

Coming Out: A Guide for Parents & Carers

Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Child



Belong To LGBTQ+
Youth Ireland

Welcome

Whether someone in your family has come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ+), or you think your child may be LGBTQ+, you have come to the right place.

For over 20 years at Belong To, we have been talking to parents and family members of LGBTQ+ youth – answering questions, sharing information and letting them know how they can be there for their child.

We know that it can be tough on a parent when their child comes out. Your child has probably come to terms with their sexual orientation or gender identity and felt comfortable enough about it to ‘come out’ to you. Now it’s your turn to deal with this the best way you can.

You may be worried about their future, whether they will meet someone, get a job, be happy. During our time supporting LGBTQ+ young people, we have seen people thrive and flourish, especially those who have a parent who stands with them and offers love and acceptance.

The fact that your child is willing to share this with you and be open about who they are shows how much they trust you as their parent and want to be fully themselves in the family home. Being able to fully share who they are and being accepted for this has a hugely positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Often, when letting us know about telling their parents, LGBTQ+ young people describe the weight that comes off their shoulders by not having to hide who they are anymore. The lifting of such a weight that can include stress, anxiety and fear of rejection often brings with it a sense of belonging, acceptance and connection.

Give yourself time to come to terms with the new situation. While you do this, be mindful that your child needs your support now more than ever. Take time to consider what to say and the impact it will have on your child.

Remember that this is not a 'lifestyle choice'. Your child's sexual orientation or gender identity is inherent and nothing you did, or didn't do, made them LGBTQ+. You can't make someone be different to who they are meant to be, but you can support them and help them to accept themselves for who they are.

We put this guide together with the help of parents who have engaged with our Family Support Service. I want to thank them for their advice, and I hope that this guide can provide you with some information on how to support your child and yourself.



Moninne Griffith (She/Her)
CEO, Belong To

Moninne Griffith

Helpful Terms

Understanding LGBTQ+ language and terminology is an important step in supporting someone who comes out.

LGBTQ+ terminology might be new to you, and may feel a little overwhelming. The most important thing to remember is that you don't need to know it all. Most people want to use LGBTQ+ inclusive language, but they are not sure where to begin. By learning some of the key concepts and understanding what the letters in LGBTQ+ stand for, you can feel more confident in discussing LGBTQ+ topics.

Terms change over time and some people prefer certain words to others. The terms here are relevant and accurate at the moment. Their meaning and definition will gradually change, and new terms will be introduced. If a term comes up that you aren't familiar with, it's ok to ask what this means or to ask an individual what term they prefer to use.

LGB

Lesbian / Gay / Bisexual About Sexual Orientation

Sexual Orientation	Our sexual and romantic attraction to other people.
Lesbian	A woman who is attracted to other women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.
Gay	Someone who is attracted to people of the same gender.
Bisexual	Someone who is attracted to more than one gender e.g. both men and women.
RELATED TERMS	
Pansexual	Someone whose romantic and/or sexual attraction towards others is not limited by sex assignment, gender identity, or gender expression.
Asexual (Ace)	Someone who experiences limited or no sexual attraction.

T

Trans About Gender Identity

Gender Identity	Our personal sense of our own gender.
Transgender or Trans	A term describing a person's gender identity that does not match their assigned sex at birth. This word is also used as an umbrella term to describe some groups of people who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression.
RELATED TERMS	
Sex assigned at birth	The designation of a person at birth as male or female based on their anatomy (genitalia and/or reproductive organs) or biology (chromosomes and/or hormones).
Non-Binary	People whose gender identity is neither exclusively woman or man or is in between or beyond the gender binary.
Pronouns	The words used to refer to a person other than their name, e.g. he/she/they.
Cisgender	Someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
Gender Expression	How we show our gender through our clothes, hair etc. This is different to gender identity. Gender identity refers to how we feel inside, and gender expression is how we present ourselves outside.

Q

Queer About Gender Identity

Queer	An umbrella term used to describe people who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender. Queer was used as a slur against the LGBTQ+ community for many years and still can be. However, the word has been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ communities and many now embrace the term. Check if someone is comfortable with this term before referring to them as queer.
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+	The 'plus' is used to signify all of the gender identities and sexual orientations that are not specifically covered by the other five initials.
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I Think My Child Is LGBTQ+...

You may think that your child is LGBTQ+, but because they have not talked about it themselves, you don't know how to bring it up.

For many reasons, LGBTQ+ young people may not tell anyone about how they are feeling. They may not be aware of their own sexuality and, if they are, they may be having difficulties in coming to terms with it. Some young people may not tell their parents for fear of rejection, while others may feel, and even hope, that “it is just a phase”, or “it will pass”, and therefore that there is no need to tell anyone.

Some children may feel insulted and upset if you raise the suggestion that they are LGBTQ+ as they are not yet ready to accept this themselves. Approaching the subject indirectly can be a good way to start. You could begin by talking to your child about sex and relationships. Speak positively about being LGBTQ+ and show you are accepting. You could mention examples of same-sex relationships or TV shows such as ‘Heartstopper’ as a way to show allyship. Emphasise that you want your child to be happy and secure, and that you will always support them no matter what life decisions they make.

If you can show that you are relaxed about talking about sexuality and gender, then your child may be more likely to talk to you about how they are feeling when they are ready.

The Coming Out Conversation

Coming out means sharing your sexual orientation or gender identity with people in your life.

Because people are generally brought up to believe everyone is straight and cisgender, LGBTQ+ people can decide whether they want to let important people in their life know about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Before coming out to others, it is likely that your child will have spent a lot of time thinking about this and starting to come to terms with it themselves. This doesn't make it any easier for them and lots of the LGBTQ+ young people we have worked with at Belong To describe the fear they feel when approaching this topic with their parents. Fears include being kicked out of the family home, dismissed or being met with a negative, homophobic response.

When your child comes out, you may feel uncomfortable, worried or not sure what to say. Based on our experiences working with both parents and young people, we have put a list together of what you could say and things to consider when your child comes out.

What to Say

- I love you no matter what.
- Tell me more, I want to understand.
- I'm so glad you told me!
- How can I support you?
- What do you need?
- Do you have any friends you can also talk to about this?
- How are you feeling?

Things to be Mindful of

Being LGBTQ+ is not a choice.

Your child's sexual orientation or gender identity is inherent. Nothing you did, or didn't do, made them LGBTQ+. You can't make someone be different to who they are meant to be, but you can support them and help them to accept themselves for who they are.

Keep the conversation going.

While you may be shocked, upset or disappointed, try not to lash out at your child or dismiss what they have told you. It is not their choice and saying hurtful or negative comments could cause them to shut down and not share how they are feeling with you in the future. Listen to them and let them know you are here for them and open to learning. Come back to the conversation again so that it does not become a taboo or something that is seen as shameful or not spoken about in your home.

Telling your child they are 'too young' to know.

Recent research from Trinity College Dublin tells us that the most common age a young person knows that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer is 12. For individuals who are trans, this can be even younger.

Coming out to others.

Speak to your child about whether they are ready to tell other people. They may want time before they let anyone else know, and that is OK. If that is the case, you may need to talk to someone and come to terms with the news. Our Family Support Service is free, confidential and a great place to start.

Supporting



Yourself

When your child comes out as LGBTQ+, it is normal to experience a range of emotions.

It is ok to be upset, to be confused and to feel scared. This may be completely unexpected and new to you. You may have a lot of questions and feel as though you have to solve everything by yourself. This is not the case. We are here for you.

Some parents feel a sense of loss that the person they knew so well seems to have changed, others feel a deep sense of shame and worry for their child's safety or what the neighbours and other family members will think.

You are not alone in this experience. These are common feelings of parents who have heard the news that their child is LGBTQ+.

We've worked with many parents who feel guilty for not knowing or feel overwhelmed by a whole new topic, terminology and world. For some parents, this news is at odds with their religious beliefs or personal values and can cause internal angst as they struggle with their faith and love for their child.

It is important for you to have a space where you can feel these emotions and begin the process of working through them.

You are not alone in this. There are parents in every county in Ireland who have experienced some of these feelings upon hearing the same news. They have worked through the feelings, learned more and got support so they can be there for their child, and truly accept this themselves.

You may be reading this guide because you want to support your child. But you also need to support yourself.

Learn more about our Family Support Service on the next page, and visit www.belongto.org to find local peer support groups and more information on LGBTQ+ identities.

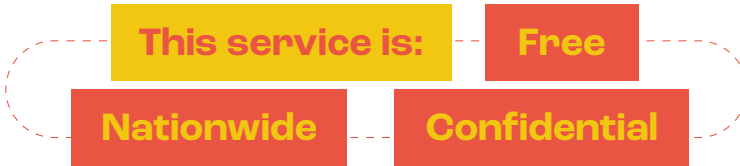
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I'm more confident in supporting my child as they develop and grow after using the Family Support Service. I feel more equipped and knowledgeable to help them.

”

Family Support Service

At Belong To, we offer a family support service for the parents and carers of LGBTQ+ youth.



Our Family Support Service offers one-to-one support for the families of LGBTQ+ young people across Ireland. We can meet you in-person or online and share information and resources. Our Family Support Worker will also answer online queries and help you with information to support yourself and your child.

You don't need to have things sorted out in your head or even know what questions you want to ask. We know that it can be a really emotional and sometimes lonely time for parents. We are here for you with information, advice and, most importantly, a listening ear.

“

I was feeling overwhelmed and alone, but the Belong To Family Support Service connected me with resources and support I never knew existed. It was a lifeline for our family.

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Contact the Family Support Service



Call > 01 670 6223



Email > family@belongto.org



Web > www.belongto.org/family



Supporting your Child

One way to start supporting your LGBTQ+ child is to become an LGBTQ+ ally.

Ireland already has great examples of LGBTQ+ allyship, most notably during the marriage equality referendum in 2015. If it had only been LGBTQ+ people who voted in favour of LGBTQ+ marriage equality, the result of the referendum would not have been a resounding yes! However, thanks to the support of LGBTQ+ allies the referendum passed, with the final result showing 62% of voters had supported the motion.

Be an Active Ally

Allies are not just people who are tolerant of LGBTQ+ people or don't discriminate against them. Instead, they take action to show solidarity, challenge prejudice and make the world fairer and more equal. While the word ally is of course a noun, some people like to think of being an ally as a verb to emphasise that taking action is a fundamental component of the role. The types of actions that LGBTQ+ allies take can vary. Providing a supportive ear to someone in distress, intervening when overhearing a homophobic remark or attending a Pride protest march are all examples of allyship.

Create Community for your Child

Research shows that LGBTQ+ young people who have friendships with allies have less internalised stigma about their identity. As LGBTQ+ youth may have more difficulty accessing support from family members, support that youth get from their peers may be even more important to them. Together with your child, find out if there is a local LGBTQ+ youth group or a LGBTQ+ and ally group in their school. Visit www.belongto.org for a list of all of the LGBTQ+ youth groups across Ireland.

Attend a Pride Celebration

The first Pride parade in Dublin took place over 50 years ago, and now there are local Prides in towns and cities across Ireland. Visiting Pride is a great way to see how being LGBTQ+ is something to be celebrated and show your child that there is a fun, open and vibrant community of LGBTQ+ people right across the country.

Show your True Colours

Think about ways you could integrate LGBTQ+ into your home. For example, you could display a Pride flag or wear a rainbow pin showing that you are an ally. It is best to check with your child before doing this to make sure they are comfortable. Lots of streaming channels have an LGBTQ+ section and there are brilliant shows and films made specifically for young people including 'Heartstopper' on Netflix and the film 'Dating Amber' and 'Handsome Devil'. Think about incorporating some of these into a family movie night – again in conversation with your child.

Support at School

Talk to your child about if or when they want to let people at school know. It is up to them to decide when it feels right and safe for them to share this with other people. Sometimes LGBTQ+ young people can find a school setting challenging. There are incredible schools across Ireland that work really hard to make their spaces inclusive and safe for LGBTQ+ students. On the Belong To website, you can find a list of all of the schools who have completed our LGBTQ+ accreditation programme.

Online Safety

Online platforms are places we can connect, express, learn and explore. For LGBTQ+ young people, they can be a great source of support and connection – a place to talk to other LGBTQ+ youth and learn about LGBTQ+ culture and identities. There can be a lot of false information about LGBTQ+ identities online and LGBTQ+ young people can experience harassment and cyberbullying. It is important that you know how to support them as a parent. There are lots of great organisations who work to make young people safer online and support parents to do so including CyberSafeKids and the ISPC.

Support Services for LGBTQ+ Youth

Since 2003, Belong To has provided a range of services for LGBTQ+ young people.

We create spaces with and for LGBTQ+ youth so they can come together, find community and have fun! We also offer a range of support services for times when your child needs deeper support for their mental health and wellbeing.

Dublin Youth Groups and Youth Projects

At Belong To, through groups and seasonal projects, we provide a space for LGBTQ+ young people to develop friendships, get support and belong. Our qualified and experienced youth workers welcome, support and encourage new young people to participate in the youth groups at their own level of comfort. Youth workers meet with young people where they are at – in a caring and supportive manner. Activities range from pizza nights and special events to arts and crafts and information nights on a range of LGBTQ+ issues – determined by the group members. All groups and activities are free of charge. Visit www.belongto.org to learn more.

National Network of LGBTQ+ Youth Groups

Youth groups nationwide provide a space for LGBTQ+ young people to develop friendships, get support and belong. It's not always easy to find other LGBTQ+ folk and an LGBTQ+ youth group is a good place to start.

Your child can meet other LGBTQ+ young people, share their experiences, hang out and chat. We support a number of LGBTQ+ youth groups that are run by our friends at organisations such as Crosscare and Foróige. Find out more at www.belongto.org/find-a-youth-group

Crisis Counselling with Pieta

Working with Pieta, we provide a free crisis counselling service for LGBTQ+ young people who are based in Ireland. Our therapists are friendly, welcoming and will listen to you in a safe, non-judgemental space and work through whatever is worrying your child. This service is available free of charge to LGBTQ+ young people aged 12-23 based in Ireland who are self-harming, thinking of suicide or bereaved by suicide. All Pieta therapists are fully qualified and accredited psychotherapists. Each session lasts for 50 minutes, and your child may receive up to 12 sessions for crisis counselling and up to 30 for bereavement counselling. Visit www.belongto.org to make an appointment.

Drug and Alcohol Service

We offer a dedicated drug and alcohol service for LGBTQ+ youth. We know from research that LGBTQ+ young people have higher rates of drug and alcohol misuse than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. The service is free, confidential and non-judgemental. This is a space for young people to bring any concerns they have around their drug and alcohol use and they can talk to our dedicated Drug and alcohol youth worker.

We will listen, offer support and if needed, refer your young person to a specialty service for further support. We operate from a harm reduction model. This means supporting people to manage their use of drugs or alcohol so that it is safe. We are not going to judge or stigmatise any young person.

“Belong to has been a great support to me and my children. In a world that looks momentarily to be against them, I have felt like Belong To has had our back. They support me in my care for my children.”

Parent who engaged with Belong To's Family Support Service, 2024

Reach out for advice, support or information



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