

## Scouts for Equality: A Guide for Coming Out for Scouts and Scouters *Be Prepared*

Thank you for trusting Scouts for Equality as you discern your path to coming out. For some this process is easy while for others it is exceptionally difficult. The directors of Scouts for Equality are committed to supporting LGBTQ+ scouts as they explore their identity and find safe avenues to honestly and fully express themselves. This guide focuses on navigating the specific hurdles faced by Scouts and Scouters in the Boy Scouts of America. The policy change that took effect on January 1 of 2014 means that no youth member of any BSA program can be expelled simply for being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Additionally, the policy change that took effect on July 27 of 2015 means no adult member of any BSA program above the unit level (e.g. district, council, national) can be expelled simply for being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. However, units chartered by faith-based organizations can still deny adults membership in that unit because of their sexual orientation. Units chartered to secular organizations, however, must consider adult applications without regard to sexual orientation.

As Scouts, we are taught to be prepared. There are still considerations for Scouts and Scouters of all ages who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning their sexual orientation and want to be open and honest about who they are.

**For urgent concerns, including the possibility of harm, contact The Trevor Project's crisis and suicide prevention hotline for immediate help at 1-866-4-U-Trevor or at [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org).**

### **YOUTH MEMBERS (UP THROUGH 17):**

If you are a youth member and are gay, lesbian, bisexual or questioning your sexual orientation and want to be open with your Scouting family, you may be afraid that your fellow Scouts and Scouters will treat you differently or lose respect for you. You may be worried about the possibility of bullying or harassment. While a youth member (up to age 18 in the Boy Scouts and up to age 21 in Venturing) may not be expelled from a Scouting unit for the reason of being gay or lesbian, it will take time for all members of the BSA to understand that we all have inherent dignity and deserve respect for who we are no matter our sexual orientation. This may affect your decision to come out. The following is some practical advice to keep in mind for how you plan to let other Scouts and Scouters get to know you better.

- **It is ok** to not be certain of your sexual orientation. Everyone's path is different, and figuring it out is not something that happens overnight; you do not need to rush to tell others. Take your time and listen to yourself.
- **Understand** that you control what you tell others. Many find it helpful to talk to your parents, friends, and adults that you trust that you believe are more likely to support you before making your sexual orientation known to those who may not be immediately supportive.
- **Don't assume** that you know 100% how someone will react. Someone you think will react negatively might surprise you by being supportive.
- **Realize** that other Scouts and Scouters' reaction to you may **not** be because you are LGBTQ+. Coming out during stressful, strenuous, or busy situations may cause fellow Scouts to act differently than they would under less stressful conditions.
- **Remember** that coming out is a continuous process. You may have to come out many times.

- **Don't wait** for your friends' attitudes to change to join in on your unit's Scouting activities like camping and volunteering. Recognize that your friends need time to acknowledge and accept that they have a LGBTQ+ friend. It took you time to come to terms with who you are; now it is your friends' turn.
- **Let your friends' judgments** be theirs to work on, as long as they are kind to you.
- If it is too difficult to be with some members of your Scouting unit, **work on strengthening friendships with Scouts and leaders who are accepting.**
- **Be understanding** with your friends' "slip ups" when they are well-intentioned and trying to be affirming. Let them know you know how difficult of a process it is.
- If you experience bullying or harassment, **with your parents, ask your unit to provide anti-bullying training.** [PFLAG](#) has many [local chapters](#) that can help.
- If you are a part of a unit that does not belong to an open and affirming Chartering Organization and you experience bullying or harassment that will not stop, **with your parents, research local units that belong to affirming organizations as a potential place to participate in Scouting.** Under the current policy, if you come out as a youth member, and your unit is chartered by a faith-based organization, they could deny your registration with them once you become an adult. This is an unfortunate policy, but it is important to consider this current reality before deciding to come out. Keep in mind that your overall BSA membership can no longer be revoked because of your sexual orientation, though.

### **YOUTH MEMBERS (AGES 18-20)**

If you are a Boy Scout actively involved in the Order of the Arrow between the ages of 18 and 20 or in Venturing and under the age of 21, you may want to confirm that either (1) your unit allows gay adults, or (2) you're also registered on the district or council level, before coming out. While the BSA can no longer expel you from Scouting for coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, if you're above the age of 18, faith-based units are allowed to deny you membership in that unit. Once your registration is confirmed, you may have some of the same concerns as those under 18 regarding bullying and harassment. Before you come out:

- **Make a decision** about being out to individual Scouts or Scouters.
- **Recognize** that knowledge about your sexual orientation may spread to people you did not intend to tell.
- If you are in a relationship, **decide in advance** how you will talk about it.
- **Be prepared** if a coming out situation becomes difficult on unit trips or outings.
- **Find out** about local LGBTQ+ resources for you and your unit.
- **If you do plan to come out** to your unit, have support available, including helpful [PFLAG publications](#).

### **ADULT VOLUNTEERS (AGES 21+)**

If you are an adult volunteer, you cannot be expelled from the BSA for coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. However, if your unit is chartered by a faith-based organization, they may deny your membership with that unit. This may make you want to not come out for the time being. It would be best for you to make sure you fully understand your unit's policies before coming out to people in the unit. If you feel you should come out to someone who is safe, affirming, and trustworthy, keep the following in mind:

- **Make sure** the person or people you come out to understand the sensitivity of the information and the precariousness of the situation.
- **Request that you control your coming out process.** Ask the person to refer questions about your sexual orientation to yourself.
- If your child is involved in Scouting, emphasize that **you want to be involved to give your son or daughter a better experience in the program.**
- If your unit is not a part of an open and affirming Chartering Organization, **research local units that belong to affirming organizations** as a potential place to participate.

## ADVICE FOR ALL AGE GROUPS

Some advice for everyone to consider:

- **Reassure** fellow Scouts and Scouters that you are still the same person they have always known.
- When interacting with people you have recently come out to, **focus on common interests.** You enjoy camping, hiking, and high adventure trips with your friends just as much now as you did before.
- Emphasize how being open allows you to **be more trustworthy**, and that you value the ability to be your honest and true self.
- If you are in a relationship, **be sensitive** to your own needs as well as how your friends react to finding out about something very important about you for the first time.
- **Be aware** that people may or may not be surprised.
- **Remember to affirm yourself and expect respect.** You should not be the target of bullying, mean-spirited comments, or exclusionary behavior. Reverence is the twelfth point of the Scout Law, and that means your fellow Scouts and Scouters need to respect your identity and beliefs.
- **Realize** that you don't need other people's approval, but you deserve their respect.
- **Connect with someone else who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual** who understands what you are going through and will affirm you along the way.
- If someone comes out to you as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning, **be supportive, affirm them as an individual, and thank them for trusting you.** If they ask you to keep their sexual orientation confidential, do not reveal it to others. Research organizations like PFLAG in order to be a better provider of support.

## KEEP CONTACT OPEN.

- **Talk to your parents.** They are here to support you.
- **Talk to your Scoutmaster** or trusted adult leaders. They care about your experience in the Boy Scouts.
- **Talk to other Scouts.** You might be surprised how supportive your friends can be.
- **Email Scouts for Equality or PFLAG** at [info@scoutsforequality.com](mailto:info@scoutsforequality.com) and [info@pflag.org](mailto:info@pflag.org). We can connect you with resources at the local level.