

I N T R O D U C T I O N

When I was growing up in rural North Carolina in the 1970s, I honestly thought I would grow up to be President. After all, that was my birthright as an American. I lived in a country where anyone who was determined and worked hard enough could aspire to the highest office in the land. I planned to live out that American dream.

However, from an early age, I realized that something was amiss.

I knew I was gay long before I had heard that word or knew what it meant. I remember at age six or seven being more fascinated by my brother's bodybuilding magazines than by his *Playboys*, but somehow knowing that this was information I should keep quiet. As I grew up and came to understand what these feelings meant, I recoiled in horror from myself.

Being a boy who loved books and who shied away from grade school machismo—a boy who didn't always conform to the gender expectations of my small-town world—cast me out. By middle school, my classmates had labeled me the “school fag.”

The relentless taunting was cruel and soul-destroying. I began to hide in the library during any unstructured time in the school day so I wouldn't be beaten up. I'd eat lunch alone in the hallway to avoid cafeteria teasing. I'd spend every Sunday night battling my “Sunday funny feeling”—a euphemism for the fear-inspired nausea that the prospect of returning to school on Mondays always brought.

When my family moved to another small southern town in 1979, after my sophomore year, I started in a new school and decided to shed my unfortunate past. I pursued what I thought was “normal” with a vengeance. I dated every girl I could literally get my hands on, earning a well-deserved reputation as a big jerk who always tried to see how far he could get on the first date. I was the biggest teller of fag jokes and ridiculed anyone who suggested anything decent about gay people.

What I really hated was myself, and this I could not escape from, regardless of how often I got drunk or stoned, no matter how deeply I retreated into music or magazines, soaking up hours behind the locked door of my bedroom.

I never told my mom that I ate lunch alone everyday. I never revealed that my insides felt chipped away by meanness and alienation. I never let on that I thought I would never fit in anywhere. Only once, did I test the waters. I told her that I was gay and then quickly denied that it was true. That’s a common thing LGBT people do. You kind of come out like a turtle, look around to see if it’s safe. If it’s not, you stick your head back in and scurry away.

The most important thing in my world was making my mother proud; I couldn’t—I wouldn’t—risk letting her down.

So I bore the burden of my secret shame alone, wondering if my loneliness would ever abate.

YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO

If your child is LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning—terms we’ll define later) her day-to-day experience probably mirrors what mine was. While it’s true for many LGBTQ youth that there’s an unprecedented level of acceptance and support, it is also true that these remain extraordinarily difficult times for young LGBTQ people.

And, like me, I bet one of the most important things for your child is pleasing you—even when you feel like a mere blip on his or her radar.

If you are one of the millions of parents who suspect that your child is LGBTQ, or if she has just come out to you, you’re probably experiencing a kaleidoscope of emotions. Chances are you have burning questions: will my child be okay? Is it my fault? Can I still be a good parent when I don’t understand this at all? What am I supposed to do?

We’ll cover the emotions later in the book, but for now, I want to get to your questions, so that you can relax a little.

With your support, your child will be just fine.

No, it is not your fault. It is no one’s fault.

If you know how to be a good parent—and you do—you know how to serve your LGBTQ child, because she wants the same things that every child wants: to be loved and accepted for who she is.

There is nothing that you are supposed to do that you haven’t done before. This book will teach you how to use what you already know. A lot of it is intuitive.

Trust your intuition.

While there is information in this book that may be new to you, you will be applying the skills and techniques that you’ve used throughout your life as a parent. These are the same skills that you used when you wanted to convey something important to your child from the time she was a toddler: don’t touch the stove, don’t get into a car with a stranger. Those skills will be applied to situations concerning your child being LGBTQ.

If your child has recently come out, she may no longer feel sure you still love her as much as you did before. She may doubt that you still think she’s great. She doesn’t automatically assume you still value her for being a star volleyball player or a triumphant student. She probably questions whether you understand what she’s going through or if you have any useful

guidance to offer. She may think now that all you can see is her sexuality.

So, you need to tell her clearly and often: "I love you. I think you're great. And we'll work together to overcome any challenges you face—just like we always have." You know how to do this. You've done it for years. You make the message clear and you repeat it constantly.

It's straightforward. It's simple. And it works.

"Easier said than done," you're thinking?

Fair enough. Many parents of LGBTQ children feel that they don't know them anymore. Many have qualms and disappoinments about having an LGBTQ child. Some sense a rift the size of the Grand Canyon. The trick is to not beat yourself up, to not feel defeated before you've given yourself the opportunity to grow closer to your child, which you can do, just like other parents of LGBTQ children already have. (And some of the most unlikely parents.) *Always My Child* will lend a hand.

Straight parents can't be blamed for not knowing how to proceed when they learn they have an LGBTQ child. You don't know how because you've never been in the position your child is in. In any of the other "minorities" in the United States—people of color or non-Christians like Jews or Muslims, for example—youths usually grow up with parents who are like them. When their children meet discrimination or prejudice, they can turn to their parents, who have probably shared their experiences, and receive empathy and advice. A parent can say, "There's nothing wrong with you. Be proud of who you are, just like I am." Understandably, a straight parent cannot offer the same perspective to her LGBTQ child because she'd had a different life experience. But you can learn. *Always My Child* is designed to help you do so.

Always My Child will also help you move to the next level of

developing a strong relationship with your child. The most effective way to do that is to understand the worlds through which she moves in the course of a day, from the classroom to the bagel shop down the street; from your kitchen table to the record store where she works after school.

When you glimpse the contours of your child's sphere, you will begin truly to comprehend what she faces everyday, and giving her the support she needs will come naturally. This book, in turn, will give you guidelines for supporting her in every phase: at home with your family, at school, with her peers, and in the community.

I want to help you in recognizing all of your child's facets so that you see her for more than her sexual identity: you see her as a human being. And, I will show you how to support her so that she never feels alone.

GENDER STRAITJACKETS

To understand what your child is going through every day, we need to step back and take a bird's-eye view of society. For starters, like so many of my straight friends, you may not have realized that our culture is built around a subtle, but pervasive bias, in which the people who make up cultural institutions, such as schools and churches, and even the shops and markets we frequent, are conditioned to expect others to live and behave as if everyone were heterosexual. The first thing parents need to recognize—which is almost impossible to see unless it is pointed out to them—is that there is a pervasive societal idea that everyone is straight unless proven otherwise.

And that straight is better than LGBTQ.

This message, with its stereotypes and innuendos, reverberates within every LGBTQ young person. Like an incessant jackhammer outside the window, the notion that there is something

wrong—abnormal—follows LGBTQ youth everywhere they go . . . and often all the way home.

When I reflect on my junior high school years now, I see how the ridicule and harassment that I blamed on my peers stemmed from the stereotypes and myths that suffuse our culture. Not that the kids who tormented me were blameless. Not at all. But kids don't like anything that deviates from "the norm." And they learn that norm from society's signals and cultural myths at a very early age: in the toys they play with, the colors they wear, the television shows they watch and the way they act in school and on the playground. Some messages are blatant, while others seamlessly invade our culture through religion, the media and yes, our very own families.

Recently we've seen tremendous change in attitudes to Young people today receive enormously conflicting messages around sexual orientation. There is much more social acceptance of LGBTQ people, but also much more violence and harassment as they become more visible. Young people are coming out at younger ages while their peers may feel more and more hostile to the increasingly visible LGBTQ community in their midst because, for the first time, straight children have to confront their prejudices and deep-seated fears. There is a tremendous irony here, but it is the reality: there is much greater visibility and support for LGBTQ young people, and yet they are a bigger target than in the past.

sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identification. In such a rapidly changing world, young people—both heterosexual and homosexual—are uncertain how to behave. With many floundering and looking for something familiar they can rely on, they succumb to the intense pressure from peers to squeeze themselves into what I call gender straitjackets: prescribed, stereotypical notions of what is acceptable male and female behavior.

Boys feel pressure to act macho, be tough and flaunt their dates with girls. Any deviation—a talent in dramatic

arts or a preference for dance—brings a social penalty: they are swiftly labeled "gay" because these (and other) interests have been stereotyped as "girl" activities. Girls, too, must play a traditional part: looking and acting feminine and dating guys. They have a little more leeway than boys (girls can wear "boy" clothes like jeans), but if they are too interested in sports, don't wear makeup or show little interest in "putting out" for boys, their peers call them "dykes."

Why is homosexuality so troubling to many Americans? One reason that some people feel uncomfortable with LGBTQ people is because of the "sex" in homosexuality. In fact, that may have been the first thing you thought of when you learned your child was LGBTQ: What does he do with his friends? How does she experience pleasure? In this country, we tend to define homosexuals by their sexual behavior. We don't see heterosexuals in the same way. We see heterosexuals as people first and define them by their roles or occupations: lawyer, nurse, social worker, mother, brother. The fact that they are attracted to the opposite sex is not their defining characteristic. With time, you will be able to see your child in this broader way too.

As co-founder and executive director of Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, known as GLSEN, the largest organization in the United States whose mission is to make schools safe for LGBTQ youth, I've worked with schools and communities in forty-four states on LGBTQ issues. I have encountered school principals and teachers who both willingly and unwittingly perpetrate stereotypes. I have met well-meaning school board members who believe that an LGBTQ child who's been victimized should simply change schools but don't realize that it is the schools that need to change. I have talked to wonderful, involved, loving parents who don't notice that their child's unhappiness comes from a silent source of shame. While talking to these myriad people, I have been able to put my finger on the pulse of America and I have seen, first-

hand, the way our culture and its expectations shape the real life day-to-day struggles of LGBTQ children and their families.

It's important for parents to recognize cultural myths so that they don't perpetuate stereotypes in raising their families. That's not always easy to do, however, because many parents actually want their children to fit the traditional mold. These parents are more comfortable with a conventional, conforming child who validates their lifestyle.

But this is generally not what is best for your child.

ALWAYS YOUR CHILD

When teens come out, they often question their place in their family, their school, their religion, and their community, and wonder if they still belong to any of these critical institutions. That's one of the reasons it's important for you to understand your child and her world: She needs to know she is still loved and still belongs.

While many LGBTQ youth fit in well everywhere and have a dynamism that energizes their friends and family, there are LGBTQ youth who, like me years ago, withdrew from everyone and everything, especially themselves. Adolescents today have greater knowledge, more information, and more diverse sexual experiences than previous generations. They are having sex earlier, more often and with more partners. They face social and interpersonal situations in high school that I would imagine you barely touched in your twenties. Yet, there's a paradox: today's youth are more isolated from one another and from their families and schools than any other generation. This is especially true for LGBTQ youth.

Throughout this book, I'm going to talk about the importance of young people developing a healthy identity that is consistent