

**The Risks of being a Lesbian
Gay Bisexual Transgendered
or
Questioning Student**

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How can Educators Help?

Be an advocate. GLBTQ students just like any other students want to have sense of belonging to the school community to which they belong. We, as educators, must consider it a responsibility to create environments that foster this sense of belonging for each student, GLBTQ students included. This can be done by **advocating** for GLBTQ youth to your fellow educators, the principal, the school board and maybe even their families. By advocating, it gives them and **their voices value** and **strength**.

Keep an open door/ear. Oftentimes, GLBTQ students, like most young people, need to know that they can go somewhere that or to someone who they feel **safe** with. They want to know that you **care** and that you are always **available** and **willing to listen**. This can be done by building a repertoire with students that makes them **feel comfortable** coming to you about issues and concerns. Sometimes, it can be as simple as **acknowledging** and/or **showing sincere interest** in them.

GLBTQ students' needs **are no different** than any of our other students. What's important to remember is that because we belong to a Heterosexual society, how they are received and welcomed impacts their life-long experiences. Within the school, we, as educators, have a responsibility to help them to **create and maintain positive experiences**.

A Message from the Author

The purpose of this booklet is to bring to the forefront of our minds a population of youth who are often ignored —youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, or are questioning their sexual orientation. Sexuality alone is already a subject that often brings discomfort or uneasiness in discussions, regardless of the persons involved; incorporate sexuality that is non-heterosexual and the discomfort is heightened. Whether we'd like to confront it or not, sexuality is a part of all our lives and is explored much sooner than we'd like to admit during our adolescent years.

When we are on the threshold of adulthood and wincing out of childhood, we can recall the difficulty of the transitional years—**adolescence**. Youth during this period are learning more about the world and their place in it. Junior high and high school are settings where most of these **revelations** and **explorations** take place. We, as educators, must acknowledge these changes our students are going through and equip ourselves to create and be support systems to make the transition toward adulthood and self-discovery as smooth and meaningful as possible. This booklet is intended to be a resource for all educators positively supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, or questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

2. What is LGBTQ?

LGBTQ is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-gendered, and youth Questioning their sexual orientation.

According to Russell and Stover (2001):

A **lesbian** is any female who sexually orients herself as being sexually attracted to another woman.

Gay is any male who sexually orients himself as being sexually attracted to another male.

Bisexual is any male or female who is sexually attracted to persons of the same and opposite sex.

Transgendered does not imply any specific sexual orientation, but instead embodies any person who does not fit in or conform to traditional gender/sex roles

Questioning refers to any person who is unsure of or exploring his/her sexual orientation. A questioning does not necessarily mean the person will eventually identify him/herself as non-heterosexual. As shown in studies, students who were not confidently heterosexual were often subject to the same kinds of risks as those students who did identify as non-heterosexual.

Bianca has always been a tomboy and when she wanted to play football instead of being a cheerleader for the neighborhood football team, her parents signed her up.

As a high school student she is the captain of the 3-time statewide champion girls basketball team.

When some of the other girls wrote on her desk derogatory terms about her tomboy-ish style and her rumored sexual orientation she felt comfortable enough to tell her teacher.

In the middle of class her teacher stopped instruction to address the inappropriate actions of the unknown students.

Her teacher contacted her parents as well as the principal of the school to inform them of the incident.

Her parents informed the school about what Bianca had shared with them concerning comments on a popular social media website.

By the end of the week, the school had called an emergency staff meeting to discuss the situation.

Together the staff of the school created a plan of action to inform both parents and students of the severity of such actions.

Which of these students would you rather be? Imagine how it would feel to not have such an option available.

6. Consider this Student

Now that we've explored the elements that effect GLBTQ youth, this section will disclose two situations—one with a GLBTQ student in a high school setting without support and the other with a GLBTQ student in a high school setting with support. Imagine each of these situations as if you were these students or a key player in these students lives and the powerful impact support or lack there of can have on this particular group of youth.

Jeremiah was recently asked to quit the football team because the other player threatened to quit if he stayed on. Not knowing who to turn to for help, he obliged.

In the classroom, cafeteria and in the halls, he is constantly teased and taunted for his sexuality.

On the bathroom walls, profane and derogatory language about him and his sexuality is written in permanent marker. Three weeks after notifying the custodians, the markings are still there.

In gym none of the boys want to be in the locker room while he is in there and the gym teacher doesn't let him change at the same time as a result of the other boys complaining.

He doesn't attend any social events for fear of awkwardness. For the Sadie Hopkins dance, he was asked to guy by a guy as a mean prank. His mother is tries to encourage him to go to prom and assures him that the neighbors daughter will go with him.

When given assignment to do a persuasive speech, he was told his topic on why same sex couples should be allowed to go to prom was too controversial.

3. The Gender Factor

Gender Atypical Behavior (3)

Though every atypical child will not become a LGBTQ youth, gender atypical behavior during childhood is often an early indicator.

Lack of support from family and a family's attempt to suppress atypical behavior begins the psychological conflict LGBTQ youth face.

Gender Differences

- Gay, bisexual, transgendered or questioning males face much greater lifetime victimization than lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning females do (3).
- LGBTQ male youths self-identify earlier than females (5).
- LGBTQ females report suicide attempts in studies much more frequently than non-heterosexual males, but males are more likely to actually attempt suicide as a result of their sexual orientation (3).

4. Heterosexist Institutions

Heterosexism

Heterosexism is a belief system that considers heterosexuality superior to and/or more natural than homosexuality. It is much more subtle and discreet than homophobia and is often manifested by individuals who would not be considered as being blatantly homophobic or holding negative attitudes (1). Therefore it is much more widespread and pervasive and therefore much more damaging.

Heterosexist Institutions

Heterosexist institutions are places and systems that encourage and support heterosexist practices, beliefs, and traditions. Heterosexist Institutions are the root of harassment and victimization toward LGBTQ youth (4).

A Heterosexist Society

Society is entirely anti-homosexual in its ideologies, attitudes and social expectations. Research shows that students who “come out” at an early age increase their vulnerability of persecution by society and its beliefs(4).

A Heterosexist Family

The very concept of family was built on the formation of heterosexual relationships. Marriage can be defined as holy matrimony between a man and a woman and conception requires the reproductive organs from the biology of a male and of a female.

DID YOU KNOW? A family member is often the first person a LGBTQ youth reveals his/her sexual orientation to. But more often than not, family rejects the early indicators of non-heterosexuality

gitimate and culturally acceptable within the LGBTQ community. Suicide among adolescents is a highly researched concern, however not until the mid to late 90s were researchers adamant about thoroughly exploring the issue as it related to LGBTQ youth in particular.

DID YOU KNOW? In Europe suicide and suicide attempts are culturally acceptable within the homosexual community.

According to research, females are much more likely to report suicide attempts than males. However males are more likely to attempt suicide. Contrary to mainstream beliefs, only 17% of teenage suicide attempts were related to their sexual orientation (3).

Predictors of Suicide(3)

According to a 2005 study designed to predict suicide attempts of LGB youth predictors for LGB youth’s likelihood to attempt suicide were:

- Earlier parental psychological abuse
- Gender atypical behavior during childhood
- Parental discouragement and abuse of childhood atypical behavior
- More lifetime verbal abuse regarding sex-orientation
- Earlier openness about non-heterosexual orientation

5. Risks

Outlets for Distress(6)

Contrary to popular belief, not all LGBTQ attempt suicide when in distress. Suicide, or self-destructive behavior is only one of three categories employed by persecuted LGBTQ youth. The other two categories are resilience and ambivalence.

Resilient LGBTQ youth:

- reject the idea of heterosexuality and instead believe sexual diversity to be more natural
- Resist discrimination by fighting back/ standing up for themselves when bullied
- Seek out people and places with whom/where they feel safe, protected and accepted

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is another risk that is often resorted to as a means of relief from pain, fear, or anxiety over external and internal conflicts.

Ambivalent LGBTQ youth are those youth who are a combination of resilient and self-destructive but never completely one or the other.

Self-Destructive LGBTQ Youth:

This category of youth is by far the biggest concern; these are the LGBTQ youth who employ self-harm when in distress. Self destructive behavior is most frequently cutting or harm intended to be a means for sympathy and attention. Serious attempts at committing suicide, according to a study conducted in Europe, are considered le-

Prior to “coming out” families often try to punish and suppress atypical behaviors early in childhood as a means of denying early signs of non-heterosexual behavior.

Heterosexist School System

School has been identified as the primary setting where victimization and harassment toward LGBTQ youth occurs(4). These youth are persecuted and attacked physically and verbally, directly and indirectly by both their peers and the very institutions they attend. These negative experiences

DID YOU KNOW? School is the most common setting for studies examining LGBTQ youth due to the manifestation of systematic heterosexism in school policies, programs and social domains.

cause heightened problems in the psychological, academic and behavioral domains of these youths’ lives.

By not providing inclusive or supportive policies, programs, or social domains, LGBTQ youth are isolated by the very institution they attend until adulthood.

A THOUGHT TO CONSIDER
IMAGINE the heterosexist traditions such as THE PROM. This tradition supports, encourages and even showcases heterosexual coupling and embodies society’s gender expectations....but what about those high schools students who do not fit in to society’s established gender roles? How do such “traditions” include and support them? How does the lack of support effect them?

Lack of Support

With the lack of support from each of these systems, LGBTQ youth are further forced into isolation, which leads to depression and deterioration of self-esteem, both of which are risk factors in themselves. Unlike heterosexual youth, LGBTQ youth rarely have an environment that supports their sexual orientation. And it is this absence of support that fuels suicide attempts, ideation, and other kinds of risky behavior and thoughts among LGBTQ youth (2).