STARTING LGBTIQ+ FAMILIES:

TIPS ON ACCESSING HEALTH, FERTILITY AND OTHER SERVICES

Ideas for self and community care, advocacy, and strength

A guide from Queer Families and Queer Future Families

Queer Families Project

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What this guide is for, and why we created it

This is a guide that aims to help LGBTIQ+ people prepare for appointments, be more supported, challenge any discrimination, and have their needs better met while accessing the services they may use while starting a family.

People taking part in the Queer Families groups in Glasgow suggested creating this guide, as it can feel especially helpful and encouraging to hear tips from people who have been through it. These tips are based on community members' experiences of planning, preparing, trying to start and starting families, and what they've learned from community members facing intersecting inequalities. It also includes wider learning from organisations like Amma Birth Companions, whose sharing of knowledge about birth journeys and support with this work we really appreciate. We hope this guide can give some useful suggestions around generally starting the journey of trying to start a family, whether by conception, or other paths which might not involve pregnancy, which can take some years and a lot of effort and emotion. We also hope it feels supportive of the experiences of discrimination and unequal treatment (in medical and other settings) many of us have had, that can shape how we feel when trying to start a family.

Who this is for

People starting families. This guide is mainly for LGBTIQ+ people planning, preparing or starting to start a family. It should definitely be relevant for anyone who hopes to become pregnant as part of that journey, or go through a process like adoption or surrogacy where there's waiting, uncertainty and different steps to prepare for. And it's for for non-pregnant partners, friends, and loved ones, who need to care for and support themselves through the journey. It also includes tips on finding ways to support your partner, friends or other people in your community - including advice on ways to offer help, and listen to what they need.

People supporting people starting families
Anyone starting a family needs community belonging and support ('it takes a village'), and LGBTIQ+ people can be more likely to not have older generations around, needing chosen family and community to show up. We hope this guide will help build understanding and support in wider LGBTIQ+ communities. If you're not LGBTIQ+ you're very welcome to use this guide - we hope it's helpful and interesting, for you or people you support.

TIPS ON TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Tips on taking care of yourself, and supporting your needs and wellbeing - for before and after going to appointments or accessing services.

Be Kind to yourself

- Be gentle with yourself.
- Listen to your body, and pay attention to how you feel.
- Get sleep and rest, as much as you can.
- Give yourself enough good nutrition.
- Create a supportive, caring environment around you - a nest.
- Practise giving yourself what you need, and asking others for what you need.
- Set boundaries - do not give up more of your energy than you can. You deserve to keep energy for yourself too!
- Sometimes you don't really know what you need. Give yourself space for that. It's ok to not know, or need some time to think.
- Manage your stress levels - conscious and subconscious.
- Practising grounding exercises or working out which work for you ahead of time. It can be good to create a menu that works for you, before you're feeling stress.
- Focus on the present, and the moment you're in, to try not to over worry about the future and next steps.

Connection

- Connect with community.
- Chatting to people will help.
- Keep taking part in what usually brings you connection or peace.
- If it's right for you, looking for LGBTIQ+ friendly groups, massage therapists, different kinds of social and creative spaces, and wellbeing supports.
- Accessing other kinds of care you might need - counselling, healthcare, care, community support, etc.
- Plan, write a list or draw a mind-map or doodle showing who you can reach out to for support. It can be harder to reach out in a moment of stress, so it might help to decide beforehand who you want to contact if you're feeling different things, or dealing with practical barriers.

TIPS ON TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Tips on supporting yourself - for before and after going to appointments or accessing services.

Information

- Read what you can to prepare. It can help anxieties to gather the information, and save or store it somewhere so it's easy to find when you need it.
- Knowing what the next steps are can help you go through it. You may not be able to chart out what the full journey will be (as things often change or there are extra steps or delays), but sitting down alone or with support and writing down key info about your next step can make it feel easier to manage.
- But - too much reading or Googling can lead to you comparing to others' experiences - and worry about the more stressful experiences you read about, which may be more likely to be shared online. If something you're reading is making you feel more stressed, not more aware and confident, it might not be the best source of info for you at that moment.

Where to get support

- For many kinds of support, you might find luck reaching out on a local or LGBTIQ+ social media group.
- Find queer spaces to help building a community in all parts of the journey, whether online or in person.
- Resources like 'Queer Nursing' and 'Supporting Queer Birth' and 'the queer parent' and 'a guide to providing lgbtq+ inclusive reproductive health care' can be useful not just for you but for those looking to support you.
- Meal trains - A way for friends & family to support you by signing up to organising meals on the days you need them.

Finding ways to be active

- Taking part in fitness and active activities can feel really helpful.
- Many people find value in doing exercises that focus on breathing and being grounded in your body. You can find written how-to's or videos on sites like YouTube which guide you through a breathing or body exercise, for lowering stress, relaxation or feeling more power and self-trust.
- Finding a way to connect with nature or spend time outdoors.

TIPS ON SUPPORTING PEOPLE - FRIENDS, FAMILY, COMMUNITY

Tips based on how community members like being supported.

Things you can do

- Ask how they best like to be supported. What makes a difference to them?
- Say something that shows you care and that you are there to support them in whatever way they need.
- Offering and giving support involves paying attention to boundaries and only give support when it's consented to and welcome. It's important the person who needs supported feels heard and in control. Understand they know best what they need.
- Have conversations regularly before stressful situations come up, so you're a bit more prepared for them when they do.
- Listening and chatting can be the first step to finding out how someone wants supported. Once you listen, and ask open, curious questions about what they're finding hard, what's helping them, what they need, you might have a better understanding of what to offer.
- You could offer:
    - To bring some food over
    - To bring some groceries
    - To listen, chat, have a phone or video call
    - To help them do tasks and chores, or sit with them while they do tasks
- You could say something like:
    - 'I'd like to _____. Would that be ok with you?'
    - 'I could _____. Would that be welcome right now?'
    - 'I can ___ or ____. Would either of those feel helpful at the moment?'

Things not to do

- Be offended if your offer of support is rejected. It's often hard to accept help, or maybe the exact offer wasn't what they needed at that time.
- Assume where someone's at emotionally, especially when it can be quite up and down. Sometimes it's easy to assume someone doesn't have energy, or would get in touch if they wanted to. If you're not sure - you could reach out and ask.
- Wait until a stressful situation happens before having a conversation. Talking regularly before challenges come up will help you be more prepared for them when they do.

TIPS ON BEING SUPPORTED BY PEOPLE

On reaching out for support, finding and welcoming it

Thinking about what kinds of support you need

- Start by asking yourself what you might need in the moment, and writing that down or saying that out loud. Once you've named it, it might be easier to think 'ok, I need this, so I'm going to ask for it'.
- In friendships and relationships you can also practise asking each other for what you need.
- Who in your life is best for giving certain kinds of support? Are there any gaps, for example getting a lift to somewhere, or looking up your rights online, where you might need to reach out wider for support?
- How you want to communicate about it with people in your life (e.g. them asking for updates, or not asking, etc.).
- Think about boundaries with people whose support you don't always want. It might help to let them know 'I don't want help with...' or 'I won't always want to talk about ....' beforehand. Getting these conversations out of the way can make things feel less stressful.

Asking for help/support

- Asking for support can feel vulnerable and hard - often harder than giving it. If you find it challenging, it can help to talk about this to people who will be supporting you through the process. If they understand, it might be easier to say 'Hey, I'm finding it hard to ask, but...' and they might make more effort to try to show up for you.
- Being able to ask for help - is often based on trust - people will say 'no' when they can't. It makes it easier to ask when you know someone will set and manage their own boundaries.
- Don't be afraid to tell people what you want, and how you want it. For example, if you're having a difficult time - saying you want to talk about other things, or need space, or more connection.
- Try not to worry that you're bothering anyone by asking for or welcoming the support you need. Lots of people have extra time or resources to share, and find happiness in being supportive members of their communities.

TIPS ON PREPARING FOR APPOINTMENTS

Before the appointment

- Writing a list, or even a short script, so you remember what you want to say or ask. Not having to remember can reduce the mental pressure on you, which might help you feel less stress.
- Writing in a journal in the days before an appointment might help you work out any worries you might have. If there's a particular worry, a chat or journalling might help you work out if it's likely to happen, if there's anything you could do to make it less likely, and what you could do next if it did happen.
- It might help to note what you want to happen in the appointment. That way if the doctor or other professional urges you to do something different (like not bring someone into the appointment with you), you feel more prepared to say 'I want….'. Most of the time, unless there's a reason or rule against it, saying what you want is enough.
- Letting someone know that you have an appointment and when might help. You could send them a message before and after the appointment - even if they can't reply at that time.
- Ask someone to come with you into an appointment.
- Planning to do something nice before and after an appointment can make a big difference.

During the appointment

- Having a notebook and pen, or a charged phone or device to take notes on, can help you write down anything the professional says that you might need to remember.
- Someone accompanying you in an appointment could stay silent, or take notes, or (perhaps if you look to them or ask them to explain) could speak and explain the background, or what you want, or anything else you've asked them to say.
- A doctor might say something that seems to discourage bringing someone in, like 'Are you ok to come into the appointment by yourself?' but you can just say 'I want them to come in with me' or something similar to that. In some appointments they'll ask the companion to go out briefly, as safeguarding, but mostly you can have someone with you.
- Asking to record appointments. When you go into an appointment you can ask if you can record it, for example as you might have trouble remembering what was said and will want to listen back. It reminds doctors to be thoughtful too.

THE POWER OF PEER ADVOCACY – TIPS FROM AMMA BIRTH COMPANIONS

Being a peer advocate doesn't require formal training or expert knowledge. It's simply about standing alongside someone you care about, helping them feel heard, safe and respected. This solidarity can be especially powerful when navigating care that may not always feel inclusive or affirming.

Advice for Peer Advocates

- Listen first: Ask the person you're supporting what matters most to them, what they want to say, and what they'd like your help with.
- Be a witness: You can validate their experience by confirming what was said or how they were treated, especially if they feel dismissed or unsure of their own perceptions.
- Stay present: Sometimes the most powerful thing is sitting beside someone, offering your undivided attention, and reminding them they're not alone.
- Let them lead: Step in if they're being ignored or interrupted but let them lead unless they've asked you to speak for them. Your role is to amplify their voice, not replace it.
- Keep things calm: If tensions rise, ask for a private moment or brief pause. You can also ask to speak with someone else or rearrange the appointment entirely.
- Support informed decisions: If options aren't explained clearly, help them ask "What are the alternatives?" "What are the risks and benefits?" or "Can we have more time to think?"
- Take notes: Write down key points, decisions, and next steps. If issues arise, ask for details to be recorded in their medical notes and note the provider's name.
- Check in afterwards: Debrief together. How do they feel? Is there anything to follow up on?
- Look after yourself: Advocacy can be emotionally demanding. Make space for your own feelings and seek support when needed.

Remember, you don't need to be an expert to make an impact. At Amma, our companions come from all walks of life with varied experiences, but their support is what makes a difference. Trust that you have what it takes to help someone navigate pregnancy and birth.

Amma Birth Companions is a Glasgow charity that provides vital services to ensure women and birthing people from migrant backgrounds and other underserved groups are supported during pregnancy, childbirth, and early parenthood. Visit Amma's website at: https://ammabirthcompanions.org/about/

YOUR RIGHTS WHEN ACCESSING HEALTH CARE AND MEDICAL SERVICES

- You have a right to make decisions about your body, including to say no, decline treatment, and withdraw consent (say no after saying yes at first).
- You should be given information to base your decisions on. You can ask questions and ask for more information, and usually ask for more time to decide, unless it's an emergency.
- To be treated with respect, equality and non-discrimination.
- You can ask for a second opinion from another professional.
- Ask to switch to a different doctor or healthcare professional.
- You can access your medical records, and see what's been written about you. To get your medical records if you need them, you may have to write to a specific NHS office, and give them consent or confirmation of who you are, before they send you the records.
- Having time to ask questions in appointments, and to have them answered to your satisfaction. It's their job to answer the questions and explain it until you do understand it. Be sure to say that you don't understand something.
- Other than for quick safeguarding checks, you can usually have someone with you in the appointment, as a companion for emotional support, or taking on an advocacy role.

- Make a complaint - you have the right to complain and point out any issues with how you're treated. If it's about a particular member of staff, write down their name or PIN (personal identification number in the NHS).
    - The first way to make a complaint to a service is usually their internal complaint system, for example the NHS has a system for receiving and dealing with complaints. Making a complaint/giving feedback internally means it's possible your input will lead to useful changes so more people don't have the same experience.
    - The Patient Advice & Support Service (PASS) in the NHS can help you complain. www.pass-scotland.org.uk/
    - If making a complaint in the NHS or other service doesn't have the outcome you want, it may be possible to raise it with the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO).

HOW YOU SHOULD BE TREATED WHEN ACCESSING SERVICES

- When trying to take a 'human rights approach', many services in Scotland use the 'PANEL principles' from the Scottish Human Rights Commission. These PANEL principles are:
    - Participation
    - Accountability
    - Non-discrimination
    - Empowerment/equality
    - Legality

More info at: www.scottishhumanrights.com/projects-and-programmes/human-rights-based-approach/

- If a service uses these principles as a way to try to meet people's human rights in practice (or even if they don't), you can look the principles up to use as a tool for challenging them. While PANEL isn't legally enforced it can help influence services, by reminding them of principles they should value and act by.

Note on human rights and legal rights

- Legal rights: Our legal human rights can be found in Scots Law (cases and principles going back hundreds of years, and legislation from Holyrood), UK-wide law (some cases and legislation from Westminster), and some international conventions and treaties 'incorporated' in Scots and UK laws - mainly the European Convention on Human Rights, which is incorporated by the Human Rights (Scotland) Act 1998. Public Bodies must respect these rights in the Human Rights (Sc.) Act, by acting in ways that are 'compatible' with them.

Info on human rights in Scotland: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/law-and-courts/civil-rights/human-rights/

- What we call 'human rights' in everyday language are broader: food, housing, safety, etc. They relate to international law and UN Conventions, but aren't all part of UK and Scots law, so these rights can't be brought to a UK court when they're not met.
- While only some are legally enforceable, human rights can be used as tools, something you can demand are respected.
- Often people's human rights aren't met - this doesn't reflect on you, it's a wide problem and you deserve respect.

DEALING WITH ANY DISCRIMINATION OR HOSTILITY

Tips on taking care of yourself if you do experience discrimination

In the Moment

- Remember there's no perfect response to discrimination or being treated unfairly. Try to be compassionate with yourself. It wasn't fair, it wasn't your fault, and you deserve to be treated with respect and equality.
- It's normal to react in lots of different ways to discrimination. People might freeze, get tense, cry, feel overwhelmed or shut down. It's also normal to take some time to work through it afterwards - even laughing or minimising it at first when telling other people what happened.
- In the moment, the main options are to leave or challenge. Leave the space if you can, as a way to take care of yourself. Only if you feel safe in the context, you might be able to challenge the person's behaviour in the moment.
- Using questions like: 'Can you explain that more?', 'Can you give me more details about that?'. These questions can help challenge in an 'innocent'/fake ignorant/non-confrontative way - which may be useful depending on the context, how safe you feel, and the balance you need between challenging their behaviour, and maintaining calm and getting what you need.
- Reflecting it back, so that the person hears what they're saying or doing can be helpful. Saying it back out loud, as a question, or question why they said that - can make them realise they don't have a justification for saying that.
- If it's a health worker or other professional, and you feel able to, you could challenge in the moment by asking a question like 'What did you mean by that?', 'Do you want to consider again what you just said to me?' or 'If that's your final answer, can you please write it down, saying why?' - asking them to write things down so there's a record.

DEALING WITH ANY DISCRIMINATION OR HOSTILITY (2)

Tips on taking care of yourself if you do experience discrimination

Afterwards

- Writing down what happened or asking someone else to.
- Whether you feel emotional afterwards, or think you're feeling ok, going through an experience of hostility or discrimination can take up a lot of energy under the surface. If you can, plan to get more rest and support in the coming days, take extra care of yourself.
- For healthcare, you can check the 'NICE Guidelines for fertility support' (or the NICE guidelines for any other condition). You could even print parts of the guidelines out to remind doctors of the recent guidance on good care they should be following.
- Reach out to someone you know as soon as you're able to, to chat and get emotional support.
- For challenging it after, in NHS/healthcare contexts, you can ask for the worker's PIN (Personal Identification Number). You can complain to the Practice Manager (at a GP) or other manager, or complain through the NHS's complaint system.
- Reaching out to advocacy services.

When making health decisions

- If you're in a medical situation and feel rushed or pushed into a decision, another tool is the 'BRAN' or 'BRAIN' - which stands for 'Benefits, Risks, Alternatives, Intuition, and Nothing', reminding you of questions you can ask yourself and the doctor as part of having informed consent.

Find out about the BRAIN tool here:
https://rightdecisions.scot.nhs.uk/realistic-medicine-national-toolkit-for-professionals/quick-access-to-patient-care-resources/bran-helping-patients-ask-the-right-questions/

BARRIERS TO STARTING FAMILIES

There are various intersecting barriers we know some families worry about when accessing services and trying to start a family. For example barriers stemming from: services' eligibility criteria for who can use them, what's legally recognised (and not) in other countries' legal systems, cost, and worries of discrimination when using services.

Marital Status

- Some worry services might treat them differently if they're a single parent, or in a non-traditional co-parenting structure.
- If someone isn't able to be married or enter a civil partnership, it may affect how they can gain parental status re their child.

Income

- Income requirements when adopting. Adoption involves checks on financial security and income.
- General cost barriers to starting a family. Many people can't afford the costs of assisted conception support (when NHS funding isn't given), which can be thousands to tens of thousands of £s. For many, finances are a key barrier slowing or shaping their options.

Ethnicity/Citizenship

- Finding the right donor sperm or eggs may take longer based on ethnicity, or there may be fewer options. Matching with a child for adoption may take longer or be quicker depending on your background and the backgrounds of children to be matched, as adoption services consider cultural background and ethnicity.
- If you have citizenship in another country, or if you access a service (e.g. for conception, surrogacy or adoption) in a country outside the UK, the laws of that other jurisdiction may create complexities around a baby's legal parents and nationality.

Health

- Not being able to access assisted conception based on BMI (body mass index), being lower or higher than the services' thresholds, or having different health conditions.
- Health, infertility and health conditions that might affect fertility and the safety of conception.
- For people taking hormone replacement therapy (e.g. as gender affirming care/transitioning), needing to stop hormone treatments if their eggs/sperm/uterus will be used to conceive.

WORRIES ABOUT THE PROCESS OF STARTING FAMILIES

These are some of the concerns we know some people have about starting families. This isn't to say these will happen to you - but that if you have this worry, you're not alone in it.

Discrimination

- People who have experienced intersecting inequalities and discrimination when accessing health and other services may worry about this happening while starting a family. These might include ableism, ageism, racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, transphobia, interphobia, queerphobia, homophobia, biphobia, classism, and discrimination based on other aspects of someone's life.
- Many people worry about people implying that they shouldn't become parents or wouldn't be good or suitable parents. For example because of being LGBTIQ+, or disabled or neurodivergent, or working class or on a low income, or having non-traditional relationship or family structures. There's worry about people blocking us from getting the support needed to start a family for discriminatory reasons.
- Concern about being spoken to or judged in a way that is hostile or discriminatory, and the impacts on mental health.
- Not being able to access gender appropriate bathrooms or other spaces (for trans people, and gender non-conforming people) when accessing some services.
- Misgendering (of trans and gender non-conforming people).

Other

- Being turned down or denied access to support from a service. For example, access to gamete storage, trans-related healthcare, and NHS-funded fertility support/assisted conception services. This is very hard, whatever the reason.
- When trying to access assisted conception services, we know some queer people who couldn't conceive in their relationship (e.g. both assigned female at birth, or otherwise couldn't possibly conceive without help) have been told there's a requirement to 'try naturally' for 2 years first.
- If someone has a prior conviction from earlier in life, it may be a barrier to adoption.

DEALING WITH BARRIERS TO STARTING FAMILIES

- When you face a barrier, try not to get stuck in worry about having a bad experience or being unable to start a family.
- Finding community where other people have been through the same barriers can help a lot - for venting, getting peer support, and thinking about any practical ways around them.
- Ask people in your life to learn about what you're dealing with.
- Care for yourself when the barriers and hoops you need to jump through don't feel fair.
- Some people find it helps to tell/remind themselves some eligibility criteria (e.g. around health or income) are for the best interests of a child. Others find it helps to remind themselves the criteria are simplifications that services use to quickly choose who to prioritise, and don't map perfectly onto who'll be good parents. So if you don't meet the criteria (e.g. for assisted conception or adoption) it doesn't mean you couldn't be an amazing parent.
- You might find it helps to take it one step at a time. If you plan out every detail it's likely you'll find it doesn't all go to plan. Most people find they need to adapt and make new decisions along the way. Expecting this, and not counting on anything until it's happened might make the process a bit easier emotionally.
- It's worth knowing that many people start one path, find out it doesn't work for them for some reason, and then need to adapt and find another way forward. For example, with assisted conception the NHS offers up to 2-3 tries, so if those don't work out people often go on to use a private fertility clinic.
- If you're in a part of the journey that isn't directly about accessing a service or trying to conceive, still reach out for peer support. For lots of people a big and lengthy part of the process is saving money, or getting their health, income, housing and life set up so they can access services or start a family.
- Depending on you, it might help to mentally prepare for challenges at the start. For example, planning for the journey to potentially involve barriers, waiting and more time than you'd like it to. Or it might feel better to imagine a clear path to keep stress low, and just deal with things when they come up.

- Dealing with disappointment, delays and loss: You're allowed to feel whatever emotions you feel. It can help to talk about what you're going through and get support, whatever that support looks like to you.

Thank you for reading our guide, we hope you find it helpful. We welcome any ideas and suggestions for making it more useful when we update it.
Fill out our quick feedback survey at:
https://forms.gle/kk684qMurRXcScrY6

Queer Families Project

Get in touch

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