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Gay, Lesbian, And Bisexual Teens: Facts For Teens And Their Parents

The teenage years are filled with new experiences, changes, and a growing sense of who you are. But for teenagers who feel "different" from their peers, these years can be confusing, frustrating, and even scary.

It is important for everyone to understand more about the diversity in people's sexual orientation. If you are a teenager, this article provides information to help as you discover more about yourself, your friends, and your place in the world. There also is information that may help your parents understand you better.

"Am I Gay?"

Many gay and lesbian adults remember their late childhood or early teenage years as the time when they first began to wonder about their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, because we live in a society that is not always accepting of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, dealing with the possibility that they may be gay can be a very difficult thing for teens.

How do you know if you are gay? Many young people go through an anxious stage during which they wonder, "Am I Gay?" It is normal to feel this way as your sexual identity is taking shape. Maybe you feel attracted to someone of the same gender or you have had some same-sex activity. This is normal and does not necessarily mean that you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Sexual behavior is not always the same as sexual orientation. Many people have had same-sex experiences but do not consider themselves gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Others call themselves gay without having had any sexual experience.

Sexual orientation develops as you grow and experience new things. It may take time to figure it all out. Do not worry if you are not sure. If over time you find you feel romantic attraction to members of the same sex, and these feelings continue to grow stronger as you get older, you probably are gay or bisexual. It is not a bad thing, it is just who you are.

Definitions

- Gay (or homosexual): People who have sexual and/or romantic feelings for people of the same gender. Men are attracted to men and women are attracted to women.
- Lesbian: Gay woman.

- **Straight (or heterosexual):** People who have sexual and/or romantic feelings for people of the opposite gender. Men are attracted to women and women are attracted to men.
- **Bisexual (or bi):** People who have sexual and/or romantic feelings for both men and women.
- **Sexual orientation:**How an individual is physically and emotionally attracted to other males and females.

You Are Not Alone

Some estimates say that about 10% of the population is gay. You cannot tell by looking at people whether they are gay. Gay people are all shapes, sizes, and ages. They have many types of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Pay no attention to stereotypes. Just because a boy has some feminine qualities or a girl acts somewhat masculine does not mean that he or she is gay. Most gay males and females look and act just like their straight peers.

"Am I Normal?"

First, homosexuality is not a mental disorder. The American Psychiatric Association confirmed this in 1974. The American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics agree that homosexuality is not an illness or disorder, but a form of sexual expression.

No one knows what causes a person to be gay, bisexual, or straight. There probably are a number of factors. Some may be biological. Others may be psychological. The reasons can vary from one person to another. The fact is, you do not choose to be gay, bisexual, or straight.

Talking About It

Most people find that it is hard to start talking about their sexual feelings and attractions, but in the long run, it feels better if you do not keep these important feelings a secret. You do not have to know that you are lesbian, gay, or bisexual before you talk to people about your feelings. Remember that the process of sharing what you are feeling is different for every person. Start with people you trust the most. This may include the following:

- Close friends
- Gay, lesbian, or bisexual friends
- Parents
- Close family members
- Your pediatrician
- A teacher, school counselor, coach, or other adult mentor
- A minister, priest, rabbi, or spiritual advisor
- A local gay, lesbian, and bisexual support group

The important thing is to find someone you trust with whom you can talk about your thoughts and worries.

Coming Out

Because of the negative feelings some people have about homosexuality, "coming out of the closet," or revealing your sexual orientation, can be difficult. Some people wrestle with revealing their identity

for years before finally deciding to do so. Others keep their sexual orientation a secret for their entire lives.

Talk to other gay friends about their "coming out" experiences. This may help you know what to expect. Gay youth organizations also can be a great source of support. See the end of this article for a list of such groups.

If you do know that you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, do not feel pressured to "come out" before you are ready. On the other hand, keeping your identity a secret can be a burden. It is up to you to decide the best time to share your sexual orientation with your family and friends.

Telling your family and friends that you are gay probably will not be easy. Your family may respond well. But most parents picture a traditional future for their child. News that their child is gay may require them to rethink a whole new future.

Choose a good time and place to tell your family. If this information comes out during a family conflict or crisis, it may be even harder for your parents to accept it.

Be prepared for a variety of reactions including shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness, and even rejection. Remember, you have had time to accept your identity. Give your family and friends time, too. Keep in mind that you can help them by being open, honest, and patient.

Often family and friends will be relieved that you have helped them to understand you better. Whether right away, or after some time, they may be happy to help you sort out your sexual orientation and how it affects your life.

Health Concerns For Gay And Lesbian Youth

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens are not the only ones who need to be concerned about their health. All teens need to be aware of what can happen if they are sexually active, use drugs, or engage in other risky behaviors.

Sexual activity: You do not have to have sex to be aware of your sexual identity. Most teenagers, whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight, are not sexually active. In fact, not having sex is the only way to protect yourself completely against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). But if you choose to have sex, make sure you know the risks and how to protect yourself.

Gay and bisexual males must be particularly careful and always use latex condoms. Using condoms is the only way to protect against human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/ acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and many other diseases that are spread during anal, vaginal, or oral intercourse. Condoms also help to prevent pregnancy during vaginal intercourse.

Lesbians and bisexual females also must always use protection such as latex dental dams and condoms to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. Avoid risky sexual practices like using alcohol and drugs before or during sex, having unknown sexual partners, or having sex in unfamiliar or public places.

Regular health examinations are crucial. Ask your pediatrician if you have questions or concerns about STDs or other health issues. Make sure all of your immunizations are up-to-date. Check that you have had three doses of the hepatitis B vaccine. Hepatitis B is a virus that can make you very sick. It can be spread through contact with infected blood or

other body fluids. This can happen during sexual intercourse or when drug users share needles.

Substance use: Being a gay or lesbian teen in our society can be very difficult. Avoid using drugs or alcohol to relieve depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Doing so can lead to addiction.

In many communities, bars are popular places for gay and lesbian people to socialize. This increases the pressure to drink and use other drugs.

Drug and alcohol use can lead to unsafe sex. Adopt a drug-free lifestyle and look for other ways to socialize and meet new people.

Mental health: Isolation, peer rejection, ridicule, harassment, depression, and thoughts of suicide - any teen may feel these things at some time. However, gay and lesbian youth are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide than straight teenagers. About 30% of those who try to kill themselves actually die.

Gay and lesbian youth who fear rejection or discovery may not know to whom to turn for support. Try your pediatrician, parents, a trusted teacher, or a counselor. Members of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community, or gay and lesbian youth groups, also can be helpful. They can be a real source of support and a place to find healthy role models.

Counseling may be helpful for you if you feel confused about your sexual identity. Avoid any treatments that claim to be able to change a person's sexual orientation, or treatment ideas that see homosexuality as a sickness.

Discrimination and violence: Gay and lesbian youth are at high risk for becoming victims of violence. Studies have found that 30% to 70% of gay youth have experienced verbal or physical assaults in school. They also may be called names, harassed by others, or rejected by friends and family.

There are things you can do to avoid becoming a victim of violence, especially at school.

Talk to a trusted school counselor, administrator, or teacher about any harassment or violence you have experienced at school. You have the right to attend a safe school that is free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse.

A Message To Parents: When Your Teenager Is Gay, Lesbian, Or Bisexual

Each year some parents learn that their son or daughter is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This news is sometimes difficult. Most parents dream that their child's future will include a traditional marriage and grandchildren. Keep in mind that your son or daughter still can find lifelong companionship and become a parent.

Parents also often have to deal with their own guilt. They may ask themselves questions like, "Did I do anything to cause this?" "Should we have done something differently when he was a child?" "Is it my fault?" Questions like these are common, but do not help.

Rejecting your child also is not a good response. When gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens make their sexual orientation known, some families reject them. Perhaps that is how you think you would react. But that is the wrong response. It may be very difficult for your teenager to come to terms with her or his sexuality. Your child may find it devastating if you reject her or him at the same time. Your child needs you very much!

So take a deep breath and think. Take a little time to come to grips with your child's sexual orientation. You may need to readjust your dreams for your child's future. You may have to deal with your own negative stereotypes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. But you must not reject your teenager for his or her sexual orientation. He or she is still your child and needs your love and support.

Many parents find that it helps to talk to other parents whose children are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Check the end of this article for information about support groups for parents.

Your teenager did not choose to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Accept her or him and be there to help with any problems that arise. Your pediatrician may be able to help you with this new challenge or suggest a referral for counseling.

Get involved in gay/straight alliances at your school (or help form one). These groups can help promote better understanding between gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, and other students and teachers.

Join a gay youth support group in your community. Encourage your parents to join a support group for parents and family members of gay and lesbian teenagers.

Resources

Hetrick-Martin Institute for the Protection of Gay and Lesbian Youth
2 Astor Pl
New York, NY 10003
212/674-2400
www.hmi.org

Lambda Youth OUTreach
www.lambda.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
1700 Kalorama Rd NW
Washington, DC 20009-2624
202/332-6483
www.nglft.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition
1635 R St NW
Suite 300
Washington, DC 20009
202/319-7596
www.nyacyouth.org

OutProud, the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth
369 Third St
Suite B-362

San Rafael, CA 94901-3581
www.outproud.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
1726 M St NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202/467-5150
www.pflag.org

Youth Guardian Services, Inc
5665 Sudley Rd
#304
Manassas, VA 20110-4588
877/270-5152
www.youth-guard.org

Youth Resource
A Project of Advocates for Youth
1025 Vermont Ave NW
Suite 200
WashinSton, DC 20005
202/347-5700
www.youthresource.com

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