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GLBTQ
Youth

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Adolescence is a time when all youth explore their sexuality, including their sexual orientation and gender identity. A youth's sexual orientation is the sexual and romantic attraction he or she feels for individuals of the same gender or of the other gender. A youth's gender identity is his or her own self-perception as either male or female; that self-perception may or may not match the youth's biological gender. It is important to note that sexual orientation and gender identity are two different things – and that all youth have a sexual orientation and a gender identity.

GLBTQ Definitions

- **GLBTQ.** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning; the term preferred by some.
- **LGBTQ.** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning; the term preferred by others.
- **Gay or Homosexual.** Individuals who are sexually and romantically attracted to others of the same gender; used by some to refer to both males and females, used by others to refer only to males.
- **Lesbian.** Females who are sexually and romantically attracted to other females.
- **Bisexual.** Males and females who are sexually and romantically attracted to individuals of both genders.
- **Transgender.** Individuals whose gender identity differs from their biological gender.
- **Questioning.** Individuals who are questioning or unsure of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Many questioning youth decide ultimately that they are heterosexual and that their perceived gender is the same as their biological gender.
- **Straight or Heterosexual.** Individuals who are sexually and romantically attracted to individuals of the other gender.
- **Coming Out.** The process of accepting and publicly disclosing a GLBTQ sexual orientation or gender identity. Youth may be out in certain situations or to certain people and not in other situations or to other people.
- **Gender Expression.** The outward expression of one's gender identity in behavior, clothing, and body characteristics.
- **Homophobia.** Hostility or hatred ranging from verbal comments to physical attacks directed at GLBTQ individuals solely on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Challenges Facing GLBTQ Youth

The process of exploring sexuality can be relatively simple for some youth but more complex for others. In our culture, there may be stigma attached to same-sex sexual and romantic relationships and to a gender identity that differs from

biological gender. Such stigma can be expressed in hostile attitudes and behavior. So youth who feel sexual and romantic attraction to individuals of the same gender or whose gender identity does not match their biological identity can experience difficulties that other youth do not face.

Many GLBTQ youth experience some form of homophobia, as reported in various surveys:

- 84 percent of GLBTQ youth reported that others called them names or verbally threatened them at school.
- 39 percent of GLBTQ youth reported being physically attacked.
- 28 percent of GLBTQ youth reported dropping out of school because of peer harassment.
- 26 percent of GLBT youth reported that they were thrown out of their home when they came out to their parents; between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth identified themselves as GLBTQ.
- Many GLBTQ youth reported being verbally or physically harassed by staff or peers when using social services such as homeless shelters, foster placements, and youth programs.

GLBTQ youth also face other challenges:

- 33 percent of GLBTQ youth reported attempting suicide in the last year, compared to 8 percent of straight youth.
- GLBTQ youth exhibited risky sex behaviors and drug and alcohol use more frequently than straight youth.

GLBTQ Youth in WIA Youth Programs

A youth's GLBTQ status is not a factor in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth program eligibility, but many GLBTQ youth are served in WIA youth programs. Naturally, WIA youth programs should create a positive environment that ensures the physical and emotional safety of *all* youth. Likewise, WIA youth programs should ensure the physical and emotional safety of GLBTQ youth by instituting practices that create a positive environment.

Creating a Positive Environment for GLBTQ Youth

- In all likelihood, some of the youth you serve are GLBTQ; 3-5 percent of people in the US identify themselves as GLBTQ. So, don't assume that all youth you encounter are straight. And don't assume that GLBTQ youth will come out to you.
- Don't assume you can identify GLBTQ youth based on stereotypes. Many gay male youth act as masculine as straight male youth; many gay female youth act as feminine as straight female youth.
- Your interactions with GLBTQ youth should be the same as your interactions with all other youth, regardless of your own beliefs, values, or knowledge about same-sex behavior or relationships.
- **Never** disclose information about a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity to anyone without the youth's express permission.
- Maintain the same sexual behavioral expectations for GLBTQ youth as for heterosexual youth. For instance, if a heterosexual couple is permitted to hold hands or express affection in public, a gay or lesbian couple should also be permitted to do so.
- Do not use or permit homophobic speech.
- Use gender-neutral language with all youth, even when making casual conversation. For example, ask a youth "Are you seeing somebody?" rather than "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Creating a Positive Environment for GLBTQ Youth (continued)

- Create a physical environment that indicates that GLBTQ youth are welcome. For example, display the rainbow flag, pink triangle, lambda symbol, or gay-themed posters.
- If a youth chooses to come out to you, respond nonjudgmentally regardless of your own personal beliefs, values, or opinions.
- Assure that all service providers create a positive environment that ensures the physical and emotional safety of all youth, including GLBTQ youth.
- Respond promptly to any indications that GLBTQ youth are suffering harassment or unequal treatment.
- Refer GLBTQ youth and their families to other community resources, including GLBTQ resources.
- Provide families with information and resources and opportunities to discuss their feelings and issues of concern.
- When needed, refer all youth, including GLBTQ youth, to health care services that provide developmentally appropriate sexual health care and information.

Many of the practices recommended for GLBTQ youth in WIA youth programs also help to create a welcoming and supportive environment for all youth. So those practices can help all youth to successfully transition to adult roles and achieve their educational and employment goals.

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