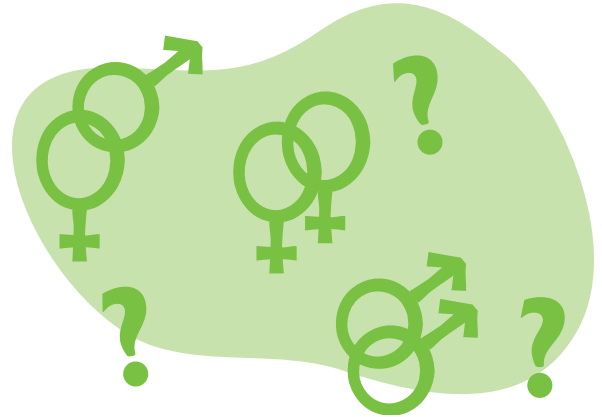


Families Are Talking

Volume 3
Number 2

Why It's Important to Talk about Sexual Orientation

Whether or not you talk with your kids about sexual orientation, young people receive messages about this topic from various sources including their peers, the media, and the Internet. As parents and caregivers, you have a crucial role in dispelling myths, challenging stereotypes, and expressing the idea that everyone deserves respect regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.



The Basics of Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to a person's physical, emotional, and spiritual attraction to individuals of the same and/or opposite gender. Some people know from a young age that they are attracted to people of the same or opposite gender. For others, it can be an evolving process.

No one knows for certain why people have different sexual orientations. There are many theories including genetics, prenatal and socio-cultural influences, and psychosocial factors, as well as a combination of all of these. But we do know that sexual orientation is not something that is chosen. Nor is it something that can be changed by medicine or therapy.

Sexual orientation is one part of a person's multifaceted life. The truth is that gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, and heterosexuals can all have fulfilling lives and establish friendships and lifelong committed relationships.

People's beliefs about sexual orientation vary and are based on their religious, cultural, and family values. While some families already discuss this topic, for others the topic may be difficult.

Terms to Talk About

When talking about sexual orientation, many different terms may be used. These definitions can help make conversations clear.

Heterosexual (or straight) refers to a person who is attracted to and falls in love with someone of the other gender.

Homosexual (or gay man or lesbian woman) refers to a person who is attracted to and falls in love with someone of the same gender.

Bisexual refers to a person who is attracted to and falls in love with someone of either gender.

Many people identify themselves as having a certain sexual orientation based on who they are attracted to or fall in love with, but this is not always the case. For example, there are some people who have sexual thoughts and experiences with people of the same gender, but who do not consider themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. And there are people who have sexual thoughts and experiences with people of the other gender but who do not consider themselves to be heterosexual.

There are a couple of more words that you may hear when learning about sexual orientation.

Questioning: A person who is unsure of their sexual orientation.

Transgender: A person whose internal feelings of being male or female differ from the sexual anatomy they were born with.

Although transgender refers to a person's sexual identity, not his/her sexual orientation, one often hears about transgender individuals as part of the gay and lesbian community. This is why you may have heard the acronym LGBTQ, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning.

Tips

to Help Parents and Caregivers Talk with Their Children

- Do not wait until your children ask questions.
- Know and practice the messages that you want to share.
- Seek “teachable moments”—daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children—that make it easy to share your messages and values.
- Let your children know that you are open to talking with them about these important issues.
- Listen.
- Try to understand your children’s point of view.
- Provide pamphlets, books, and other age-appropriate, medically accurate materials.
- If you don’t know how to answer your children’s questions, offer to find the answers or look them up together.
- Find out what your children’s schools are teaching about these topics.
- Stay actively involved in your children’s lives.
- Help your children plan for their future.

Sharing Messages about Sexual Orientation with Your Children During “Teachable Moments”

Before talking with your children, it’s helpful to consider the messages you want to share. Perhaps you want to share the following using clear, age-appropriate language.

5–8 Messages for Young People Age Five through Eight:

- Human beings can love people of the same gender and people of the other gender.
- There are men and women who are heterosexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the other gender.
- There are men and women who are homosexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the same gender.
- Homosexual men and women are also known as gay men and lesbian women.
- People deserve respect regardless of their sexual orientation.
- Making fun of people by calling them gay (e.g. homo, fag, queer) is disrespectful and hurtful.

9–12 Messages for Young People Age Nine through 12:

- Sexual orientation is a person’s physical, emotional, and/or spiritual attraction to an individual of the same and/or opposite gender.
- There are men and women who are bisexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with people of either gender.
- Sexual orientation is one part of who we are.
- Gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, and heterosexuals are alike in most ways.
- The origin of people’s sexual orientation is not known.
- Some people are afraid to share that they are gay, lesbian, or bisexual because they fear they will be mistreated.

- Gay, lesbian, or bisexual people’s relationships can be as fulfilling as heterosexual people’s relationships.
- Gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual people can adopt children or have their own children.

12–15 Messages for Young People Age 12 through 15:

- Every culture and society has people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual.
- People do not choose their sexual orientation.
- Understanding one’s sexual orientation can be an evolving process.
- There are many theories about what determines sexual orientation including genetics, prenatal and socio-cultural influences, psychosocial factors, and a combination of all these.
- Many scientific theories have concluded that sexual orientation cannot be changed by therapy or medicine.
- Having discussions about sexual orientation can be difficult for some people.
- Teenagers who have questions about their sexual orientation should consult a trusted and knowledgeable adult.
- People’s beliefs about sexual orientation are based on their religious, cultural, and family values.
- When a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person tells another person his/her sexual orientation, it is known as “coming out.”
- Sometimes one’s sexual orientation is disclosed without his/her consent. This is known as being “outed.”

- Coming out or being outed can be difficult because people may fear or experience negative reactions.
- People who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual engage in many of the same sexual behaviors as heterosexual people.
- There are young people who have sexual thoughts and experiences with people of the same gender, but do not consider themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- There are young people who have sexual thoughts and experiences with people of the other gender, but do not consider themselves to be heterosexual.
- Gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, and heterosexuals can establish lifelong committed relationships.
- Marriage between two people of the same gender is currently being debated in the United States.
- There are organizations that offer support services, hotlines, and resources for young people who want to talk about sexual orientation.

15-18 Messages for Young People Age 15 through 18:

- Sexual orientation is determined by a combination of a person's attractions, fantasies, and sexual behavior.
- The understanding and identification of one's sexual orientation may change over the course of their lifetime.
- There are many states that ban discrimination against individuals because of their sexual orientation.
- While the Internet offers a wide range of information about sexual orientation, some of it is inaccurate.
- There are places on the Internet where gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals can find and join communities for friendship and support.
- While chatting or meeting people online can be fun, it is important to be cautious because it can be unsafe.
- If you or someone you know is being intimidated, harassed, or harmed because of a perceived sexual orientation, it is important to tell a trusted adult, school official, or law enforcement authority.
- Your school's bullying/harassment policy is _____
_____. (fill-in)
- Civil rights for gay men and lesbian women are being debated in many states and communities across the United States.

The messages listed above are an updated version of the ones found in the Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten—12th Grade. For messages about other sexuality-related topics, download the Guidelines at <http://www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf>

Activities

for Parents, Caregivers, and Young People

There are many teachable moments that will allow you to share your values and beliefs about sexual orientation with your children. To talk with young children ages five through eight, the books *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite and *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman can help you begin to have conversations. You can order these books through Alyson Publications at 800/525-9766.

For pre-teens and teens, you can find teachable moments by reading an article in the newspaper about gay marriage, watching a sitcom with a gay character, or listening to music lyrics that may have positive or homophobic remarks. The following questions can help continue this important dialogue.

- **What messages have you received about gay men, lesbian women, or bisexuals?**
- **What messages have you received about heterosexuality?**
- **Do you know anyone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual?**
- **If you know someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, does his/her sexual orientation make a difference in your relationship with him/her?**
- **What does our religion say about gay men, lesbian women, or bisexuals?**
- **How do you think most of your friends' parents would feel if they discovered that their son or daughter was gay, lesbian, or bisexual? What would they do?**
- **What would you suggest to a teenager who thinks she or he might be gay, lesbian, or bisexual?**
- **What do you think a teen or an adult should do if they hear a person criticizing someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or someone who is thought to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual?**

Adapted from an activity by Eva S. Goldfarb, Ph.D. and Elizabeth M. Casparian, Ph.D. from *Filling the Gaps: Hard-to-Teach Topics in Sexuality Education* (New York: SIECUS, 1998).

FAMILIES ARE TALKING
Volume 3, Number 2
2004

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Families Are Talking is a quarterly newsletter published by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1964 to affirm that sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living. SIECUS develops, collects, and disseminates information; promotes comprehensive education about sexuality; and advocates the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices. To find out more information about SIECUS, visit www.siecus.org.

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This newsletter is supported by a grant from The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Organizations and Websites for More Information

The following local and national resources can offer information and support—whether you or your children are gay, lesbian, or bisexual; you know someone who is part of the LGBTQ community; or you just want to learn more information about this topic.

Gay and Lesbian National Hotline

This toll-free hotline provides anonymous services including peer counseling, information, and referrals.

Hours: Monday-Friday, 4 pm to Midnight; Saturday, Noon to 5 pm, Eastern Standard Time; 888/843-4564; www.glnh.org

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

This organization envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

121 West 27th Street, Suite 804, New York, NY 10001; 212/727-0135; www.glsen.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)

This organization works for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, with vision and commitment directed towards building a powerful political movement.

1325 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005; 202/393-5177; www.nglhf.org

National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Organization (LLEGÓ)

This organization is devoted to representing Latina/o lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities and addressing their growing needs regarding an array of social issues ranging from civil rights and social justice to health and human services.

1420 K Street, N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005; 888/633-8320; www.llego.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC)

This coalition focuses on improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth through advocacy, education, and information.

1638 R Street, N.W., Suite 300, Washington, DC 20009; 800/541-6922, 202/319-7596, or TTY 202/319-9513; www.nyacyouth.org

Outproud, the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth

This coalition serves the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents by providing advocacy, information, resources, and support.

369 Third Street, Suite B-362, San Rafael, CA 94901-3581; www.outproud.org

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

This organization promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, their families, and friends through support, education, and advocacy.

1726 M Street, N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036; 202/467-8180; www.pflag.org

Youth Resource: A Project of Advocates for Youth

This website for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) young people 13 to 24 years old offers support, community, resources, advocacy, and peer-to-peer education about issues of concern to GLBTQ young people.

www.youthresource.com

In addition, many public schools have Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) that provide students with opportunities to discuss issues related to sexual orientation. These groups work to help create a safe school environment, as well as to educate the school community about sexual orientation. To get involved or learn more about GSAs in your school or state, contact the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) at 212/727-0135 or go to www.glsen.org and click on the “students” section.

For books that address sexual orientation go to www.familiesaretalking.org/resources/sexual_orientation.html or call SIECUS at 212/819-9770, extension 303.