reassurance of your presence and love is very important.

School-age children begin to understand that there are differences between different families, cultures and customs, and that not everyone lives in the same circumstances that they do. They tend to view the world in black and white, however, and assume that if one choice is good, the other is bad. Children this age can understand concepts such as insemination, adoption and pregnancy, as well as sexuality and gender. They are also beginning to construct their own self-concept and may focus primarily on the potential effects having an LGBT parent will have on them. Their primary concern may be how their peers will perceive them.

Reassurance of your presence and love is very important.

Adolescents are much like adults in their cognitive abilities. They can consider abstract concepts and even imagine themselves in someone else's shoes. They are often extremely egocentric, however, and imagine themselves as the center of everyone's attention. They can become very self-conscious and sensitive to real or imagined criticism. Peer relationships are of utmost importance. They are also developing their own sexual identity during these years. Your adolescents may be able to understand your sexual orientation or gender identity but may be troubled by what others will think of them if anyone finds out. Reassurance that true friends will not abandon them may help. Also, they should know that they have their own identity and that their parents' sexual orientation or gender identification is not theirs.



For Parents who are transgender or transsexual (TG/TS)

Many of the ideas that we spoke about earlier in this pamphlet apply to families where there is a parent who is tg/ts. Self-acceptance and pride, as well as being a good listener and teaching respect for diversity can go a long way in teaching our children to accept us and deal with any transphobia that they might encounter.

Children with trans parents live in a variety of different family situations. For instance, some may have grown up in a “conventional” heterosexual family only to discover in later childhood that their dad has never felt comfortable as a man and is now planning, or even in the process of, transitioning (hormones and surgery to make the person’s body and gender match). Others may be raised by lesbian mothers, in which one or both of the parents later decide to transition to male. Some kids, on the other hand, will be raised by a trans parent from birth. In addition to these differences, some trans parents will be recognized as being trans some or most of the time, while others will “pass” as gender normative most of the time. These are some of the factors that come into play as we decide how and when to tell our children about our gender identity.

There is no simple answer as to when is the best time to come out to children about being trans. Any parent however who transitions when one or more of their children is over two years old, has little choice but to offer their child some age-appropriate explanation for the changes, as they will surely be noticed. Although this period can be difficult for

the adult who is transitioning, it can also be a period of intense relief where the trans parent is finally allowing himself or herself to be who he or she really is. If an older child might find it difficult to adjust to the fact that a parent is transitioning, the positives of having a parent who is much happier at finally living an authentic life can outweigh this difficulty. A sex change does not in any way diminish the parent's love for the child, nor does it affect the ability to be a good parent.²

Likewise, a trans parent who is often identified by other people as being trans, even if their child was born after transition, will have little choice about outing herself or himself to his or her children. If the trans parent is the frequent target of every-day transphobia (addressed by the wrong pronoun/name, stared at, etc.) the children will quickly pick up on it. They will need frequent reassurance that those who are harrassing their parent are wrong and they will also need unconditional love, acceptance and support through difficult times. Being proud and honest about who we are in a transphobic society, while certainly not easy, makes our children strong and more tolerant of diversity. It is society's transphobia that needs to change, not whether or not we remain closeted about who we are.

[...] the positives of having a parent who is much happier at finally living an authentic life can outweigh difficulties.

Like single gay, lesbian or bi parents, trans parents can often "pass". A couple with a mom and trans dad may look no different from the average heterosexual couple. These parents must choose whether or not to come out in public. It is a choice that is very personal. For some, "coming out" is both a political and personal gesture of identity

2 Mildred Brown, Ph.D. in True Selves, Jossey Bass Publishers, 1996.



and pride. Others may consider themselves transsexual only for the time period during which they are making a transition, and after that time may identify solely as 'woman' or 'man'.

No matter when the transition or how well one "passes" it is important for parents to share their personal histories with their children. Are you in touch with your extended family, who all know about your transition? Does anyone who knew you prior to transition frequently slip-up on your name and/or pronoun? Though you may pass most of the time as a non-trans woman or man, do you pass in the swimming pool? In the bathtub? Are all your legal papers changed to reflect your lived gender and new name? Do you keep family photos of your pre-transition self? Do others, whose homes your child might visit, keep photos like this?

Though keeping in mind the child's stage of development and intellectual capacity is critical, children of all ages can understand concepts about gender transition and fluidity. Although some information may be difficult for a child to accept at first, especially for kids who have grown accustomed to their parent in a given gender, being honest and out can also eliminate feelings of secrecy, shame and even foster closer relationships.

Most parents do agree, that they owe it to their children to be truthful, open and respectful and so they decide to share the story of their transition with those that they love.

Resources for Parents

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Joining community, meeting people, engaging in discussion and reflection, and making new friends, are excellent ways for both you and your children to feel pride and self-esteem in your experience of family. The following is a list of resources that can be useful to you and your kids. Using some of the resources listed below is a great way to reach out to others, share our experiences and learn from each other.

APGL (Association des Parents et futurs parents Gays et Lesbiens)

L'APGL de France s'adresse depuis 1986 à toute personne ou tout couple concerné par l'homosexualité, et ayant ou désirant avoir et élever des enfants. Excellent source for research articles on LGBT parents.

www.apgl.fr

Association des pères gais de Montréal

A francophone group providing help, support and a forum for discussion for fathers who were previously in heterosexual relationships and are desiring to take charge of their lives as gay men.

www.algi.qc.ca/asso/apgm

514 990-6014



COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere)

COLAGE is the only international organization in the world specifically supporting young people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents. Also includes an extensive list of resources for kids with trans parents.

www.COLAGE.org

Gai Écoute (French only)

Support services, hotline and information for people with questions about sexual orientation. The hotline is available free across Québec, from 11 am - 11 pm.

www.gai-ecoute.qc.ca

514 866-0103 in the Montreal region

1 888 505-1010 elsewhere in Quebec

Gay Line/CAEO Québec

CAEO Québec is a charitable volunteer organization founded in 1976 originally operating under the name of GAY LINE. Since then, the organization has grown to reflect the needs of the Québec English-Speaking LGBTQ Community and to take on a new identity. CAEO Québec currently operates three programs: GAY LINE a free and confidential listening, referral and support telephone service for the LGBT community; SILK, (Sexual Information Leads to Knowledge) an initiative to increase the awareness and knowledge of targeted groups, such as students and seniors with respect to sexual health, orientation, and diversity through free workshops; and Gay ONLINE, a free and confidential monitored chat room service, whose main focus is to provide referrals and support to the community via an online medium.

www.caeoquebec.org

514 866-5090 in the Montreal region

1 888 505-1010 elsewhere in Quebec

LGBT Family Coalition

The organisation provides interactive workshops on family diversity and homophobia are for teachers who wish to be better equipped to intervene when faced with homophobic or sexist incidents, and intimidation among elementary school and high school students. During the workshops, participants receive teacher resources, available in both English and French, which include various teaching tools (lesson plans, posters, book and resource lists). The workshop and resources are available thanks to financial support from the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS). Since its inception in June 2009, thousands of participants from the education sector have taken part in this workshop.

www.familleshomoparentales.org

514 878-7600

Les GRIS du Québec (French only)

These organizations favour interactive interventions. Volunteer trainers, who are for the most part young gays, lesbians and bisexuals, share their lives and their knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality in ways that are adapted to teaching young audiences. The teaching method raises awareness about prejudice and homophobic behaviours that occur at school. The organizations work primarily in high schools, youth centres and in youth protection in order to raise awareness about homosexuality and bisexuality amongst youth. In the Greater Montreal area volunteers are available to carry out activities in elementary (Cycle 3) and secondary schools, in both English and French.

www.gris.ca/lesgrisduquebec

Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

America's largest gay and lesbian organization, the HRC works to advance equality based on sexual orientation and gender expression and identity, to ensure that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans can be open, honest and safe at home, at work and in the community. Excellent guides on "coming out" and family issues.

www.hrc.org



PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

PFLAG holds regular meetings in Montreal. These meetings are open to everyone, regardless of how you identify. The common thread is a desire for a better understanding of LGBT issues in a safe and supportive environment.

www.pflag.ca

Pride education network

Website by LGBT educators in Vancouver. Boasts an extensive list of LGBT/anti-homophobia resources for teachers, including videos, sample lesson plans, books and links..

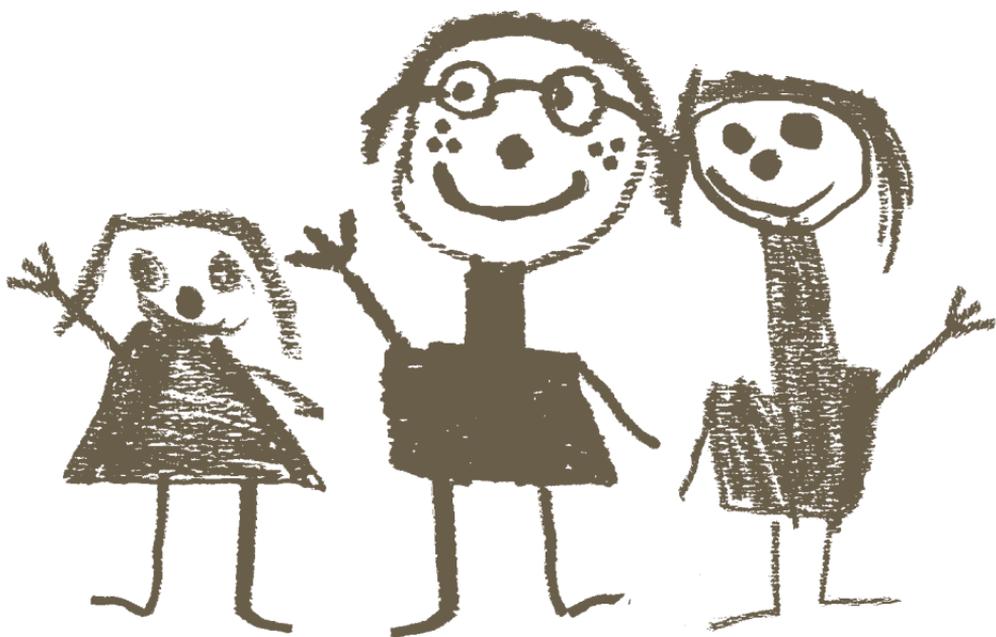
www.pridenet.ca

Project 10

A support group for young LGBT people in Montreal that also offers support for parents. The Allies Program, developed by Project Ten and Queer McGill (in collaboration with Project Interaction), tackles homophobia in schools, including arranging for speakers to go into schools.

www.p10.qc.ca

514 989-4585





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