

CAN WE UNDERSTAND?

INTRODUCTION

It is often a shock for parents to find out that their child is homosexual. Whether you are a mother or a father, whether you have a son or a daughter, whether you long suspected something of the kind, or were completely surprised, finding out for sure can be a shock. The feelings that shake you are very strong and confusing. You may hardly be able to talk about it at first without tears and anger. Every family is different and every case individual: one parent may find out by chance, another may be told face-to-face, a third may receive a phone call or letter; the child may be a teenager or an adult, self-accepting or upset with what he or she is; parents may be ready to listen, or react by drawing back. For all, however, there are some underlying concerns and questions.

FIRST REACTIONS

Why did he or she have to tell us?

Many parents think that they would be happier if they didn't know. What you must realize, however, is that if you did not know, you would never really know your child. A large part of his or her life would be kept secret from you, and you would never really know the whole human being. The fact that your son or daughter told you is a sign of his or her love and need for your support and understanding. After all, who should know if not you? No other minority is asked to hide from their own parents what makes them "different"!

Why did he or she do this to us?

Many parents feel bitter resentment at the fact of their child's homosexuality. This feeling is based on the assumption that being homosexual is a matter of choice and that this was a conscious decision, perhaps even made to hurt them. In fact, homosexuals do not *choose* their sexual orientation--they simply are what they are: homosexuality is their true nature. The only choice most lesbians and gays have is whether to be honest about who they are or hide it. Hiding imposes a tremendous burden--it means living a lie, day in and day out. What parent would want a child to have to live that way?

What did we do wrong?

Most parents feel guilt when they first find out. Psychology and psychiatry have told us for years that the way the child turns out is the parents' "fault." In fact, no parent has that much power over a child. Homosexuals are found in all types of backgrounds. No one knows as yet what "causes" any kind of sexuality, but it is widely accepted today that a child's sexual orientation is set at a very early age, if not at birth.

PARENTS' CONCERNS FOR THEIR CHILD

Will he or she be ostracized, have trouble finding or keeping a job, or even be physically attacked?

We must answer: "Yes, unfortunately, these things are possible." It depends on where he or she decides to live, what kind of job he or she wants, how he or she

decides to act. But we must also say that attitudes toward homosexuals have been changing for the better and are more positive in many places. Also, there are a growing number of groups (including Parents FLAG) who are working for such a change, and who are ready to help those who have difficulties.

Will he or she be lonely in his old age if he does not have a family of his own?

Maybe; but we must remember that this is very often true of all of us. Spouses die, marriages break up, children often live far away, and many young couples do not have children at all. Many of us have to adjust to loneliness when we are old. On the plus side, many lesbians and gay men develop long lasting relationships, and the gay community is warmly supportive of its members. As it is becoming easier to “come out”--that is, acknowledge their sexual orientation to themselves and others--many homosexuals will have a chance to live as part of a community all their lives. Lesbians and gay men include in their concept of “family” not only their blood relatives but their lifetime or long-term partners.

Will he or she get into trouble with the law?

It is difficult to answer this question briefly since in some countries laws differ. However, many of the legislatures or courts have decided that sexual behaviour between consenting adults in private is not a crime. Most gays live their lives never having problems with the police.

Should we send our child to a psychiatrist to be “cured”?

It is now generally acknowledged by the psychiatric community that homosexuality is not, as was previously supposed, a disease which can be cured. In December 1973 the American Psychiatric Association declared that homosexuality *per se* is not a mental disorder or a disease. The American Psychological Association has taken the official position that it would be unethical to try to change the sexual orientation of a homosexual. However, many people who are homosexual are so imbued with the prejudices of our society that they cannot accept their sexual orientation as normal. In these cases it is often helpful to get psychiatric or psychological help for the purpose of self-acceptance. Care must be taken, however, to select a therapist who is not himself or herself imbued with those prejudices.

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