



AMERICAN COUNSELING  
ASSOCIATION

# Inclusion and Well-Being of LGBTQ Youth - TIP SHEET

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**Introduction:** Adolescence can be difficult and challenging in the best of conditions. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth face the same issues that all adolescents do, however, they must often do so through the lens of homophobia. Fortunately, society has advanced and there is greater appreciation for different orientations and identities. Unfortunately, homophobia is real and ubiquitous, and our LGBTQ youth still face difficulty across many fronts, including home, school, and religious organizations as they strive to develop healthy and positive self-identities.

The following tips may be helpful to those who serve in mentoring or advisory roles with LGBTQ youth.

- Explore your own internalized homophobia. We were all raised in a society that teaches us there is something wrong with different orientations and identities. Explore your own beliefs and stereotypes about sexual minority youth. Assess your own comfort level with your sexual orientation and gender identity. Remember, LGBTQ youth are hyper-vigilant, often looking for signs of prejudice and disregard. The onus is on you to prove you are different from the rest of society: you are safe and trustworthy.
- Educate yourself. There are a number of wonderful organizations you can engage with, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), Gay and Lesbian Educators Network (GLSEN), and Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).
- Allow for and expect ambiguity. Remember, adolescence is a time for exploration. Avoid rushing or forcing labels. Accept and affirm experimentation.
- Avoid over-sexualizing LGBTQ youth. They are no different from other adolescents in terms of examining burgeoning sexuality.
- Challenge negative and derogatory language. Defy name-calling and use of phrases that are demeaning such as "that is so gay" or "gay people are sick and perverted."
- Respect confidentiality. If a LGBTQ youth trusts you with information about his/her orientation or identity, treat it as a gift because you have been deemed trustworthy. You may be the first person he has opened up to, and it's important to honor his privacy.
- Do not assume heterosexuality when working with youth. Always use language that is inclusive, and send a message that all are important and warrant respect.
- Understand the devastating impact of bullying. LGBTQ youth and those who are perceived to be LGBTQ are at greater risk for bullying. If a LGBTQ youth tells you she is being bullied, do not take it lightly. Listen closely and be prepared to serve as an advocate in order to help and protect.
- Take the experience of homophobia seriously. The risk of suicide among LGBTQ youth is 2–3 times higher than that of other adolescents. Feelings of self-hate and shame are not uncommon. Exercise active listening without judgment.

### **Taking Action:**

If you observe teasing or overhear derogatory comments targeting an LGBTQ youth, stop and take a moment to remind everyone that you are operating a safe space and there is zero tolerance for hostility. Be a role model and stand up—interrupt name-calling, teasing, and bullying and address it head on.

Make it a teachable moment. Remember, ignoring hateful comments or behavior gives implicit permission to let the negative behaviors continue. Make a real effort to speak with the group about the comments you overheard and why they are wrong and hurtful. Remind everyone that differences are okay, neither good nor bad, just different.

Be sure to explain that malicious teasing and name-calling can be considered bullying. Discuss why it's so difficult for the individuals who are being bullied to speak out, and explore the problem with ignoring this type of behavior (also known as "bystanding"). Ask why they think the derogatory comments and negative behaviors are so pervasive and what they think should be done about it.

**In summary:** As someone on the "front lines" who works directly with youth, you have the opportunity to honor, affirm, and support our LGBTQ youth. You may be the only one who provides affirmation in an LGBTQ youth's life. Value that role and know that you can make a huge difference.