

LGB¹ Youth: Challenges, Risks and Protective Factors

A Tip Sheet for Grantees of the Office of Adolescent Health and the Family and Youth Services Bureau

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth attend your program, schools, faith-based institutions, colleges and universities; they are your children, your clients, your students, your relatives, your neighbors and your children's friends. Although you don't need to know the sexual orientation of program participants, you should strive to create a safe space in your program to ensure that all young people feel comfortable and included.

LGB youth face a variety of challenges, both environmental and individual, that shape how they view themselves as well as their perception of how others see them. This tip sheet provides an overview of key statistics that describe the challenges LGB youth face and their risk and protective factors, a brief explanation of LGB youth risk behavior and suggestions for creating a safe space in your program.

Understanding homophobia

Homophobia—both actual homophobia and an LGB youth's perception of homophobia—may perpetuate the risk factors experienced by LGB youth. Regardless of the true attitudes of a young person's community, family or school, LGB youth may assume that they will be negatively judged for their sexual orientation and may experience intense fear and/or anxiety that prevent them from being open about their sexual orientation. The perception of homophobia from the community (whether accurate or not) and the internalizing of negative things that they have heard about being gay can lead to risky behavior.

Homophobia affects all youth regardless of sexual orientation. Some youth may be bullied and harassed because of a perception that they are LGB even when they themselves do not identify as LGB.

Key LGB statistics

LGB youth suffer alarmingly high rates of bullying and violence in schools, alcohol and drug use, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS), suicide and homelessness. Some statistics include:

- 84.6 percent of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1 percent reported being physically harassed and 18.8 percent reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.²
- Nearly two-thirds (61.1 percent) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation.²
- 38.4 percent of LGB youth drank alcohol before age 13, compared with 21.3 percent of heterosexual youth.³
- In 2009, young MSM (men who have sex with men) accounted for 27 percent of new HIV infections in the United States and 69 percent of new HIV infections among persons between ages 13 and 29.⁴

¹ Different statistics apply to different groups of youth. Lesbian (L), gay (G) and bisexual (B) youth are known as LGB as a group; if a letter or letters are omitted, the statistic applies only to the relevant youth. For instance, LB youth refers to lesbian and bisexual youth only. Transgender (T) youth are omitted from this tip sheet because they are a unique group with distinct challenges, outcomes and risk and protective factors; information about transgender youth is beyond the scope of this tip sheet.

² Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. (2009). *2009 National School Climate Survey: Nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students experience harassment in school*. Washington, DC: GLSEN.org. Retrieved April 30, 2012, from <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/2624.html>

³ Washington, H. A. (2002). Burning love: Big tobacco takes aim at LGBT youth. *American Journal of Public Health* 92(7), 1086–1095.

- Many LGB youth experience high levels of homelessness or “couch surfing” because of their sexual orientation. A couch surfer is a transient person who moves from friend to friend, sleeping on couches. In some instances, LGBT youth are forced to exchange sex for shelter, behavior that can lead to commercial sex work and/or using and/or abusing drugs and alcohol. Twenty to forty percent of the homeless youth population is gay or transgender, compared with only 5 to 10 percent of the overall youth population, and 58 percent of homeless gay and transgender youth have been sexually assaulted.⁵
- LGB youth report rates of suicide attempts from 20 to 40 percent and lifetime prevalence suicide attempt rates ranging from 7 to 20 percent as adults.⁶

LGB youth are also more likely to engage in behaviors that may result in unintended pregnancy:

- LB youth experience twice the risk of unintended pregnancy of their heterosexual peers.⁷
- LB girls’ teen pregnancy rate is 12 percent higher than their heterosexual peers’.⁸
- LGB youth, at a rate of almost 60 percent, reported having four or more sexual partners during their lifetimes compared with 11 percent among their heterosexual peers.⁹
- LB young women reported lower use of birth control and have 12 percent prevalence rate for teen pregnancy and 24 percent prevalence of multiple pregnancies.⁹

Protective factors for LGB youth

Regardless of a young person’s sexual orientation, a positive youth development framework can influence a young person’s ability to overcome adversity by strengthening the protective factors in his or her environment. These factors are the same for LGB and heterosexual youth and include family support, caring adults, positive peer groups, a strong sense of self and self-esteem and engagement in school and community activities.¹⁰

Although all young people face challenges as they grow up, LGB youth have the added struggle that they might not be accepted as a result of their sexual orientation. For instance, many LGB youth are bullied, kicked out of their homes and suffer from depression and other mental health issues. LGB youth face obstacles including poverty, homelessness and mental health issues because of their lack of acceptance from family, peers, teachers and others.

To help LGB youth better manage their life experiences, support from adults is essential and, in some cases, life changing. Parents and caregivers play an important role in the self-esteem of any child; receiving support from their parents and/or caregivers is integral to the positive physical, mental and emotional health of LGB youth. While some LGB youth may not receive support and positive reinforcement from parents and/or caregivers, the support they receive from one staff person at a local agency (possibly a manager, facilitator or program director) can positively affect their outcomes.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2010). *HIV among youth: Fast facts*. Atlanta, GA: Divisions of HIV/AIDS Prevention. Retrieved June 1, 2012, from <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/youth>

⁵ Ray, N. (2007). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. Washington, DC: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Retrieved June 1, 2012, from <http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf>

⁶ Paul, J., Catani, J., Pollack, L., Moskowitz, J., Canchola, J., Mills, T., et al. (2002). Suicide attempts among gay and bisexual men: Lifetime prevalence and antecedents. *American Journal of Public Health* 92(8), 1338–1345.

⁷ Blake, S.M., Ledsy, R., Lehman, T., Goodenow, C., Sawyer, R., & Hack, T. (2001). Preventing sexual risk behaviors among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents: The benefits of gay-sensitive HIV instruction in schools. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(6), 940-946. Retrieved July 16, 2012 from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1446472>.

⁸ Saewyc, E., Bearinger, L., Blum, R., & Resnick, M. (1999). Sexual intercourse, abuse and pregnancy among adolescent women: Does sexual orientation make a difference? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 31(3), 127-131.

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). Sexual identity, sex of sexual contacts, and health-risk behaviors among students in grades 9–12—Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, Selected sites, United States, 2001–2009. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 60. Retrieved June 1, 2012, from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss60e0606.pdf>

¹⁰ FindYouthInfo.gov. (2012). *Positive youth development*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved June 1, 2012, from <http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>

Creating and maintaining a “safe space” in programming activities

Program participants come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have had diverse life experiences. You cannot know whether youth in your program identify as LGB, have friends who are LGB and/or come from a household with same-sex parents, so it is essential to create a safe, welcoming environment for all youth at all times.

Sexuality educators can take several steps to include and create a safe space for LGBT youth, including:

- Use Inclusive Language—Change language that assumes heterosexuality; use “partner” instead of boyfriend/girlfriend and include examples that feature same-sex relationship scenarios and gender-neutral names. Facilitators should also try using examples that include same-sex parents.¹¹
- Know Your Audience—Assume that 10 percent of your students are LGB and that a greater percentage of youth may have important LGB people in their lives.¹¹ Avoid the assumptions that everyone is heterosexual, consider the difference between identity and behavior and respect identities, even when they don’t fit with your perceptions. Ask all of your colleagues, clients, patients, students, etc. for preferred name and preferred pronouns, not just those who are openly LGB, and use them.¹²
- Display LGB-Inclusive Materials—Make the space safe for LGB students by displaying LGB-inclusive materials (Safe Space stickers, posters, etc.).¹³
- Teach Respect—Do not tolerate name-calling or slurs, and discuss the potential harm of anti-gay language.¹³ Set expectations and ground rules at the start of your program. You should work with all youth to help define what is acceptable and what is unacceptable¹²; this should include examples, like not using derogatory words or sayings such as “that’s so gay” when addressing their peers. All staff members should address offensive behavior and language toward LGB individuals.¹²
- Train staff around language use, domestic partner benefits, gender presentation diversity, etc., and develop strategies to maintain a diverse and culturally competent staff. Continue educating yourself and encourage others to learn about LGBTQ communities.¹²
- Know Your Resources—Support local Gay-Straight Alliances and have relevant hotlines and LGB youth-friendly organizations available for warm referrals.¹¹

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¹¹ ETR Associates. (2004). *Six Strategies for Including Gay and Lesbian Youth*. Scotts Valley, CA: Author. Retrieved February 6, 2012, from <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/hlgbsp/including-youth.pdf>.

¹² Colorado Youth Matter. (2012). *PRIDE Training: Incorporating Inclusive Frameworks in Working with Youth*. Baltimore, MD: Office of Adolescent Health Conference.

¹³ The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. (2010). *Back-To-School Guide for Creating LGBT Inclusive Environments*. New York, NY: GLSEN. Retrieved February 2, 2012, from http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/000/001/1885-1.pdf