

## **Assisting Students With Sexual Orientation Disclosure (The “Coming Out” Process)**

The ability of school health professionals to discuss sexuality, provide education, and give support about issues of sexual orientation may prevent sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection, among LGB youth. These discussions may also reduce the use of drugs and alcohol, which many LGB adolescents may use to cope with the isolation they experience.

### **What is “Coming Out?”**

Coming out is the popular term used to describe disclosure to others that one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Coming out is not a one-time occasion. Coming out is often described as a life-long process that involves a widening circle of friends, family, and acquaintances.

### **How Can the School Health Professional Assist with Students Who May Want to Disclose Sexual Orientation?**

Be yourself. The student approached you because he or she likes and/or trusts you. Use the vocabulary that the student uses. If the student uses the term “homosexual,” follow the student’s lead. If he or she does not use those words, do not assume the student is confused about issues of her or his sexual orientation. Rather, the student may not be comfortable with those words. Students who disclose issues about sexuality usually have the same stereotypes, misinformation, sexual prejudice, and fears that anyone in our society may have. Be aware of your own strengths and limitations. Are you comfortable discussing issues of sexuality in general? Ask yourself how knowledgeable you are around issues of homosexuality/bisexuality. Are you comfortable affirming a student’s sexuality, regardless of what it might be? Create a safe space for the student by assuring the student (when appropriate) that what is shared with you is respected and will remain confidential. To avoid misunderstanding, clarify with the student the situations in which you feel you would need to share the information.

### **What Questions Should the School Health Professional Ask? What Suggestions Can Be Made?**

It is important for the school health professional to explore her or his own knowledge of sexual orientation. Those people to whom the young person discloses her or his sexual orientation may have limited or stereotyped information about what it means to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Having some basic information will be helpful in answering student questions. Know your community resources and utilize them.

Assuming the student wants to discuss sexual orientation with you, the following questions might be helpful:

“How can I be of help to you?”

“How/when did you come to this awareness?”

“How has the growing awareness been for you? Has it been easy? Difficult?”

“Have you discussed this with anyone else? How did they respond?”

Suggest that the student do some reading on the topic of sexual orientation. Reading is a safe way for the student to learn about the feelings he or she may be experiencing. Be certain to offer necessary information regarding HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as drug and alcohol abuse information. Additionally, ask the student the same questions you would of anyone who came to see you regarding their personal life:

“Do you have many friends?”

“Do your friends know about your feelings?”

“Is there a peer you can trust?”

“Do your parents/guardians know? How do they feel about this?”

“Do any other family members know? Are they supportive?”

“Are there any adults outside of the family who are supportive and are positive role models?”

Be sensitive to what students reveal about family, as families play a crucial role in aiding LGB youth in dealing with and accepting their own sexuality. Be especially aware of how cultural issues may affect a family’s reaction to knowing that their son is gay or their daughter is lesbian.

Ask the student if he or she is dating anyone and, if yes, how that relationship is going. This lets the student know that you understand that they might be romantically involved. Be prepared for any number of answers to this question. A student may be involved or may have been involved in any number of relationships with both the same and the opposite sex.

In a private conversation with a student, an important area to explore is sexual activity. If a student trusts you, it is important to provide education about both abstinence and barrier protection. Remember that this part of the discussion is an important educational tool. A student’s understanding of protected sexual activity may be inaccurate. The ability to discuss this may reduce a student’s risk for sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and HIV.

Questions may include:

“Are you sexually active? What does sexually active mean to you?”

“Do you know about safe(r) sex? Explain to me what this term means to you.”

“Do you understand how sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV) occur? Tell me how.”

### **When is a Student Ready to Share the News With Others?**

If the student has not already discussed sexual orientation with friends or family, the supportive environment you have created may lead the young person to assume that others will respond in a similar manner. Caution the student that others may not be as receptive as you have been. Encourage her or him to take the time to consider carefully with whom to share their sexual orientation, as well as the appropriate times and situations. The personal safety of the young person is a paramount consideration. Ask the adolescent to consider who else can also provide you with support?

It is to be hoped that the young person has been able to confide in at least one peer who can also provide support. This peer support is an important adjunct to the encouragement you provide. You can facilitate discussion between the student and peers by meeting with them. Remind the students' peers that coming out is a personal choice and they should respect the privacy of their lesbian/gay/bisexual friend. Information about sexuality should remain confidential and treated with respect.

The student should be asked "Are you comfortable and happy with your sexuality?" If the student is still questioning issues of sexuality and experiencing periods of depression or confusion, it might be better to wait before telling family and friends. Coming out to others requires courage and may demand patience and energy. Unless the young person is comfortable with her or his sexual awareness, dealing with the concerns of others may prove a liability. Encourage the student to talk with you, another supportive adult, or another professional to sort out the issues where concern still lingers.

It is important to explore timing with students when they are considering telling their family. Explore the student's family relationships in general. Are there stresses at home that may make it more difficult for the student at this time? It is a good idea to inquire whether the student is attending school regularly and whether he or she feels safe and supported at school.

If the student is financially dependent upon the family, and if the family does not receive the news well, will the young person be forced from home? It is believed that the largest numbers of young persons living on the street are there because their parents did not accept their sexual orientation.

Inquire whether the family has preconceived notions about sexual orientation that another adult can assist them in confronting. It may be helpful for you or another professional to assist the student in telling the family. The presence of another adult may calm parental/guardian concerns for their child as well as provide important education and resources.

Finally, be sensitive to the cultural and religious background of the family, as it may play an important role in how a young person's sexual orientation is received.

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