

By Michael Lavers for [ColorLines](#)

Edward Plata, a self-described “macho Marine dad,” struggled to accept his eldest son E.J.’s homosexuality.

As a young child, his son wore jewelry and a wet towel around his head that he pretended was hair. Plata repeatedly threw away the Little Mermaid doll with which his son played and replaced it with G.I. Joes; E.J.’s mother, Elizabeth, always went to the store and replaced it.

“If E.J. likes the Little Mermaid, he likes the Little Mermaid. And if he wants to play with it, that’s fine,” she says now. “It made him happy and if it made him happy than it was okay with me.”

In spite of his wife’s persistence, Plata still had misgivings about his son—even scolding him when he said his classmates had picked on him in school. “As time went on, I started thinking about myself and what I’m going to tell my friends,” he told Colorlines.com as he, his wife and their five other children drove home to Modesto, Calif., recently, after visiting E.J. in San Francisco. “A macho Marine dad doesn’t put out gay kids. He puts out athletes and scholars and devil dog marines.”

It came as no surprise to Plata when his wife told him that E.J. had come out to her. E.J. was a 14-year-old eighth grader at the time, but something had changed within his father. “I did have a talk with E.J. and with teary eyes I said, ‘Son, I love you and we will deal with every situation here,’ ” recalled Plata.

The Platas are among a group of families profiled in a unique research project at the Marian Wright Edleman Institute of San Francisco State University. Researchers there have set out to document the specific experiences of families from varying racial, ethnic and socio-economic communities whom have LGBT children—and to develop support tools for similar families based upon the findings. Dubbed [the Family Acceptance Project](#), it was launched in 2002 by researchers Caitlin Ryan and Rafael Díaz and has followed participants from their teens through young adulthood.

The project contains four components: study how parents, families and caregivers react to and adjust to an LGBT child's coming out; **develop training and assessment materials based on this data for people who work with LGBT youth and their families, ranging from health care providers to juvenile justice officials** ; and create resources to help families support their LGBT youth.

The researchers' first step was to establish an understanding of how families in various California communities reacted to their LGBT children's sexual orientation and gender identity—whether they accepted, rejected or acted ambivalently to the teens coming out. Ryan and her team of researchers started by looking at white and Latino families, because they are California's most prominent ethnic groups.

Gradually, they expanded into several racial and ethnic communities—working with families of African-, Asian- and Native-American descent and with Spanish-speaking families. Many of the families with whom Ryan and her team have worked are multilingual. Others are farm workers, immigrants or live far below the poverty line. Some parents could not read or write because they lack a formal education, while other families have limited cognitive abilities. One father in the study is a former KGB officer.

“Our work with them has really helped us to understand how do we communicate this new information to families who have a wide range of not only cultural, but literacy and educational experiences,” said Ryan. “Culture is really a part of everything we do and it's very important to us to not only have worked with families from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, but also to depict their experiences in a very real way.”

Ryan and her fellow researchers interviewed LGBT teenagers about their early childhood experiences, based on a long list of factors—their gender, culture, ethnicity, faith, values and education. They also asked the teens about their parents' or caregivers' reaction to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Researchers recruited study participants through California's LGBT youth programs and gay-straight alliances.

“We were really trying to document what are the range of experiences, because historically the perception is that families aren't expecting this, that they can't support their children,” says Ryan, who is a clinical social worker. “Because I had worked in the field, I knew it was much

more diverse than that.”

The project's second phase focused on what happened to the youth after they separated from their families, between the ages of 21 and 25. The goal was to document how each a rejection impacted a young person later, as an adult. Strikingly, researchers took their findings back to the families whom they studied, and further documented the families reactions. They then interviewed the families again three months later, to examine how the information impacted each families' thoughts and beliefs.

“We learned a lot about how this information affected their relationship with their child, with their other family members,” says Ryan, who noted she and her team asked the families how they could share it with those who have similar backgrounds. “They really educated us. Everything that we have done has come from the lived experiences of LGBT young people and families.”

As a someone who has worked on LGBT health and mental health for nearly four decades, Ryan found herself in Atlanta at the start of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s. She helped launch AID Atlanta, the Southeast's first HIV/AIDS service organization in 1982, and worked closely with the families of gay and bisexual men who were succumbing to the virus.

“I was present for them, to comfort them, to help them to whatever extent I could as they were standing by their son's bedside, [a son] who might be on a respirator, was dying and had little time left. And within a matter of minutes their parents would learn that their son was gay and was dying of AIDS,” she recalls.

“So many people lived a compartmentalized life,” she says, “but it really came together around their death.”

Decades later, Ryan's project hopes to prevent that kind of distance from developing inside families. One of the research team's particularly striking findings is that most parents who kicked out their LGBT child came to regret that decision later. Today, a wide range of research estimates that anywhere from 25 percent to 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBT. While there is little race-specific data, anecdotal evidence from service providers suggests those youth are overwhelmingly people of color.

“The first inclination of parents is not to push that child out of their home,” said Ryan. “Maybe they might be angry or hurt or upset in so many other ways, but underneath that there is still that deep bond with that young person.”

That’s one of the many lessons included in the resources for parents that the Family Acceptance Project is developing. Among those resources, for instance, is a series of [10- to 15-minute](#) videos that feature culturally and ethnically diverse families who discuss how they came to embrace their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

“What we’ve learned over time is that families can learn how to support that LGBT person, but how one looks at them has to be culturally appropriate,” said Ryan. “It has to really be done in ways that respect their religious traditions and their cultural values.”

The Plantas are among eight families whom the Family Acceptance Project has documented, and Edward Planta is the first to acknowledge the transformation he has undergone. He and his wife started an LGBT youth group after their son came out, and they routinely work with other parents who are struggling to accept their LGBT children. E.J., who is now 21, lives with his boyfriend of nearly four years, P.J., in San Francisco.

“P.J. brings out the best in E.J., and E.J. brings the best out of him,” said Edward Plata. And that’s enough to embrace.

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