

Parents

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I had done some reading on parents of gays and lesbians in preparation for coming out to my parents. The scant information available seemed accurate, but left me with many questions.

The P-FLAG guidelines note that everyone is at a different level of comfort in relation to their children's sexual orientation. This seemed to be the key. Could these levels be defined and enumerated? And what causes a parent to be at a certain level, and then to change? I decided to conduct extensive interviews in an attempt to learn more about this process.

Through Joan, I was able to obtain a list of 34 present and past participants in P-FLAG. Represented in these 34 names were 22 different families. I sent each family a letter proposing an informal, confidential interview and eventually met with 19 parents from 16 different families.

All parents were frank and open, and seemed willing to discuss virtually anything. I found that I could be candid with them and that they would be direct with me. My status as a recently-out lesbian, concerned about my parent's reaction, seemed to help these parents realize that I really cared about their responses. In addition to the interviews, I continued observation and participation in the monthly P-FLAG meetings, which provided evidence of evolving attitudes.

When it came time to analyze the pages and pages of my notes, I found it difficult to separate information from the names, faces, and stories that I had become immersed in. Only by isolating the raw data from the parents and their individual stories was I able to see clear evidence of the process they were experiencing. Direct quotes from the parents helped me with this.

"Change occurs from within yourself. . . it is possible for anyone."

Many theorists have posited the stage or step model to illustrate the process of dealing with change. Erikson's stages of development, Kubler-Ross' stages of grieving, and AA's 12-step model are all examples. Through my work with the parents involved in P-FLAG, it became evident that the members of this group, too, go through a series of stages in their effort to accept the homosexual orientation of their offspring.

Before introducing my model of this process, it is useful to put this work in perspective. First, all the people I talked with have been participants in P-FLAG, indicating that they are willing to try to understand their children's sexuality. In contrast, other parents, upon finding out that their children are gay or lesbian, do not attend a support group. I, obviously, did not talk to anyone in this latter group. The parents I interviewed experienced shock and denial and confusion at their child's coming out, but at some point all felt the need to talk to similar others about this. Thus, these results are applicable to parents similar to those who I interviewed, which is only a portion of all parents of lesbians and gay men.

Second, the stages proposed through this research are not mutually exclusive nor are they exhaustive. Individuals start at different levels and move at different speeds, with a variety of motivations for progress. Other reactions are possible and do appear; the stages that I describe, however, are representative of the changes experienced by those parents I interviewed.

RENUNCIATION

"Finding out your child is gay is like experiencing a death."

I have broken this initial stage down into six parts, including: Confusion, Moral

Condemnation, Denial, Guilt, Family Concerns, and Isolation. It is at this point that many parents who have found out about P-FLAG call Joan or Dan. For some, they are the first people that these parents are able to talk with about their gay or lesbian children. Although many speak of relief in knowing that they are "not alone," they also tell of the difficulty in attending their first P-FLAG meeting, for there they would be "out." When a parent has reached this point, denial has subsided and the long process of education and healing has begun.

RESIGNATION

"This isn't what we would have chosen."

This stage is characterized by more involvement with the child, although parents still display much concern with themselves. Resignation involves Conditional Acceptance, Concerns with Parental Identity, Family Concerns, Protectiveness of Child, and Visibility.

RECOGNITION

"You just accept it, and don't try to change it."

As parents become more accepting of their gay son or lesbian daughter, their interest gradually moves from concern for themselves to concern for their child. I have called this process Recognition, which involves five parts: Reconstruction, Rationalization, Selective Coming Out, a Critique of the Status Quo, and the Building of Positive Perceptions.

ACTIVE ACCEPTANCE

"I am proud of my lesbian daughter."

Gradually, throughout this process, parents move from a purely emotional response to a more rational and intellectual response. Their issues have gravitated from concern for self, to concern for their child, and then outward even more, to concern

with society. Not only have they raised their own consciousness, but they are ready to see other people and societal institutions undergo these transformations as well. Ironically, these parents are often fighting against many of their own original prejudices. Active Acceptance has three aspects: Re-defining the Problem, Seeing their Child in Terms of a Gay or Lesbian Identity, and Personal Consciousness-raising.

Through my work with P-FLAG, it has become obvious that the process of accepting a child as gay or lesbian is a long and difficult task, characterized by a host of conflicting emotions. My research has both applied and theoretical applications. The fact that an individual's sexual orientation can cause his or her parents such pain is strong evidence that all individuals could benefit from education in this area. From a purely theoretical standpoint, parents of lesbians and gays are an intriguing group to examine using an interactionist approach. The effects of labeling, stigma, and deviance are clearly present not only in the way that these parents view their children, but also in the way that they see themselves as parents. The dynamics of stigma provide these parents with a source of anguish, but also with a special set of problems. This phenomenon and the way that parents overcome it merits further study by the academic community. ▽

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