Who, what, why

Gay Dads Scotland (GDS) is a small, volunteer run, Scottish registered charity which has been operating for about 15 years.

There is a substantial, but largely invisible population of gay fathers in Scotland, the vast majority of whom entered into a traditional marriage at a time when societal attitudes to homosexuality were much less liberal than they are today.

GDS’s primary focus is to host support groups for these gay fathers. In addition, we also have a small number of members who have children by donor insemination.

Our objective is to provide an environment where such fathers can discuss and work through the challenges and difficult choices which their situation presents, in a way that is will result in a positive outcome, not just for him, but also for his spouse and children.

The group operates support group meetings on a monthly basis in Edinburgh, where gay fathers can meet and provide mutual support. It is our pooled experience that can sometimes help individuals, as none of us is a trained counsellor. The attendees are generally a mixture of men who are actively seeking support along with others who are “giving back” to the group. Typical attendance is 6 to 16 people, and most months there will be one or two new attendees, who come from all walks of life and a wide age group.

Our geographical remit is Scotland-wide. At present we are only hosting support group meeting in Edinburgh. Men have come to our meetings from as far away as Inverness, Aberdeen, Dumfries and Girvan. There is regular attendance from Fife and Central Scotland. Only occasionally do we get attendees from Glasgow. For about five years we also hosted meeting in Glasgow, but these were discontinued as the numbers attending were insufficient to provide mutual support. We are at the early stages of exploring the possibility of hosting meetings in Aberdeen.

We are also engaged in providing information to agencies involved in working with gay parents and to raising public awareness of gay parenting, with the objective of combating discrimination against gay fathers and their children.

New members are sometimes directed to us by their GP, a counsellor or mainstream support agencies, such as the Samaritans. We maintain a website at www.gaydadsscotland.org.uk

Father’s perspective

Such was the general lack of awareness and acceptance of homosexuality in the past that many men did not come to realise there true sexuality until after they were married and had had children, Others may have had some varying degree of
understanding, but either bowed to societal pressure or perhaps felt that that was a part of them that could be set aside.

We do not know the statistics for the number of families where the father is gay, but we believe it to be a large number. During the more than 15 years that GDS has been running we have met many hundreds of gay fathers, but feel that this is only a tiny proportion.

It is typically the case that someone who finds himself in this position is under enormous emotional stress. On the one hand, he loves his wife and children and is desperate not to break up the family. On the other, he has come to realise that there is a part of his true identity that must be addressed. These seem to be irreconcilable and result in feelings of stress and guilt. Many fathers are very isolated and believe that they are the only ones to be in their position. It is commonly the case that, when they first come to one of our meeting fathers exhibit or report high levels of stress, depression, anxiety and guilt.

**Spouse's perspective**

There is a need for better support for wives of gay men. We are sympathetic to the position of the wife in these situations - it is not her fault that her husband or partner turned out to be gay. We do not feel that there are circumstances where a gay husband should not tell his wife. If she then decides to agree to continue the relationship, perhaps until their children are older or beyond that, then that is an informed decision.

**Child's perspective**

Everything GDS does is directly or indirectly is aimed at protecting the welfare of the children of our members.

Whether or when to “come out” to one’s children is a regular subject of concern from new members. It is actually rare for there to be an adverse reaction from a child to the news that dad is gay. They tend to much more concerned that mum and dad might split up. Where there has been adverse reaction it is because they believe, not always correctly, that dad has not treated mum fairly.

Both parents are also commonly worried that there will be bullying at school and, sadly, this does occur.

Happily, for the most part, gay fathers and their children go on to have very positive experiences.
Outcomes

There are a wide spectrum of outcome scenarios, including:

- Some fathers decide to continue to internalise their sexuality and never tell their wives or children.

- Some come out to their wives, who is accepting and they negotiate a way to continue to live as a family, perhaps until the children are older.

- Many come out to their wives, there is a separation/divorce and they continue to successfully co-parent their children.

- Some come out to their wives or are “found out”, there is a bad reaction. Sometimes the father then has a lot of trouble maintaining contact with his children.

Clearly, real life is more complex that this simplified list. However, in our experience the two most important issues leading to a happy outcome are:

- Being honest with one’s spouse

- Being honest with one’s children

Fortunately, we see more happy than unhappy outcomes. However, the unhappy outcomes are often tragic, not just for the father, but also for his spouse and children. We have seen a number of cases where contact between the father and the children has been made very difficult or where the children will no longer agree to see their father. Poor communication is the most common reason for such breakdowns and outcomes.

Looking to the future

We aim to extend out geographic spread of our support groups to other Scottish towns.

The age profile of gay fathers coming to our support group suggests that fewer young gay men are marrying as a result of societal pressure or lack of awareness about their sexuality.

That said, there remain a number of social groups where young gay men are still marrying straight spouses. We know that working class men rarely come to our support group meetings, nor do we see men from any of the ethnic communities and we would like to find outreach routes to these groups.

Ewan Jeffrey
Chair, Gay Dads Scotland
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