

what's up?

sexual orientation

INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

What's it all about?

One of the passages of adolescence is the development and understanding of sexuality. This includes understanding one's body, one's gender identity, sexual orientation, and one's values about sexual activity. During adolescence, many teens begin to explore their sexuality and begin to be sexually active.

For all teens, this is a challenging transition. But for teens who are questioning their sexual orientation, or who identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, this can be a very lonely, difficult and threatening transition. It can also be a difficult time for parents, who may have fears and questions of their own. It is crucial for teens to get support and understanding from their peers, parents and other adults when they have questions about sexual orientation.

Why does it matter?

It is a matter of safety:

- In one study, 45% of gay men and 20% of lesbians surveyed reported being victims of verbal and physical assaults in secondary schools.
- 1 in 5 high school health teachers surveyed said that students in their classes often used abusive language when describing homosexuals.

It is a matter of emotional health:

- The experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens can be one of isolation, fear of prejudice and lack of peer or family support.
- Gay and lesbian youth may have a higher risk of suicide. Up to 30% of gay and bisexual adolescent males say they have attempted suicide at least once. Some of the increased risk may be due to societal or family rejection of gay youth.

It is a matter of physical health:

- Gay and lesbian youth may have higher risk of substance abuse or eating disorders.
- 1 in 5 HIV-positive men were likely infected during their teen years.

What are the details?

- How one's sexual orientation is determined is unknown. It develops across a person's lifetime.
- Sexual orientation, also called affectional orientation, is one component of a person's identity. It is more than just sexual behavior, and involves how people feel about themselves, how they express affection and emotional connections, and how they live their lives.
- "Coming out" is a process of understanding and deciding not to hide one's sexual orientation.
- Exploration with both same-sex and opposite-sex partners is a natural part of growing up for many youth.
- Gender identity is the self-expression of physical and behavioral traits that a culture sees as masculine and feminine. People who are transgender have characteristics and behaviors which are typical of the opposite gender. They can be gay, straight, or bisexual.
- Homophobia—an intense or irrational fear or hatred of gays and lesbians—makes it very difficult for gay teens to feel safe, to express their feelings or to seek help.

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What can I do?

If you are a parent who thinks your son or daughter is dealing with issues about their sexual orientation, there are groups and resources that can help, such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Their Web site offers parents tips on how to talk to teens about sexual orientation, how to support teens, and how to support yourself.

Find out about peer support groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens, that are facilitated by trained adults. These groups can help teens cope with isolation and fears and help prevent high-risk behaviors.

Make sure the schools in your area enforce policies to protect all students from verbal and physical harassment and abuse by other students and staff.

What Do Teens Need From Me?

- Be aware of your own biases and prejudices about this topic before you talk with a young person.
- Make sure teens know that no one has the right to harass, threaten or hurt them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They need to tell a trusted adult if this ever happens.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth need to know that they are not alone, and that they are loved, accepted and valued.
- They don't have to "come out" if they don't feel ready or safe.
- Because our society sexualizes the lives of people who are gay and lesbian, gay teens need to know that you see them as whole human beings, that their sexual orientation is only one aspect of who they are.
- All young people need information that will help them protect their sexual health. Postponing sexual activity is good advice for all teens, no matter what their sexual orientation.
- Be prepared with accurate information to help teens understand their bodies and manage their feelings.

Adults can help teens develop:

- Communication skills so they can talk with partners, friends and family members.
- Self-esteem to cope with homophobia, and guard against peer pressures and engaging in sexual activity before they are ready.
- A network of supportive friends, family, and professionals so they are loved and protected.



Gay and Lesbian National Hotline 1-888-843-4564 www.glnh.org

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays www.pflag.org

Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center 415-703-6150 www.lyric.org
Their resource section has information about youth support groups in California.

Out Proud www.outproud.org

Gender Identity Center www.transgender.org/tg/gic

Bureau for At-Risk Youth "How to Talk to Children About Sex" 1-800-999-8884

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States www.siecus.org

The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network www.glsen.org

Gay-Straight Alliance www.gsanetwork.org

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