

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (GLBTQ) Youth

A population in need of understanding and support

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender* and questioning (GLBTQ) youth face tremendous adversity in a society that privileges heterosexuality and demonizes and oppresses other sexual identities and expressions. Within this culture, to identify as GLBTQ is to be marked deviant and unnatural, marginalized, and to be harassed. In addition, to possess gender non-conforming characteristics often evokes hostility and/or violence.

Research shows that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism all contribute negatively to GLBTQ youth's mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being, as evidenced by high rates of attempted and completed suicide, violence victimization, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and HIV/STI-associated risky behaviors. However, there are some programs that provide GLBTQ youth with the necessary skills to combat homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of social oppressions that would hinder them from developing into healthy adults.

SEXUALITY AND GENDER ARE COMPLEX AND OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD

- Research suggests that sexuality is fluid and most likely influenced by a combination of socio-cultural and biological factors. Sexual identity, behavior, and desire are not always synonymous, but often conflated. For instance, those who engage in same-sex behaviors may not always identify as GLBTQ; a person may not conform to traditional gender roles yet may still identify as heterosexual; and an individual who is transgender may experience same-sex attraction or opposite-sex attraction.^{3,2}
- By age three, most children can recognize gender and by age 5-6, children have a strong understanding of gender-appropriate behavior. Transgender people report experiencing conflict over their gender assignment throughout childhood and adolescence, often reporting that they feel they are in the "wrong" body.^{3,4}
- Individuals can become aware of same-sex attraction very early in life, even younger than puberty; they acknowledge or act on it at any point in life. However, since many youth begin to date and have relationships with one another in middle and high school, many GLBTQ teens begin to self-identify as such during this time.⁵

OPEN GLBTQ IDENTITY CAN MEAN FAMILY REJECTION AND MAKE SCHOOL DANGEROUS

- Service providers estimate that 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth may be GLBTQ. According to one study, 50 percent of gay teens experienced a negative reaction from their parents when they came out and 26 percent were kicked out of their home.⁶
- Higher levels of family rejection during adolescence have been linked to negative health outcomes for GLBTQ youth.⁷
- In one nationwide survey, 84.6 percent of GLBTQ students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1 percent reported being physically harassed and 19 percent reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.⁸
- 29.1 percent of GLBTQ students missed a class and 30 percent missed a day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe in their school. GLBTQ who experienced more frequent harassment had lower grade point averages than those who were harassed less frequently.⁸

GLBTQ YOUTH OF COLOR FACE MULTIPLE FORMS OF OPPRESSION

Youth of color who are also GLBTQ face special challenges in a society where racism and homophobia are common and intersect. They not only experience greater discrimination from society as a whole, but may also face rejection or pressure to remain closeted from within their own racial/ethnic communities.

- Youth of color are significantly less likely to have told their parents they are GLBTQ: one study found that while about 80 percent of white GLBTQ youth were out to parents, only 71 percent of Latinos, 61 percent of African-Americans, and 51 percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders (APIs) were out to parents.⁹
- GLBTQ youth of color are at high risk for harassment. A nationwide study of homophobia in schools found that more than a third of GLBTQ youth of color had experienced physical violence because of their orientation.¹⁰

THE FACTS

Twenty to 40 percent of homeless youth may be GLBTQ. In one study a quarter of teens were kicked out of their home when they came out to their parents.

- GLBTQ youth of color experience negative sexual health outcomes at high rates. For instance, among men who have sex with men, young African-American/Black men who have sex with men (MSM) bear the greatest burden of new HIV infections. This group experienced 5,220 new infections in 2006 compared to 3330 among young white MSM and 2300 among young Hispanic MSM.¹¹ Young Hispanic MSM also have a disproportionate risk compared to young white MSM and compared to Hispanic men of other ages.¹¹
- GLBTQ youth of color report feeling pressure to choose between their ethnic and their sexual identities; these youth are less likely to be involved in gay social and cultural activities than their white counterparts.^{22,23}

MANY GLBTQ YOUTH ARE AT RISK FOR UNPROTECTED SEX, SUICIDAL IDEATION, AND DRUG USE

- Studies establish links between attempting suicide and gender nonconformity, early awareness of sexual orientation, stress, violence, lack of support, school dropout, family problems, homelessness, and substance use.²⁴
- According to the National HIV Behavioral Surveillance System, 89 percent of young MSM reported anal intercourse with a male partner in the past year and 46 percent had unprotected anal intercourse (UAI). Seventeen percent of young MSM in the study reported having had UAI with more than one male partner.²⁵
- Compared to young men who had UAI with only one male partner, those who had UAI with multiple male partners were more likely to have engaged in UAI with a casual male partner* (77 percent versus 16 percent). Thirty-one percent of young MSM in the study reported drug use during sex.²⁵
- Young women who have sex with women (WSW) are often regarded as “safe” from negative sexual outcomes. Yet studies have found

that over their lifetimes, WSW experience STIs at similar rates to all women, and young lesbians experience pregnancy at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts and are less likely to use protection during heterosexual intercourse than other women.¹⁶

- While limited information on transgender youth is available, one study found that 45 percent reported that they have seriously considered suicide.²⁷
- GLBTQ youth with more rejecting families are eight times more likely to report having attempted suicide, nearly six more times as likely to report high levels of depression, more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs, and three times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases than GLBTQ youth with less rejecting families.⁷

SOME POSITIVE TRENDS EXIST, BUT MORE WORK IS NEEDED

- The creation of a Gay Straight Alliance within secondary school settings creates a safer school climate for GLBTQ youth and decreases the occurrence of homophobic language.⁶
- Research has found that having a lesbian or gay friend is related to more positive attitudes about gays and less tolerance toward unfair treatment of lesbian and gay peers.¹⁸
- Fifteen states and the District of Columbia have “safe schools laws” designed to protect students based on sexual orientation. Only 12 states and D.C. have such laws to protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Laws which specifically address homophobic bullying have proven more effective at curbing bullying against GLBTQ youth in schools.^{8,19}

** A person who does not identify with their biological sex; an umbrella term for all who challenge the boundaries of biological sex and culturally determined gender expression.*

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Gay-Straight Alliances and laws and policies which prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression help keep LGBTQ youth safe in schools.

MISSION

Established in 1980 as the Center for Population Options, Advocates for Youth champions efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health.

OUR VISION: THE 3RS

Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people as a valuable resource.

The core values of Rights. Respect. Responsibility.® (3Rs) animate this vision:

RIGHTS: Youth have the right to accurate and complete sexual health information, confidential reproductive and sexual health services, and a secure stake in the future.

RESPECT: Youth deserve respect. Valuing young people means involving them in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their health and well-being.

RESPONSIBILITY: Society has the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves from too-early childbearing and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

SOME RELATED PUBLICATIONS FROM ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH

Issues at a Glance: Adolescent Sexual Health and the Dynamics of Oppression

The Facts: Young Men who Have Sex with Men

The Facts: Young Women who have Sex with Women

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