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parenting for high potential

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a note from the editor

While it might seem like light years away, the holiday season will soon be here. This issue of *Parenting for High Potential* provides a potpourri of perspectives for navigating upcoming holiday celebrations, gift-giving traditions, and extended family gatherings.

We're pleased to feature two perspectives from the leadership of NAGC's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (GLBTQ) Special Interest Group (SIG), which provides support to parents of those who are "G-Squared"—gifted and gay. Their wisdom on ways for nurturing strengths and helping reduce stress for GLBTQ adolescents during the holidays, and beyond, highlight universal themes that all parents of gifted children can draw upon.

Puzzled about the perfect way to engage your high-ability learner? Be sure to check out NAGC's annual toys and games review, featuring the top toys, games, and puzzles as selected by more than 250 junior game reviewers. And for educational, no-cost ideas, author Martha Hildebrandt challenges us to play math games in the car or on the run, using a keen sense of observation and everyday items.

Finally, parents regularly report that one of the most beneficial, rewarding things they can do for themselves and their families is to connect with other parents of like-minded children. Be sure to take a look at how Washington state parent Deborah Simon discovered that starting a parent support group brought her something money can't buy: the priceless gifts of friendship, camaraderie, and support. Personal connections are what will remain the constant in our lives, long after the parties are over and the gifts are unwrapped.

Kathleen Nilles, Editor-in-Chief
Parenting for High Potential



» **Using Everyday Objects to Practice Math Anytime, Anywhere** Inside »



Home for the Holidays: Reducing the Stress for your Gifted GLBTQ Kid

By Teresa Ryan Manzella, NAGC GLBTQ Special Interest Group Advocacy Chair

As families get together for various brands of holiday merry-making over the next couple of months, parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth can play a key role in making these gatherings more comfortable for their kids.

Studies indicate that children are identifying as gay at earlier ages than in previous generations—often between the ages of 7-12¹. If your gifted daughter or son has come out to you, I hope that you are still on great terms and that you are able to have open conversations about everyday challenges these kids face. Having strong relationships with our children is critical for them as they grow into adulthood.

If you have a sense that your child has something important—having to do with sexuality—to tell you, but that talk hasn't happened yet, you can still be an advocate when the extended family gathers.

Some tips that can make this time of year easier:

Clothes

When your family is getting ready for a party, don't force your child to put on clothing that is more dressy or gender-conforming than she or he feels okay about wearing. Highly gifted youth have a strong tendency to be androgynous anyway², and the GLBTQ ones may be particularly uncomfortable about dressing to gender stereotype. Clean—yes. Fussy—not necessary. It's not worth fighting over.

Appearance

Hairstyles and colors, jewelry, piercings, tattoos...some fashion choices that teens make don't always sit well with parents. Again, remember that you are the adult and are therefore supposed to be the calm, mature one in the equation. The more we stress out about our kids' choices, the more likely they are to become increasingly outrageous. I have found that letting my kids try different hair colors and/or piercings has resulted in their eventually going for more mainstream styles. It may take a while, so be patient.

Conversation

Whether your kid is out to you or not, his or her sexuality is not something to share. Extended family members don't always understand, and it's up to the young person to decide who should know. However, if your child wants to come out to the family,

you should support it. Making your child keep his or her GLBTQ identity a secret in the family and not letting him or her talk about it is known to cause health and mental health problems³. If your child is not yet ready to share, be careful not to out your child through references to dating or inadvertent comments.

Tolerance

Research also shows that lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults who report higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were more likely to attempt suicide, be depressed, use illegal drugs, and engage in unhealthy sexual practices compared with peers from families with no or low levels of family rejection⁴. Sometimes, people at parties can say obnoxious things, and the holidays have a way of intensifying this. If any of your relatives get into gay bashing, let them know—in no uncertain terms—that you won't tolerate their intolerance. Be an “upstander,” not a “bystander.” Your teen will be grateful (whether you know it or not), and knowing you will stand up for her or him will build confidence and self-esteem.

Extended Family Allies

Relatives can sometimes surprise us in positive ways, too. Perhaps there is an aunt, uncle, or cousin who is known to be a supportive type and could be an ally for your kid. Having an understanding, supportive adult—other than Mom and Dad—can be very helpful in general, and especially at family gatherings.

Your Perspective

Even if you do not feel completely comfortable with your child's sexuality, you will need to protect him or her, help him or her cope with reactions experienced from others, and focus on teaching problem-solving and coping skills⁵. Try to open the doors of communication with him or her long before you take your teen to a holiday party. The holidays are stressful times, and if your kid feels as though you don't accept him or her, the holidays can turn into times of depression and potential self-harm. Have some conversations with your teen, look into your heart, and remember the pledge of unconditional love you made when this child came into your life.

Exit Strategy

Some gifted kids experience sensory overload in settings with lots of people and noise. Stress about identity issues in a room full of people they don't see very often will heighten this. Before you get to the party (or before it comes to your house), agree on a plan for departure, should the atmosphere get to be too much. If your child knows that it will be possible to leave, or even just take a book break in the car for a while, that will make being at the party easier.

Not all of our gifted-GLBTQ kids get stressed out over family get-togethers. But if you have some plans in mind for keeping these events comfortable for your teen, the holiday season will be more enjoyable for everyone in your family. ☺

Resources

Websites

G-Squared Youth Advocate (<http://gsquaredyouthadvocate.com>)

Site for youth who are gifted and GLBTQ and for the adults in their lives.

The Trevor Project (<http://www.thetrevorproject.org>)

Provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to GLBTQ youth.

PFLAG (<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=191>)

For parents and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons.

Articles & Books

Brown, R. M. (1997). *Rita Will: Memoir of a literary rabble-rouser*. New York: Bantam Books.

Huegel, K. (2011) *GLBTQ: The survival guide for queer & questioning teens, 2nd ed.* Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

Peterson, J. S., & Rischar, H. (2000). Gifted and gay: A study of the adolescent experience. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44(4), 231–246.

Author's Note

Teresa Ryan Manzella is Gifted Youth Coordinator and Past President for Minnesota Mensa, one of three founding members of the NAGC GLBTQ Special Interest Group, and a member of the American Mensa National Gifted Youth Committee. She holds a Master of Liberal Studies degree, the focus of which addresses the challenges facing youth who are gifted and GLBTQ. Teresa has written articles for the *Virginia Association for the Gifted Newsletter*, 2e: *Twice Exceptional Newsletter*, and *Mensagenda*. She is currently working on resource guides for parents and educators of gifted GLBTQ—"G-Squared"—youth. Teresa is the mother of two profoundly gifted kids, and lives in Maplewood, MN.

Endnotes

¹ Ryan, C. (2009). *Supportive families, healthy children: Helping families with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children*. San Francisco, CA: Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University. Retrieved from <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>

² Tolan, S. (1997). Sex and the highly gifted adolescent. *Counseling and Guidance*, 6(3).

³ Ryan, 2009.

⁴ Ryan, C., Huebner, D., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. (2009). Family rejection as a predictor of negative health outcomes in white and Latino lesbian, gay and bisexual young adults. *Pediatrics*, 123(1), 346–352.

⁵ Malik, N.M. & Lindahl, K. M. (2011). Coming out as gay or lesbian. In G. Koocher & A. La Greca (Eds.), *Parent's guide to psychological first aid: Helping children and adolescents cope with predictable life crises*, 285–294. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

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