

Fact Sheet:

FACT SHEET Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Young People

Realising Sexuality and Gender Identity

Sexuality and gender identity are integral aspects of everyone's personal identity. Gender, sex (male or female) and sexual desires all influence our sense of identity, emotional needs, interpersonal relationships and awareness of our bodies. Realising same sex attraction or emerging gender identity issues is a process of self-awareness and acceptance of personal, identity rather than a choice to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), cross gender norms or engage in same sex sexual behaviours.

Research indicates that many LGBT people are aware of their sexuality or gender identity at an early age. Evidence indicates that 55% of same sex attracted youth realise their sexual difference around the age of puberty, while one third have realised this at a much earlier age. However for many LGBT people issues of sexuality and gender identity are often not addressed until later stages in their lives, when people are able to access supportive environments and have the ability to be in more open and confident about their feelings.

The Relationship between Gender Identity and Sexuality

Many transgender people have experienced identifying as lesbians or gay men before realising that their difference relates to gender identity rather than sexuality. This may reflect the lack of awareness and understanding of transsexuality in the broader community and/or personal denial or discomfort in confronting gender identity issues at an early age. While confronting sexuality issues may reflect part of the process of exploring gender identity issues for some transgender people, sexual behaviours or sexuality does not necessarily relate to a person's gender identity. Transgender people have varied sexualities, being heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian and gay. Gender identity relates to a person's sense of identity as a male or female, not their sexual practices.

Young People Identifying and Labelling

Adolescence is the stage in life where young people develop a sense of their own identity, often exploring issues of sexuality and gender identity. Since 1998 the amount of same sex attracted youth identifying as lesbian, gay or homosexual has increased, from 41% to 61% in 2004. This correlates with indications that gender identity issues (transsexualism) are increasingly being identified in young children and teenagers. The increased awareness and willingness of young people to identify as LGBT is considered to reflect the increased social awareness, visibility and acceptance of same sex attraction, transsexualism and public LGBT identities in our current society.

However there are still many young people who while acknowledging same sex attractions will choose to avoid labels or identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Many young people are concerned if they label themselves as an LGBT person they will be judged or identified solely on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity, or it may limit their options to explore their sexuality in the future or are concerned that they are still unsure of their feelings towards sexuality or gender identity.

The Process of Coming Out

Coming out is an integral aspect of incorporating one's sexuality or gender identity into their social and personal lives. This process often requires LGBT people to overcome negative values and beliefs relating to same sex attraction or gender identity issues, while also overcoming the fear of how other people will react to this information. In confronting these issues many LGBT people experience increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression. This often results from experiencing or confronting the threat of being rejected by friends and family, being social isolation and stigmatised, harassed, physically and verbally abused due to their sexuality or gender identity.

Experiences of Discrimination

Many LGBT young people experience interpersonal and indirect discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender identity. In 2004 33% of same sex attracted young people reported experiencing unfair treatment, 44% experienced verbal abuse and 16% experienced physical abuse as a result of their sexuality. Transgender people are considered to experience far greater rates of discrimination on the basis of their gender identity than lesbians, gay men or bisexuals (LGB). Many transgender people are easily identified by members of the general public, unlike some LGB people, and are consistently dealing with negative reactions and experiences of hostility. However LGBT young people also experience heterosexism

on a daily basis. That is the assumption that everyone is and ought to be heterosexual and that gender identity issues do not exist. The affect of such attitudes often reinforce feelings of guilt, social isolation, not being 'normal' and the invisibility of LGBT people in the general community.

Discrimination and Mental Health issues

There is strong evidence to suggest that experiences of discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender identity are linked to the mental health outcomes of LGBT people. The link between experiences of discrimination and mental health is considered to be influenced by the social pressures that LGBT people experience such as:

- Decisions surrounding disclosing one's LGBT identity or coming out
- The fear of other people disclosing one's LGBT identity
- Experiences or threat of discrimination or prejudice
- Social isolation and stigma
- Rejection by family or friends
- Internal feelings of guilt, not being 'normal' (internal homophobia or internal transphobia)

LGBT young people compared to their heterosexual peers experience higher rates of:

- Depression and Anxiety
- Suicide attempts and self harm, especially for people in rural areas and transgender people
- Multiple risk taking behaviours, and earlier initiation into these behaviours
- Homelessness often resulting from rejection by families
- Drug and Alcohol use

Sexual behaviours and Sexual identity

Same sex attracted youth, on average, are likely to be sexually active at an earlier age than their heterosexual peers. Seventy percent of 15 – 18 year old same sex attracted youth were sexually active and significantly more likely to engage in sexual activities such as oral sex, genital touching and penetrative sex than heterosexuals in this age group. However this sexual activity was not restricted to members of the same sex.

Who Same Sex Attract Youth Had Sex with over the last two years in 2004

Same Sex Attracted Youth	Had Sex with Men Only	Had Sex With Women Only	Had Sex With Both Men & Women
Gay Men	61%	3%	16%
Lesbians	30%	12%	30%

The discordance between sexual identity and sexual behaviour may reflect a desire to explore and confirm their sexual feelings for one particular sex or both. It may also reflect efforts to avoid being labelled or stigmatised as a result of their sexuality, attempts to overtly identify as heterosexual and hide their same sex attraction. LGBT young people's sexual health demands an awareness that sexual identity may not always correlate with sexual behaviours

Sexual Health concerns

Evidence has shown that LGBT young people engage in multiple risk taking behaviours, including risk taking in sexual activities, at higher rates and an early age than their heterosexual peers. Such behaviours are considered to be influenced by and used to cope with the social pressures related to sexuality and gender identity such as denial, guilt, hiding or not disclosing LGBT issues, discrimination, social stigma and isolation.

Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections

Rates of condom use during penetrative sex are similar between heterosexual (65%) and same sex attracted (70%) young people however the rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are significantly different between the two groups. Same sex attracted youth are five times more likely to be diagnosed with an STI than their heterosexual peers. Ten percent of 15 – 18 year old same sex attracted youth have been diagnosed with an STI compared to 2% of their heterosexual peers. The most common STIs reported amongst this group are warts, gonorrhoea, Chlamydia and herpes. Same sex attracted youth are also three times more likely to have been diagnosed with some form of Hepatitis than their heterosexual peers.

The higher rates of STI infections may be influenced by the earlier age LGBT young people are having sex, their sexual partners are in a higher risk group for STIs or that safe sex information for same sex attracted youth is more difficult to obtain. However evidence also suggests that the rates of STIs may be influenced by the increased rates of drug and alcohol use by LGBT young people often linked to sexual risk taking behaviours.

Safe Sex Education

Many LGBT young people have difficulty in accessing information on safe sex practices for same sex partners. 80% of same sex attracted youth found sex education in schools useless or fairly useless due to the lack of information for same sex partners. This is compounded by the lack of information on safe sex practices for same sex partners in general sexual health resources. LGBT young people are most commonly using the internet, same sex attracted friends, the LGBT community and LGBT media to access information on safe sex practices. However information on contraception is still a concern for these young people. Ten percent of 15-18 year old same sex attract women who had engaged penetrative sex with a man had experienced being pregnant, and of these women 26% identified as a lesbian, exclusively attracted to women.

LGBT Students in Schools

Nearly 80% of the discrimination and abuse experienced by same sex attracted youth was experienced within school environments, with over 40% of these young people not feeling safe at school. These factors most likely influence the increased absentee and drop-out rates for LGBT youth compared to heterosexual students. Concerns related to supporting LGBT students are often complicated by their often invisible presence school environments. While sexuality is not generally a physically trait (easily identified) these students are also under pressure to conform to heterosexual norms to avoid discrimination, harassment and being outcast by others. The pressure to conceal sexuality or gender identity issues for LGBT students is reinforced by the lack of positive role models, LGBT teachers and other LGBT peers who they can approach for support and advice. Few schools offer educational resources that address LGBT issues and relationships that could support and assist LGBT students.

The importance of Support

Maintaining LGBT health and wellbeing is considered to be linked to the degree of support LGBT people have from family, friends, the wider community and the ability to access quality health care and welfare services. Social isolation is a primary concern for LGBT people in general. Not knowing other LGBT people, how to access support services or groups to address sexuality and gender identity issues or having visible LGBT role models in the community increases the sense isolation LGBT people experience. Accessing support has been shown to make a positive difference towards feeling safe, developing social networks and having a positive self-image. However many LGBT young people do not know how to access services or who to contact for support, and often face real concerns that parents or friends will find out about these issues as a result of accessing support.

Supporting LGBT young people

Australian research has indicated that LGBT young people who have experienced abuse on the basis of their sexuality are more likely to disclose this information to other people. However it is also noted that they are least likely to disclose these issues with health and health-related professionals. For those working with young people, it may be useful to consider the following factors, to assist and encourage young people to address sexuality or gender identity issues with you or your service:

- Not assuming young people are heterosexual
- Providing visual resources that include LGBT people or sexuality and gender identity issues
- Recognising the high priority for confidentiality surrounding sexuality and gender identity
- Reassuring LGBT young people that confidentiality will be maintained
- Providing information and resources on sexuality and gender identity
- Providing referrals to support groups or telephone counselling services for LGBT people to further discuss these issues, if appropriate

It is also important for those working with LGBT young people to be aware that coming out to family and friends may not be a safe or viable option for some young people. Many LGBT young people face homelessness, harassment and abuse as a result of disclosing these issues. It may be a safer option and more positive experience for LGBT young people to disclose this information when they have access to environments and social networks are able to provide support and understanding, also considering the confidence of the individual to deal with the experience and likely consequences of disclosing this information to others.

References

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