

**PASTORAL
GUIDELINES
TO ASSIST
STUDENTS
OF SAME-SEX
ORIENTATION**

A Parent's Guide

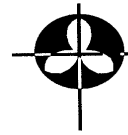
*I have come in order that they may have life
and have it abundantly.*

John 10:10

Purpose

The purpose of this brochure is to assist parents trying to deal with the discovery of homosexuality in their son or daughter.

the world. Help your child to discover and focus on the many gifts they have to offer – their abundant kindness, their many talents, their intelligence. Our children are a precious gift from God, each one of them with a special purpose in God's plan.



ONTARIO CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
CONFERENCE DES EVEQUES CATHOLIQUES DE L'ONTARIO

September 15, 2004

Dear Parents,

If you have this text in your hands, it is because you are facing the challenge of parenting a child who is dealing with issues of same-sex orientation. As Chair of the Education Commission of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, I want to assure you of my solidarity and my prayer.

The Bishops of Ontario want to contribute to the effort of our Catholic school system in helping your child with this reality. To this purpose, we wrote a letter in the spring of 2003 to clarify the authentic teaching of the Church on sexual morality, particularly in the area of homosexuality. In addition to this letter, we have been directly involved in the development of *Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students of Same-Sex Orientation*, guidelines which have been prepared to guide Catholic schools who have students such as your child in their care.

As Catholic schools in Ontario show a growing willingness to address the human reality of homosexual youth, they do so to help their students understand the Church's teaching on sexuality, to help them strive for the virtue of chastity, and to promote the dignity and respect which rightfully belongs to all of them as members of their school community.

In 1976, the American Bishops, in a pastoral letter on moral issues entitled *To Live In Christ Jesus*, clearly distinguished homosexual orientation from same-sex behaviour and recalled the Church's constant teaching in this area. In speaking to the Bishops a few years later, Pope John Paul II praised them for this letter, in particular for refusing to betray those people

who, because of homosexuality, are confronted with difficult moral problems. . . Rather, by your witness to the truth of humanity according to the plan of God, you effectively manifested fraternal love, upholding the true dignity, the true

human dignity, of those who look to Christ's Church for the guidance which comes from the light of God's word. (Origins 9 [18 Oct. 1979] 287-291, no.6)

It is in the spirit of these words that the Ontario Bishops commit themselves to helping all our young people grow in the knowledge of God's love for them and in their ability to respond to his call to holiness. May God bless you and your children in this journey.

Yours sincerely,

Most Rev. Paul-André Durocher
Chair, OCCB Education Commission

Are there physical indicators associated with same-sex orientation?

Those with same-sex orientation are as different from one another as are those of opposite-sex orientation. There is no such thing as a typical gay man or lesbian woman.

Are there problems associated with a same-sex orientation?

Becoming aware of a same-sex orientation often carries with it feelings of fear, mistrust and anxiety. It takes great courage for a young person to share this new discovery with their family and close friends. If you child has told you that he or she is experiencing these feelings, recognize how much they must love and trust you to have been able to open up to you with such a private and often unaccepted part of their personhood. It took great courage and a sense of confidence in your unconditional love for them for them to reach out to you for help.

Without support, discovering a same-sex orientation can be a very difficult event in a young person's life. They are often victims of rejection and abuse. Schools are the primary setting for such hatred to be expressed. When issues of prejudice and bullying are not addressed or when little or no support is offered, schools can be a very hostile place. Without the support of family, friends, the local parish and school communities, young people can feel isolated and overcome by the challenges a same-sex orientation presents. They can feel isolated from intimate human relationships and constantly in fear of being discovered and rejected. Where these feelings are felt occasionally by all adolescents, statistics indicate that for students of same-sex orientation, these feelings are more prevalent and intense, placing them at risk. There is a deeper sense of isolation for these students because it strikes at the very core of who they are as persons. In an attempt to escape the pain of isolation, fear and anxiety, some may choose to leave their home, school and community to live in anonymity on the streets where violence, illness and exploitation are common realities. Even when they do remain at home they can experience severe depression. For these reasons, these students are at a much higher risk for suicidal thoughts and attempts.

By offering your son or daughter the understanding and love they deserve and so desperately need, you can provide support and a sense of belonging as they grow to understand their human sexuality. But more importantly, you can help them to discover the beautiful gift they are to

Sometimes homophobia exhibits itself in silence. When no mention is made from time to time that there are people of same-sex orientation in every population, silence can be perceived as compliance to continue discrimination.

Why is the label homosexual problematic?

Homosexual is a label that has been given to individuals who experience a same-sex orientation. This is distinct from same-sex attraction which can be experienced also by heterosexuals. In general, men are referred to as gay and women as lesbian. Attaching a label to the person implies that they are their orientation. Every person has a full range of inter-personal elements that together constitute their identity. For that reason, the label of homosexual should be avoided when discussing the person who expresses a same-sex orientation. The orientation or act is homosexual or heterosexual but the person is not.

Why do some people experience a same-sex orientation?

There seems to be no single, clear understanding of the origins of same-sex orientation. A common opinion of experts is that there are multiple factors – genetic, hormonal, psychological – that may give rise to it. Generally, it is experienced as a given. "Sexual orientation is discovered, not freely chosen" (Catechism of the Catholic Church #2357-58). By itself, therefore same-sex orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose.

Is there an age at which sexual orientation is determined?

Adolescents may be encouraged to accept homosexuality prematurely when it is more of a developmental issue for them and phase appropriate. Adolescents are in the process of discovering their sexual identities, and a homosexual inclination may be quite normal when it occurs only for a period of time and is not firmly fixed. Adolescents need to be given time and often need some skillful questioning to help them determine more accurately the nature of their homosexual interest. Again, a similar situation can exist for older adults who have a delayed psychosexual development and need to be treated as adolescents even though they are much older chronologically.

PASTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

For parents the discovery of your child's same-sex orientation can be a very difficult moment in your lives. It will present to you many and varied challenges. Parents who continue to lovingly accept and support their child may fear for their child's safety and happiness. Some parents may find it difficult to accept either the child or his/her orientation. On the other hand, some parents may accept their child's sexual orientation but feel sadness, fear, confusion and even anger because of society's mistreatment of sexual minorities. This misunderstanding about homosexuality, their own personal biases and prejudices, their denial of the issue, their sense of loss, or their discomfort in general about sexuality are some of the variables that can get in the way of their ability to offer their child the unconditional love they deserve.

Parents can be in as much need as the child of pastoral care and of a loving supportive, faith-filled community. Do not be afraid to seek out help from others who have and are still going through the challenges that you now face. Your primary concerns are for the safety of your child and the healthy development of their personhood. For yourself, you may need to focus on rediscovering a sense of hope for your child's future. The following pastoral recommendations are presented here to give you guidance and hope as you face the many and varied challenges ahead.

- Appreciate that your child is created and loved by God.
- Continue to love yourselves as parents in order to accept and love your son or daughter. Do not blame yourselves for a homosexual orientation in your child.
- Continue to demonstrate love for your child. However, accepting his or her homosexual orientation does not have to include approving all related attitudes and behavioural choices. You may need to challenge aspects of a lifestyle you find objectionable, as all parents do with their children.
- Encourage your son or daughter to stay joined to the Catholic faith community. If they have left the Church, invite them to return and be reconciled to the community.
- Recommend that your son or daughter find a spiritual director/

mentor to offer guidance in prayer and in leading a chaste and virtuous life.

- If you feel distressed, seek help for yourself, perhaps in the form of counseling or spiritual direction, as you strive for understanding, acceptance, and inner peace. Also, consider joining a parents' support group or participating in a retreat designed for Catholic parents of homosexual children. Other people have traveled the same road as you but may have journeyed even further. They can share effective ways of handling delicate family situations such as how to tell family members and friends about your child, how to explain homosexuality to younger children, how to relate to your son or daughter's friends in a Christian way.
- Reach out in love and service to other parents in the same situations as yourself. Contact your parish about organizing a parents' support group. Your diocesan family ministry office, Catholic Charities, or a special diocesan ministry to gay and lesbian persons may have information which you would find useful.
- As you take advantage of opportunities for education and support, remember that you can only change yourself; you can only be responsible for your own beliefs and actions, not those of your adult children.
- Put your faith completely in God, who is more powerful, more compassionate and more forgiving than we are or ever could be.

Adapted from *Always Our Children*, 1997, USCCB

ANSWERS TO MOST COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SAME-SEX ORIENTATION

The definitions that follow are intended to provide you with a clear understanding of same-sex orientation and the challenges it presents to both parents and their children. It is hoped that this information will help you communicate openly with your child about what he or she is experiencing.

What is heterosexuality?

Heterosexuality is experiencing an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction towards persons of the opposite sex.

What is bisexuality?

Bisexuality is experiencing sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex and of the opposite sex.

What is homosexuality?

Homosexuality is experiencing an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex.

What is meant by transgender?

A person whose gender identity (feeling of being either male or female) does not match their physical/anatomical sex. Some describe it as being born into a wrong body.

What is homophobia?

Homophobia is a strong negative attitude toward homosexuals and homosexuality. It takes many forms: fear of associating with homosexuals, an irrational fear of being considered a homosexual, violent dislike or hatred of homosexual persons, vulgar and abusive language and jokes about homosexuals, condemnation, discrimination, persecution, and even murder of homosexuals. Unlike homosexuality, homophobia can be "cured" through education, experience, reflection and prayer.