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FamilyNet Chapter on Talking About Sexual And Gender Orientation

***FamilyNet* is a project of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation
<http://www.hrc.org/familynet>**

HRC FamilyNet is dedicated to all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families -- whether parents or nonparents, young or old, single or coupled. FamilyNet was born of the belief that it takes great courage, love and commitment to create, nurture and support a family of any kind -- and even greater courage, love and commitment when our laws, schools, health care providers, religious faiths and politicians fail to extend to us the very real support and protections they lend to other families. FamilyNet is a place where you can find practical information, community support and expert advice about topics ranging from having children to growing old; dealing with children's health issues and your own; managing your finances and using the law to protect your most important relationships. It also is a place where you can share personal insights, experiences and even family photos -- and where we will work together to bring about the changes in our laws and society that will honor all our families with the support they deserve.

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN
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[Location in FamilyNet: Home Life/Developmental den/Talking about sexual and gender orientation]

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Introduction

Children's understanding of gender, gender identity and sexual orientation unfolds over time. They naturally pass through various stages of interpreting the information that they receive through their experiences and interactions with others around gender roles and expression.

Children's interaction with gender roles begins at birth. Parents and family attach meaning and expectations for children based on the sex of the child and on their own conscious and unconscious understanding and assumptions about maleness and femaleness. Throughout the first few years of life, children are constructing their ideas of what it means to be a boy or a girl.

The beliefs, attitudes and responses of parents and extended family influence the level of freedom that children have to explore the full range of possibilities. As children test out different forms of gender expression, messages are both given and received; children gather this information as they determine what is expected of them.

At times, because of the oppression experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, parents become concerned about raising children who conform to expected gender roles as if to prove they can raise "normal" children. Because of this, children might experience conflict between what they see (in gender non-conformity) and what they are expected to become, as stereotypical "boys" and "girls."

Children under 3

"I have two daddies."

What children talk about and play at this age is what they know. They are beginning to pretend-play, using roles of the most important people in their lives. For each child, these are different. Around age 2 or 3, our children will naturally use us as their models of nurturing relationships. At child care or in play groups, children are just beginning to assign roles to themselves and other children, as in: "OK, we'll be the daddies, and you be the baby."

Children in this age group are interested in relationships between adults. They are often heard saying things like "Kiss Daddy" or "Kiss Papa" to prompt their parents to show affection. This reinforces their understanding of the connection between their parents.

Parents may want to be prepared for this. Children will talk about who is in their family in grocery stores, at family gatherings, in parks and anywhere else they catch the attention of another person. If we are not prepared, we risk responding in a way that communicates embarrassment, secrecy or shame. Multiracial families may find themselves constantly defining their families in public places as people ask the children, "Who is your mom?"

Some parents may choose to point out to children that people make mistakes about their family. Indicating that the question is silly or the person might be uninformed is one way of reinforcing who is in their family. For example, you could say: "She thought that you must have a dad somewhere. In your family, you have two mommies."

Children age 3 to 9

"How come I have two mommies?"

Children naturally become aware of similarities and differences. It is unlikely that they are judging or feeling bad about their family. They are simply noticing that their family is different from many others.

One way to respond is to tell the story of how you came to be a couple and decided to have children. Another response may be: "There are many ways to be a family. Some children have one mom or one dad, some children have a mom and a dad, some children have a grandma, some children have two moms or two dads, and some children have two moms and a dad. What all children need is someone who loves them and takes care of them."

"Josephine said that boys can't marry boys."

No matter what we do, our children will be exposed to heterosexism: the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. As children become more aware of and influenced by people outside their family, they are confronted with a lack of understanding of our families.

For children at this age, this question is not about legal definitions. It is more focused on relationships.

Parents may respond with, "You know that boys can marry boys. Remember, we went to Erik and Jim's wedding?" Pointing out their own experiences and identifying people they know in committed relationships will help children to recognize family based on a broader definition.

"What is a lesbian?"

Children may want more information about your sexual orientation as they get older. The words they have been hearing for years suddenly take on new meaning as they learn more about the world. They may be hearing words at school and wondering what they mean and why other children use them differently from the way they are used at home.

Be careful to figure out if the child is asking you to define the word or is asking about you.

A simple response may be: "A lesbian is a woman who loves other women."

"Judi is a lesbian and Juan is a gay man."

Sometimes our children need us to help them understand heterosexuality. They may assume that everyone is a gay man or lesbian. You may want to tell the child by saying

something like: "Judi and Juan love each other just like your mom and I love each other. Women who love men are called heterosexual."

"A mom and a dad, a mom and a dad, why is it always a mom and a dad?"

At this age, children recognize that our families are underrepresented and often not included when people talk about families. Children may notice that teachers or other adults use a heterosexual, two-parent model when talking to children about their families. "Take this home to your mom and dad" is a common direction given to elementary school children.

Children may become silenced about their families if the adults never talk about the possibility of alternative family structures. They may not have an opportunity to bring up their family in these settings.

Some parents have gone to teachers and schools to tell them about their family at the beginning of the school year and to encourage teachers to offer opportunities for their children to discuss their families in the same way that other children's families are represented.

You also might want to empathize with your child and agree that it is not fair for others to ignore their family.

Children 10 and older

As children's bodies begin to change, they recognize changes in others. This is accompanied by a curiosity about sexuality and changes in their feelings about others.

While it may seem that it should be easier for our children to explore all the possibilities for sexual orientation, many children report that this is not the case. They are confused by all of the choices and often don't know if they are feeling attracted to the same gender because they are comfortable with lesbian and gay people, they are responding to the expectations of their parents or because it is their true feeling. That is, the typical stages of same-sex crushes common to all children may be more confusing for our children.

Adult children also have said that, in remembering their struggle in these years, they recognize that they sometimes felt pressure to prove that they turned out to be heterosexual - in other words, "normal" in spite of being raised by lesbian and gay parents. This was both out of their own juggling of all of the possibilities and internal conflicts and the need they felt to protect their parents from the scrutiny that the children sometimes sensed from the larger community.

"One thing I know for sure, I'm not gay."

Children may push away the possibility that they could be lesbian or gay, or may try to prove that they are "different" from their parents. This can feel insulting or hurtful to parents but at this stage, children are trying to form their own identities. Part of this process is declaring yourself as different from your parents in any way possible.

Children also are aware of the price paid for being different within their peer group. They may want to draw clear boundaries between themselves and their parents and the lesbian and gay community. They also may affect extreme gender stereotypical behaviors as they create this distance. These actions are not necessarily specific reactions to their parents but may be their ways of exploring their own identity and creating safety within their peer community.

Creating a safe space for them to talk through their confusion or feelings about sexuality and gender expression will help them to understand how complicated this process is. They need to know that we will love and accept them. You might want to reassure them with statements like, "You will know what is right for you. When you meet someone you really love, it just feels right."