

Many parents struggle for years to adjust after learning a child's sexual orientation

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Two years after their child "comes out" as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), many parents still say that it is moderately or very hard for them to adjust to the news, according to a study published today. Those responses are the same, on average, as parents who have recently learned about their child's sexual orientation, a finding that suggests most parents struggle with such news for several years.

The results are important because previous studies suggest parents who have trouble adjusting are more likely to disapprove or adopt [negative behaviors](#) that can, in turn, put LGB youth at risk of serious health problems.

"Surprisingly, we found that parents who knew about a [child's](#) sexual orientation for two years struggled as much as parents who had recently learned the news," said David Huebner, Ph.D., MPH, associate professor of prevention and [community health](#) at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health (Milken Institute SPH). "Two years is a very long time in the life of a child who is faced with the stress of a disapproving or rejecting parent."

This study is one of the first and largest to survey parents themselves, Huebner said. In addition, the study includes data from parents rarely ever studied, Huebner said, noting that 26 percent of the parents surveyed had only learned their son or daughter identified as LGB in the past month. Huebner and his colleagues studied more than 1,200 parents of LGB youth ages 10 to 25. The researchers asked parents who visited a

website with LGB resources to fill out a questionnaire.

Huebner and his colleagues asked parents "How hard is it for you, knowing that your son or daughter is gay, lesbian or bisexual?" Parents responded using a five-point scale of magnitude that ranged from not at all hard to extremely hard.

The researchers found:

- Parents who had learned about their child's sexual orientation two years ago reported struggling just as much as parents who had been told very recently;
- African American and Latino parents reported greater trouble adjusting compared to white parents;
- Parents of older youth said they had greater levels of difficulty compared to parents of younger children;
- Fathers and mothers reported similar levels of difficulty as did parents of boys and girls.

Huebner says that the difficulty most parents experience runs a developmental course with most gradually adjusting over a long period. Parents in this study who had known for five years or longer reported having the least amount of trouble with the fact that their child is LGB.

Parents who have trouble accepting the news may worry that their child might face a more difficult life, one that includes bullying or harassment. Others need time to adjust because they have long imagined a traditional heterosexual future for their child, Huebner said.

Previous research by this team suggests that if parents reject their child or react negatively—even for a few years—it takes a toll on the parent-child relationship. Negative parenting behaviors run the gamut from mild disapproval to outright rejection. Huebner's research and other

studies suggest such behavior puts the child at high risk of depression, suicide, [substance abuse](#) and other health risks.

Still, Huebner says most parents, even those in shock when first learning the news, care deeply about their children and eventually do adjust.

"Our results suggest interventions to speed up the adjustment process would help not only the parents but also their children," Huebner said. "LGB youth with accepting families are more likely to thrive as they enter adulthood."

Huebner and his team have created a website, Lead With Love, that contains evidence-based resources for families, including a documentary film, to help support parents who have just learned about a child's [sexual orientation](#).

At the same time, the researchers say much more needs to be done. For example, this study looked at parents and their reaction at a snapshot in time. Additional research must be done that follows parents and children to see how the relationship changes over the months and years. Such studies could help researchers develop better supports for families—ones that would help keep the relationship between [parents](#) and children healthy and strong.

The study, "Effects of Family Demographics and the Passage of Time on Parents' Difficulty with Their Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Youth's Sexual Orientation," was published in the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. The National Institute of Mental Health funded the study.

Provided by George Washington University

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