

## **Working With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Youth: Cultural Considerations for Working With Youth of Color**

Issues of sexuality look different in each culture. Each student who comes to you with questions regarding sexuality will have her or his own culturally based assumptions and stereotypes. This cultural support group is essential in creating a positive sense of self-identity for youth. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth of color who have the courage to “come out” risk losing not only the support of their family but may also experience the loss of their cultural support group. School health professionals need to consider their own cultural stereotypes to be successful in assisting LGB youth of color.

A student’s identity includes issues related to age, gender, race, class, and culture. All of these factors combine to make the discussion of sexual orientation complex. Cultural issues must be considered when creating a safe place for a student’s questions about sexuality. When working with immigrant students, it is helpful to assess where the student and family are in terms of an acculturation process. When working with youth of color, assessment of the student’s situation relative to his or her culture will assist the school health professional in bridging potential cultural gaps.

In most cultures, there are definitive roles for each family member that may place additional pressures on students questioning their sexual orientation. For instance, in traditional Chinese families, the role of the first son is to marry and perpetuate the family surnames. This may be unrealistic for a gay male student.

Pay close attention to the student’s vocabulary, as labels in one culture may not be understood in another. Ask the student to explain any unfamiliar terms that may be used. Ask the student to define any culturally specific words you do not know. If the student feels that the school health professional is non-judgmental and sensitive to her or his cultural needs, he or she will be more likely to feel safe when discussing sensitive issues.

Although youth of color may initially appear enthusiastic to attend support groups or seek counseling at school, some LGB youth of color may have difficulty remaining involved if their cultural background is not understood and affirmed. Students frequently complain about being the “only one.” This feeling may occur for LGB youth of color in two ways. First, he or she may experience feeling different within their own family and culture. In addition, the student may feel isolated in LGB youth support groups where he or she had hoped to fit in. Subsequently, the student may begin to feel discouraged and lose interest in participating.

Consider how you may assist the student in finding community-based organizations serving LGB people of color. Some community-based organizations have pen-pal programs or online computer programs available for young people. If diversity is not a strength of your immediate area, attempt to locate resources in metropolitan areas that may be able to refer groups, individuals, or publications that will be of assistance.

As school health professionals working with lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth of color, you need to remain aware that although there may be similarities that occur in youth of particular cultures, one student's story or situation should not be seen as stereotypical of a particular cultural identity. Each student's story is unique. The goal of the school health professional should be to understand and support the awareness of the student's sexual orientation in the context of an individual community.

### **Potential Questions for Youth of Color**

Do you have a support system within your family?

Have you told anyone in your family about your feelings?

What have you heard about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from your family?

Can you name someone in your family or extended family who might be a source of support?

Are you newly arrived in the United States?

How many generations has your family been in the United States? (This may affect how the family views sexual diversity and adapts to differences.)

Were you concerned about issues of sexual orientation in your country of origin?

How were you received in your country of origin (if the student identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual)?

Do you have the language capabilities to discuss sexual orientation with your family (if the student speaks English, but English is not the language spoken at home)?

What are your family's expectations for you within your family? (Is the student the first son? The only child? Oldest daughter?)

Is there a conflict regarding your role in the family apart from sexual orientation?

How do you feel about those conflicts?

How do you feel about yourself in the family structure?

How do you think your sexual orientation will affect your role in the family?

How do you think your sexual orientation will affect your family's expectations?

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