

## YOUR CHILD AND SEXUAL/GENDER DIVERSITY

**What if your child is lesbian, bisexual, gay or transgender? A brochure for parents.**

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## What is this sexual and gender diversity?

Many parents expect their children to grow up as a man, a woman and as someone who eventually will get married to somebody on the other sex. However, in some cases it will not happen like that. This has to do with how their sexual characteristics, gender identity and sexual orientation develops.

#### Sexual characteristics

Did you know that some children are born with biological characteristics that are neither male or female? These characteristics are called *intersex variations*. Because children are socially expected to be male or female, being born with an intersex variation can pose a social problem. Parents and the child have to finds solutions for such social expectations.

#### Gender identity

Other children are born with biological characteristics that are either totally male or female, but they still clearly *feel* different. They are unhappy with the body they got. Parents will raise such children according to the expectations related to their biological sex. This is called *cisgender*; to behave according to your biological sex at birth. But children who are raised cisgender, while they feel different, may become confused or frustrated at a later age. Eventually they may decide that they want to change their body, or part of their body, to the sex that they are feeling. This is called *transgender*: changing into the gender you feel to be.

#### Sexual orientation

Then, some children may discover during their adolescence that other young people feel attracted to the other sex (this is called *heterosexual*), but that they don’t. Maybe they feel only attracted to others of the same sex (this is called *homosexual*, or *gay* for boys and *lesbian* for girls) or sometimes to men and sometimes to women (this is called *bisexual*).

Nowadays many people know *more or less* about this, but many have only partial or biased information. Some people may not like such differences because they were raised with traditions that dislike such diversity. This causes many prejudices and myths around sexual and gender diversity. And such misunderstandings may cause children to be hurt.

#### Different parents, different feelings

Parents have different ways to approach these differences. There are parents who have experience with diversity in society and a mindset that helps them to be better prepared to accept such differences. Maybe they already know about sexual characteristics, gender identity and sexual orientations, and maybe they don’t. For them this doesn’t matter, they are the *acceptors*. Their main question is: what can I do to support my child?

Then there are parents who don’t know what to think of this. On one hand they want to support their children no matter what, but on the other hand they feel ambiguous and insecure. They have many questions like: will others accept my children? Will they be discriminated and have less chances in society? And what about venereal diseases? These parents need to process a lot of feelings and new information which is why we call them the *processors*.

Finally, there are parents who agree with more traditional social expectations that you are either strictly male or female and that you should be heterosexual. Such parents may have great difficulty accepting their children feel different. They are *disapprovers*.

What do you consider yourself to be, an acceptor, processor or disapprover? Or something in between? Read the following chapters to find out more and to get some suggestions.

## Acceptors: how can I support my child?

As an accepting parent, you may want to do except your child, but still see some challenges. Not all children want to share their most personal feelings or experiences about sexual relationships with their parents. This is normal.

It may be that children feel that their parents have made their own clear choices in life, and would like their child to make the same or similar choices. Even when you don’t want to force your own choice upon them, children can still feel this as a risk. Research shows that children often confide personal doubts and experiences with friends rather than with parents and if they confide with parents, it is often more with their mothers. Parent-child relationships cannot change overnight, the only thing that you can do as a parent is to make clear that you are open to listen to them and to support them in making their own choices. And that you will try to refrain from giving them advise that is based on your own experience an opinion rather than on what could be relevant and good for the child.

Such conversations could be called “non-violent communication”. How do you communicate in a non-violent way? First, ask your child to tell you about their *feelings.* Listen without interrupting and when your child is ready, you can ask what they *need*. Note that *needs* are deeper than feelings or emotions. They are things like security, acceptance or a sense of belonging. Needs are things you want, but they are abstract and not concrete objects or acts. After knowing more about their deeper needs, ask how such needs could be fulfilled. With your child, you can explore pros and cons of different ways to fulfil their needs. Don’t try to give your own opinion, superimposing your own judgments may not be welcomed by your child. You can close such a conversation by asking what you can do to help them to fulfil their needs.

## Processors: what should Ithink of this?

Most parents have little information about sexual characteristics, gender identity and sexual orientation. When they were young themselves, they often did not get good sexual education in school or by their own parents. Even when they did, such sexual education was mostly limited to messages about heterosexual dating and prevention of pregnancy. Even when they have heard about the existence of homosexuality, they may have little information about it. Maybe such information is mixed with prejudice which can create fear.

Many processing parents wonder: how can my child be sure? Is it possible that it is just a phase? It would be good to ask yourself why you are worried about this. If your children feels this way, why not allow them to experiment and to find their own way? You can be there for them to support them - if they want - so that they can develop their personality in a safe way.

Another fear processing parents often have is that their child will be marginalized or discriminated. Of course, this is possible. Regrettably we live in a society where prejudice and inability to deal with diversity is still happening. But what can you do? Are you willing to alter our personality in order to be accepted by everyone? This would be bad for your mental health. The better solution is to support your child in their choices, and to help them to stand up against people who offend or marginalize them. As parents you can do this yourself too. If your family, neighbours or community members make surprised or nasty comments, don’t be silent. Simply tell them that diversity is normal and everywhere.

Many processing parents fear their child will come in contact with a dangerous subculture. Maybe you are afraid your child will be at risk for venereal disease, broken relationships or social rejection. If you feel like this, it would be wise to explore how lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders or people with intersex variations really live. You can also talk with your child about such questions. Try to be curious but not insensitive or offensive.

It may take some research and dialogue, but you will see that in time, many issues that were unclear to you before become clearer and you will feel more secure in relationship with your child.

## Disapprovers: how it affects to my child?

If you disapprove of sexual and gender diversity, you may be part of a community in which a boy has to become a real man, a girl has to become a proper woman. It is probably expected that your children will be heterosexual and get married, get children and maintain the family line. Your expectations may be supported by religious texts and traditions. You may be aware that people who behave different risk being cast out of the community. Such different behavior may be called sinful, a sickness or a bad choice that brings shame on the family and community.

For disapproving parents it would be good to consider why and how they want to maintain their traditions and social status and realize that most children want to honour their parents and maintain their relationship with them and with the community. It’s not that they want to oppose you or that they want to damage your status in society. It is just that they feel *so different* that it becomes impossible for them to comply with traditions. It is possible they tried to comply, but that such attempts to deny their feelings made them sick and depressed. Some children even commit suicide when they feel desperate and unable to change their situation.

When you realize this, you may have to strike a balance between your convictions and the well-being of your child. This is a hard choice, we know. Don’t be too hard on yourself. It may be impossible to make a clear cut choice for one or the other.

A choice to break contact with your child completely or to condemn other sexually and gender diverse children is a harsh thing to do. And it is often not in line with your religious scriptures, although some preachers may claim so. Note that hate-speech and (incitement to) violence is crossing the line of acceptable behaviour in European countries.

Some may say that all diversity is created by God and therefore believers should not question this beautiful creation. But you may feel that totally embracing the sexual or gender diversity of your child is also too difficult.

A middle road could be to *double bind*. This is a solution in which you tolerate, accept or support your child, while at the same time not breaking with your religion or community. In finding *double bind* solutions that fit your situation, it would be good to talk with parents in a similar situation.