

The adolescent years often present difficult times for parents and young people who are developing the skills for independence and adulthood. For young people who find themselves attracted to the "wrong sex", the journey can be particularly fraught because it stands as a barrier to honest communication with parents. Young people know that, if shared, this secret is likely to elicit disappointment and disapproval from them.

'It's a catch 22': same sex attracted young people on coming out to parents

In SS Feldman & DA Rosenthal (Eds), Talking sexuality: Parent-Adolescent Communication. New Directions for child and adolescent development - Series. Jossey-Bass: USA.

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Introduction

Dear Mum and Dad,

I know you will both be very upset when you read this and hear me tell you that I'm gay. It was extremely hard for me to write this, and build up the courage to tell you, but now that it's done I hope you understand that I am still your son, the same son I was before you knew I was gay. You both loved me yesterday, so hopefully you'll still love me today. I love you both very much, and I hope you both still love me.

You have done a terrific job in raising me, and I appreciate and thank you for this. Me being gay is not a reflection on how I was brought up in any way. It's just something that happened, it happened when I was born, the decision was already made for me. According to statistics, one tenth of the population is gay; that's a lot of gay people. It may not seem like there are many gay people around, but a lot of them are too afraid to come out in fear of being rejected by family, friends and society. I just happen to be part of that one tenth, and nobody can predict who will turn out gay.

I hope you will both be supportive about this issue, but if you don't want to know me as your son, then I will be happy you know the truth, but sad that you don't love me for who I really am. I will understand if you no longer want me to be a part of your

lives. If you have any questions about this issue, I would love to talk to you, and answer any questions you may have, and I hope we can still be as we are now; one happy family.

Thank you, and please remember, I love you both always!

Love from your son.

Adolescence is often experienced as a stressful time for parents and their adolescent children (Smetana, 2000; Smetana, Yau & Hanson, 1991; Yau & Smetana, 1996). It is a time of increased conflict with family members, when young people distance themselves from their parents, defining larger areas of their lives where parental input is neither sought nor valued. Parental anxiety around adolescence has as much to do with puberty as anything else, including concerns about sexual safety, for example, pregnancy and STDs and social safety, for example, a bad reputation. In general, sexual behaviour becomes problematic in adolescence more because of its timing, that is, it is too early, too often, or the wrong type of partner rather than it being absolutely taboo.

We want young people to wait longer or have sex only within certain boundaries, after marriage, or at least within a committed relationship. We want them to wait to have children until they have finished school and/or established a career and are in a stable, committed relationship. Underpinning these concerns, there is the assumption that young people will

eventually take up a (hetero)sexual lifestyle, producing the children of the next generation and grandchildren for the previous one. Same-sex sexual attraction, homosexual or lesbian sex and/or a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity all lie outside the parameters of what many parents regard as a 'normal' and/or 'healthy' sexual life.

Young heterosexuals rarely have to reflect on their sexual preference because it is taken for granted. Parents generally assume that their children are heterosexual and there is no need to bring it out into the light of discussion or debate. Most sex-related communication between parents and children focuses on pubertal development, reproduction, sexual safety and heterosexual morality (see Jaccard & Miller, this volume). Sex-related communications almost never focus on the sex of the partner (Rosenthal and others, 1998). In contrast, young people who are same sex attracted know that their sexual desires are an unexpected difference that is unlikely to be welcomed or even tolerated by their parents or their community (see Herdt, 1989 & Harbeck, 1995 for discussion about this). For many young people this knowledge is a heavy burden to carry. It also creates a situation in which any sex-related communication from parents is likely to omit the most pressing issue on the young person's agenda.

In the past five years adolescent research conducted in Australia, has revealed that a significant minority of young people are not unequivocally heterosexual with numbers ranging between 11% in rural research (Hillier et al, 1996) and 8-9% in a

large national survey of over 3,500 senior secondary students (Lindsay et al, 1997). Similarly in the US, Remafedi and others (1992) found in their representative sample that 11% were not exclusively heterosexual. Our knowledge about this significant minority has slowly increased over the last 20 years as a result of small anecdotal studies and more recently the large-scale research mentioned above. We do know that young people who have sexual feelings for someone of the same sex experience adolescence differently to heterosexual youth.

Adolescent theorists have pointed to the many ways in which growing up gay, lesbian or bisexual can be a particularly lonely and stressful time in comparison with the experiences of other minority youth (Martin and Hetrick, 1988, Savin-Williams, 1990; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Young people who are members of racial or religious minority groups most often share their status with their families and there is always that opportunity for affirming their identity. However, this is almost never the case for young lesbian, gay or bisexual adolescents whose parents are overwhelmingly likely to be heterosexual and to strongly disapprove of same sex relationships.

What happens to parent-child relationships when the child holds information about him or herself that is contrary to parental expectations and potentially life shattering for them? How does a young person decide whether or not to communicate that information to parents? Moreover what price do young people pay for not communicating? How do parents react when told by their son or daughter that they are not heterosexual and they take on

the accompanying assumptions that their offspring will not be following the usual trajectory of heterosexual relationships, marriage and children? In this chapter we define "coming out" as the process by which one declares his/her identity to be "homosexual" or "gay" "lesbian" or "bisexual" to parents who assumed their offspring to be heterosexual (Ben-Ari, 1995).

A number of researchers have written about the "coming out" process for same sex attracted young people (Ben-Ari, 1995; Cramer & Roach, 1988; Herdt, 1989; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995) and much of this has focussed on "coming out" as a stage in an individual's identity formation. Savin-Williams (1998) in his review of the literature concluded that young people's "coming out" decision making process and parental reactions are two areas that have been neglected so far. There are a few recent exceptions with Waldner & Magrudez (1999) writing about the decision to communicate with parents and Savin-Williams & Dube (1998) reviewing the literature on parental reactions. Waldner & Magrudez (1999) in their quantitative study argued that the decision to "come out" depends on certain factors such as family relations, involvement with gay community and sexual behaviour. The Savin-Williams and Dube paper argued that though most of the literature describes parental reactions to their children's disclosure as following a grieving process, they were unconvinced that this was necessarily the case. What is missing from the literature are parents' attitudes and beliefs and how they might influence the "coming out" decision and young people's well-

being. One quantitative study with parents a decade ago (Holtzen & Agresti, 1990) found that high levels of homophobia in parents were inversely related to offspring communicating with parents about their sexuality. A final welcome addition to the literature on "coming out" is a detailed book (Savin-Williams, 2001) based on longitudinal data and published at the time of writing this chapter.

Using the personal stories of same sex attracted young people, it is the aim of this chapter to chart young people's decision-making processes about "coming out" to their parents and the price of telling or not telling for parent-child relationships. Of interest also is the diversity of parental reactions to disclosure and the ways these impact on parent-child relationships. From young people's experiences, a number of strategies emerge that may help maintain healthy relationships in the face of developing sexuality.

The data for this chapter were drawn from research that was conducted with same sex attracted young people throughout Australia in 1998 (Hillier and others, 1999). Rather than approaching young people individually as many other studies with this group have done, the project was advertised widely in generalist national youth magazines, street press and the radio. Young people were asked to contact the researchers or go to the website if they wished to participate. This sampling strategy was chosen in order to reach a broad spectrum of young people and to give them as much control over the process as possible. It may be that this biased the sample in some way, however where

communication about sexuality was concerned, there was an even spread of young people from those who had spoken to no one to those who had communicated widely. Data were collected through a questionnaire about young people's experiences of discrimination and abuse, emotional and psychological wellbeing, sources of information about safe sex, relationships, sexual behaviours and support and safety issues. Also included in the survey were a number of open-ended items and a request at the end for autobiographical stories. Of particular interest to this chapter were the items '*Have you talked to anyone about being attracted to the same sex?*' with potential check the box responses to mum, dad, brother sister and male and female friends and '*Who was supportive?*' Questionnaires were filled out on the Internet or on a hard copy which participants requested by mail or phone from the researchers.

Profile of the group

Valid questionnaires were received from 748 (379f, 369m) same sex attracted young Australians aged 14-21 years. Two hundred of them wrote stories about their lives and family almost always featured in their stories. The mean age was 18 years with almost three-quarters (73%, 549, n=748) attending school, university or further education courses. Two thirds (65%, 484, n=745) lived at home with their families. All Australian States and Territories were proportionally represented as were metropolitan (78%, 573, n=738) and rural (22%, 165, n=738) municipalities. Eighty-seven percent were born in Australia (645,

n=744) and two percent were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (14, n=742). Half accessed the survey through the Internet and half through the post. Forty-five percent (333, n = 745) identified as exclusively gay or lesbian and 35 percent (264, n = 745) as bisexual (for a gender analysis of these figures, please refer to Dempsey and others, 2001)

All of the young people knew that their sexual feelings were regarded as perverse in their culture and the author has written elsewhere about the discrimination and abuse that they suffered because of this (Hillier and others, 1999). Over half had been verbally and/or physically abused and, unlike information about heterosexual safe sex, few young people had been able to access information about gay and lesbian safe sex from school (ym 23%, 63/268; yw 25%, 50/197) or the family (ym 10%, 27/268; yw, 9%, 17/197). One in five had disclosed their sexuality to no one, however, this did not ensure a trouble free life. Some were physically and verbally abused because they did not conform to gender norms and many others were filled with anxieties and fears about someone finding out about their sexual orientation.

PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

At the time of the research, 28% (211, n = 739) of the participants had disclosed their sexuality to their mothers and 16% (117, n = 739) to their fathers (no gender differences). However fathers were never told first and mothers rarely were (1%, 7, n = 739). Friends, especially female friends were more

likely to be confided in. This was a wise choice because friends were generally more supportive when young people disclosed to them than were parents. The reactions of some of the non-supportive parents are described later in this chapter. Given young people's dependence on their parents and the serious ramifications of disclosure which goes wrong, we need to better understand ways to expedite communication about sexual orientation when young people are not heterosexual.

"to tell or not to tell" - making decisions about "coming out" to parents

When young people become aware of their sexual desire for someone of their own sex, this is accompanied by the uncomfortable realisation that these feelings are regarded as taboo in the culture. The tendency is to hide the same-sex-desiring self and this was particularly the case at home. Most young people had not communicated to their parents about their sexual orientation (72% mothers, 528, n=739; 84% fathers, 624 n=741). Many young people described looking in from the outside at their families, friends and at themselves as they acted out a pretence of heterosexuality. Brendon wrote:

I'm still in high school and completely in the closet. I think I'm one of the best actors in our school! Still, the lie gets burdensome. I'd like to be able to relate to someone my REAL feelings, but rumours spread fast and I don't know who I could completely trust. (Brendon, 18 yrs)

Same sex attracted young people very carefully monitor their parents' (and friends') behaviour looking for clues about their attitudes to homosexuality and potentially their reactions to them in the event of a disclosure. Evidence of homophobia, which for the purposes of this chapter means a fear and dislike of same sex sexual desire and practice, is carefully gathered and used as proof of a potentially negative reaction. For Lissie, the realisation was profound:

This is where it gets messy you see after much fishing I've come to realise that ALL of my friends and family are homophobic.
(Lissie, 21 years)

Given the overwhelming research evidence about homophobia in westernised countries (Hillier and others, 1999; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Smith, 1998; Telljohann & Price, 1993), Lissie's comments are likely to be fairly accurate.

Same sex attracted young people are aware of their vulnerable position in the family as they struggle with their secret. Many are emotionally and financially dependent on their parents and few are making their own way in the world. They go over and over in their minds the scenarios that might unfold if and when they tell their parents and many of them are afraid that they will lose their love and support. Homophobic comments make

potential rejection all the more real. Lea, who was 18 and still at school, wrestled with the possibilities:

I don't know if my family will be that supportive as my friends have been but it's a matter of time. Its not going to look nice when I do tell them, for they have been raised as little catholic people who are very judgemental, and will be probably thinking to themselves, where did I go wrong? I hope that they can accept me for who I am, not what I am, their daughter, flesh and blood, their baby, but if worse comes to worse and they don't, well, the only solution is to move out; that's if they haven't kicked me out of the house already! But I'll be moving out anyway, for I can't stand being in the same house with them and thinking the worst about me, but I will tell them!

(Lea, 18 yrs)

Lea hoped that the standing of her past relationship with her parents would be strong enough to absorb this new information about her.

In many cases, unthinking homophobic comments by parents did damage to relationships with their same sex attracted children. This is quite evident in Lou's story:

The biggest issue for me is my parents. I have not told them and probably will never tell them. They are both homophobic and hate

gay people. It upsets me when they insult gay people because they are really insulting me! I wish they knew!!!! (Lou, 18 yrs)

Parents who do not know about their children's sexual preferences are in a vulnerable position. They are watched and judged by the offspring they think they know well and they make judgments and off-hand comments without realising the serious consequences on relationships at home. Alex alluded to this when he commented:

I feel people should stop and think about what they are saying when they make homophobic comments in front of family and friends, as they could very easily be hurting someone close to them. (Alex, 20 yrs)

Tom's unsatisfactory relationship with his father was also a result of unguarded homophobia on the part of the father:

It was very difficult realising that I was gay in a family that's very intolerant toward homosexuals. My father and I have a bad relationship because I know of his hatred to gay people and that is what I am. (Tom, 19 yrs)

Young people were not only fearful for themselves. Many felt a deep concern at the effects a disclosure might have on their parents' well-being and were left instead with the isolation, remorse and shame they felt for lying to them. For Daniel, who was 20, the burden was particularly heavy:

I come from an extremely Catholic background and my family is very well known in the local area. This makes it completely impossible to tell my parents. The worst thing it all is the guilt. Not the guilt at being gay, but the guilt at lying to your family and friends. THAT is where the shame comes for me. Most of the time it is unbearable. I sneak and I hide and I lie. (Daniel, 20 yrs)

Similarly, Shaun who had struggled with depression since he realised at 12 that he might be gay, was mainly concerned with "letting people down because of my sexuality". The decision to disclose was too difficult for him because he could see no way that he could win. He had also thought about suicide:

I think that if I was rejected by my family and friends for something that I can't change, I'd run away to a place where gays are accepted for what they are, but then I think I couldn't handle the pain of my family turning on me! It's a "catch 22" (Shaun, 15 yrs)

For Dean it was the burden of being an only child and not providing grandchildren that worried him most and prevented disclosure:

The thing that is scaring me the most is telling my parents. What do you say to your parents when you are an only child and know that they aren't going to have any grandchildren as such? I tell you what, I'm shitting myself over that one. I think I'll wait a while - like after I've moved out of home (Dean 21 yrs).

Young people take many factors into consideration when deciding whether or not to come out to their parents. In this research, most of these were externally based, including concern about causing hurt, shame and disappointment to parents, the potential loss of standing in the family, parental love, and in the worst case scenario the possibility of total rejection and ejection from the family home.

"Coming out" to parents - what prompts the disclosure?

Some young people never make a decision to come out, rather they are "pushed out" by circumstances or the people around them. In this study, some parents precipitated disclosure by asking their children if they were gay or lesbian and this was a positive move under certain circumstances. Asking was a good strategy only if parents were prepared to accept an answer that went either way, including if it went against their own beliefs on the subject. Terry's father and girlfriend had clearly come to

terms with his sexuality and the following interchange was affirming for him:

My dad's girlfriend told me last night that she asked my dad if he knew about my 'lifestyle' and dad says, casual, I've known since '91. I was twelve - must have got into a dress or something. (Terry, 18 yrs)

And for Hannah and her family, the knowledge was communicated and understood without any upset:

I didn't really have to tell my family, I guess they knew, like I did. (Hannah, 21 years)

In contrast, parents who asked only because they wanted their fears allayed often found that their children would lie to them. Lauren, who was 14 knew that her mother wanted her to be heterosexual and lied because she was not ready for the upset a disclosure would bring:

My mum has talked to me about gays and lesbians, she even asked me if I was gay. I said 'no' because I knew that she'd get upset if I said yes. (Lauren, 14 yrs)

There were also occasions when parents accidentally came across evidence of their child's homosexuality. One mother found her son in bed with his lover and another came across her

daughter's love letters. In each case disclosure was pre-empted before the decision-making process was complete, but the results were not always disastrous. Liam's mother dealt with it quickly and though she may have been struggling with an inner turmoil, she listened carefully and took her son's decision seriously:

When I was 16 I fell smack in lust with this guy at school. Two weeks, a party and a dozen or so margarites later I was smack in the middle of my first same sex relationship. My parents thought we were just REALLY close friends. My next same sex relationship came when I was 18 - this one lasted one pretty steady year, during which my mother found us in bed together (I hadn't told her yet), and my ex girlfriend saw us kissing in the Northcote Hotel Bar (she was already my ex by that time). My mom took about a day to compose herself, but I haven't spoken to my ex-girlfriend since. Which is strange, because my mom is rather conservative ... eek. aaaah, what the hell it's an anonymous questionnaire (Liam, 20 years)

In contrast, Louise's mother's anger and Louise's terror of her father's reaction led to her doubting her own sexual feelings:

It was not until my mother found a love letter from her [her lover] that my feelings for her became screwed up. My mother's disapproval along with the fact that I was scared shitless of my Dad's reaction, rearranged my feelings toward her. That afternoon

I broke her heart by telling her I shouldn't be going out with her any more and that I was only going out with her to be 'nice'. She hasn't forgiven me for it to this day. But I knew we had a really strong connection and there was no way I was going to forget about her. After many serious discussions, our relationship was built up again in a more solid and honest sense. (Louise, 17 yrs)

The incident set Louise back in terms of her relationship with her girlfriend, her parents and her feelings about herself.

Most young people told their parents about their sexual orientation when the time felt right or the pretence of heterosexuality became too difficult to maintain at home. The best example of preparation for "coming out" to parents came from Nick who wrote letter (at the beginning of this article) and gave it to his parents because he knew it would be too hard to say the words. The giving of the letter was the last stage in a long process of preparation which included telling friends and using the Internet for information and support.

What happens after parents are told?

A glance back at Table 1. shows that 28% of the young people in the study had spoken to their mothers about their sexuality and 16% to their fathers. Mothers were a little more supportive than fathers though there were examples of fathers supporting their child when mothers in the same family did not. No parents

celebrated their child's sexual orientation. Their reactions ranged from, at best, passive acceptance, tears, screaming, and at worst rejection and ejection of the child from the family home. The following examples of parental reactions to disclosure support research findings that better teen-related outcomes occur when parents listen to their children and speak honestly, while avoiding black and white thinking and an insistence that the child share their point of view.

Parents doing it badly

In some cases strong religious or other conservative beliefs left parents unable to think positively about their same sex attracted child. We have written elsewhere about the dominant cultural discourse around same sex attraction which posit these young people as 'sick, twisted and perverted' (Hillier and others, 1998). In a small number of cases parents were unwilling to see past these beliefs and the child became unacceptable and unlovable. In Jane's case, her parents rejected her and withdrew support:

My parents (my dad doesn't live with my mum) totally freaked out, especially my mum who yelled, screamed, threw stuff at me, cried, said I was going to hell, told my dad who said I wasn't his daughter any more and I said "yeah well fuck you I never was anyway" and mum threw me out of the house saying I couldn't come back to HER house till I changed my evil ways and gave my heart to Jesus. Well fuck them. (Jane, 16 yrs)

At the time of writing Jane had left school, was unemployed and had stopped looking for a job. She lived in a shared household and expressed concern about her drug use. Brent's experience of coming out at the age of 15 was also problematic; although he managed to achieve a better outcome than Jane:

A month before I was 16, I "came out" to my father and as a result I have moved out of home. I have been supporting myself since and am currently continuing my education. (Brent, 17)

Generally young people were understanding when their parents were emotional or upset but they had more trouble dealing with denial and having their parents patronise them by refusing to believe that they knew their own feelings. For Justin, his parents refusal to talk about his sexuality left him isolated in the family.

I dealt with it myself quite ok. It was other people who couldn't deal with it like my parents. It was being lonely that got to me. My parents refuse to talk to me about it though I have heard from my brother-in-law that they had suspected. My father is really negative, he refuses to believe it, thought I know for a fact that he is bi. (Justin, 20 yrs)

Like some religious creeds that tolerate the person but not the sexual behaviour, some parents denied their child's sexuality by accepting the sexual feelings but not the sexual practice:

My family sees it at OK as long as I abstain from sex. It seems that people can love the person but not the act. (Bill. 21 yrs)

And many parents reacted as though this was tragic news:

When I told my friends (that I had) they were ok about it (just a little uneasy around me) which was sad cause there's no need to be. My family is not so good about it though. I told my mum one morning when I was coming home from going out all weekend and she seemed in a good mood (which wasn't often) so I told her when we got home and she carried on and flipped out and ran around the house screaming. Then she rang my dad in Queensland [another Australian state] and then, after that the whole family seemed to know. (Ben, 21 yrs)

There were parents who dealt with disclosure in a more considered manner and this lead to a better outcome all round though tolerance was often the most any of them were likely to experience.

Parents who do it well enough

Some parents dealt reasonably well with the disclosure of their child's sexuality though there were almost always problems.

Jan's parents were accepting because they preferred her girlfriend to the previous boyfriend. However, they failed to really listen to her and were still hoping it was just a phase:

My immediate family has full knowledge of our relationship; hers do not know and would not tolerate it if they did. My parents do not have a problem with it, and approve far more of her than the male I was having sex with. My mother is inclined to believe it is "just a stage" that I am going through now. I do not (Jan, 16 yrs).

In some cases, parents reacted negatively to begin with and then came around after contact with health professionals or self help groups such as Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG). Young people, such as David and Wayne below, waited and watched as their parents went through this process:

My mother just fell apart when I came out. I expected Dad to, but he was fine. I have a feeling I was THIS close to being kicked out. My sister had gay friends at Uni at the time, and mum was fine with them, but I have a feeling it was the old 'friends are fine but not my son'. After she settled down from the rage, she became very sad, and would often mention things like me missing out on the experience of a wedding, of children, etc. But now, it's like the Brady Bunch. She joined PFLAG (did her the world of good) and is still an active member! I've been out to them for two years now and all is great. (David, 20 yrs)

My mum took about four months to come around, but fortunately one of my good friends got her to go to some PFLAG meetings which seemed to work for her. Now she's supportive to the point that she wants me to bring home a partner. (Wayne 19)

David and Wayne's parents, while presenting their own concerns, were prepared to take the son's pronouncements seriously and spent time joining groups and educating themselves about sexual difference. In both cases the parents were able to come to terms with their sons' sexuality.

In most cases, when one parent was told, this information was passed on to the other parent fairly quickly. By contrast, Jill's mother persuaded her not to tell her father:

When I told my mum we both cried, she was disappointed, she was worried about me not being able to get married and have a family. I told her I still wanted to have a child. She told me that she'd prefer that I didn't tell my father because she wasn't sure how he'd take it. Soon after that my dad died, and I never got to tell him. This is something I really regret. I never got to talk to him about it, I never found out how he felt. Now it's too late. Anyway, my mum is really good about it all (Jill, 21 years).

Homophobia was not always the cause of problems that young people encountered. Both Tony and Nina faced their parents'

reverse discrimination and this created unusual challenges for them. Tony found that people (including his mother) were so keen to acknowledge his sexuality that they assumed that all of his same sex friendships were sexual:

The only problem that I encountered here was that as my best friend is openly gay, people thought that we were a couple, including my mother; which irritated me a bit because if I had a fight with him in class some teachers thought that we were having relationship problems. (Tony 18 yrs)

Nina had a good relationship with her mother and her mother's female partner of at least 10 years but she hadn't come out as bisexual because she suspected her mother would think that she was not lesbian enough:

I wanted to talk to my mum about all this SO much, but just couldn't. My close friends helped out. I was happy but it still bothered me and still does that I can't tell mum. Maybe it's simply that I don't want her to ever be disappointed if I don't live up to any safe idealistic label she'll automatically want to give me despite herself. Just plain gay like her. It's not me right now. We all want labels - me too usually. I know I'm not straight and I guess I'm probably bi-queer. At this time in my life I'm not just plain anything (Nina, 20 yrs)

However, Nina and Tony's problems were merely small annoyances in comparison with the imagined and experienced consequences for many sexual minority youth in "coming out" to their parents. It is possible to draw on the experiences of the young people in this research to construct some guidelines for parents about ensuring a safe and comfortable family context in which same sex attracted young people can speak about their sexual preferences when they are ready.

Creating a safe space for coming out

Young people's stories highlighted their deep reluctance about speaking with their parents about their sexual orientation. Many of them wrote in detail about the tensions between their fears and anxieties over disclosure and the need to relate honestly to their parents. Family support is vital for this group because they face (and fear) hostility outside the home, at school, in their friendship groups, and in the general community. For most of them, there is nowhere to safely act on sexual desire and their access to information about safe sex is often limited to sources that are not credible, such as the media and peer groups. Given that one in every ten young people are not unequivocally heterosexual, there is the strong probability that parents will have some contact with a non-heterosexual adolescent, whether it is within the family or part of the child's friendship group. What can parents do to keep communication lines open and help prevent the isolation and alienation of these young people?

Ben-Ari (1995) has argued that parents need to educate themselves about sexual diversity before their children reach puberty so that when a young person discloses, they are not filtering this information through negative beliefs and expectations. Many young people think that their parents and other adults are ignorant where sexual diversity is concerned and in many cases they are right. Research has shown and psychology promotes the belief that homosexuality is not a matter of morals, rather, like heterosexuality, it is part of the range of human sexual expression. Keeping an open mind on young people's sexuality is a first step in being open to accepting what eventuates and helps prevent a parent from falling into patterns which make the same sex attracted person invisible and alienated. In many ways this is no different from being aware of issues around sexism and racism.

Parents need to face their own anxieties about same sex attraction and deal with them. What is it about having a gay, lesbian or bisexual child that creates such fear and anger in many parents? We have learned from their stories that same sex attracted young people believe that their parents are afraid for them and what they will lose, for example, a heterosexual marriage, children, social approval, health and a fulfilled life and these fears are reasonable in a culture which marginalises this group. In reality gay men and lesbians do have children and live happy fulfilled lives in their families of choice but much of this is invisible. Referring back to Savin-Williams and Dube (1998), a grieving process was obvious for some parents who moved

through some of the stages of shock, denial and anger to acceptance. This was not, however, the case with all parents and whether the notion of grieving was relevant probably had more to do with the (mis)match between parents expectations of their child and the child's perceptions of him or her self. What young people are lacking is the knowledge that they will always be loved and supported, even when they don't measure up to their parents' expectations for them.

In the same way that human rights movements over the last few decades have promoted non-sexist and non-racist language, it is also important that homophobic language is weeded out of the culture and this is especially important for parents' relationships with young people who are not heterosexual. Young people scrutinise their parents carefully and homophobic behaviour and speech has at least three negative effects. It alienates the offspring and destroys relationships because the homophobia feels like a personal attack, and it reduces opportunities for communication and disclosure. Homophobic comments by parents strike fear in the hearts of young people who are questioning their sexuality. Ben remembered his mother's words for 11 years:

When I was little, about five my mum said "We'll always be proud of you, even if you are homosexual, maybe not as proud but still proud." This was said after I asked what a homosexual was. I know that my mum's attitude has changed, but what she said when I was

five still rings clear in my head...That really hurts. (Ben 16 yrs)

Sexuality and sexual preference need to be considered as one possibility when a young person seems depressed. Population studies in the USA (Gibson, 1989; Remafedi and others 1998) have shown strong links between a young person's suicide and his/her sexuality, and this is also a well-recognised factor in Australia (eg Fordham, 1998). Jon who was 16 was obviously depressed and had attempted suicide. However, his father who discovered him during a suicide attempt, had not spoken with him about his sexuality:

I first knew in primary school, year two to be exact when I had a crush on a male teacher. I haven't told any of my family, but I am getting outside support at the moment and just starting to cope with it. I went through a bad time two years ago when I tried to take my own life, slashing my wrist. It would have been successful but my father found me and got me to the hospital on time. (Jon, 16 yrs)

Parents are thought to have the potential to be important sex educators though many young people do not take advantage of this resource. Part of the reason for this is that the information is available from other, more comfortable sources. However appropriate information is not available to same sex attracted young people and parents may be in a unique position to

fill the gap or at least direct young people to appropriate sources.

Finally, disclosure to a parent is a genuine attempt at communication that exposes a child in profound ways. Regardless of how difficult and uncommunicative the child has been previous to this time, disclosure is a precious gift that should be handled very carefully. Bob Brown, member of the Australian Federal Parliament and environmental activist suggested on National television recently that when a young person comes out to a parent and the parent is shocked and lost for words, the best thing that parent can do is hug the child. Brown's advice may be crucial for parents in communicating to their same sex attracted child that first and foremost, the relationship is valued and they are loved regardless of their sexual preference.

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Table 1. Numbers of young people who had spoken to parents or friends and the support they received from them.

	Young men	Young women	Total
Spoken to someone	80%, 291/365	85%, 317/374	82%, 608/739
Told mother	32%, 115/365	26%, 96/374	28%, 211/739
Told father	21%, 61/365	15%, 56/374	16%, 117/739
Told female friend	57%, 208/365	70%, 262/374	64%, 470/739
Told male friend	57%, 209/365	50%, 189/374	54%, 398/739
Mother supportive	57%, 66/115	59%, 57/96	58%, 123/211
Father supportive	49%, 30/61	57%, 32/56	53%, 62/117
Female.friend supportive	72%, 150/208	74%, 193/262	73%, 343/470
Male.friend supportive	71%, 148/209	72%, 136/189	71%, 284/398

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the work of Dr Lyn Harrison and Deborah Dempsey in the formation and execution of the Australian SSAY research project and all of the young people who gave their stories. Thanks also to Ritch Savin-Williams for comments on an earlier draft.

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