Thursday, Oct. 11, is National Coming-Out Day, an annual celebration of living openly for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Some people approach this particular square on the calendar with pride and courage, others with trepidation. Then there’s a third group, which gazes at the day with an uncomfortable blend of longing and impatience. These are parents who know, deep down inside, that a son or daughter is almost certainly gay, but hasn’t worked up the nerve to open up about it. And many of them want to scream, “Would you just come out, already?”

Parents aren’t blind, and the clues are often there. Some research suggests that sexual orientation can show itself even at 3 years old. In our family, by the time our youngest son came out at 13, my wife and I had long progressed from inkling to conviction. A toddler who wore a feather boa around the house and pleaded for pink light-up sneakers with rhinestones is probably telling you something, even if he doesn’t yet know what it is.

We’re not the only ones, said Ellen Kahn, the director of the Family Project for the Human Rights Campaign, a leading advocacy group for gay men and lesbians. Recalling that her own tomboy ways served as a signal, she said, “I was one of those kids, and my parents were those parents.”

Ms. Kahn added, “I’ve heard many parents who have said, ‘I knew my son was gay, I heard my daughter was a lesbian, and I just was waiting’” for what she called the “Mom, Dad: I have something to tell you” conversation.

In her home, and in too many others, she said, “Nobody wanted to talk about it.” (She initially told her mother that she thought she was bisexual, because she thought “it wasn’t going to crush her as much.”)

Whether the parents might embrace or reject a gay child, families naturally tend to avoid difficult subjects — and so a stalemate ensues, with many parents worrying that the act of concealment could be a psychic toll on their child.

Considering the growing support for gay rights, as well as the rise of openly gay public figures and sympathetic roles in television and movies, people might be forgiven for thinking that it’s no big deal to come out these days. But the process of announcing your sexual orientation to the world can still be a minefield, said Ilan H. Meyer, a professor at the Williams Institute for Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy at the law school of the University of California, Los Angeles.

“Coming out and coming to terms with being gay is easier now, but it’s a matter of degree and not a complete reversal of the world,” Professor Meyer said. He studies what he refers to as “minority stress” and its effect on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Along with the fear of being rejected or attacked, he has said, such stresses include strain of concealing sexual orientation and inner fears of a second-class existence. “Gay kids do suffer consequences for being gay, and having to deal with social attitudes that are not accepting of them,” he said.

Young people are coming out at earlier and earlier ages, having shifted from the 20s and college years into high school and even middle school. According to a new survey of more than 10,000 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teenagers conducted for the Human Rights Campaign, 64 percent of those in high school say they are out, and 54 percent of those in middle school say they are. This early openness about sexual orientation carries a possible burden of its own, since adolescence can be such a vulnerable time, and being different can feel like something between a crime and a disease.

The strain of it all plays out in difficult and even risky ways, Ms. Kahn noted; studies suggest that gay teenagers have higher rates of suicide, depression and drug and alcohol abuse than their straight counterparts. The reasons, she explained, include the stress of being different
and being spurned by friends and family. “It’s not like gay kids are wired to do any of that,” Ms. Kahn said. “It’s the sense of being stigmatized.”

Another survey from the Human Rights Campaign this year showed that the leading concerns for straight high school students were things like “trouble with classes,” “college and career decisions” and paying for college. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children had those worries as well — but they came after fears of rejection by parents and family, bullying at school and fear of coming out.

Once children are out, the pollsters for the Human Rights Campaign found, they tend to be exposed to higher levels of “frequent” verbal harassment (name calling) at school than those who stay in the closet. Seventeen percent of respondents who say they are openly gay encounter the harassment; while only 12 percent who are not openly gay reported the frequent harassment.

Why, then, wouldn’t parents be happier to see their child stall in the closet for a while? The Human Rights Campaign survey suggests an answer: as tough as it may be to be an openly gay child, it’s even harder to be closeted. Among those surveyed, 41 percent of those who are out to immediate family said they are “very happy” or “pretty happy,” while just 31 percent of those who said they had not revealed themselves could say the same. Forty percent of those children who are out at school said they were very happy or pretty happy, compared with 33 percent of the closeted kids.

To Ms. Kahn, that tips the scales toward openness, but with caution and compassion on the part of parents. A child might be well advised, she suggested, to come out to close friends at school but not broadcast sexual orientation to avoid harassment and stay focused on school.

In our family, we knew that Joseph was probably gay, and we saw in problems he was having at school that he was under psychological pressure. We believed that keeping his sexual orientation under wraps (he’s since told us that he knew he was gay from the age of 8) was aggravating the situation. But we were reluctant to force him out of his closet.

We asked our gay friends what they would have wanted at Joe’s age. They confirmed: don’t push, unless Joe seemed to be in real distress. It’s his secret to reveal, they said. But they also suggested that we make it clear that however our son turned out, we’d accept and love him — and to work references to gay life into our daily conversation instead of treating it as a touchy subject best left alone.

We did, and Joseph came out to me one evening when I had taken him out for sushi at a local restaurant; he was telling me about ways that he unsettled the other boys by dropping comments like, “Do you think Josh has any idea how attractive he is?” I asked if maybe he wasn’t trying to tell them something — and asked if he might also be trying to tell me something. “I might be,” he said. And so we knew.

Soon he came out at school as well. That was rocky at first — in fact, almost catastrophic — but today, at 16, he’s a more comfortable, happier boy. He enjoys the music of the potty-mouthed songwriter Bo Burnham, whose comic song “My Whole Family Thinks I’m Gay” is kind of our anthem.

The most important thing, Ms. Kahn said, is that parents need to find ways to let their children know that their love is unconditional, and that their home is a safe place where anything can be discussed. Adolescence can be a secretive time, but “it’s the role of the parents to try to create the open path,” she said. “The adults have to do a little work here.”

In other words, Ms. Kahn said, the job of the grown-ups is to help guide their children through adolescence. The terrain may be unfamiliar, but the role is not. It’s called parenting.

Possible WN topic
- Pick one line or passage from this article and respond to it.