Intercom Trust

Positive Relationships

a guide for parents of LGBT+ young people

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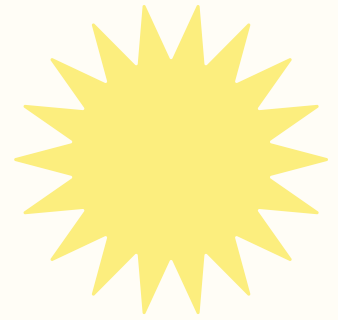
We use the word 'parent' to refer to anyone with a parental role in a child's life, including step-parents, foster carers and grandparents.

Part I

Introduction

Introduction

It might be that your child has recently come out to you as LGBT+ and you're unsure how to handle the situation, or you might have known for a while and there are some more difficulties that have arisen recently. The journey can present new challenges, but it also offers an opportunity for deeper understanding, empathy, and connection. As parents, it's natural to have questions, concerns, and differing opinions on how to navigate this experience. However, the way you handle these moments can make all the difference in your child's wellbeing and your relationship with them.

Parenting or co-parenting adds another layer of complexity as it involves coordinating with another parent who may have different values and views to ensure consistent support and understanding. Positive parental relationships provide a stable foundation for promoting the wellbeing of the child and strengthening family bonds.

This booklet is designed to help navigate some of these situations and help resolve conflict. Whether you are navigating your own feelings about your child's sexual orientation or gender identity, or learning how to support them through their unique experiences, the goal is to foster healthy, open communication and mutual respect.

Emotions
after coming out

Although you might be surprised and shocked by your child's news, try and remember how vulnerable they are feeling. Remember too, that they are still the same person that you have always known and loved. They have shared an important part of who they are with you.

It is likely that they may have been thinking about their sexual orientation/gender identity for a while before coming out to the people around them. For some people, it takes a lot of courage to come out and can be scary due to various reasons, such as fear of rejection.

It can be very normal to have a lot of mixed emotions as a parent after this news has been shared with you, sometimes people experience feelings of loss, overwhelm and worry about the future. This can lead to feeling vulnerable, isolated and helpless, which can sometimes lead to anger and conflict within the family.

"I feel like the information that they've given me has allowed me to have conversations with other people in my family who perhaps would prefer to kind of turn away from it and pretend as though it's not something that's happening"

– Parent who has received family support from Intercom Trust

Part II

Identity

Sex, Gender and Orientation

Sex

Sex is assigned at birth based on primary sex characteristics, the genitals. So the doctor or midwife delivering a baby will look at the baby's external genitalia; if there is a penis the baby will be assigned male and if there is a vulva, female. Some people don't have genitalia that easily fall into either category and other secondary characteristics develop later.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation has no relation to assigned sex, gender identity or gender expression. It is who you are attracted to and want to form romantic and/or sexual relationships with. Anyone, whether cisgender or transgender, can have any sexual orientation.

Romantic and sexual attraction

Romantic attraction is a type of attraction in which people desire a romantic relationship with another person. Romantic attraction can also occur without the desire for physical or sexual contact which is also know as asexual. Sexual attraction is an attraction based on the desire to engage in sexual activity with another person.

Gender identity

This is the way a person thinks and feels about themselves, whether they feel like a boy or a girl or a man or a woman, or neither. For most people, their gender identity 'matches' their assigned sex – this is referred to as 'cis' or 'cisgender' from the Latin cis, meaning the same. But other people feel that their gender does not match their assigned sex; they are trans or transgender. Some people don't identify with being a man or a woman but feel they are somewhere in between or neutral; this is sometimes referred to as non-binary. Some people's gender identity fluctuates, sometimes feeling like a man and sometimes feeling like a woman, or somewhere in between and the term gender fluid can be used to describe this.

Gender expression

Whatever our gender identity we all have preferences in how we express this. If we think of this as a spectrum, with extremes of masculinity and femininity, most people will have a comfortable place along this spectrum, regardless of sex or gender. There are masculine men, masculine women, feminine men and feminine women and people with more neutral or androgynous preferences. Gender expression can be seen in the way people choose to dress, wear their hair, speak or through their gestures.

he/they   they/them   she/they   he/him   she/her

Language glossary

Aro/Aromantic - A person who does not experience romantic attraction. Some aromantic people experience sexual attraction, while others do not. Aromantic people who experience sexual attraction or occasional romantic attraction might also use terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or straight as well as aromantic.

Ace/Asexual - A person who does not experience sexual attraction. Some asexual people experience romantic attraction, while others do not. Asexual people who experience romantic attraction might also use terms such as lesbian, gay, biromantic, or straight as well as asexual.

Bi/Bisexual - Romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender. Bi is sometimes used as an umbrella term, and a number of identities may fit within this, for example pansexual.

Cis/Cisgender - Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

Deadnaming - Calling someone by a previous name after they have changed their name. Trans people often start using a different name as part of transitioning, but not always.

Gay - Men who are attracted to men. Some women prefer the term gay rather than lesbian, and some non-binary people may also identify as gay.

Gender - Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics associated with the sexes, and is often thought of in terms of masculinity and femininity. This includes norms and roles which can vary over time and across different societies.

Gender dysphoria - The discomfort felt when a person's gender identity does not 'match' the sex they were assigned at birth. This is also a clinical diagnosis given to people who feel this discomfort.

Gender expression - A person may express their gender through their appearance, behaviour and mannerisms. These may or may not conform with societal expectations of their gender.

Gender identity - A person's internal and individual experience of gender. This includes identities such as man, woman, or non-binary, and may or may not correspond with a person's assigned sex.

Gender reassignment - Another way to describe transitioning (see below). Gender reassignment is also a protected characteristic in the Equality Act (2010).

Intersex - An umbrella term used to describe natural variations in sex characteristics. Intersex people have sex characteristics that do not fit in the traditional binary of male and female. Terms such a differences in sex development (DSD) and variations in sex characteristics (VSC) are also used by some people.

Lesbian - Women who are attracted women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.

Non-binary - An umbrella term for identities that don't fit in the traditional binary of 'man' or 'woman'.

Pronoun - Words we use in place of nouns. Some of these are gendered, such as 'he' and 'she'. Some people may change the pronouns that are used to refer to them, with some opting for gender neutral pronouns such as they/them.

Queer - Queer is used by some as an umbrella term including all LGBT+ identities. Some people use it to describe their sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly if they don't want to use more specific label. The word has been used as a slur, which has been reclaimed by some LGBT+ people, although not all feel comfortable being described this way.

Sex - Assigned to a person at birth based on the appearance of their genitalia.

Transitioning - The steps a trans person may take to live in the gender with which they identify. This may include telling friends and family, using a different name and/or pronouns and changing legal documents. This may also include hormone therapy and surgeries, but not all trans people want or are able to have this.

Social transition

The process of a transgender person adopting the name, pronouns, and gender expression that match their gender identity. It is not a compulsory part of being trans, and there is no one way to do it. People who do socially transition may change their name, pronouns or clothing in various ways.

Medical transition

The process of a transgender person undergoing medical hormone replacement therapy or surgeries for their body to reflect their gender identity.

Transition

Legal transition

The process of a transgender person legally changing their name via deed poll, and therefore documents such as NHS records, passports/ driving licences. There is also the option of applying for a gender recognition certificate to change a birth certificate for future legal documents such as marriage certificates, from the age of 18.

Exploration of identity

People who have come out as LGBT+ may explore their gender identity and/or sexual orientation over time, and this is a journey that can span over the course of someone's whole lifetime. Therefore, the way in which someone identifies could change over time.
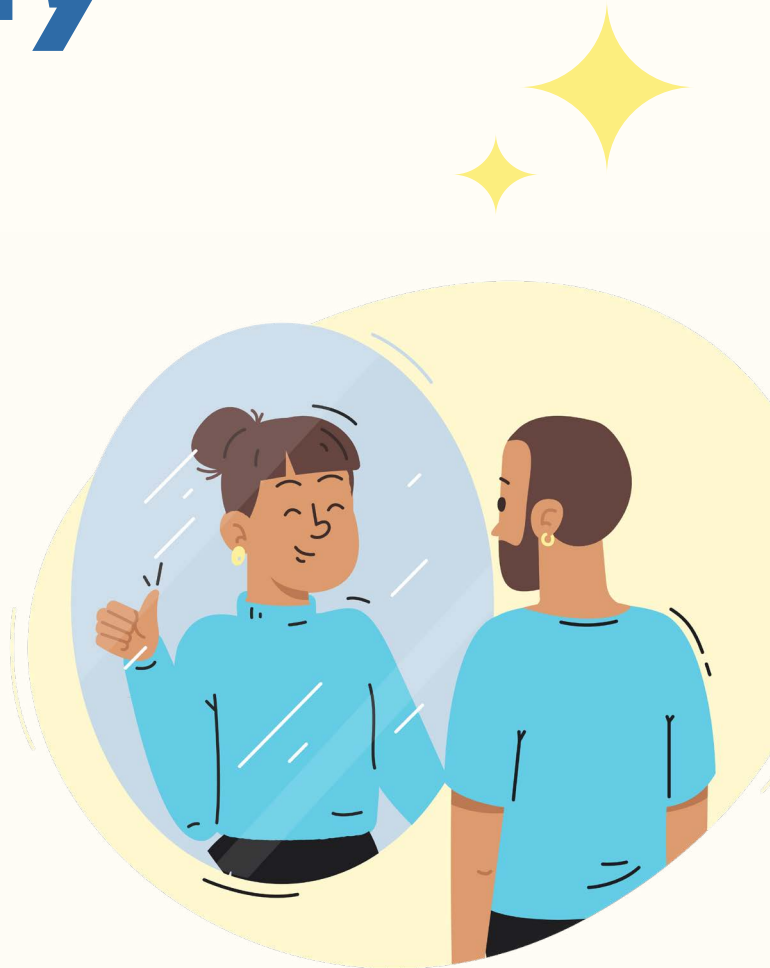
Exploration could be trying various ways to express themselves, such as trying out different names/pronouns or presenting in different ways to find what fits best such as through their physical presentation or through exploring connections with other people and relationships, or it could be through their interests. Exploration is individual to each person.

Part III

Effect on Parental Relationships

What Can Cause Conflict?
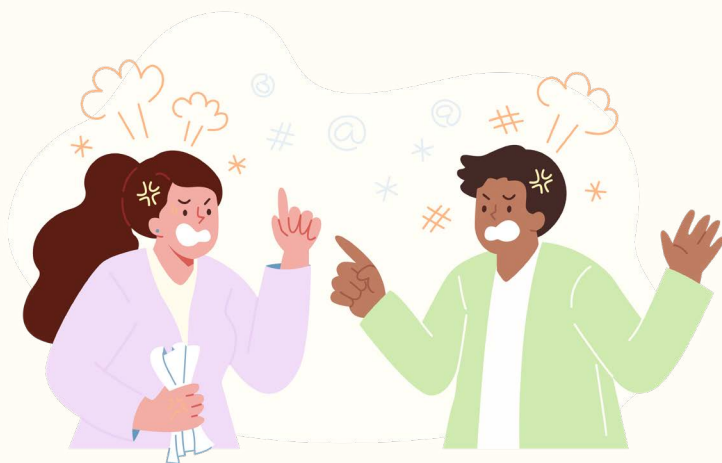
for *parents* of LGBT+ children

Disagreements about how to support the child

Differing opinions

Negative reactions from other people

Opposing beliefs

Worries about the future

Mental health difficulties

Denial

Worries about being judged by others

Struggling with understanding

Feeling unable to talk about it

Lack of communication

Worries about other people being disrespectful

How does conflict affect children and young *people?*

Feeling guilty - This can be especially true if a child's parents are disagreeiment is centred on part of a child's identity

Education - Children worrying about their parents'/carers' relationships might be distracted at school or when learning

Future relationships - Young people's relationships in the future may be impacted.

Mental health - A child's mental health may be affected by conflict/arguments at home.

Remember: It is normal for couples and families to disagree. What is important is that children see these disagreements resolved in a healthy way. See section 5 for some tools for having these conversations constructively.

Situation:

Lena (a 14-year-old) has recently expressed a desire to explore and express a gender identity that feels more aligned with their true self. Lena, who was assigned female at birth, feels more comfortable presenting in a more masculine way, wearing boyish clothing, cutting their hair short, and using different pronouns (they/them). Lena has come out to their parents, sharing their feelings and desire to experiment with this expression, but their parents, Sam and Alex, have very different responses.

Sam's View:

Sam is generally supportive of Lena's desire to explore their gender identity, understanding that adolescence is a time of self-discovery. Sam is open to Lena expressing their gender however they choose, including wearing clothes that feel right, using new pronouns, and experimenting with hairstyles. Sam believes it's important to foster an environment of acceptance and freedom so Lena can feel authentic and comfortable.

Alex's View:

Alex is more hesitant and conflicted about Lena's new gender expression. They grew up in a more traditional environment and feel uncomfortable with Lena's decision to present as masculine. Alex worries that Lena's exploration might lead to confusion or potential social difficulties, especially in school. They feel it's important for Lena to "fit in" and that such gender expression might expose them to bullying or negative attention from peers and others. Alex also fears that Lena might be going through a phase and doesn't want to encourage something that could be "just a trend." Alex suggests Lena wear more traditionally feminine clothing and refrain from cutting their hair too short, believing that it would make things easier for them.

How This Conflict Affects Their Parental Relationship

Tension Between Sam and Alex: The disagreement creates significant tension between Sam and Alex. While Sam tries to reassure Alex that supporting Lena's gender expression is critical for their well-being, whereas Alex feels that Sam is being too permissive and not considering the potential social consequences. This leads to frequent arguments, with both parents feeling frustrated and misunderstood.

Communication Breakdown: As Sam and Alex's positions harden, communication between them starts to break down. Sam feels that Alex is not being compassionate or empathetic toward Lena's needs, while Alex feels that Sam is too idealistic and doesn't fully understand the challenges Lena might face. They begin to argue less about Lena's gender identity itself and more about their conflicting parenting styles and how best to protect Lena.

Feeling of Isolation for Lena: Lena becomes increasingly aware of the tension between their parents, leading to feelings of isolation. They feel caught in the middle and may start to withdraw emotionally. Lena might start to wonder whether they can truly express their gender identity fully in such a divided household. They might also feel guilty for causing the conflict between their parents, which can lead to feelings of shame or self-doubt.

Strained Family Atmosphere: The ongoing conflict creates a stressful home environment. Family events or everyday activities are clouded by underlying tension, making it difficult for everyone to feel relaxed or comfortable. Sam and Alex might stop interacting as openly and affectionately, with each parent holding firm to their stance. This can create a sense of distance and even resentment between the partners.

Impact on Parental Authority: The disagreement over Lena's gender expression affects their ability to present a united front as parents. In the eyes of Lena, the lack of consensus can erode trust in their parents' ability to support them. Lena might feel that one parent is "on their side," but that the other parent is less understanding, which creates inconsistency in how they are guided and supported. This can make it harder for Lena to feel secure in their identity and choices.

Potential Solutions

Open Dialogue: Sam and Alex could try to engage in a more open and empathetic discussion about their concerns and feelings. Acknowledging each other's fears and emotions around the issue can help de-escalate the conflict. They could also agree to give each other space to process, while continuing to come back to the conversation in a calm and thoughtful manner.

Seek Professional Help: They could consider attending family therapy with a professional who specializes in LGBTQ+ issues. A therapist can help both parents work through their differing views and find common ground on how best to support Lena while respecting their individual concerns.

Educate and Support Each Other: Sam could share research or personal stories with Alex about the importance of gender expression for mental health, while Alex could express their concerns about social pressures and potential risks. Mutual education may help them understand each other's perspectives better and reach a more balanced, supportive approach.

Reaffirming Love and Support: Despite the conflict, both parents should strive to ensure Lena feels loved and supported. Regardless of differing views, it's crucial that Lena sees both parents working together toward a common goal—providing a safe, loving environment where their identity is respected and valued.

In this example, the parental conflict over Lena's gender expression is not just about the specifics of how Lena expresses themselves, but also about the emotional and ideological differences between the parents. These conflicts can deeply affect the family dynamic, but with communication, empathy, and external support, there's a path forward that can allow for mutual understanding and a stronger family relationship.

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Part IV

Other Factors

Mental Health

Neurodivergence

Bullying/Hate crime

Stereotypes

Other Factors

Mental
Health

LGBT+ people face the same mental health difficulties as non-LGBT+ people, of which the most common are: Depression and anxiety, self-harm, alcohol and drug misuse and suicidal thoughts

Although some things that LGBT+ people go through can affect their mental health, such as: Discrimination, homophobia or transphobia, social isolation, rejection and difficult experiences of coming out

LGBT+ young people are three times more likely to self-harm and twice as likely to have depression, anxiety and panic attacks

LGBT+ young people (68%) are twice as likely to contemplate suicide than their non-LGBT+ peers (29%)

However...

LGBT+ youth who report having at least one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.

Being aware of the mental health challenges that your LGBT+ young person may be facing will help to understand their experience, although this can have a strain on parental relationships.

Caring for a young person with mental health difficulties can take a lot of time and energy. This can leave less time and energy to work on your relationship with your partner.

Stress can make it harder to communicate. It's ok to take a breather, do something to help you stay calm, then come back to a difficult conversation.

Charlie and Jude have a 14 year old daughter, Sophie, who has severe depression and doesn't currently attend school due to her mental health and her experience of homophobic bullying. Jude no longer works in order to be at home with Sophie to make sure she is safe during the day. Charlie and Jude are struggling to agree whose responsibility it is to care for Sophie when Charlie gets home from work. Charlie and Jude aren't able to spend much time alone together.

Charlie and Jude try not to have arguments in front of Sophie. They decide to ask Charlie's parents to help out and be with Sophie one evening a week. This gives them space to talk things through, and also gives them time to themselves which helps them feel more supported by each other.

Neurodivergence

The language around disability and differences in how humans think, behave and learn has evolved.

The term neurodivergence emerged in the 1990s to reflect that differences are not synonym with disabilities nor do they need to be pathologised.

- **Neurodiversity:** spectrum of ALL types of brain
- **Neurotypical:** brains that process information, function and behaviours that are 'standard'/usual/common
- **Neurodivergent:** brains that work in a different way (over 1 millions people in UK are neurodivergent (ASC, dyslexia, ADHD, etc).

Intersection of LGBT+ identities and neurodiversity

Evidence suggests that neurodivergent individuals, particularly those diagnosed with autism, are significantly more likely to identify as LGBT+ than those who are neurotypical. A 2020 Cambridge University study found autistic people might be three times more likely to identify as trans, while in 2021, another study found neurodivergent individuals were 8 times as likely to be asexual.

No one is really sure why there is such an overlap between the neurodivergent and queer communities, but the predominant theory is that neurodivergent people tend to be less aware of or inclined to follow societal norms. We live in a binary society where being heterosexual and cisgender is the default, so neurodivergent people may feel freer to express their gender or sexuality without the worry of being judged, or the need to conform to society's expectations.

Communication and Interaction Needs
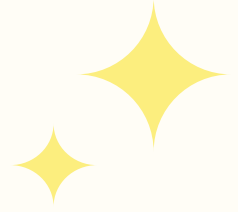
Ask your young neurodivergent person how they want to describe themselves and as much as possible, agree to using what they prefer (such as autistic person, neurodivergent person, person on the spectrum, etc). When your young person comes out to you, you might worry this is just a phase or that they are not able to understand what this actually means. Your young person might have developed of great knowledge of all the 'lingo' and meanings linked to the LGBT+ communities, making you wonder whether this is an obsession.

Special interests bring autistic people joy and can be a positive influence on the rest of their lives, helping them gain confidence, find a future career path, etc. Obsessions are different in that they cause unhappiness, undermine the ability of the young person to learn because they cannot focus on anything else or cause issues with new or existing relationships.

Clear, concise communication will help everyone understand what is going on for others in the family. Taking turns talking and providing uninterrupted time for everyone might help avoid frustration. Find how your young person best communicates to enable them to succeed; some might need a outline of what the conversation will be about in bullet points. An example could be: who I am, what my needs are to feel happy being me, how others can help me, how I feel.

It could be that you or your partner is neurodivergent. Think about what might make conversations easier. Some people prefer to talk without making eye contact. Try talking while walking or doing an activity.

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Bullying and Hate Crime

Bullying and hate crimes against LGBT+ individuals are serious issues that can have effects on mental health and wellbeing. These harmful behaviours often stem from prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Bullying can occur in various settings such as schools, workplaces, and online - it can involve verbal, physical or emotional abuse. LGBT+ individuals are particularly vulnerable to bullying, with many experiencing name-calling, harassment, social exclusion, and even violence.

Hate crimes are defined as any criminal offence which is perceived by the target or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a person's race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity. These crimes can include physical assaults, verbal threats, and property damage, and are often fuelled by homophobia, transphobia, or other forms of hate.

You may disagree with your partner/co-parent on how best to support your child if they are experiencing bullying or a hate crime. Perhaps one of you feels you should report this to the child's school or the police. Perhaps one of you feels this won't help or will make things worse. Try and let each other know why you feel the way you feel. It might help you understand each other more, and come up with a way forward.

Stereotypes

In western civilisation, we traditionally think of gender as being a binary of two options: man or woman, although this isn't the case in all cultures.

In some families, it can be tempting to avoid all conversations about gender norms and social roles once transition has taken place. But it is important to go on questioning gendered social 'rules' in order to create a freer social space in which gender diverse children can grow and develop.

Important conversations need to continue about the potentially limiting way that gender roles and gender stereotypes operate, questioning simple binary gender rules about how we live our lives. It is good to encourage the child's curiosity about people whose bodies and identities do not entirely 'match' and whose lives have the same potential to be interesting, rewarding and worthwhile.

'We've thought a lot about our language and where that was coming from'

– Parent of an LGBT+ young person
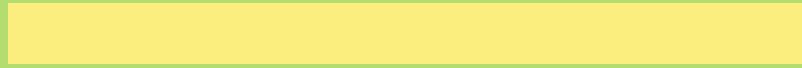
Part V

Parental Relationships Support

Handling Parental Conflict

Handling parental conflict when there are differing opinions on parenting an LGBT+ young person can be difficult, however it is possible with patience, empathy, and open communication. This situation can be sensitive because it often involves deeply held beliefs, values, and sometimes generational gaps.

It's essential that parents can work together to create an environment of acceptance and respect, regardless of differing opinions. The child's wellbeing should remain the central focus, with both parents supporting them in navigating their journey with compassion.

In this section you will find tools and models that may help you have difficult conversations in a healthy way, maybe even learning more about yourselves and deepening your understanding of each other.

'We've got the same goals, we just want our child to be happy; however that looks, whatever that means. By us aligning what our end goal is, it has made it much more manageable for us.'

– Parent of an LGBT+ young person

Difficult Conversations

It is normal to avoid conversations we know are going to be difficult, as we want to protect ourselves from feeling upset or vulnerable.

Conversations can feel particularly difficult if:

You aren't used to talking about the topic

You or the other person is angry

You don't know a solution

You don't have the energy

To prepare for difficult conversations think about the following:

Writing things down - it can be hard to remember everything you want to say, especially if you are worried.

Meeting your basic needs - are you hungry? thirsty? have you slept enough? It is easier to stay calm when you are comfortable.

Where is a good place? Talking in a neutral space can help everyone feel comfortable.

When is a good time? There will never be a 'perfect time' for a difficult conversation, but it might be better not to speak late at night, or immediately after getting home from work.

'I' vs 'You' Statements

Statements that are blaming often start with 'you'. Defensiveness is a common reaction to feeling blamed. Statements starting with "I" often focus more on your own feelings, reducing the feeling of blame for the other person. See some examples below of how 'you' statements can be rephrased into 'I' statements. Think of some ways to approach the scenario's with 'I' statements and avoid blame.

Examples

Blaming
"You don't care about our child because you doubt their identity"

"I" Statement
"I feel worried that our child isn't feeling supported by the both of us"

Blaming
"You never take our child to their LGBT+ youth group"

"I" Statement
"I feel overwhelmed because I'm doing a lot of the running around"

Scenario
You are in regular contact with the school due to your child being the victim of homophobic bullying, however your partner doesn't engage with these meetings

"I" Statement

_____
_____
_____
_____

Scenario
Your child has recently come out as transgender, your partner is wanting to tell the wider family, however you want more time before sharing this
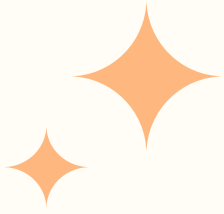
"I" Statement

_____
_____
_____
_____

Scenario
Your co-parent has refused to talk about your child being non-binary since they came out, and will often change the subject if it gets brought up

"I" Statement

_____
_____
_____
_____

Constructive or Destructive Conflict

Conflict refers to disagreements or arguments about things that are important. It is normal to disagree and argue in relationships, but the way this happens can be either constructive or destructive. Constructive conflict focuses on a resolution, whereas destructive conflict tends to be more personal and focussed on 'winning'.

It can actually be helpful for children and young people to have constructive conflict modelled for them. If disagreements become more destructive in front of children, but are resolved in private, it can be useful to let the children know that you have 'made-up' and worked through it, otherwise the young person may think that things go back to normal after arguments, whereas in reality this takes work, effort and constructive communication.

If young people are regularly witnessing destructive conflict, this can make them worried that the relationship is about to breakdown, even if this is not the case. See below some examples of constructive and destructive communication during conflict.

CONSTRUCTIVE
(i.e. helpful)

- Acknowledging
- Calm
- Focus on topic
- No blaming
- Find a solution
- Show respect

OR

DESTRUCTIVE
(i.e. unhelpful)

- Shouting/swearing
- Trying to win
- Make personal comments
- Don't listen
- No resolution
- Lack focus

"I understand what you and saying and why you feel that way"

"You're being too strict, it's because of your own upbringing"

"It's your fault that they are feeling this way"

"I feel that we are moving away from the topic we need to focus on"

"I'm not listening to what you have to say unless you agree with me"

"I think it would be good to think of things that we both agree on"

Example of Constructive and Destructive Conflict

Destructive Communication

These communication styles, known as the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse' make it harder for disagreements to be resolved

Critical

Being critical of someone's character makes them feel rejected and hurt. This can escalate into a pattern where criticism becomes more frequent and intense.

Criticism is often phrased in 'you' statements. It's ok to have complaints, but important to try and communicate without blame. Try and focus on communicating your feelings in 'I' statements. See page 30 for examples.

Contempt

Contempt includes mocking, disrespecting, name-calling, mimicking, scoffing and eye-rolling. It often happens when one person believes themselves to be 'morally superior' over the other.

Try and remember to be kind to your partner/co-parent, even when you feel angry or upset. Remember to show appreciation for positive things that they do.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is often a response to criticism, but can also be a response to complaints. It shifts the blame onto the other person. This can lead to a cycle of criticism and defensiveness, that doesn't lead to a resolution.

It's important to acknowledge your partners feelings and accept responsibility for your part in the situation.

Stonewalling

Stonewalling is usually a response to contempt. It involves withdrawing and shutting down. Rather than trying to find a resolution, someone stonewalling may tune out and ignore the person talking to them. It can be a response to feeling overwhelmed.

Try taking some time out to process. It is important to let your partner know you are doing this. You could even agree a signal in advance. The disagreement will still need to be resolved, so try and come back to the discussion later.

Emotions

Finding the right words for how you feel can be challenging. Getting beyond the surface of basic emotions like sadness or surprise can help explain in more detail how you are feeling to your partner.

'Being able to talk about it and not be in conflict, to be able to talk about it openly and in a very accepting way of each other's feelings'

– Parent of an LGBT+ young person on what has been helpful for their family.

The feelings wheel can help you work out what you feel in more detail, and help you communicate this to other people. You can use this in a conversation with your partner/co-parent as well as when reflecting on your own emotions.

Emotions: Anger

An emotion often felt during conflict is anger. Anger can feel like a strong emotion, but can be masking emotions that feel more vulnerable. The anger iceberg shows what other emotions there could be beneath the surface. Knowing more about the emotion can help work out what will be most helpful.

For example, anger and anxiety can feel similar in the body; raised heart rate, tension, feeling hot. If the source of anger is anxiety, doing things that help you stay calm may help you approach conversations and disagreements in a more constructive way.

THE ANGER ICEBERG
What's really behind the anger?

ANGER

GUILT
SADNESS
SHAME
FRUSTRATION
HUNGER
EMBARRASSMENT
FEAR
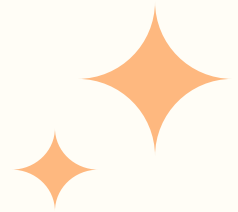OVERWHELM
INSECURITY
HELPLESSNESS
JEALOUSY
ANXIETY
TRAUMA

Can you think of a time when you got angry, but on reflection there was another emotion underneath?

Are there emotions you find it particularly difficult to express?

What emotions do people around you express?

What emotions did you see expressed by people when you were younger?

Attachment Styles

Attachment styles reflect how people think about and behave in relationships. Those with a secure attachment style generally trust their relationships, while those with an insecure style often worry about or distrust their bonds with others.

Secure	Anxious	Avoidant	Anxious-Avoidant
Often engage in relationships with trust, commitment, effective communication, and autonomy. They are able to clearly express their needs and trust their partner.	Often worry about their partner's availability and commitment, feel incomplete without them and may seek a lot of reassurance or experience jealousy.	Often seem distant or emotionally detached, they might avoid intimacy, vulnerability, and commitment.	Often shift between anxious and avoidant behaviours, simultaneously desiring and distrusting intimacy which can lead to inconsistent and contradictory approaches to difficulties in the relationship.
• Able to communicate wants/needs • Understand their emotions and can manage emotional responses • Aware, loving and receptive	• Lack trust within relationships • Fearful of abandonment and conflict • Seek approval and sensitive to critique	• Create distance with a partner • Conflict and emotions can feel uncomfortable • Struggle to express wants/ needs	• Express emotional extremes – may switch between clingy to dismissive • Struggle to maintain healthy boundaries

Attachment styles are shaped by early parenting, childhood experiences and adult life events, however those with insecure attachment can develop a more secure style by adopting healthier beliefs and behaviours. While most have a primary attachment style, it's common to show traits from other styles as well. Partners in a relationship can influence each other's styles, either encouraging growth or reinforcing negative patterns.

Creating Secure Attachments

Healthy relationships require the right mix of intimacy and independence. Someone who is insecurely attached often struggles to trust or commit to others. With time and effort, it's possible to feel safe and fulfilled in relationships while remaining your own person. Below are some tips for how to do this:

Understand Your Attachment Style
Familiarize yourself with the four primary attachment styles and the related thoughts and behaviours. This knowledge helps you recognise patterns in your past relationships and create a plan to break unhealthy cycles.

Communicate Openly and Listen with Empathy
A secure attachment thrives on respectful, honest communication. During conflict, work together with your partner to ensure both of you feel heard and understood, even if you disagree.

Reflect on Your Beliefs About Relationships
Our beliefs about relationships are often formed early in life. It's essential to examine what is true in your current relationships and let go of outdated beliefs or interpretations.

Surround Yourself with Healthy Relationship Role Models
It could be that the relationships you have been exposed to have modelled insecure attachment styles. You can improve your own relationships by observing and learning from those who have healthy, thriving partnerships.

Challenge Anxious or Avoidant Tendencies
If you have an anxious attachment style, take small steps toward becoming more independent. If you lean toward an avoidant attachment style, practice lowering your defences and initiating intimacy.

Increase Your Emotional Awareness
Learning to recognize, express, and manage your emotions helps you better understand and empathize with your partner's feelings. See the feelings wheel and anger iceberg on pages 32–33 for ideas on how to do this.
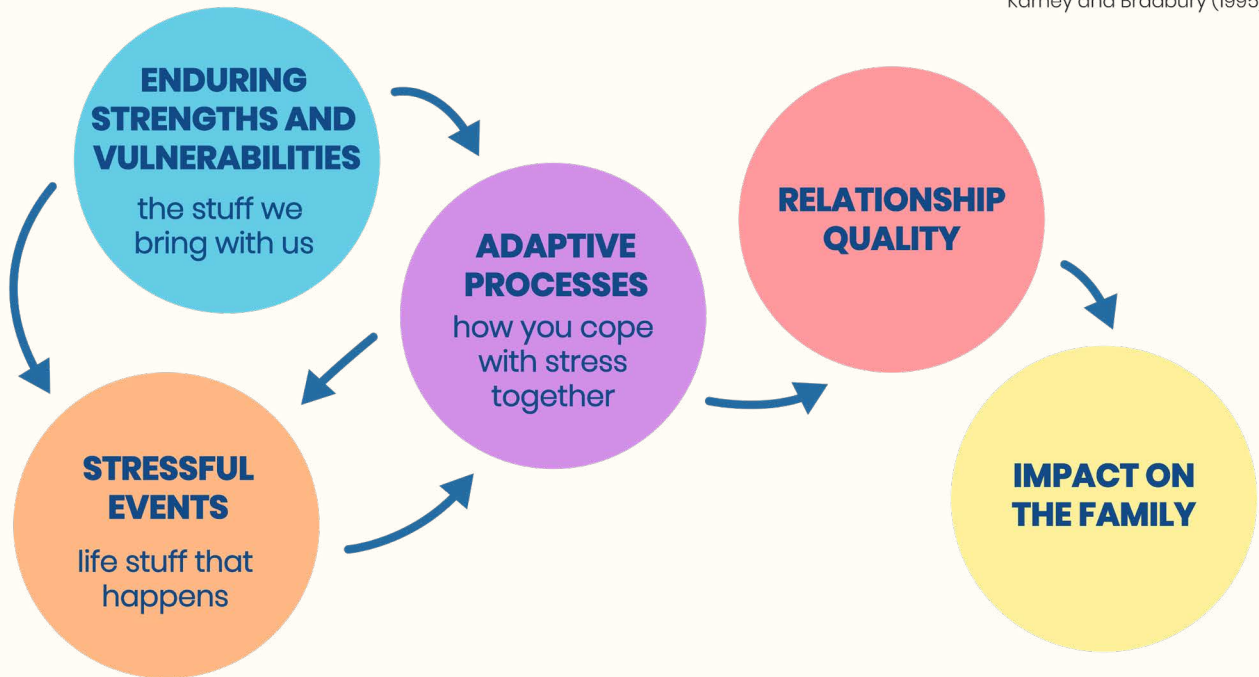
Reduce Stressors
Stress can exacerbate attachment issues. Take a proactive approach by looking after yourself first, addressing conflicts early, and engaging in calming activities with your partner to maintain balance.

Past Experiences

The way you approach different situations will be affected by your past experiences. Stressful life events can also affect how you deal with conflict and disagreements. It's important to find ways to adapt to these with your partner/co-parent. This can be visualised in the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model.

Karney and Bradbury (1995)

ENDURING STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES
the stuff we bring with us

ADAPTIVE PROCESSES
how you cope with stress together

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

STRESSFUL EVENTS
life stuff that happens

IMPACT ON THE FAMILY

Enduring Strengths and Vulnerabilities
These are your past experiences and how they have affected you. Each person will bring these to a relationship. These can include:
- How you were parented
- Personality traits
- Experiences of past relationships

Stressful Events
Your enduring vulnerabilities may not be obvious until a stressful event, when they start to affect how you respond. Examples of stressful events could be:
- A new baby
- Illness
- Bereavement

Adaptive Processes
How you work through stressful events with your partner/co-parent will impact your relationship. For example, if your partner has a long-term illness, the share of responsibilities in the household may change. You may feel resistant to this if in a previous relationship you were expected to do the majority of the housework. If you are able to be open with your partner about this and avoid blaming them, you are in a better position to work through the stressful time together.

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How you and your partner/co-parent communicate when things are good might be very different to how you talk about situations you find stressful.

Understanding your partner/co-parent's enduring vulnerabilities may help you understand and empathise with how they respond to stressful situations. Try to listen without judgement and allow them space to talk about it. This can be difficult if you don't agree with how they are acting, but can help you understand what could make the situation easier to cope with.

It's also useful to think about how your own past experiences and how these may be affecting your own response to stressful events. Perhaps you have reacted to something in a way that surprised you. Talking this through with your partner might help you understand why, and work out a way forward.

For example

ENDURING STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES
"I was told that being gay was wrong throughout my childhood"

STRESSFUL EVENTS
"People are talking negatively about my child since they came out to wider family members"

ADAPTIVE PROCESSES
"We are going to take time out of family situations if needed, and check in with each other afterwards"
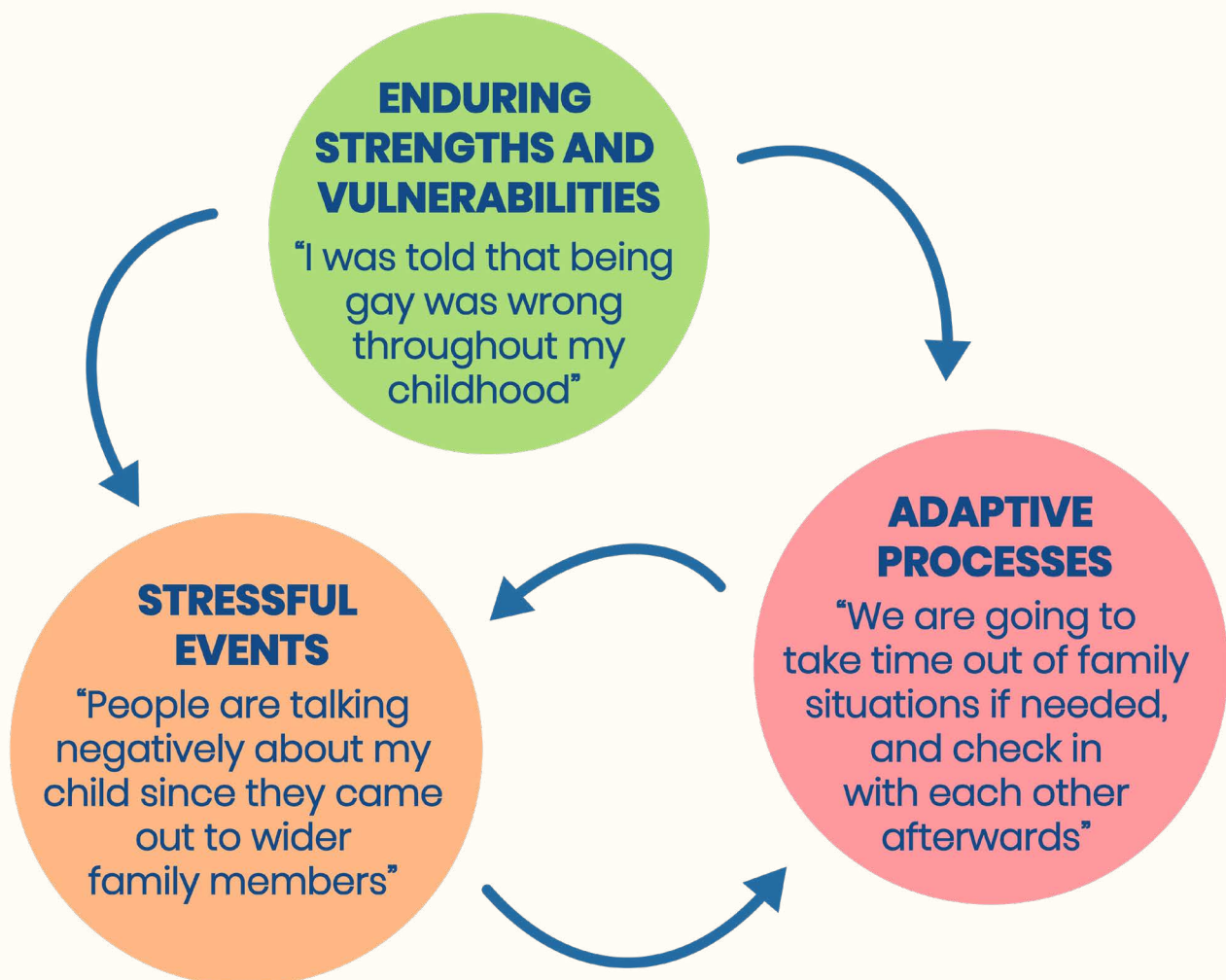
Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviours

When your partner/co-parent behaves in a certain way, you may make assumptions about why they have done what they've done. This will affect how you feel about it, and may impact on your own behaviour. This can develop into a cycle.

You ignore your partner when you get home.

The cycle then starts again with your partner responding to your behaviour

Observed Behaviours

Your partner doesn't come with you and the kids to see your parents

Behaviours

Thoughts

'You don't like my parents'
'You don't want to spend time with me and the kids'

Feelings

Annoyed
Alone
Rejected

You cannot control your partner's behaviour, but you can control your own. In the example above, a better option might be to tell your partner that it is important to you that they come along to family gatherings with you and the children. There might be a reason why they find them difficult which they haven't shared with you yet, and starting the conversation gives them the chance to do so.

Conclusion

A child or young person coming out as LGBT+ can be a big change for parents. Your child will also be feeling vulnerable, and conflict between parents about their identity may lead to feelings of guilt.

Everyone has different past experiences that effect how they respond to their child's identity. Where parents respond differently, this can cause conflict. We hope that the tools and models in this booklet will help you think about your emotions and ways you communicate with your partner/co-parent. Every person is different and every family is different, so you may find some tools more helpful than others. Working towards stable and positive relationships will help build strong family bonds, and help your child to thrive.

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Acknowledgments

Further Support

'I don't know where we would have been if we hadn't had the support, I don't know if me and my husband would still be together because of the strain it was putting on us as parents trying to figure it out and trying to manage extended family as well. It really unified us to be like "we are doing the right thing"'

– Parent who has received family support from Intercom Trust

Parental Conflict Specific Support:

oneplusone.org.uk

click.clickrelationships.org

seeitdifferently.org

relate.org.uk

families.barnardos.org.uk

LGBT+ Parent Specific Support:

proud2be.org.uk

fflag.org.uk

transilience.org.uk

transparentpresence.co.uk

free2b.lgbt

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Contact Us

📞 0800 612 3010

✉️ helpline@intercomtrust.org.uk

🌐 www.intercomtrust.org.uk

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