

# The Positive Aspects of Being the Parent of an LGBTQ Child

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*Parenting an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) identified child presents unique opportunities for growth and development. This study focused on self-reported perceptions of the positive aspects of being the parent of an LGBTQ child. Participants (N = 142) were mothers (83.8%) and fathers (16.2%) of LGBTQ identified individuals who responded to an open-ended online survey. Thematic analysis revealed five primary themes: Personal Growth (open mindedness, new perspectives, awareness of discrimination, and compassion), Positive Emotions (pride and unconditional love), Activism, Social Connection, and Closer Relationships (closer to child and family closeness). The practice implications of these findings for supporting parents in envisioning positive relationship outcomes for themselves and their children are highlighted in the discussion.*

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“Being the parent of an [LGBTQ identified] child has made me a wiser person, and one who has come to realize the wealth of differences among people, differences that make us all richer and teach us all tolerance. Above all, we may appear different outwardly but all people want love and respect” (71-year-old mother of a gay male).

Parenting is a role that shapes the development of many adults. While children learn from parents, they also present their parents with opportunities to learn and grow. Being a parent of an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) identified child presents unique opportunities for personal growth and the development of life skills. While much of the literature focuses on the struggles of some parents during and after a child’s coming out, for many and perhaps most parents the experience inspires positive transformation and growth. (It is important to note that we do not assume that all parents struggle with accepting and celebrating a child’s LGBTQ identity). The research reported

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herein explores the positive experiences of growth and development as self-reported by parents of LGBTQ individuals.

Research on parental development suggests that parents learn and grow exponentially based on interactions with their children. Dillon (2002) found that interactions with children increased parents' cognitive flexibility and creativity, their emotional sensitivity, and their attentiveness to personal values. Facilitating their child's development helps parents to be more accepting of themselves, more authentic, more open minded about different perspectives, and to develop stronger connections with others (Luvmour, 2011).

Ego development theory (e.g., Loevinger, 1976) and research on adult development (e.g., Pfaffenberger, 2005) suggest that adults reach advanced stages of development through a willingness to actively engage in challenging experiences and restructure their world views in response to these experiences. According to Manners, Durkin, and Nesdale (2004), the highest level of ego development is characterized by "increased personal and interpersonal awareness, self-regulation, autonomy, conceptual complexity, and integration" (p. 19). These authors suggest that attaining this level of development results from actively engaging in experiences that are personally and interpersonally relevant, emotionally compelling, yet cause some cognitive disequilibrium. For example, Pfaffenberger (2005) found that life experiences that instigate an in-depth, personal exploration resulting in the rejection of a social norm are a developmental path to self-actualization. Because of the common social stigma associated with LGBTQ identities, parenting an LGBTQ-identified child may provide opportunities for this type of challenge, disequilibrium, engagement, and ultimate growth.

Two recent qualitative interview studies (Goodrich, 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008) explicated a series of stages portraying parents' adjustment to learning about their child's nonheterosexual identity. Goodrich interviewed 13 parents from nine families associated with LGBTQ support groups. Phillips and Ancis conducted 15 interviews with 17 parents recruited through a local PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) group. Both of these studies found that parents' initial negative emotional reactions eventually gave way to cognitive reappraisals and new commitments and behaviors. Education and social support were important to these outcomes and at least some parents looked back on the process as one of personal growth that led to more satisfying familial bonds.

LaSala (2010) recruited 65 gay youth (ages 14–25) and 76 of their parents in New York City and Philadelphia. Using data from in-depth interviews, the author generated a stage model in which parents react, recover, and then renew their bonds with their child. Similar to previous studies (Goodrich, 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008), LaSala (2010) found that social support and developing new perspectives were important aspects of parents' "recovery" process, and about half of LaSala's participants were able to recognize some growth in themselves in the year following their child's disclosure. Several reported feeling grateful for the process they had gone through and the positive outcomes they enjoyed.

The findings from the interview studies reviewed above provide insight into the stages of development that parents may experience following their child's disclosure of an LGBTQ identity. The purpose of this study is to build upon these previous studies by specifically asking parents to reflect on the positive experiences of being the parent of an LGBTQ individual. Our interest in understanding the positive experiences of parents is grounded in narrative theories of identity construction, which posit that integrating difficult experiences into stories of growth and redemption enhances psychological well-being (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). Consistent with narrative theory, research has established that people who can find benefits or positives in their challenging life experiences report higher levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being (see Lechner, Tennen, and Affleck (2009) for a review of this literature). Our goal was to gather and thematically analyze data on these positive experiences. The results inform mental health professionals

in their work with clients who experience difficulty in expressing full acceptance and celebration of their LGBTQ child's identity and who can thus benefit from positive narratives, role models, and exemplars.

## METHOD

### Participant Recruitment and Sample Description

Email announcements about the study were sent to the contact persons of support groups for parents, who then posted the announcement to their group members. We targeted general parent support groups as well as support groups specifically inclusive of parents of LGBTQ children (including, but not limited to, PFLAG). Within the announcement, volunteers who were at least 18 years of age and who were parents of a person who identifies as LGBTQ were invited to complete a survey on their positive perceptions and experiences relevant to being parents of LGBTQ children. The announcement contained an electronic link for those who were interested in participating. We also invited people to forward the announcement about the study to other parents who met the criteria and who might be interested in participating. All study procedures and materials were approved by the university institutional review board.

The open-ended survey was completed by 142 parents of LGBTQ children. The majority of the sample was from the United States residing in 30 different states (97.20%; the remaining participants were from Canada, England, and South Africa). The participants ranged in age from 34 to 81 ( $M = 59.58$  years;  $SD = 9.81$ ). Of the sample, 83.8% was female and 16.2% was male. The participants identified as European American/White (89.4%), Biracial/Multiracial (2.8%), Hispanic/Latino/Chicano American (2.1%), African American/Black (1.4%), Asian American/Pacific American (.7%), and Other or unknown (3.6%). The educational background of the sample was as follows: high school diploma (2%); some college or technical school (22%); Bachelor's degree (30%); Master's degree (24%); Doctorate or Professional Degree (21%); prefer not to answer or left blank (1%).

Participants reported the current age of their LGBTQ child, ranging from 4 to 56 ( $M = 29.77$  years;  $SD = 11.08$ ). Participants' report of being aware of their child's LGBTQ identity ranged from less than 1 year to 38 years ( $M = 10.78$  years;  $SD = 9.15$ ). Participants were asked to provide their understanding of their child's identity. Categories were provided for parents to choose from, but parents also had the option of writing in an open-ended text box. Participants identified their child as a gay man (47.2%), lesbian (28.2%), woman-loving-woman (3.5%), bisexual (5.6%), queer (3.5%), and other (10.5%); two participants (1.5%) left the question blank. Participants identified their child as female (37.3%), male (50.7%), transgender (9.1%), and other (1.4%); two participants (1.5%) left the question blank.

### Data Collection Instrument and Procedures

The online study began with an informed consent page that detailed the purpose of the study. Participants clicked an acknowledgement button that indicated participants were at least 18 years of age and had read and fully understood the consent form. In addition to the demographic information reported above, participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended question in a text box:

Please tell us what you think the positive things are about being the parent of a LGBTQ identified child. Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important to your life and in as much detail and with examples if you wish.

A final page thanked participants and provided the researchers' contact information.

## Data Analysis

The length of typed responses submitted by the participants varied from one sentence to multiple paragraphs. These responses were systematically coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analytic approach was based on the assumption that people make meaning out of their experiences and express these meanings in language that has a social context. In this case, the stories of positive experiences were told in the context of the parenting relationship with an LGBTQ child. Our analytic strategy, therefore, was to privilege and code the actual words of the respondents into categories and themes using an inductive approach.

To ensure the credibility of our findings, we used a consensus building process with three primary coders and an external auditor to finalize the thematic structure of the data. The group of primary coders consisted of one faculty team member experienced in qualitative methods and two graduate research assistant team members who received training in the methodology prior to beginning the coding process. The external auditor was also an experienced qualitative researcher and faculty member. No members of the coding team were parents of an LGBTQ child.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for conducting thematic analysis, the three coders began by individually familiarizing themselves with the 142 participant responses while taking notes on a starter list of possible codes. The team met and discussed these initial impressions and agreed on an initial set of codes. The coders then coded the data through careful reading of the participants' responses. After all of the data were coded, the three coders met to determine the thematic structure that would best capture the meaning of all of the codes. There was considerable overlap in the identification of initial codes by the three coders. Five themes were collaboratively determined to capture all of the codes. The three coders separately collated the data into the identified themes. After the three coders independently collated the data into themes, one coder quantitatively calculated an 89% interrater reliability among the three coders.

The auditor then read the coded data and met with the primary coders to give feedback and suggestions for revisions. Data coded into each theme were reviewed and discussed. Minor revisions in the placement of data into codes were made by reference to the actual words of the participants. Data in each theme were subjected to this constant comparative process and any discrepancies in coding were discussed and reconciled until all four members of the research team reached a consensus.

## RESULTS

Almost all of the participants (95%) identified at least one positive aspect of being the parent of an LGBTQ child, including the impact it had on their lives and their child. The five positive themes that emerged from the data were Personal Growth (open mindedness, new perspectives, awareness of discrimination, and compassion), Positive Emotions (pride and unconditional love), Activism, Social Connection, and Closer Relationships (closer to child and family closeness). There were seven participants who stated that they could not express anything positive with respect to being the parent of an LGBTQ child. For instance, a 52-year-old mother of a gay male reported, "There are no positives of any type." These participants were not included in the reported themes.

### Personal Growth

The most common theme that emerged was the report of personal growth that parents (56%) perceived in themselves. Several different, but highly interrelated, types of personal growth were identified: becoming more open minded, learning new perspectives, attaining

a greater knowledge and awareness of discrimination, and developing deeper compassion. Each of these subcategories or types of personal growth is illustrated below.

### *Becoming more open minded*

Parents expressed a sense of having to stretch themselves or challenge themselves to step out of their comfort zones. One 68-year-old mother of a queer female (descriptions are from self-reports of the participants) summarized her experience as the parent of an LGBTQ child:

In every way I can think of, I stepped way outside of my comfort zone, and really, out of my own closet, to become educated, meet new people, confront ignorance, and expand my own acceptance, understanding, and celebration of difference. My daughter's coming out and its implications affected me in ways I never expected. It changed how I think about people whose lives and views of the world are vastly different. I have to question (and then revise) my opinions and judgments—not just about GLBT people, but universally. I've become insecure—less certain that I'm 'right'—and that's very positive indeed.

Some parents said that becoming more open minded had positive effects on their family relationships. A 52-year-old mother reflected on her relationship with her lesbian daughter and extended family, "Maybe that is a positive too—I think my daughter and my reaction to her ... has brought openness and love into all of our lives." Parents indicated that as they became more open to new experiences, they perceived that they were growing in positive ways.

### *Adopting new perspectives*

Becoming more open led many parents to reconsider and reevaluate previously held beliefs. A 51-year-old father of a gay male said that having an LGBTQ child provided "exposure to a new world, a new and enriching perspective on life and society, and a new outlook on gay people." Some participants perceived that they had learned to be more flexible, or less rigid, in their views. A 53-year-old mother of a woman-loving-woman commented, "[My daughter] has made me more aware of people's feelings, which helps me to not pigeon-hole people. She has helped broaden my attitude about how people look at themselves and their sexual identity." A 68-year-old mother of a queer female described her decision to expend the effort to reexamine her views and consider new perspectives:

Having my child come out while still in her teens forced me to confront the stereotypes of "homosexual" people. I had to make a choice to learn more, to be able to understand what she had experienced already, and probably would experience as she grew older. I found that simply loving her wasn't enough for me; I needed to learn more about both sexual orientation and gender identity. Reading, engaging in support groups, and talking with people informally exposed me to new and mind-expanding ideas.

Parents indicated that they were actively taught by and learned from their LGBTQ children. Many parents pushed themselves to learn more about the LGBTQ community because of their LGBTQ child.

### *Awareness of discrimination*

Open mindedness to new perspectives increased many parents' awareness of discrimination and prejudice toward all minorities, including sexual and gender identity minorities. Several participants reported that being the parent of an LGBTQ child led to an evaluation of their own biases and prejudices. A 77-year-old father of a gay male commented that having an LGBTQ child "has led my wife and I to rethink many of our biases. We are far more sensitive to the inequalities faced by other marginalized groups and recognize the advantages that white, heterosexuals have in our culture." Another parent

wrote, “We were forced to re-examine cultural ideas that we had never questioned before, and we found them to be limiting and unjust. This led us to a sense of freedom, the quality of which we had never dreamed existed” (78-year-old mother of a gay male). Participants felt that having an LGBTQ child increased their knowledge and awareness of discrimination both in the world and within themselves.

### *Deepening compassion*

As parents became more aware of the effects of stigma, discrimination, and prejudice, they often experienced deeper compassion and empathy for others. “Having a gay son in what has been and is a very homophobic culture has taught me so much about compassion for any individuals who suffer persecution as a result of their differences,” reported one 60-year-old mother of a gay male. A 79-year-old father of a gay male commented that having an LGBTQ child “[h]as made me more understanding, tolerant, and compassionate for others in the LGBT community and more intolerant of the abuses levied upon them.”

In sum, parents demonstrated personal growth through cultivation of their willingness to be open minded and through reexamination and reevaluation of their beliefs and perspectives. For many parents, this process led to changes in their views about gender and sexuality. Parents also gained awareness of discrimination and new levels of empathy and compassion for their child, the LGBTQ community, and other groups of people who are marginalized.

## **Positive Emotions**

When asked about the positive aspects of being the parent of an LGBTQ child, many (41%) participants reported enhanced positive feelings for their child. These positive emotions included a sense of pride in the child and feelings of unconditional love. For some, these feelings were simply an extension of prior feelings; for others, these feelings deepened following their child’s disclosure and the sharing of new experiences.

### *Pride*

Parents described strong feelings of pride in their children because of their LGBTQ identity. A 52-year-old mother of a lesbian female stated, “I am PROUD to be her mom. And lucky.” A 57-year-old mother of a gay male echoed this belief, “We are proud of our son and he enriches our lives in so many different ways. Any worries we may have had have been replaced with the expectation of a bright future.” Participants also expressed pride in the accomplishments of their child. One parent reported, “We know her life will be whatever she wants it to be and we are proud of all she has accomplished” (56-year-old mother of a lesbian female).

Parents also felt a sense of pride in themselves. One parent wrote, “What’s been a big deal is helping her navigate the world around her—that was very challenging, especially in the years before coming out. And about that I’m proud to have come through for her” (53-year-old mother of a lesbian female). Many parents expressed a sense of satisfaction about the positive support they had provided their child.

### *Unconditional love*

Many participants expressed that their feelings of unconditional love for their LGBTQ child transcended sexual or gender identity. Some stated that their child’s identity had no bearing on how they felt about their child; thus, they asserted that the question about positive aspects of parenting an LGBTQ child was hard to answer. For example, one participant commented, “It seems such an unfair question—what is the difference between having straight and gay children? My answer will be the same as with my straight

children: You love unconditionally” (44-year-old mother of a lesbian female). Likewise, a 60-year-old father of a gay male commented, “We as parents give our unconditional love and support regardless; not whether he’s straight or gay but because he is our son above anything else.”

Some parents expressed admiration for their child and an unconditional love that accompanied a deep prizing of the child’s unique strengths and positive attributes. A 68-year-old mother of a gay male commented, “I will always love him. I know who he is: a kind, intelligent, sensitive lover of beauty and art and literature. He is a gift to the world.” For these parents, sexual and gender identity were unrelated to love and appreciation for their children.

## Activism

The third theme that emerged was an increase in some form of activist behavior as a result of being the parent of an LGBTQ child (33%). Parents frequently saw their activism as giving a new purpose to their lives. Activism included activities such as involvement in PFLAG, fighting for equality through advocacy, and providing social support to other parents. A 77-year-old father of a bisexual transgender identified individual reported that having an LGBTQ child “led my wife and I to PFLAG, which led to all the other LGBTQ organizations. We have become leaders in PFLAG, both nationally and in our local chapter. We have become activists and advocates for the transgender community.”

In addition to getting involved in PFLAG, parents talked about becoming advocates in the broader community. For example, one 68-year-old mother of a queer female said,

I began to be an advocate for equal rights for LGBT people. I started to share my experience with friends and acquaintances. I wrote letters to local media, appeared on local public access TV and public radio, and participated in 5 years of training for school personnel under Safe School grants from the state.

Parents also wrote about helping other parents accept their LGBTQ children. A 69-year-old mother of lesbian female indicated that, “Based on my family experiences, I am able to support other LGBTQ families in their handling their issues.” Other participants found it rewarding to provide support to LGBTQ people whose families were not yet accepting. A 57-year-old mother of a gay male found that having an LGBTQ child allowed her to “help GLBT folks whose families may not be accepting—being there for them to offer love and support.”

Many parents perceived that activism, in all its forms, provided a new sense of purpose and meaning to their lives. A 75-year-old father of a gay male summarized his and his wife’s experience: “Working for a cause that we strongly believe is right has given added purpose and meaning to our lives.” Similarly, a 73-year-old mother of a gay male commented:

Having a gay son opened my eyes to the world of sexual minorities. It led me into many years of advocacy for them, and support and education for families who had a G or L son or daughter. This involvement profoundly impacted me, enlarged me, and empowered me as a person.

Parents who became involved in activism, educational efforts, and/or provided direct social support to LGBTQ people experienced new sources of positive meaning. Parenting an LGBTQ child prompted them to engage, take a stand, and join in the fight for LGBTQ equality at local and national levels.

## Social Connection

Nearly one third of participants (31%) commented that having an LGBTQ child led to new social connections with people they would likely not have met otherwise. Some

parents met new friends throughout the LGBTQ community or through groups such as PFLAG. A 57-year-old mother of a gay son commented that “meeting all the wonderful people who I otherwise would have never met” was a positive aspect of being the parent of an LGBTQ child.

Parents also expressed increased social connectedness through engaging in LGBTQ activities and interacting with other allies. A 66-year-old mother of a gay male remarked that she has “met hundreds of great folks through PFLAG (local and national) and through our local LGBT center and advocacy group.” Other parents found new communities as a result of having an LGBTQ child. A 70-year-old mother of two gay males said:

I have joined a church that supports equality and acceptance of all peoples. This is a church that not only has made this statement but actually practices what they preach, unlike many other mainstream churches. There is a wonderful closeness shared by the attending members.

Many parents commented that being the parent of an LGBTQ child led to new friendships with other people they might not have met otherwise, especially within the LGBTQ community and among other allies.

### **Closer Family Relationships**

Participants (20%) reported an increased feeling of closeness among family members as a result of having an LGBTQ child. These parents felt closer to their LGBTQ child. They also noted closer bonds among the members of the larger family unit.

#### *Closer to child*

Some parents indicated that, after their LGBTQ child came out to them, they built a closer bond with their child. A 73-year-old mother of a gay son said, “When he [my gay son] ultimately trusted me with his deeper truth, it only deepened our relationship.” Another parent wrote, “Needless to say, now that this ‘secret’ is no longer between us, we are closer than ever” (50-year-old mother of a straight FTM transgender identified individual).

#### *Family closeness*

Some participants commented that their family has grown closer as a result of having an LGBTQ child, including closer relationships within the overall family unit. A 61-year-old mother of a gay male commented:

Going through the experiences of my son’s coming out, facing stigma at times with him, bonded us—strengthened us—as a family—taught us all how to cope better, stand up for ourselves, face a sometimes hostile world. We can now talk about just about anything since the bonding we did during the early coming out period of my son.

Another 56-year-old mother of a lesbian female expressed similar feelings:

We have the mother-daughter bond that we had before and now may even be stronger. She still has her father-daughter bond [intact] and healthy also. It has shown us how strong our family bond is also—her brothers have been supportive and accepting. The bond among the three siblings is strong.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present qualitative online study of a convenience sample of parents provides support for the notion that having an LGBTQ child can be a growth opportunity with positive, life-enhancing outcomes. The five themes that emerged from the data suggest that parents were able to articulate a number of psychosocial benefits to parenting an LGBTQ child.



The current study extends findings on the positive aspects of LGBTQ identities (Gotta et al., 2011; Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011; Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008; Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010) by suggesting that the parents of LGBTQ persons also have opportunities for positive experiences that can enhance their growth and development and sense of well-being.

Consistent with findings from previous interview studies (Goodrich, 2009; LaSala, 2010; Phillips & Ancis, 2008), more than half of the parents in the current study reported personal growth related to their child's LGBTQ identity. Parents' reports were consistent with some of the strengths that Dillon (2002) cites as positive outcomes of general parental development. For instance, some parents indicated that their growth took the form of new perspectives and ideas, or cognitive flexibility. Other parents reported a newfound purpose or meaning in life, or what Dillon calls "inspiration" and "attentiveness to value."

Many parents in this study reported that having an LGBTQ identified child led them to engage in the types of deep introspection, personal exploration, and critical examination that characterizes self-actualization (see Pfaffenberger, 2005). This critical examination led to the rejection of social norms that stigmatized their child. Perhaps parents of LGBTQ children, like LGBTQ people themselves (see Abes & Jones, 2004; Riggle & Rostosky, 2012), recognize more opportunities to develop critical thinking skills when faced with stigma and discrimination. Developing greater cognitive complexity requires that parents cultivate strengths such as open mindedness so that they can critically examine prejudicial beliefs about LGBTQ people that have gone previously unquestioned. As a result, parents attained an experiential knowledge and understanding of the reality of discrimination and prejudice and its negative effects on their child, on themselves, and on society.

Consistent with previous research (Goodrich, 2009; LaSala, 2010; Phillips & Ancis, 2008), we found that social support and positive social connections to others were important positive experiences that were associated with parents' personal growth and development. These positive social connections came from participating in social support groups, such as PFLAG or affirmative religious communities, participating in education and activism, and building a closer relationship within the family unit.

Like previous studies of this population, the majority of our sample (61%) was connected to a social support group (i.e., PFLAG). The importance of having access to positive support and social connection was highly valued by our participants. Not all parents choose to participate in parenting support groups and instead find support in other organizations or informal social networks; these parents may not be adequately represented in the current study. Also, our data do not represent those parents who are more socially isolated or "closeted" and may not be connected to any groups or networks.

Our findings were based on a sample that is predominantly Caucasian, highly educated, and middle aged with young adult children who had disclosed their LGBTQ identities to their parents an average of 10 years prior. Many more mothers than fathers participated. Future research should strive to better represent the voices of fathers, of parents who do not have socioeconomic privilege, and of parents of color. These valuable perspectives remain underrepresented in the LGBTQ literature.

Recruiting representative samples of parents of LGBTQ children will be a continuing challenge for future research, however, the purpose of the current study was to gather parents' positive experiences that might serve as exemplars and role models to other parents. Future studies of the relational and developmental processes of families with LGBTQ members need to be conducted using larger, more diverse samples and diverse methodologies. To date, only a handful of studies have inquired about the positive experiences of LGBTQ individuals and their parents. We know very little about the personal, familial, and social factors that facilitate parents' ability to respond positively to their child's sexual identity.

Unlike ethnic and racial minorities who can generally count on family support for their identity development, LGBTQ children are more vulnerable to a lack of support from their family of origin. Parents' own positive development trajectory is dependent on their ability to meet this challenge. The findings from this study may be useful in helping parents to move beyond negative beliefs and attitudes that interfere with their own and their family's functioning by cultivating positive stories about LGBTQ identities.

### **Clinical Vignette: Margaret\* and Edward\*, Parents of a Gay Male Child**

Margaret, 46, and Edward, 47, sought counseling to address the individual and relational distress that they were experiencing subsequent to their only son Thomas's disclosure that he identifies as gay. Thomas is a 20-year-old college sophomore. He came out to his parents over the Thanksgiving break, about eight months ago. Edward is particularly distressed at Thomas's "effeminate" gender expression, which Edward describes as "prissy and girly." While gender expression has been a contentious issue between the two of them throughout his childhood, Thomas's disclosure has only increased Edward's overt disapproval. Margaret confesses that she had wondered if her son might be gay and reports feeling distressed by the tension in their family and her role as "peacemaker" between father and son.

In the first few sessions, Margaret and Edward could not find anything positive about being the parents of an LGBTQ child. They expressed feelings of failure as parents and were able to articulate the significant shame and alienation that they felt from their church because of the pastor's condemnation of gays and lesbians. They reported that they had avoided telling anyone in their extended family or in their friendship circle about Thomas's disclosure.

Margaret and Edward's therapist began by validating their feelings and perceptions. Specifically, Margaret and Edward generated a list of all of the negative messages about gender and sexuality that they had internalized from interactions in church and in their communities, and from the media. Edward was able to reflect on the messages about masculinity that he had learned from his family of origin, church, and society.

Socratic questioning was useful in helping Margaret and Edward to reframe their negative reactions as "normal" reactions to the host of negative cultural messages, stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination about gender expression and sexuality that they had each learned. Validating and then critically examining the messages they had learned and internalized as part of their own socialization helped to establish the therapeutic alliance and then set the stage for the therapist to facilitate the creation of more positive narratives that would support their family's well-being.

To aid in this critical examination phase, the therapist suggested several readings and documentaries to help Margaret and Edward understand different religious perspectives and interpretations at the intersection of religion and sexual and gender identity. For example, the therapist recommended *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007), a documentary (on DVD) that includes the stories of several families dealing with religious messages and gay and lesbian family members.

After viewing the documentary, Margaret and Edward were able to articulate the family values of love and compassion that the parents of LGBTQ children modeled. They appreciated how some of the parents drew on the tenets of their faith as the basis for their love and compassion for their LGBTQ child. Margaret and Edward were able to join with each other around their continued commitment to family values of unconditional love, compassion, and support even as enacting these values entailed opening up to new ways of thinking about gender and sexuality.

A new conversation in therapy centered on their unique family strengths, family values, and their hopes and dreams for their family. Once Margaret and Edward had committed to considering a new conversation, the therapist supported them in gaining a new, more holistic perspective on gay and lesbian identity. The suggested readings included *A Positive View of LGBTQ: Embracing Identity and Cultivating Well-Being* (Riggle & Rostosky, 2012), which portrays the positive aspects of LGBTQ identities and associated strengths and values. As their understanding of the origin of their negative feelings about LGBTQ identities increased and they replaced many of their negative stereotypes with positive narratives, Margaret and Edward's tolerance for discussions about LGBTQ people and about their son's gay identity increased.

The therapist also helped Margaret and Edward to build on positive family rituals that they enjoyed and that continued to increase their experiences of positive emotions and connection. They continued the weekly hour-long drive to have dinner with Thomas on his college campus. Eventually, Thomas introduced his parents to a few of his friends and even took them on a tour of the LGBTQ resource center on campus. Although he still experienced some discomfort and admitted not always knowing what to say, Edward mentioned feeling that his relationship with Thomas was much more authentic now that he knew more about Thomas and his friends. Margaret felt closer to Edward than she had in a long time because they were navigating the experience of parenting a gay son together.

There were still some negative sessions where Margaret and Edward had run into church members who verbally scorned them for having a gay son. At this point in therapy, the therapist evaluated Margaret and Edward's social support. Sensing little support in their current environment, the therapist shared a list of social support groups (online and in their community) where they would have access to other parents with similar experiences. The therapist worked with Margaret and Edward to create a support system that included supportive friends and an affirmative online support group for Christian parents of LGBTQ children.

Identifying strengths in their relationship and in their family were vital to Margaret and Edward's continued success in therapy and served as the building blocks of their own narrative stories, enhancing their well-being and functioning. Eventually, Margaret and Edward wrote their own growth stories (see Bauer et al., 2008) of how they had changed since finding out that Thomas was gay. They were able to focus on the "bigger picture" of what they wanted in life as well as what they wanted for their son. Using a guided imagery exercise (e.g., Edwards, 1989), Margaret and Edward were able to visualize a strong, cohesive family unit where Thomas's gay identity was fully accepted and integrated into their family identity. Through this exercise, Margaret and Edward began to see that Thomas's gay identity did not change him. He was still the intelligent, fun-loving, joyful young man they had always known. They, on the other hand, experienced themselves as more open and more compassionate as result of the critical reflection and examination process they had tackled together.

## **Conclusion: Helping Parents Grow**

While some parents immediately celebrate a child's LGBTQ identity, our data suggest that other parents may grow into the construction of narrative stories characterized by openness, compassion, love, and connection with their LGBTQ child and with the larger community. Growth stories such as these are associated with greater well-being (Bauer et al., 2008) and thus are useful in constructing positive identities as parents. Family therapists can help parents to generate positive stories that they can "grow into." Positive stories provide the basis for a strong therapeutic alliance and are the antidote to negative emotions that impede change (Sexton & Schuster, 2008). The dominance of negative

stories and stereotypes make corrective learning experiences for reeducation necessary to family well-being. Family therapists can help parents to navigate the process of reeducation and then refocus on the family strengths that facilitate family connection and well-being.

The parents in our study provide models of positive narratives that focus on gains rather than losses. (It is important that therapists not make the assumption that parents are necessarily “grieving losses”.) Providing positive models for parents is an important and effective intervention (MacNish & Gold-Peifer, 2011). It is also important to help parents access social support from other parents and from LGBTQ-affirmative people with whom they can share their experiences and emotions openly and honestly (Malpas, 2011). These supports can help parents to create new meanings that facilitate generativity (Wren, 2002). Optimally, all parents will be or become supportive allies of their LGBTQ children and the larger LGBTQ community. It is important that those who provide assistance to parents help them to envision and enact opportunities for positive growth experiences in relationship to their LGBTQ child.

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