



## A Parent's Perspective Gifted and GLBTQ

By Teresa Ryan Manzella

Over 25 percent of GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning) youth who come out to their parents are kicked out of their homes. Roughly 81 percent of GLBTQ adolescents report physical and/or sexual abuse, half of which occurs at home. Teens who are attracted to members of the same gender are two to three times as likely as their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide, and they experience far greater levels of harassment at school.

As is often the case with other atypical aspects of gifted children, discovering that a child is GLBTQ can send parents off on a tangent of trying to get our hands on every possible piece of helpful information. Getting educated on what life is like for GLBTQ kids who are also gifted is critical to doing a good job of responsible, supportive parenting.

In this article, I will share some of my experiences as the parent of a queer kid. (The term queer, incidentally, is used by increasing numbers of GLBTQ people whose orientation doesn't always fit into a clear-cut category.) By doing so, I hope to provide a perspective that is useful to readers who may be on this journey themselves — whether just starting out or years along the path.

### Background

I have been an active member of Mensa (the high IQ society) since long before I had kids. Once I became a parent of two profoundly gifted children, I became an active advocate for them within Mensa and through other organizations. Each year, I make several presen-

tations on gifted topics at various conferences and conventions, and the gifted/GLBTQ combination is my most frequent subject.

My own difficult youth as a gifted, bisexual person has informed my approach to parenting significantly, and my past experiences have helped to establish a supportive environment in our immediate family circle. The outside world is another story. I believe, however, that youth who are confident of being loved unconditionally by their families have a better chance of being strong wherever they are.

### Challenges

No matter how supportive the immediate family is, having a gifted GLBTQ child can present some challenges. These can include privacy matters, overexcitabilities, and other family members, as well as situations at school. Let's take a brief look at each.

#### Privacy

A significant challenge is maintaining the gifted GLBTQ child's privacy. My daughter came out to me in a conversation we had about a young man who was pursuing her to a degree that made her obviously (to me) uncomfortable. I had not previously discussed my own sexuality with either of my kids because I had not felt the time was right. But when I observed what my daughter was going through, the time became right. In sharing my own bisexuality with her, I was able to communicate that she was free to be whoever she is — but her letting me know who she is did not permit me to share that with anyone.

Respecting privacy and maintaining confidentiality are critical to holding your child's trust. Trying to figure out ways to talk with other adults about someone your child may like or be dating, for example, without revealing the gender of that person — and thereby outing your kid — can be difficult. It takes careful thought, but it's one aspect of respecting our children that we must commit to.

#### Overexcitabilities

The overexcitabilities (OEs) that I observed in my gifted kids, then read about in Michael Piechowski's book, *Mellow Out they Say...If Only I Could*, have the potential to be both challenging and rewarding. For those not familiar with this term, it comes from Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980). According to his Theory of Positive Disintegration, OEs are more common in gifted people; and they can allow us to, as Piechowski says, "experience life in a higher key."

Overexcitabilities can lead those who possess them to be extremely sensitive and reactive — which can prove difficult at home and in school. At home, sensitivities to fabrics or noise and a heightened sense of justice can cause struggles from getting dressed to completing assigned chores.

At school, in situations where bullying and harassment can occur, average kids may be able to let teasing roll off their backs; but gifted kids, with their heightened sensitivities, may find themselves in rapidly escalating situations. The more we, as parents,

## A Parent's Perspective, continued

understand OEs, the better prepared we can be to address this challenge both with our kids and with members of the school staff, who sometimes imply that gifted GLBTQ kids bring bullying on themselves.

### *Other Family Members*

No matter how open we are in our own immediate family, I have not discussed my daughter's sexuality with extended family members. We all have relatives who can be difficult, and my family is no exception. Because I have been given grief about my Mensa membership by some, I know that adding sexual-minority issues on top of that might generate some intolerant — and intolerable — remarks. If my daughter chooses to share, that's entirely her prerogative and not for me to do on my own.

### *School*

Because neither of my children was getting basic academic needs met in regular school, even following a grade skip, I pulled them out and homeschooled them for several years. After three years at home, my daughter applied and was accepted to the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College. Though not a perfect fit (something rare for highly and profoundly gifted students), the all-women campus was generally a good place for her to be. Because a number of the girls there were queer, it was not a big deal to be open about her sexuality.

For most students, however, it is a big deal. Supporting them and advocating for their needs at school are tasks parents should be prepared to take on — as-

suming the kids are all right with that. Again, it can be a delicately choreographed effort, depending on how "out" your child is. Find out about policies on dress code and bathroom use — very important for trans kids (a term used to describe all types of trans people, without specifying whether they are transsexual, transgender, or transvestite). Also check into policies for clubs and events. For example, do same-sex couples go to dances together?

Just getting into a college can be an issue for GLBTQ students who have been bullied. They are almost twice as likely (72 vs. 43 percent) as their straight peers to miss school, resulting in GPAs that are one-half point lower (on average) than students who feel safe and do not miss school (the Gay-Lesbian-Straight Education Network, 2009). This drop can be critical for gifted students! Often, college is the first environment where gifted students find true peers. Given the competitive nature of college admissions, a lower GPA (one that does not reflect the teen's true abilities) can be a roadblock to getting into a school that would be a great fit. If your son or daughter has been missing school because of not feeling safe, see whether there is any leeway in grade policies.

### **Some Suggestions**

My first suggestion for parents of gifted GLBTQ kids is love, respect, and value your child for the person s/he is. We can have all kinds of ideas about the children we might have before they are born, but we need to openly treasure them for whoever they turn out to be.

Here are some other suggestions I'd like to share:

1. Take your kid's word regarding her/his sexuality. If your daughter or son shared this with you, it happened after long, agonizing hours of deciding how and when to tell you. This identity element is as legitimate as the gifted one, and it should not be questioned. Avoid asking whether it might be a phase or just something the kid is "experimenting" with.
2. Learn as much as you can. Just as you do for the gifted/talented aspect of your child, learn about sexuality and gender identity so that you can better understand this part of your child. Unless you are also a member of a gender or sexual minority, you cannot fully appreciate your kid's experience. Still, become as informed as you can so that you can be a valuable resource.
3. Don't pathologize or focus on the risky elements of your child's life. Every kid faces risks and imperfect outcomes. Support your child in constructive ways that acknowledge that some things might be more difficult because of gender/sexuality matters, but try not to take over or act as though this is a tragic thing.
4. Practice zero tolerance for gay bashing. You might not realize it, but if you don't let Uncle Chuck get away with making jokes about GLBT people at Thanksgiving, your kid will think you're a hero. Be an "upstander," not a "bystander." By that, I mean that we parents need to actively demonstrate our beliefs about the benefits of difference.



## A Parent's Perspective, concluded


5. Find sympathetic teachers/staff at school. The Gay-Lesbian-Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has "Safe Space Kits" that can be purchased for \$20. Even if your child never actually talks to a teacher about sexuality issues, knowing that the teacher's classroom/office is a safe space will help provide support for your child when you are not there.

### Closing Thoughts

If you've read this far, it's because you're genuinely concerned about your child and dedicated to being as supportive as possible. This path is not an easy one. Even as my kids have moved into adulthood, I still have to remind myself sometimes of the principles I suggested earlier. Respecting every facet of who they are is an ongoing practice.

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