



Sexual Orientation

During childhood, it is quite common for kids to have many different kinds of sexual feelings and experiences. During adolescence and into adulthood, people are compelled to define themselves through their sexuality. Though academics generally agree that sexuality includes a spectrum of feelings and actions, teens report enormous pressure to characterize themselves as “straight”. No one is sure what percentage of the population is gay or lesbian, and there is considerable ongoing debate. Some studies suggest approximately ten percent of people are not heterosexual (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). This means that approximately ten percent or more of the students in your classes will define themselves, either now or in their lifetimes, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gendered, trans-sexual, queer, questioning, two-spirited or another sexual orientation other than heterosexual. These students deserve a safe environment in which to learn about sexuality.



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Definitions of Terms Related to Sexual Orientation

Sexual Orientation: The physical and emotional attraction of someone to persons of the opposite, same sex or both.

Homophobia: A fear and extreme dislike of gays, lesbians and bisexuals (homosexuals), often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, harassment and acts of violence.

Heterosexual: Someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Homosexual: Someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex.

Gay: A term for “homosexual”. This can refer to both males and females, but increasingly is used only to refer to men.

Lesbian: A female “homosexual”

Bisexual: Someone who is attracted physically and emotionally to persons of both the same sex and the opposite sex.

Sexual Behaviour: How someone expresses themselves sexually.

Sexual Identity: How an individual presents to the world i.e. heterosexual identity, gay/lesbian, and bisexual identity.

Gender Identity: Someone’s sense of being male or female.

Transsexual/Transgendered: Someone whose gender identity is different from her or his biological sex.

Heterosexism: The belief that heterosexuality is better than any other form of sexual orientation. The assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless otherwise indicated.



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Ten Suggestions for Reducing Homophobia in Your Environment

1. Make no assumption about sexuality. If a student has not used a pronoun when discussing a relationship, don't assume one. Use neutral language such as "Are you seeing anyone" instead of "Do you have a boyfriend". Additionally, do not assume that a female student who confides a "crush" on another girl is a lesbian, avoid labelling students.

2. Have something gay-related visible in your office. A sticker, a poster, a flyer, a brochure, a book, a button... This will identify you as a safe person to talk to and will hopefully allow a gay, lesbian, bisexual or questioning youth to break his/her silence.

3. Support, normalize and validate students' feelings about their sexuality. Let them know that you are there for them. If need be work on your own biases by reading, learning and talking to people comfortable with this issue. And always remember, the problem is homophobia not homosexuality.

4. Do not advise youth to come out to parents, family and friends as they need to come out at their own safe pace. Studies show as many as 26% of gay youth are forced to leave their home after they tell their parents. IT IS THEIR DECISION and they have to live with the consequences. Help them figure out what makes sense for them.

5. Guarantee confidentiality with students. Students need to know their privacy will be respected or they will not be honest about this important issue. If you cannot maintain confidentiality for legal reasons, let students know this in advance.

6. Challenge homophobia. As a role model for your students, respond to homophobia immediately and sincerely. Encourage in-service trainings for staff and students on homophobia and its impact on gay and lesbian youth.

7. Combat heterosexism in your classroom. Include visibly gay and lesbian role models in your classroom.

8. Learn about and refer to community organizations. Familiarize yourself with resources and call them before you refer to make sure they are ongoing. Also, become aware of gay-themed bibliographies and refer to gay-positive books.

9. Encourage school administrators to adopt and enforce anti-discrimination policies for their schools or school systems which include sexual orientation. The language should be included in all written materials next to race, sex, religion, etc.

10. Provide role models. Gay and straight students benefit from having openly gay teachers, coaches and administration. Straight students are given an alternative to the inaccurate stereotypes they have received and gay students are provided with the opportunity to see healthy gay adults.



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Ontario Resources*

Sherbourne Health Centre

Primary health care for Toronto's LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bixsexual, Trans) Communities. Provides health care, counselling services, workshops, groups, and community activities. Located at 333 Sherbourne St. **416-324-4180**

519 Community Counselling Programme

This is a free service provided by trained counsellors who volunteer their time. Anyone wishing to speak with a counsellor may phone to book an appointment. Usually appointments are available within a week. To make an appointment, phone **416-392-6878 x 335** and leave a message. The Counselling Coordinator will call you back and set up an appointment.

<p>Peel Pride</p> <p><i>A weekly drop-in group that provides LGBTTTQQ youth a safe place to feel accepted.</i></p> <p><i>Discussion/Support/Coming out group</i></p>	<p>416-925-9872 (XTRA) ext.2142 905-791-7800 ext. 2869 www.region.peel.on.ca/health/ www.positivespacepeel.org</p>
<p>Central Toronto Youth Services</p> <p><i>Counselling and referral regarding sexual orientation.</i></p>	<p>416-924-2100 www.ctys.org/ctys.htm</p>
<p>Lesbian, Gay, Bi Youth Line (Peer Support)</p> <p><i>4:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m. Mon - Fri.</i></p> <p><i>The Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Youth Line is a toll-free Ontario-wide peer-support phone line for LGBTTTQQ and questioning young people.</i></p>	<p>1 - 800-268-9688 416-962- 9688 www.youthline.ca</p>
<p>Toronto Area Gays and Lesbians (TAGL)</p> <p><i>Crisis and information phone line - 7 - 10p.m. Mon – Sat</i></p> <p><i>Peer Counselling</i></p>	<p>416-964-6600 www.actoronto.org/home</p>
<p>Parents Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG)</p> <p><i>PFLAG is a nation-wide organization that deals with sexual orientation and gender identity issues from a family perspective, providing support, education and resources.</i></p>	<p>905-457-4570 www.pflag.org</p>

***All resource contact information listed within Helping Teens was current as of the printing date. (2005). This information may change, please verify links and phone numbers before distribution.**



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Resources:

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) <http://www.glesen.org>

Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays
<http://www.pflag.org/education/schools.html>

American Psychological Association (APA) <http://www.apa.org/ed/hlgb.html>

Bass, E. & Laufman, K. (1996). *Free Your Mind*. New York, NY. HarperCollins Publisher Inc.

Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students: A resource guide for school staff. (1997). *Ten Suggestions for Reducing Homophobia in Your Environment*. Youth Pride, Inc.
<http://members.tripod.com/~twood/oldguide.html#RESOURCE%20LIST>.

Peer, A., Giles, J., Dimech, S., & Collis, R. (1999). *Exploring Homophobia and Heterosexism*. Workshop Resource Package, Peel Region, Health Department.