Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Questioning Identity

QUESTION AND RESPONSE OPTIONS:

Q1.   Which of the following best describes you?
     A.   Heterosexual (straight)
     B.   Gay or lesbian
     C.   Bisexual
     D.   Not sure

Most lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ)*youth are happy and thrive during their adolescent years. Going to a school that creates a safe and supportive learning environment for all students and having caring and accepting parents are especially important. This helps all youth achieve good grades and maintain good mental and physical health. However, some LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience difficulties in their lives and school environments, such as violence.

Experiences with Violence

Negative attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people put these youth at increased risk for experiences with violence, compared with other students.[1] Violence can include behaviors such as bullying, teasing, harassment, physical assault, and suicide-related behaviors.

According to data from Youth Risk Behavior Surveys (YRBS) conducted during 2001–2009 in seven states and six large urban school districts, the percentage of LGB students (across the sites) who were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the prior year ranged from 12% to 28%. In addition, across the sites—

- 19% to 29% of gay and lesbian students and 18% to 28% of bisexual students experienced dating violence in the prior year.
- 14% to 31% of gay and lesbian students and 17% to 32% of bisexual students had been forced to have sexual intercourse at some point in their lives.[2]

LGBTQ youth are also at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide. A nationally representative study of adolescents in grades 7–12 found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers.[3] More studies are needed to better understand the risks for suicide among

transgender youth. However, one study with 55 transgender youth found that about 25% reported suicide attempts.[4]

Another survey of more than 7,000 seventh- and eighth-grade students from a large Midwestern county examined the effects of school [social] climate and homophobic bullying on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) youth and found that

- LGBQ youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to report high levels of bullying and substance use;
- Students who were questioning their sexual orientation reported more bullying, homophobic victimization, unexcused absences from school, drug use, feelings of depression, and suicidal behaviors than either heterosexual or LGB students;
- LGB students who did not experience homophobic teasing reported the lowest levels of depression and suicidal feelings of all student groups (heterosexual, LGB, and questioning students); and
- All students, regardless of sexual orientation, reported the lowest levels of depression, suicidal feelings, alcohol and marijuana use, and unexcused absences from school when they were
  - In a positive school climate and
  - Not experiencing homophobic teasing.[5]

Effects on Education and Health

Exposure to violence can have negative effects on the education and health of any young person. However, for LGBT youth, a national study of middle and high school students shows that LGBT students (61.1%) were more likely than their non-LGBT peers to feel unsafe or uncomfortable as a result of their sexual orientation.[6] According to data from CDC's YRBS, the percentage of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students (across sites) who did not go to school at least one day during the 30 days before the survey because of safety concerns ranged from 11% to 30% of gay and lesbian students and 12% to 25% of bisexual students.[2]

The stresses experienced by LGBT youth also put them at greater risk for depression, substance use, and sexual behaviors that place them at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).[1,2,7] For example, HIV infection among young men who have sex with men aged 13–24 years increased by 26% over 2008–2011.[8]

What Schools Can Do

For youth to thrive in their schools and communities, they need to feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe and supported. A positive school climate has been associated with decreased depression, suicidal feelings, substance use, and unexcused school absences among LGBQ students.[9]

Schools can implement clear policies, procedures, and activities designed to promote a healthy environment for all youth. For example, research has shown that in schools with LGB support groups (such as gay-straight alliances), LGB students were less likely to experience threats of violence, miss school because they felt unsafe, or attempt suicide than those students in schools without LGB support groups.[10] A recent study found that LGB students had fewer suicidal thoughts and attempts when schools had gay-straight alliances and policies prohibiting expression of homophobia in place for 3 or more years.[11]

To help promote health and safety among LGBTQ youth, schools can implement the following policies and practices:

- Encourage respect for all students and prohibit bullying, harassment, and violence against all students.
- Identify "safe spaces," such as counselors' offices, designated classrooms, or student organizations, where LGBTQ youth can receive support from administrators, teachers, or other school staff.
- Encourage student-led and student-organized school clubs that promote a safe, welcoming, and accepting school environment (e.g., gay-straight alliances, which are school clubs open to youth of all sexual orientations).
- Ensure that health curricula or educational materials include HIV, other STD, or pregnancy prevention information that is relevant to LGBTQ youth (such as, ensuring that curricula or materials use inclusive language or terminology).
- Encourage school district and school staff to develop and publicize trainings on how to create safe and supportive school environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and encourage staff to attend these trainings.
- Facilitate access to community-based providers who have experience providing health services, including HIV/STD testing and counseling, to LGBTQ youth.
- Facilitate access to community-based providers who have experience in providing social and psychological services to LGBTQ youth.

What Parents Can Do

How parents respond to their LGB teen can have a tremendous impact on their adolescent's current and future mental and physical health.[12,13] Supportive reactions can help youth cope with the challenges of being an LGBTQ teen. However, some parents react negatively to learning that they may have an LGBTQ daughter or son. In some cases, parents no longer allow their teens to remain in the home. In other situations, stress and conflict at home can cause some youth to run away. As a result, LGB youth are at greater risk for homelessness than their heterosexual peers.[1]

To be supportive, parents should talk openly with their teen about any problems or concerns and be watchful of behaviors that might indicate their child is a victim of bullying or violence—or that their child may be victimizing others. If bullying, violence, or depression is suspected, parents should take immediate action, working with school personnel and other adults in the community.

For more resources see: http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm

References

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