

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR SECULAR CHILD

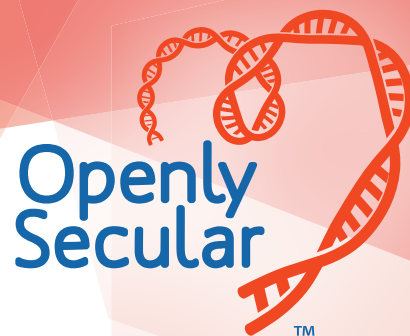
If you are reading this brochure, you probably just learned that your child is secular. Whether you were surprised by this news or if this admission is something you suspected for awhile, it's important that you know that, in opening up to you, your child made an important step on their journey to living openly and living honestly. This brochure helps religious parents properly understand and respond to children who have decided to live openly secular. While we acknowledge the difficulties of learning that your child is questioning religious beliefs or has lost faith altogether, we believe it is important for parents to refrain from reacting harshly, responding negatively, and labeling children.

A **secular** person is somebody who does not believe in a higher power or supreme being. There are multiple labels that secular persons can adopt that best describe their nonreligious beliefs. An **atheist** is someone who does not believe in any gods. An **agnostic** either sees the existence of god or gods as unknowable, or makes no individual claim to know the answer.

**Freethinkers** and **skeptics** see science and reason as more dependable than religious doctrine and revelation. **Humanism** is a nontheistic philosophy which focuses on improving the human condition. For **naturalists**, only the natural world (as opposed to the supernatural) warrants consideration, and empirical evidence is at the core of their worldview.

## ABOUT THE OPENLY SECULAR CAMPAIGN

The mission of Openly Secular is to eliminate discrimination and increase acceptance by encouraging secular people to be open about their beliefs.



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For Parents: *Understanding Your Secular Child*.  
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# YOUR CHILD IS SECULAR... NOW WHAT?

## A Guide for Religious Parents of Secular Children

## LIVING OPENLY SECULAR

*"If I come out, everyone is going to hate me. I sort of went into a long depression after I realized that. But it was through opening up about my non-belief that my depression sort of slipped away. I found my voice, my sense of self-worth, and my confidence."*  
- Matt B.

Despite the large and growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated adults, living openly secular often incurs a range of social costs. According to a national survey, tolerance has increased among all minority religious groups - except nonbelievers, especially atheists who are one of the least trusted and highly marginalized groups in the United States. Discrimination is part of the everyday reality of secular individuals, many of whom commonly experience slander, coercive religious participation, and differential treatment as a result of living openly.

Like sexual preference, secular identity is able to be concealed. Experiencing discrimination is associated with negative psychological outcomes, however, hiding part of one's self to avoid stigmatization also is problematic. There is nothing wrong with choosing to keep something about yourself private, but keeping part of who you are a secret out of necessity is linked to psychological distress and diminished well-being. So while there is a potentially high social cost for living openly secular, inhibiting free expression increases the likelihood of experiencing high psychological costs.

## YOUR CHILD IS SECULAR...NOW WHAT?

*"I told my mom awhile ago that I felt like I was born to run marathons, but every time I started running, somebody would bash me in the kneecaps. I'd heal, get back up, and soon somebody bashed me in the kneecaps again. That somebody was religion. I finally got rid of religion. Finally I can run free and unimpeded."*  
- Annie E.



Religious parents are often unprepared to hear that their child is secular. If you're like some parents, your initial reaction may be to blame yourself or feel like you failed as a parent. Others may feel happy that their child opened up to them. These are all normal reactions. However, it's important to remember:

**This is a process.** Coming to terms with your child's secular worldview may take some time. That's okay! Take the time you need to explore your feelings. If you choose, you can emerge from this period with a stronger, closer relationship with your child.

**Your responses matter.** Your response will have a huge impact on both your child's well-being and your relationship with them moving forward. Try to express your fear, worry, anger, or any other feelings of distress away from your child. Your child respected and trusted you enough to open up. Try to find ways to validate your feelings while still offering support.

## MOVING FORWARD

Remember, no matter how difficult this is for you, opening up was not easy for your child who, in all likelihood, worried about your reaction and response, about losing your love, and about losing their family and their home. It's important to remind yourself that your child is the same person they were yesterday. The rejection of your child's religious beliefs is not a rejection of your family values. The most important thing you can do in moving forward is to express unconditional love. It is never too late to show love and support, not only to your child, but also to yourself. Find a support network of people you can talk to and do some research. Visit Openly Secular website, [www.openlysecular.org/resources](http://www.openlysecular.org/resources), for more information on how you can support, educate and advocate for your child and the larger secular community.

*"Do your best, hope for good things, but recognize that, if you are really fortunate, he or she will eventually do what is best for him- or herself."*  
- Dr. Donald B. Ardell

You are on a journey. Like every journey, this one will have its ups and down, but know that many families before you have taken this same path and have arrived in a place they feel is better than where they started. The important thing is that you and your child are working towards understanding one another.