



Who Am I? Exploring Your Sexuality

Being a teen is an exciting time but also a time of stress, pressure, and confusion. As a youth in foster care, you may often have worries, questions and confusion about family, school, relationships, health, sex and even sexual identity. It becomes complicated if you are questioning whether you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Determining Identity

How do you know if you are straight, gay or lesbian? It is normal to question sexual identity. Figuring out sexual identity takes time. *LGBTQ* is a term most commonly used to describe various sexual identities. *LGBTQ* stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and questioning. The following terms might help you if you're questioning your identity.

- *Sexual orientation* refers to a person's attraction to people of the same sex (homosexual), opposite sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual).
- *Gender identity* refers to a person's identification as a female or male, regardless of the person's biological gender.
- *Transgender people* are people who were born one gender but really feel like they're the other gender.
- Get answers to questions about sexual orientation at http://www.deanofstudents.ilstu.edu/downloads/Be_Yourself.pdf.
- Frequently asked questions about identity are also found at: <http://www.transproud.com/faq.html>.

It is important to know that:

- Being gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning is normal and healthy.
- It takes time to know who you are. It's okay to be unsure if you are gay or straight.
- You are not alone! There are thousands of teens and adults questioning if they are gay.

Many wonder if they are the only one trying to figure this out!

- Many teens are trying to find a trusted person to talk to about it.
- Be true to yourself. Sexuality develops over time. If you think you are *LGBTQ*, don't be afraid of it.
- Ignore the stereotypes. Some people fit them, others do not. Gay people, like others, act all kinds of ways, dress in many ways and have many interests and talents. Stereotypes come from lack of information and understanding of diverse people.
- You will know when you know.

Stereotypes

A.J. is 16 years old and in high school. Even though he has moved three times in the last three years to different foster homes, he has been able to keep focused on high school sports. He is a high scoring center for the basketball team and sings in the school choir. A.J. plans to graduate and attend an auto mechanics school.

Tiana, also in foster care, has been living with the same foster family for the past four years. She is a petite 17 year old, has long straight black hair and is quiet. She is a writer for the local Boys and Girls Club Newsletter and likes to read mystery novels. Tiana hopes to be a teacher, write some day, and raise children of her own.

Some people think that they can tell who is gay or lesbian by a person's interests or appearance. Do you think that either of these teens is gay or lesbian? It is difficult to determine a person's sexual orientation based on interests or looks.

Though some may look or behave according to certain stereotypes, there is no way of knowing their sexual identity unless they tell others publicly or "come out" or "out of the closet" as it is sometimes described.

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At Risk but Not Alone

Approximately 5% to 10% of the population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. There are many youth in foster care who are LGBTQ.

Along with the challenges that all kids deal with, kids who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and questioning may face prejudice, discrimination, and verbal and physical violence in their schools and families. Often, kids who have identified or are questioning their sexual identity, deal with the issues by using alcohol, drugs or having suicidal thoughts.

Be supportive and respectful of LGBTQ kids. If you're finding that students and others aren't supporting you, reach out to your teachers, parents, or the LGBTQ community for help. With their help, you might be able to start a Gay-Straight Alliance group. Some schools have brought in speakers to talk to classes. Learn more about where to find good supports, resources and information about LGBTQ issues at the end of this tip sheet.

Telling Others

When LGBTQ people feel comfortable with their sexual identity, sometimes the next step is telling others about their sexual identity.

There are several important considerations to make before coming out to others.

- How will others react? Will they be accepting and supportive?
- What risks are involved in disclosing this personal information?
- Will the benefits of coming out outweigh the costs?
- Who can you talk to that will be the most thoughtful, understanding and open?
- Will you be treated the same?
- Be aware that prejudice and discrimination continue to exist in surprising places and people.

How will you know how supportive others will be?

Check out others' reactions by talking about the subject of sexuality in general. Ask questions like:

- "I saw a TV show about being gay. Do you know any gay people?"
- "Some kids in school were making fun of a kid they think is gay. What do you think about that?"
- "I heard about a kid who is gay whose parents threw her out of the house. Why would they do that?"

There may be negative comments about gay people during the conversation, but persons may respond very differently about *you* being gay. Realize that these comments are *not personal* comments about *you*.

Often, telling others about sexual identity takes years. Some people move more quickly than others and some may never get to this point. LGBTQ youth may decide to tell close friends, family members and their foster and adoptive parents, depending on their own comfort level and the reaction they think they'll get. Coming out to others requires courage and deserves respect.

Educate Yourself

Join with others to learn more about the issues facing LGBTQ kids in foster care and the LGBTQ community. Many Wisconsin communities have LGBTQ organizations as a way to connect with others for support, education and social opportunities.

The Wisconsin Alliance for LGBTQ Youth, and others listed on the next page are just a few organizations available to LGBTQ youth. Consider joining the Gay, Straight Alliances (GSA) within schools. They promote and provide LGBTQ information, support and safety within the school system.



Resources on the next page

Resources Used in this Tip Sheet

Be Yourself-Questions and Answers for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth by PFLAG 1994.

http://pflag.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Be_Yourself.pdf.

The Gay Straight Alliance, *Beyond the Binary: A Tool Kit for Gender Identity Activism in Schools* at

www.gsanetwork.org.

Adolescence, Sexual Orientation & Identity: An Overview by Warren J. Blumenfeld.

http://www.queeramerica.com/article_sexual_identity.html

Transproud by Outproud at:

<http://www.transproud.com/transition.html>.

Mentoring Sexual Minority Youth by Linda Jucovy, December 2000 at

http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/33_publication.pdf

Other Resources

The ACLU's LGBT Project brings lawsuits in courts throughout the country—cases that have a significant effect on the lives of LGBT people..

<http://www.aclu.org/lgbt/index.html>

Advocates for Youth

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbtcq.htm>

COLAGE is a national movement of children, youth, and adults with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) parents. We build community and work toward social justice through youth empowerment, leadership development, education, and advocacy.

<http://www.colage.org/>

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

<http://www.glaad.org/>

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, is working to ensure safe and effective schools for all students: <http://glsen.org>

Youth Resource is created by and for LGBT young people 13 to 24 years old.

<http://www.youthresource.com>

Youth in Out of Home Care

<http://www.lambdalegal.org/our-work/issues/youth/out-of-home-care/>

National Youth Advocacy Coalition

<http://www.nyacyouth.org/>

National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce-Youth

<http://www.thetaskforce.org/issues/youth>

OutProud, the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth, provides advocacy, information, resources and support

<http://www.OutProud.org>

Wisconsin LGBT Organizations

<http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/wi.html>

Other Wisconsin Organizations and Resources

Fair Wisconsin

<http://www.fairwisconsin.com/>

Children Service Society of WI

Jane Otto

<http://www.chw.org/>

414-531-1400

Milwaukee area LGBT Community Center

[http://www.mkelgbt.org/community/InR/InR_category_display.asp?](http://www.mkelgbt.org/community/InR/InR_category_display.asp?category=LGBTONG&display_name=LGBT%20Organizations%20and%20groups)

[category=LGBTONG&display_name=LGBT%20Organizations%20and%20groups.](http://www.mkelgbt.org/community/InR/InR_category_display.asp?category=LGBTONG&display_name=LGBT%20Organizations%20and%20groups)

Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools

envisions educational systems where all students thrive regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

<http://www.gsaforsafeschools.org/>

Mental Health of America-Wisconsin

You can find mental health providers specializing in LGBTQ issues at: [http://www.mhawisconsin.org/application/provider-search/results.asp?](http://www.mhawisconsin.org/application/provider-search/results.asp?ClienteleServed=%24&Insurance=%24&Gender=&Expertise1=14%24GLBTQ+%28Gay+Lesbian+Bisexual+Transsexual+Questioning%29&Race=&Expertise2=%24&MileRadius=90&ZipCode=53214)

[ClienteleServed=%24&Insurance=%24&Gender=&Expertise1=14%24GLBTQ+%28Gay+Lesbian+Bisexual+Transsexual+Questioning%29&Race=&Expertise2=%24&MileRadius=90&ZipCode=53214](http://www.mhawisconsin.org/application/provider-search/results.asp?ClienteleServed=%24&Insurance=%24&Gender=&Expertise1=14%24GLBTQ+%28Gay+Lesbian+Bisexual+Transsexual+Questioning%29&Race=&Expertise2=%24&MileRadius=90&ZipCode=53214)