

# Gay and Lesbian Teens

McKenzie Pediatrics, 2010

Adolescence is the time for exploring one's sexuality. It starts with socializing and flirting. Perhaps a boy and a girl are in the same ninth-grade Spanish class, and they find themselves talking and laughing together every morning until the teacher calls everyone to attention. They exchange shy smiles during the lesson, then part company in the hallway to go to their next classes. The chemistry between them is unmistakable, to them and to their friends.

Gay or lesbian adolescents may have those same feelings, but to express them openly would be unimaginable to most of them, even if they live in relatively tolerant communities. Homosexual youth often have to conduct their sexual exploration in secret from their peers and their families – most of all their families. In a survey of students in public high schools, 97 percent said they regularly heard other teens make antigay (*homophobic*) remarks. Fearing ostracism, or physical harm, many gay and lesbian teens try to keep their sexual orientation a secret, or suppress it altogether.

## What Is Sexual Orientation?

Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction that one feels toward men, toward women, or toward both. Although sexual orientation ranges along a continuum, it is generally discussed in terms of *heterosexual* – attraction to the other sex – *homosexual* – attraction to the same sex – and *bisexual* – attraction to both sexes.

While traditionally one's sexual orientation has been described dichotomously as homosexual or heterosexual, parents should be aware that newer terminology like *questioning*, or *queer* may more accurately reflect labels adolescents are comfortable with. These terms may also help to address the current thinking that, for some individuals, sexual identity may not be captured by the traditional dichotomy, but rather lie in between the two categories.

It is important to note that the word *queer*, while considered by many adults to be derogatory, has been reclaimed by many youth to describe sexual orientation or gender identity that does not conform to societal norms.

## What Is Sexual Behavior?

Sexual orientation is not synonymous with sexual activity. Many adolescents as well as adults identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual without having had any sexual experience with persons of the same sex.

Nor is sexual orientation synonymous with **sexual behavior**. Sexual behavior often does not correlate with sexual orientation, especially among adolescents. In other words, heterosexually identified youth may have same-gender sexual experiences, and homosexually identified youth may have opposite-gender experiences.

During early and middle adolescence, a youngster's sexuality may be in a state of flux. In a survey of thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds, approximately one in ten boys and one in seventeen girls acknowledged having had at least one homosexual experience. Yet that does not mean that every one of them is gay; experimentation and discovery is normal and common during this developmental period. Some later come to the realization that they were straight.

Similarly, gay youths may engage in sexual activities with members of the opposite sex. Or, in an attempt to deny their homosexuality, they may try to convince themselves that same-sex encounters were merely part of a "phase".

### **What Determines Sexual Orientation?**

An estimated 2 to 5 percent of adolescents are homosexual, the same percentage as among adults.

Scientists generally agree that several factors converge to form a person's sexual orientation. But there is good evidence that human beings are genetically predisposed toward heterosexuality or homosexuality, that sexuality is programmed before birth, just as gender, hair color, eye color and complexion is pre-programmed. By adolescence, most people are innately drawn toward one sex or the other, though the timing of the emergence, recognition, and expression of one's sexual orientation varies among individuals.

### **Dispelling Myths About Homosexuality**

- **Homosexuality is NOT a mental disorder**, as was once believed. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association reclassified it as a normal form of sexual orientation
- **Gays and lesbians are no more likely to sexually abuse children than are heterosexuals**
- **Homosexuals cannot "indoctrinate" young people into adopting a gay lifestyle.** There is NO evidence that being around gays and lesbians has any influence on a person's sexual orientation

### **What Does The Homosexual or Bisexual Teen Have To Deal With?**

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents follow developmental pathways that are both similar to and different from those of heterosexual adolescents. All teenagers face certain developmental challenges, such as developing social skills, thinking about career choices, and fitting into a peer group. Like most heterosexual youths, most lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths are healthy individuals who have significant attachments to and make contributions to their families, peers, schools, and religious institutions.

However, lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth must also cope with the prejudice, discrimination, and violence in society and, in some cases, in their own families, schools, and communities. Such marginalization negatively affects the health, mental health, and education of those who experience it.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are more likely than heterosexual students to report missing school due to fear, being threatened by other students, and having property damaged at school. These youth are also more likely to have been the victims of verbal and physical abuse. More than one in three sexual minority youth report having been physically assaulted or threatened with a weapon on or very near school property, and two in three report having been subject to repeated verbal abuse during the school year.

One result of the **isolation** and lack of support experienced by many lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth is **higher rates of emotional distress, suicide attempts, and risky sexual behavior and substance abuse**. Because their legitimate fear of being harassed or hurt may reduce the willingness of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths to ask for help, it is important that their school environments be open and accepting so that these young people will feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns, including the option of disclosing their sexual orientation to others.

And it is important that parents be open and accepting of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual children, and let them know they are loved no matter their sexual orientation. Family rejection is significantly associated with poorer health outcomes: lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who report family rejection of their sexual orientation are 8 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 6 times more likely to report high levels of depression, and more than 3 times more likely to use illegal drugs and to engage in unprotected sexual intercourse. These numbers are even worse in young Latino men.

One final note: up to 40 percent of homeless youth identify themselves as sexual minorities. Living on the street greatly increases the risk that sexual minority youth will suffer negative outcomes, such as physical and sexual victimization, substance abuse, and higher risk sexual behavior, compared to their homeless heterosexual peers.

### **Can Sexual Orientation Be Changed Through Therapy?**

The terms *reparative therapy* and *sexual orientation conversion therapy* refer to counseling and psychotherapy aimed at eliminating or suppressing homosexuality. The most important fact about these “therapies” is that they are based on a view of homosexuality that has been rejected by all the major mental health professions.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, which defines the standards of the field, does not include homosexuality. All other major health professional organizations have supported the American Psychiatric Association in its declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973. Thus, **the idea that homosexuality is a mental disorder or that the emergence of same-sex attraction and orientation among some adolescents is in any way abnormal or mentally unhealthy has NO support among any mainstream health and mental health professional organizations.**

Despite the general consensus of major medical, health, and mental health professions that both heterosexuality and homosexuality are normal expressions of human sexuality, efforts to change sexual orientation through therapy have been adopted by some political and religious organizations and aggressively promoted to the public. However, such efforts have serious potential to harm young people because they present the view that the sexual orientation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth is a mental illness or disorder, and they often frame the inability to change one's sexual orientation as a personal and moral failure.

Because of the aggressive promotion of efforts to change sexual orientation through therapy, a number of medical, health, and mental health professional organizations have issued public statements about the dangers of this approach.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Counseling Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Association of Social Workers, together representing more than 480,000 mental health professionals, have all taken the position that homosexuality is not a mental disorder and thus is not something that needs to or can be "cured."

### **What About Efforts To Change Sexual Orientation Through Religious Ministries?**

*Ex-gay ministry* and *transformational ministry* are terms used to describe efforts by some religious individuals and organizations to change sexual orientation through religious ministries. These individuals and organizations tend to have negative attitudes toward homosexuality that are based in their particular religious perspectives.

In general, efforts to change sexual orientation through religious ministries take the approach that sexual orientation can be changed through repentance and faith. In addition, some individuals and groups who promote efforts to change sexual orientation through therapy are also associated with religious perspectives that take a negative attitude toward homosexuality.

Because ex-gay and transformational ministries usually characterize homosexuality as sinful or evil, promotion in schools of such ministries or of therapies associated with such ministries would likely exacerbate the risk of marginalization, harassment, harm, and fear experienced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. In addition, the religious content of ministries and related therapies also raise legal issues, which are addressed in the next section.

### **Relevant Legal Principles At The Public School**

Public school officials are the targets of those who want to include information about efforts to change sexual orientation through therapy and religious ministry in the schools. In order to respond, public school officials should be aware of general legal

principles concerning the rights of their lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. This awareness is important because of the risk that these “treatments” may cause harm to young people and of the potential legal liability for school districts and officials.

A number of federal, state, and local laws and school district policies protect lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from discrimination, harassment, and similar harms. Two important principles from the U.S. Constitution apply to every public school in the country. They are (a) the First Amendment, which includes the separation of church and state and the protection of freedom of speech, and (b) the Fourteenth Amendment, which includes the guarantee of equal treatment under the law for all people.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits public schools from promoting, endorsing, or inhibiting religion or attempting to impose particular religious beliefs on students. For this reason, a public school counselor or teacher cannot proselytize to students or attempt to impose his or her religious beliefs about whether or not homosexuality is sinful. Because of the religious nature of ex-gay or transformational ministry, endorsement or promotion of such ministry by officials or employees of a public school district in a school-related context would likely raise constitutional questions. Thus, schools should be careful to avoid discussions of transformational ministry in their curriculum.

Apart from their obligation to avoid religious advocacy, public schools have considerable leeway in developing their curriculum. As long as the school’s instructional activity does not inculcate a religious view about homosexuality, the choice of instructional materials about homosexuality does not infringe on freedom of religion. Public schools may determine, as part of their instructional activity, not to disseminate information to students when that information is not well-founded or is inadequately researched, scientifically unsound, or biased in some way.

As the foregoing discussion of the concerns and policies of health and mental health professionals clearly illustrates, school officials should be deeply concerned about the validity and bias of materials or presentations that promote a change to a person’s sexual orientation as a “cure” or suggest that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual is a sickness or a mental illness. School officials routinely consider the views of professional experts in determining which educational and instructional materials to use in their schools, and in this case those views strongly advise against any curriculum that suggests that therapy to change sexual orientation has scientific validity or that homosexuality is a disorder that should be “cured.”

It is also important to note that a school’s legal obligations under the Establishment Clause may be different when it creates a forum for outside speakers to present to students, or when it invites students to speak about topics on their own. In those cases, depending on the individual context, school districts may not be able to forbid certain speakers who wish to express their viewpoints at such events.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, like all other students, are protected by the Fourteenth Amendment and statutory requirements of equal treatment under the law. The Supreme Court has made clear that under the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law, public officials may not impose discriminatory burdens or unequal treatment on lesbians and gays because of public animosity toward them. In the public school setting, this means, among other things, that a school district must protect students from anti-gay harassment just as it protects students from other kinds of harassment.

In 2003, a California school district paid \$1.1 million to six students who alleged their classmates repeatedly harassed them because of their sexual orientation and the school administration did not adequately address the harassment. Consistent with this mandate of equal treatment, schools should be careful to avoid curriculum choices that may single out and stigmatize lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and foster a disapproving attitude toward them.

The legal mandate of equality for gay and non-gay students alike is not limited to circumstances of harassment—it applies to all decisions a public school official might make that would treat lesbian, gay, and bisexual students differently based on their sexual orientation. School officials should follow the law by ensuring that the factor of real or perceived sexual orientation does not result in a decision that treats these students differently from other students. As an example, even outside the curricular setting, students have formed over 3,000 *gay-straight alliances* in schools. The federal Equal Access Act requires secondary schools to treat the gay-straight alliance the same as any other “non-curriculum-related” student club allowed to meet on campus.

These general legal principles, supplemented by consultation with the school's legal counsel, should be helpful in the important and sometimes difficult decisions that educators must make in order to serve all students—including those who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

### **Where Can Parents and Child Advocates Turn For More Information?**

- For a terrific article on Gay & Lesbian Teens, check out this Time Magazine article, [The Battle Over Gay Teens](#)
- For information about college scholarships for LGBT students, check out [The Point Foundation](#)
- For a clinical report from the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Adolescence, check out [Sexual Orientation And Adolescents](#)
- For an interesting book on Gay & Lesbian Teens in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, read [The New Gay Teenager](#), from the Harvard University Press