



My Son Told Me He Was Gay

Joy Dickens

Our son experienced some bad times at school. We could never understand what it was all about — the constant bruising to his legs where he'd said he'd fallen up steps, yet never did it at home; the times he came home from middle school in soaking trousers where someone had sneaked them under the shower during sports; the name-calling; the sheer misery of trailing back to teachers, head-teacher with no satisfaction. Finally, the day when my asthmatic son was held under water in the swimming bath. That's what it is like when your young son is struggling with something he cannot understand himself. At 16 it all became clear and many puzzles were solved. He told me he was gay.

The shock was like a rugby ball in my stomach — but lasted only momentarily. The look of terror on his face was sufficient for me to know this was *real* — not a joke or a lie. In spite of his young age, this was my son, and I was aware I'd never really known him until that moment when he 'came out', in spite of our closeness. I didn't consider it was something he could change as he'd have waited till he'd 'changed back' had this been the case. I knew from that moment it was part of him and not a choice as such. His only choice had been to accept himself and then decide when it felt right to tell me. He had no idea whatsoever how I might take this news, but since then we have all realised just how lucky he was, though we didn't appreciate it at the time — not all children have parents who can accept the news. We had no knowledge of homosexuality but we did have gay friends. Eventually my husband and I spoke with other parents with non-heterosexual children through numbers given to us by gay switchboards and lesbian lines. Two of the women I contacted lived in London and took calls in their own homes from people like myself. Both asked if I would act as

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contact in the North as they had no-one in our area. I took time to think it over and discussed it at length with my husband. We read every book we could find — some speaking of perverts and deviants, others being positive and accepting. Some time later, when I felt I was far more educated, I decided to take calls.

They were coming thick and fast right from the start and we soon needed a separate phone line. The last straw came when one day we'd just served out our real Yorkshire fish and chips, and, at the first forkful I had to leave to take the call. My meal was put in the oven to keep hot but when I emerged from my phone call some long time later, I was met with the most dreadful smell. My plate of food, plus fork and bone handled knife had all gone in together and everything had merged in a gooey mass within obnoxious clouds of smoke. We had the second phone put in and this became the official helpline.

We soon began hearing callers say they needed to speak with other parents, and our monthly support group meetings became well attended. It helps to discuss one's worries with someone who has been there too. Some attend regularly, in spite of having accepted their situation long ago, in order to support new members. They help us to explain that sexuality is not a disease so gay people do not need a cure, nor pills to take it all away. It is here to stay and no kind of therapy will ever change them back to something they have never been — in spite of what some so-called 'exit counselling' organisations might think or say.

In the beginning, most parents blame themselves for their child's sexuality and feel guilty, asking 'where did we go

wrong?' It is not their fault. Their child just is lesbian, gay or bisexual, as the majority of others are heterosexual. Parents feel bereaved — the body is still there but the person has gone, a stranger having taken her or his place. They have to go right through the grieving process before they can see their child has not changed but their perception of her or him has. First they might have denied it could be fact, then talked about the 'phase' and when it didn't go away, then they could easily feel hatred, turning their child out of the family home (if this was not their very first reaction). This is most likely due to homophobia — a fear of homosexuality. It is not unusual for this to happen, even where parent and child have always had an excellent relationship. Some parents have been known to physically abuse their child. One mother said she wished her son had died in his suicide attempt as then she could just say 'I had a son but he died'. Many have told us they could cope with their child having cancer better than knowing of their sexuality. One father, immediately upon his son's coming out dictated he should refrain from sitting on chairs — only the floor was good enough. Another father would not even take a cup and saucer from his daughter. These are only some of the dreadful ways parents react to their child's sexuality. We feel so sad for their offspring who feel totally rejected, unacceptable and worthless. If this is how 'loving parents' are then how can we expect society in general to act towards non-heterosexuals?

Hopefully, someone manages to get through all this mourning and myth to pass on a telephone number where they may find help. When parents eventually

decide to ring us, the first few attempts may leave them speechless — words won't come — but, at least they hear a voice asking 'How can I help you?'. Someone cares. The first contact is crucial and can be long and arduous for the helper. However, it is the beginning of the healing process and we at Parents' Friend have some inkling of whether that particular caller will ever accept. We spend as long as it takes — which can be hours — and that first pouring out of their fears and concerns leaves them drained. The relief shows through, however, as they become more relaxed and often go away having had a good cry, and, not unusually, a good laugh. Others are simply pensive, yet this in itself is promising. They have listened and, in spite of it not always being what they wished to hear, what we have said seems to make sense and was oddly comforting. They realise they did not know their real child, and may wish they still didn't, but we are allowing space to be angry and open without judgement. If they state a wish to meet others like themselves, we furnish them with lots of telephone numbers of other contacts. Talking with others is a way towards feeling less isolated. In ringing others, along with reading honest books, one gradually comes to understand that being gay is quite natural for that person just as being heterosexual is right for others. (Our own *Guide for Parents Who have Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Children* has helped many to feel better about having a non-heterosexual child, answering a lot of the questions that parents seems to have in the beginning.)

What parents find most difficult usually, after they have overcome the initial shock, is who, if anyone, to tell. They too

have to 'come out' and their non-heterosexual offspring are quite surprised at this. What they fail to appreciate is that their parents are at the same stage they were when they'd accepted their sexuality and wanted to tell others. It has to be worked out with precision and good timing and even parents will never know what the reaction of relations or friends may be. Some choose not to tell anyone — just as their daughter or son did in the first place. These parents are hiding 'in the closet' from which their child has just emerged, which is not a pleasant place to be.

The next hurdle is in being able to meet a lesbian, gay or bisexual child's friends and then partner — and eventually being able to allow them to stay overnight — finally sharing the same room as their daughter or son. But if 'rules of the house' do not allow for heterosexual children to do this, then it seems fine the same rules apply with non-heterosexual siblings. We see parents work through their issues from sheer devastation to total acceptance. Most do actually make it out the other end. Some, sadly, do not.

Our lives have changed so dramatically that we could never have imagined we could feel as we do now — privileged to be parents with lesbian, gay or bisexual offspring. It gives us an insight into all types of prejudice and makes us more open-minded and accepting people. We would not go back to not knowing, the journey for us has been so rewarding and each day continues to have its rewards — both in our daughter and son's achievements or simply their company, and in our contact with so many lovely people who initially feel their lives are ruined but usually come out of it smiling.