



# Older kids and adolescents

Parental involvement in school decreases significantly once a young person starts high school and teenagers will likely want to manage things by themselves. In many ways, the capacity of a young person to negotiate being part of a rainbow family will have been established at primary school. Many young people find good strategies and have any easy journey.

In addition to the usual factors parents consider when choosing a high school, rainbow families may also be interested in:

- whether the school has previous experience of working with rainbow families
- the school's policy on bullying, diversity and discrimination
- whether it has a gay/straight or rainbow alliance
- whether there is a secular welfare officer
- the extent to which the principal and staff are welcoming and supportive of diverse families.

Factors that may influence the high school experience of rainbow family teenagers can include:

- the extent to which they are out and open about their family structure
- who they tell and how they talk about their family
- how their friends – and their friends' parents – respond to their family
- discussions about their own sexuality
- their own level of confidence and resilience in dealing with any negative reactions from peers.

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Visits to the school, questions to staff and the principal, a detailed look at the school's website and discussions with your own social networks can help in choosing the right school.

Most grade six kids will have their own view about the school they wish to attend and will need to participate in any discussions.

Parents can check out whether any school is part of the Safe Schools Coalition which commits the school to providing a supportive environment for LGBTI students.

It can be helpful – if sometimes difficult – to take a step back and allow teenagers to manage any issues that arise on their own.

Keeping the channels of communication open, letting them know you are there for support and back up, and offering suggestions or advice can be helpful too.

Other young people from rainbow families can provide teenagers with an important outlet and can be a great source of support.

# Parents say ...

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## Choosing a school

With high school, you've actually got a 12-year-old who is going to tell you very clearly what they want. We wouldn't have chosen a school that we felt was very conservative or had no history with rainbow families, but there was never any issue with any of the schools we looked at.

**Debbie**

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When we were looking around, we noticed at several schools the counsellors had posters up about same-sex attracted youth, which indicated to us, at an institutional level, that they were not discriminating.

**Debbie**

In my head, I had already chosen her high school because our local school is really progressive and they have a Gay–Straight Alliance. But when the time came, Ella actually said she wanted to do the test for this nerdy school down the road, so that's where she's going. I did get a heads-up from someone saying there's a person in their welfare team who is awesome and really doing some good stuff, so that was nice to hear. **Bec**

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We had people within our own social networks who knew about the various different schools and which schools had participated in Pride. We also knew about schools that had education about same-sex attracted youth, and that was all part of our decision. **Debbie**

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He moved schools and that was a very positive experience. Everyone there was aware that I was gay and they met my partner. He was very comfortable there and I think the school itself actually made the difference. He was very happy to talk about it and everyone knew. He had a wide circle of friends and it was a non-event. **Mark**

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## At school

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Our philosophy in terms of handling schooling changed as he got to senior school. In primary school, we would speak to the teacher each year and disclose who we were, but as he got to high school it just naturally wasn't an issue and we didn't do that. **Jenny**

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This first couple of years in high school were probably the most difficult. It wasn't a great school experience and that was probably the only time where I got the feeling he wasn't completely open with all his friends. His close friends and the friends he'd known since primary school, yes, but it wasn't just generally known. It wasn't a nice school. **Mark**

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Once he started to go to all the different classes and had a maths teacher and an English teacher – it's not relevant to speak to them all and they don't actually care, anyway. They are there to teach maths or English. **Jenny**

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With the primary school, we did ask specific questions, but at the high school we didn't. That was partly because we felt – and this has been borne out – that at high school you've actually got far less to do with the school. It's much more to do with the child; they have to make their own way with the resources that they've got. **Debbie**

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I guess the best thing we can do to support kids going off to high school is to be open and honest. So, the first thing is that there are no secrets and everyone is comfortable with the situation. It's really useful if kids have a good social network. We would disclose whenever kids came over to our house; we would make sure that either both of us greeted them at the door, or otherwise make it very clear that this was our situation and it wasn't anything to be ashamed of. And the kids were very accepting. **Jenny**

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The enrolment forms are really good about the two family thing and parent/parent. They have an additional family form for her other family so she had her dad and his wife on that. The first time we got a letter it was addressed to me and her father at my address. We raised that and they fixed it. **Nicola**

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As a parent, it's an interesting transition to high school, because you know so much less about what is going on and you have much less involvement. That's one of the reasons I am on the school council – because I want to know what is happening. **Nicola**

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I think, in terms of high school, you really have to do the groundwork before they get there. When they're at high school, it's much more hands off. You have set the scene in primary school and by the time they get to high school, to a large degree, they are on their own. You're just there to support them if anything happens. **Jenny**

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They had a parent information session about sex education and they talked about how it is really important to talk to your kids about sex and to be open. But then they made the point that there are certain things they will not talk about and will refer back to parents – and they were things like abortion, contraception and same-sex attraction. They were giving mixed messages and they weren't very responsive. Very friendly, very open, but that wasn't done very well. **Nicola**

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## Out of school

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She has a good, supportive group of friends – a good, little core group. She talks to them about stuff and they don't give her a hard time about anything.

**Nicola**

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He's still very good friends with my partner who I went out with when he was younger. When they see each other, he is comfortable being affectionate with him – he'll give him a hug, a kiss on the cheek or whatever. **Mark**

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I think it's really important to give our kids some tools. They are going to be faced with stuff they don't know how to handle and, like any parent, you want to give them the skills to help. We talk about when people say, 'Are your parents homosexual?'

You just say, 'Yes, are yours heterosexual?' It was never a secret. I think if it's a secret it's something that people can use against your kids, but if it's not a secret, then it's really not a drama. **Jenny**

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He has a really close group of friends, amazingly close. They're all boys – they're all tradies. When Jeremy was living with me, we had two of his mates living with us as well, so there was me, my partner, Jeremy and either one or two of his mates. It was great. It was just a really good household. **Mark**

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They both talked about choosing who to tell and that you don't tell people, particularly in high school, until you've built up some sort of trust with them. Noah said that if you do tell them and they don't accept it then obviously they are not very good friends. **Julie**

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We've had conversations about sexuality. Chris is very heterosexual and he has said from very early on that he's got no doubts about that. If he was gay, that would be okay. **Jenny**

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He is very clear about his own sexuality. It hasn't confused him at all. He's comfortable with his mates and they are reasonably affectionate for young men. They seem to be a lot more balanced and just down to earth. All his mates seem quite aware and worldly and they don't have hang-ups. They're not trying to be big, macho men. **Mark**

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She's done projects and assignments on marriage equality. She gets really passionate and she talks about why we can't have rights like everybody else. She's very much taken it that it is her fight which is lovely because she is pretty sure she is straight, but she's open. **Nicola**

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My ex-wife was Malaysian/Indian so Jeremy is multi-racial. He went to a very multi-racial school and knew my sister, who is a lesbian. And with gay parents, and lots of heterosexual parents of all different nationalities in his life, trying to illustrate diversity was really easy because he was surrounded by it. **Mark**

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He is quite militant because of his strong sense of justice. He went on this *Insight* program – so, national TV, when he was fifteen. It was huge. He was obviously very clearly identified, and people talked about it, and he is very comfortable with that. I organised a Marriage Equality forum and we had a panel of speakers and one of them was Chris. He said he would like to speak for the children.

He's quite comfortable standing up in a forum and talking about what it's like to be a kid growing up in a gay family. He said, 'It's just normal; my parents are pains in the arse sometimes, and they're good sometimes'. **Jenny**

Georgia said that being in a gay family helps her have more understanding of others, and an acceptance of diversity, which I am sure is true. She said we've taught her to stand up for what she believes in. She talked about going to the Pride March when she was little and said it was really fun and it made her realise that she was part of a big community. **Julie**



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Researched and written by Jacqui Tomlins.

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