

## *Family Matters* campaign briefing

July 2008 sees a new CHAPS<sup>(1)</sup> campaign to help families support their gay and bisexual sons. It aims to counteract the harm anti-gay feeling does to both the family and the health of gay and bisexual men and boys within it.

### Background to the campaign

CHAPS HIV and safer sex campaigns for gay and bisexual men are usually not seen outside of the gay community. But the *Family Matters* campaign is aimed at the general public. Why is this? Keeping the wider picture in mind, CHAPS acknowledges how other factors shape how we behave. Family and upbringing have a lasting impact on people's emotional development and behaviour. By influencing these, improvements can be made to the health of current and future generations of gay and bisexual men. The links between health and social justice or social exclusion have been widely recognised, from declarations from the World Health Organisation<sup>(2)</sup> to those of our own government.<sup>(3)</sup>

A supportive family background has a protective effect on young people, leaving them better able to emotionally withstand bullying and hostility. They are also less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol. Without these protective benefits the mental and physical health of children and young adults is more at risk and can remain so for life.

Anti-gay hostility and exclusion from the family make a young person more vulnerable to depression, low self esteem or self harm (even suicide), factors with well documented links to sexual risk taking and getting HIV later in life. Education can be disrupted and a child may feel unable to seek help from health care professionals, teachers and other sources of support. There is also potential for long lasting, maybe permanent, loss of contact between child and family. Being young, homeless or absent from the family – and with it at risk of sexual exploitation – all carry clear HIV, drug and other health-related dangers.

When a child is discovered to be gay or bisexual this is often a source of tension, anger and anxiety. Any effort to keep a family intact and mediate to stop the marginalisation of these young people from those

close to them reduces the risk of physical harm, stress-related illness and psychological damage to the child and parents.

Being estranged from the family can have lifelong consequences for the mental and physical health of gay and bisexual people. By improving their experiences within the family, it is hoped their mental and physical health, including their sexual behaviour and risk of HIV infection, can be improved. This is what the *Family Matters* campaign hopes to do.

### Who the *Family Matters* campaign targets

#### Why mothers?

The *Family Matters* campaign speaks most directly to mothers. They are less entrenched in their attitudes than fathers and usually more sympathetic to their child's situation. Mothers frequently act as the catalyst for change within a family and function as a bridge between a gay child and other family members (especially fathers) struggling to accept this.

#### Why boys?

As CHAPS is funded to reduce HIV infections among gay and bisexual men, male children are our focus. That said, the telephone support and web based information the campaign promotes concerns all gay or bisexual children, be they boys or girls.

#### Why working class families?

Hostility to gay people has fallen over the last twenty years. But attitudes have been more resistant to change among working class communities. More than twice as many people from the lowest social class believe homosexuality to be 'always wrong' than in the highest.<sup>(4)</sup> It is here the effects of anti-gay prejudice are felt most sharply.

In their 2004 research report *Working class gay men* Sigma Research (a member of the CHAPS partnership) studied these effects.<sup>(6)</sup> They found that in these communities family bonds are especially strong; they are central to gay men's lives. But more entrenched notions of family honour, community and masculinity can all put extra stress on working class men and their families. Without the educational opportunities and other resources enjoyed by the middle classes, working class family members are more dependent on each other.

For these reasons, when a child is discovered to be gay the disruption this can cause to a working class family is potentially more serious, especially for the child. This is why our campaign particularly targets these families. This is reflected in the content of the campaign and in where it will be seen. All the same, we believe our campaign will strike a chord in a wide range of homes.

## Campaign messages

The *Family Matters* campaign has several key messages:

- Initial negative reaction to finding out a child is gay is based on understandable concerns but ultimately this reaction is a threat to the family.
- Over time it is likely the parents and child can resolve any conflict and re-establish normal family life.
- Support is available for those struggling to accept a family member who 'comes out' (and for gay individuals with non-accepting families).

Other key issues explored in the campaign are:

- Parents' concerns over a perceived loss of grandchildren (identified as the major source of upset to parents).
- Confusion over why a child turns out to be gay.
- How a sense of isolation and embarrassment felt by many parents can be lessened through realising a growing number of families find themselves in this situation.

## Focus group testing

As with all CHAPS campaigns, *Family Matters* was independently pre-tested to gauge its impact and acceptability. Two stages of pre-testing took place across the country involving over 40 mothers and fathers (parents who had no connection to the gay community).

## Press advertising

For a period of six weeks ads will appear in women's publications chosen for their popularity with the campaign's target audience; *Take A Break* and *That's Life*. These titles have a combined circulation of around 1.5 million.

The first advert mimics a magazine article in which we see the parents' journey from confusion and anger to acceptance. By seeking out support a break in the parent-child relationship is avoided. A second much shorter copy ad shows the mother reaffirming her commitment to keeping her son firmly within the family. This ad is available as an A3 poster. Both adverts give telephone and web based referral information, through which people can access FFLAG (Friends & Family of Lesbians and Gays), the national voluntary organisation and registered charity offering helpline support and parents' support groups. The woman in the ads is in reality the mother of a gay son and the young man featured is gay in real life.

## Website

The campaign web site can be visited at [www.tht.org.uk/familymatters](http://www.tht.org.uk/familymatters)

The web page links to the FFLAG internet site with its extensive range of information, personal stories and support. The *Family Matters* web page will remain online after the press campaign has ended.

Advertisement promotion



## WOULD I STAND BY MY BOY?

**Our son is gay and we will always love him**

**M**y phone rang. It was my husband, Dave, on the other end. He said, 'You've got to come home. It's Ryan.' Ryan was our 17-year-old son. Panicking, I hurried home. What had happened? Had he been caught stealing...or taking drugs?

As I walked in Dave was waiting. He looked really upset. 'Well?' I said.

'It's Ryan,' Dave answered. 'He said he's gay.'

Dave had caught our son looking at gay websites. I couldn't take it in. Ryan couldn't be gay. He was just like all the other lads we knew.

'Where is he?' I asked.

'Upstairs,' Dave said. 'Crying.'

Before, if I'd heard my son was crying, I'd have run up to give him a hug. But I couldn't move. Days went by. Ryan was quieter than normal. I kept crying as I'd lost my dream of having grandchildren.

It was even harder for Dave. He thought he'd done something wrong. And he was scared of people finding out our son was gay.

Things were getting more and more tense. Then there was a TV chatshow about parents with gay



**Ryan's happier now and soon to start his first job**

children. There was a helpline number. A few days later I plucked up the courage to ring. Sandra, whose daughter was gay, answered. 'Ryan being gay isn't really the problem, she told me. It's the way you and Dave are reacting that's causing the trouble.'

She said if we didn't learn to accept it, we'd drift apart, or drive Ryan away.

Well, she was right. It's got easier over time. Things are a lot better at home now. Dave's calmed down. Ryan's happier too and about to start his first job.

We're probably closer now than ever. We'll always love our son. Keeping the family together is what matters most.

From Lisa Pennington, 42, Manchester

**How to get help for your family**

If someone in your family is gay or lesbian and you'd like to talk about it, call our helpline, THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200, or read more families' real life stories at [www.tht.org.uk/familymatters](http://www.tht.org.uk/familymatters)




## I love my gay son



Ryan was 17 when he told us he was gay. We reacted badly. But when he almost left home we realised keeping the family together is what matters most. He's still at home and we're closer than ever.

**FAMILY MATTERS**

If someone in your family is gay or lesbian and you'd like to talk about it call our helpline, THT Direct, on 0845 12 21 200 or read more families' real life stories at [www.tht.org.uk/familymatters](http://www.tht.org.uk/familymatters)



The two campaign press ads  
(full page ad also available as a poster)

## For more information on the campaign, please contact

**Press enquiries** Sally Sharpe, THT Press Office, [sally.sharpe@tht.org.uk](mailto:sally.sharpe@tht.org.uk)

**Health promotion enquiries** Marc Thompson, Deputy Head of Health Promotion at THT [marc.thompson@tht.org.uk](mailto:marc.thompson@tht.org.uk)

**It's Time To Accept** A Terrence Higgins Trust campaign from 2003 that addresses similar issues but within the context of the Black family. [www.itstimetoaccept.org.uk](http://www.itstimetoaccept.org.uk)

**FFLAG (Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)**  
Many thanks to FFLAG for their valuable help in the development of this campaign.  
FFLAG helpline: 0845 652 0311  
email: [info@fflag.org.uk](mailto:info@fflag.org.uk)  
website: [www.fflag.org.uk](http://www.fflag.org.uk)

## Further reading

*It makes me sick – heterosexism, homophobia and the health of gay men and bisexual men*, a briefing paper by Sigma Research, available at [www.sigmaresearch.org.uk](http://www.sigmaresearch.org.uk)

This looks at the research into links between prejudice and ill-health.

## Notes

- (1) CHAPS is a Department of Health funded initiative to reduce HIV infections among gay and bisexual men. It is a partnership of community-based organisations, co-ordinated by Terrence Higgins Trust, delivering HIV and sexual health initiatives to gay and bisexual men in England and Wales.
- (2) The World Health Organisation's 1986 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, available at: [www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/ottawa\\_charter\\_hp.pdf](http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/ottawa_charter_hp.pdf)
- (3) The UK Department of Health's 2001 National Strategy for Sexual Health and HIV, available at: [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)
- (4) The British Social Attitudes survey of 2005 showed that more than twice as many people from the lowest social class believed homosexuality to be 'always wrong' than in the highest (40% compared to 16.5%). Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 2005, National Centre for Social Research.
- (5) *Working class gay men – redefining community, restoring identity*, London: Sigma Research; 2004. Available from: [www.sigmaresearch.org.uk](http://www.sigmaresearch.org.uk)

## The HIV and sexual health charity for life

**Website:** [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk) **THT Direct:** 0845 12 21 200

**Registered office:** 314-320 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP **Tel:** 020 7812 1600 **Email:** [info@tht.org.uk](mailto:info@tht.org.uk)

© Terrence Higgins Trust, July 2008. Terrence Higgins Trust is a registered charity no. 288527. Company reg. no.1778149. Registered in England and Wales. A company limited by guarantee.  
Design **Felton Communication** 020 7405 0900 Ref: 10393.5