

# Sex Talk

## Often Invisible: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth

### Editor's note

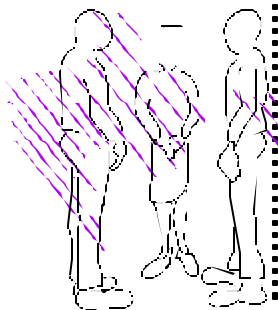
It is estimated that one out of 10 teenagers is lesbian, gay or bisexual. This translates into approximately 1,000 adolescents in Grey-Bruce. If you work with youth, chances are you have already worked with someone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are an invisible minority. Like other minority groups, they face harassment and discrimination, but unlike others, they do so in silence. Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth face all of the usual stressors of adolescence, plus the additional stress of being and feeling different. Many fear or have already experienced rejection, ridicule, or violence as a result of their sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup>

Teenagers deal with their internal struggles in many different ways. Although secrecy may be the only realistic option, the costs can be great. Some lesbian, gay and bisexual youth cope well during adolescence, patiently awaiting the time when it is safe to "come out" to friends and family.<sup>1</sup>

As a service provider, you may be the first person that a lesbian, gay or bisexual youth "comes out" to. You can become knowledgeable about issues concerning sexual orientation. Take a moment to evaluate your own beliefs and attitudes and support zero tolerance for harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation. By supporting these youth and knowing resources available to them, you will no doubt have a positive influence in their lives.

This issue of Sex Talk explores sexual orientation and identifies effective strategies and resources for working with



### Confessions of a Gay Youth Support Group Co-founder

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Sue, I'm 18 years old, I live somewhere within the confines of Grey and Bruce counties, and I am a self-described demi-dyke. I choose that word to describe myself because I don't feel that "bisexual" accurately defines my sexual orientation; while I am attracted to both genders, I have a bias toward women. Furthermore, I feel that reclaiming words like "dyke" and "queer" can be very empowering. Besides, I like the shock value. It matches my blue hair. I am also, as the title of this article suggests, the co-founder of a gay youth group called LYPS, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) Youth Peer Support for Grey-Bruce.

I've lived in the Grey-Bruce area for over eight years now, more than long enough to experience the homophobia that is so prevalent here. Because of the location of the two counties, the Owen Sound area is somewhat disconnected from the rest of the province. That makes for a frustrating and sometimes disturbing lack of resources. When I was first questioning my sexuality, I would have loved to find a gay support group to talk to and help me answer some of my questions. But there were no groups or phone lines to call; I couldn't even find a magazine or movie with a gay theme. That is the worst thing about living in a rural area; there is nothing, absolutely nothing, for gay kids here. And when it comes to area youth in general, there is no direct exposure to LGBT issues and no obvious support being given towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. That makes for a very hostile attitude towards gays in

general, and high school is hard enough without having insults hurled at you by stereotypical ignorant rednecks every day.

That rural attitude hasn't really hurt me that much (maybe it's because I fit the stereotype of the scary, loudmouthed dyke), but it has deeply scarred some of my closest friends. A gay friend of mine had just come out of the closet at school. While he was walking down the hallway one day, a group of jocks started throwing things at him, including a number of batteries and cans half full of pop. When he complained to the principal, he was told that this was his problem and that he should settle his "personal issues" outside of the school. That seems to be a common experience; many people I've met in this area have similar stories to tell. It is that blatant and hostile homophobia, as well as the lack of services for the LGBT community, that makes gay kids so invisible around here. Very few people come out because there is so much fear of abuse, particularly at school. Educators, who should be sensitive to their students' needs, constantly overlook the LGBT youth community. A local teacher once told me that no gay kids go to her school, so there's no point wasting time on teaching sexual orientation issues. With that kind of ignorance, and my stubborn do-it-yourself attitude, I had but one choice: This past August, my friend Adam and I sat down on the beach one quiet, starry evening and decided to start a gay youth group.

LYPS is, like our constitution says, a peer support and discussion group for

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lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth 21 years of age and under. The group is run by local youth under the supervision of our advisory board, which includes a minister, two teachers, a health nurse, and a doctor. (We're looking for a gay-friendly lawyer; contact LYPS for more information.) The confidential meetings are held on a monthly basis at various discreet locations, and eventually we would like to offer other activities such as movie nights, coffeehouses, and sex education workshops. You can contact LYPS by phone at 376-9420 (ext. 319) if you are in the Owen Sound area, or 1-800-263-3456 (ext. 319) if you are calling from elsewhere in Grey-Bruce. We also have an e-mail address (lyps4gb@hotmail.com) and a website at <http://freecenter.digiweb.com/teens/lyps>.

By founding LYPS, both Adam and I hope that the gay youth of Grey-Bruce will finally be able to connect with each other, share their experiences, and start taking action against the homophobia in local schools. We have had three successful meetings so far, and a total of seven people have come out, though we've gotten interest from four other people as well. Everyone seems enthusiastic and optimistic about the group and its potential. I know I am.

So please let kids know that a support group for them DOES exist. This kind of service is desperately needed in such a rural area. And if you can lend your support in any way, feel free to contact us; your help would be very much appreciated.

*Sue Weare, LYPS co-founder, freak, and demi-dyke extraordinaire*

**Sexual Orientation:** Sexual orientation includes not only a physical attraction but also the emotions of falling in love, caring for and making a commitment to a person of the opposite sex, of the same sex, or of either sex.

### Myths and Facts About Homosexuality

**MYTH: Homosexuality is only about sexual attraction.**

**FACT: Homosexuality is about emotional attraction (love) as well as physical attraction.<sup>3</sup>**

**MYTH: Homosexuality is something that someone chooses.**

**FACT: Homosexuality is WHO a person is. Research has shown that a person's sexual orientation may be set by the time they enter school or even as early as birth.<sup>3</sup>**

**MYTH: Homosexuality causes AIDS.**

**FACT: AIDS is transmitted as a result of unsafe sexual practices.<sup>4</sup>**

**MYTH: Being associated with gay men or lesbians will change our sexual orientation.**

**FACT: There is no evidence to support this myth. Most lesbians and gay men are raised in heterosexual households.<sup>4</sup>**

## Harassment and Discrimination

Many lesbian, gay and bisexual youth experience harassment and discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Much of this violence occurs in the home or on school property. Studies in the United States have indicated that 69 percent of self-identifying gay or bisexual males report school-related problems secondary to antigay verbal and physical abuse. Other studies reported that 55 percent of a sample of 15 students report verbal abuse from classmates on a regular basis and 50 percent of students report assaults that occurred on school property.<sup>2</sup> Abuse associated with sexual orientation ranges from name calling to verbal threats to physical attacks. Students who are targets of hatred and who are afraid of being exposed as homosexual develop negative self-concepts within such a hostile environment.

A number of strategies can be employed to prevent violence in schools. Develop a written anti-harassment policy that includes specific disciplinary actions for students who exhibit racist, sexist or homophobic behaviours. Be sure that the policy is meaningful, enforceable, and not tokenism. Protection of the victim's right to privacy is essential. Disciplinary action should be taken against the perpetrators. In a general sense, make

students aware that hateful comments or actions towards others are intolerable. Draw analogies between race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and age for students to make connections among many forms of oppression. Supportive material should be placed where students can pick it up without fear. Posters should be placed in visible locations and replaced if they are torn down or subjected to graffiti. Posters should include the name of a supportive counsellor or teacher so students know they have someone to whom they can turn. Just by making materials visible you can send strong messages of inclusiveness and acceptance.

Harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation is a violation of the Ontario Human Rights code. Examine the policy of your employer and professional organization. For example, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation handbook contains a variety of policies that relate generally to discrimination and specifically to sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup> It is only with zero tolerance of homophobic activities that we can prevent this form of violence in our society and in our schools.

# Health Risks for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth

## Depression and Suicide

- ☞ Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.

## Homelessness

- ☞ Between 20 and 40 percent of street youth are lesbian, gay or bisexual.

## Substance Abuse

- ☞ Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth experience substance abuse problems three to five times higher than heterosexual youth.

## Family Violence and Disruption



- ☞ Many lesbian, gay and bisexual youth experience physical violence by family members due to their sexual orientation.

- ☞ Up to 25 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are disowned and forced to leave home.

## STDs/HIV Infection

- ☞ Of all people with AIDS in Canada, 14 percent are 15-29 year old gay males.

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# Providing Support to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth

**Homosexual:** Homosexual is the name given to people whose emotional and erotic attractions are to individuals of the same sex. Homosexual men are known as gay, women are lesbian, people attracted to men and women are bisexual. Homosexuals prefer to be called lesbian or gay.

There's a "pervasive invisibility" of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth and as a result, their issues don't get identified, says Debby Minielly of the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth "don't see themselves reflected in the environment around them, so they have no life contexts that make sense to them," says Minielly. As a result, in some youth, acting-out behaviour may come from the frustration of repressing or denying sexual orientation. Minielly notes some signals:

- ☞ withdrawn behaviour
- ☞ not going to school
- ☞ daydreaming (because of preoccupation with safety problems)
- ☞ drug or alcohol misuse
- ☞ violence against gays or lesbians
- ☞ heterosexual promiscuity
- ☞ pregnancy or causing pregnancy

## be aware

There are always ways to make it easier for youth to talk about their sexuality:

- ☞ Make pamphlets, posters and important phone numbers on sexual orientation visible and accessible in your office, classroom or waiting room.
- ☞ Be aware of your biases. Instead of talking about girlfriend and boyfriend,

talk about "partner". Instead of talking about "getting married when you grow up", talk about "having an important intimate relationship".

- ☞ Invite educators into your classroom or agency to speak with students or clients. Call the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit and speak to a public health nurse in the Sexual Health Program about available resources.
- ☞ If you aren't comfortable with sexual orientation issues, make sure you refer a student or client to someone who can help.

## other suggestions

Here are some other suggestions from lesbian, gay and bisexual youth for teachers and administrators:

- ☞ Ensure students have one class annually on sexual orientation (see insert).
- ☞ Extend teaching on sexual orientation to subjects other than physical education—e.g., in English, students could read and discuss a book by a gay or lesbian writer, or a book featuring a gay or lesbian character.
- ☞ Make the board of education poster *Gay? Lesbian? Bisexual? Need Help?* easily visible.

## educate yourself

To help break down barriers at work and in the community, make an effort to enlighten yourself and your colleagues and friends about sexual orientation issues:

- ☞ Post and/or circulate articles—for example, this newsletter—to help educate your associates about these issues.
- ☞ Read books such as *Often Invisible* (see back cover under resources), an essential book for anyone teaching or working with youth.
- ☞ Attend workshops and seminars on the subject.



Adapted with permission from *Sex Talk*, Vol. 1, No. 11, Jan. 1995.

# Resources

## LOCAL

### ☎ LYPS (Lesbigaytrans Youth Peer Support)

Support group for gay, lesbian or bisexual youth. Call 376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456, ext. 319.

### ☎ PFLAG (Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

A local support group for parents whose child has "come out". Call 376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456, ext. 320.

### ☎ Support Group for Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Adults

Call 376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456, ext. 325.

### ☎ Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit—Sexual Health Clinic

Provide counselling around sexual orientation. Ask to speak to a public health nurse in the Sexual Health Program.

Owen Sound 376-9420/1-800-263-3456 Walkerton 881-1920/1-800-821-7714 Southampton 797-2010/1-800-230-7719

Website: [www.srhip.on.ca/bgoshu](http://www.srhip.on.ca/bgoshu) (under construction to include information on sexual orientation).

## OUTSIDE OF GREY-BRUCE

### ☎ Lesbian, Gay, Bi Youth Line

Operated by and for youth, this line provides confidential support for youth up to age 26. The line operates from 3:00 to 11:00 p.m. seven days a week. All calls are free and confidential. Phone: 1-800-268-9688 Website: [www.icomm.ca/lgbline](http://www.icomm.ca/lgbline)

### ☎ The Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Program, Central Toronto Youth Services (CTYS)

Phone: 416-924-2100

#### ☎ Toronto Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth

c/o CTYS Phone: 416-924-4126, ext. 456 E-mail: [tclgby@interlog.com](mailto:tclgby@interlog.com) Website: [www.interlog.com/~tclgby](http://www.interlog.com/~tclgby)

#### ☎ Supporting Our Youth (SOY) Project, Toronto

c/o CTYS Phone: 416-924-2100, ext. 264

## SELECTED BOOKS

☎ Fairchild, Betty, and Nancy Hayward. Now That You Know: A Parents' Guide to Understanding Their Gay and Lesbian Children. Harvest Books, 1998.

☎ Heron, Ann. Two Teenagers in Twenty: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth. Alyson Publications: Boston, 1994.

☎ Schneider, Margaret. Often Invisible: Counselling Gay and Lesbian Youth. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1988.

☎ Schneider, Margaret, ed. Pride & Prejudice: Working With Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth. Central Toronto Youth Services: Toronto 1997.

## WEBSITES

☎ Coalition of Services for Lesbian and Gay Youth [www.interlog.com/~tclgby](http://www.interlog.com/~tclgby)

☎ GLB Youth Suicide Stats/Reports [www.virtualcity.com/youthsuicide](http://www.virtualcity.com/youthsuicide)

☎ Community AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE) [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

☎ University of Toronto Sex Education Centre [www.sec.campuslife.utoronto.ca](http://www.sec.campuslife.utoronto.ca)

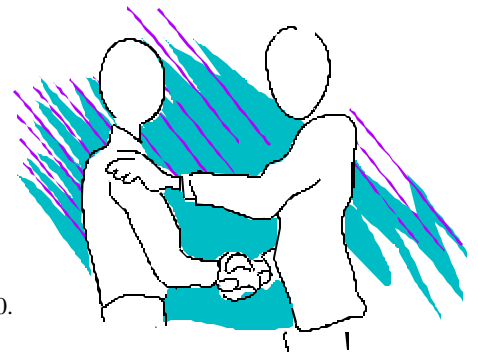
☎ Rainbow Community Centre (KW, Cambridge, Guelph area) [www.rainbow.on.ca](http://www.rainbow.on.ca)

☎ CLGRO (Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario) [www.web.net/clgro](http://www.web.net/clgro)

## VIDEO

y "Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth" (1993)—National Film Board, 1-800-267-7710.

Available in full version (79 min.) and classroom version (39 min.).



## REFERENCES

Information adapted and reproduced with permission of:

- 1 Haldimand-Norfolk Regional Health Department, Sexual Health Program. Invisible Minority. Vol. 1, Issue 1, January 1998.
- 2 Nelson, John A. Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Adolescents: Providing Esteem-Enhancing Care to a Battered Population. In The Nurse Practitioner, Vol. 22, No. 2, February 1997.
- 3 The City of Toronto Department of Public Health, SexTalk, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 1995.
- 4 Central Toronto Youth Services, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Program.

Sex Talk is produced by the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit. Please photocopy, reprint and distribute this newsletter.

To contribute ideas, comments or materials, please call Sue Askin, Sexual Health Program Manager, at 519-376-9420 (1-800-263-3456) or fax 519-376-7782.



**Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit**  
*Prevention is the Intention*

Graphic Production by Lesley Wilson