

# Identity and Sexual Orientation

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*Addressing Critical Issues*

## Disclaimer

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## Identity and Sexual Orientation

Strict enforcement of gender norms can have a devastating impact on children as they begin to define themselves. For example, when stores separate toys into aisles for girls and boys, children who identify across gender lines learn that anyone who diverges from their designated shelves is viewed as “other” and may deserve to be ridiculed. Young children who are taught limiting rules about what boys and girls can do based on strict definitions of gender experience negative reinforcement about identity and sexuality. Establishing a broader integrated identity enables boys and girls to have a sense of self that is not dependent upon gender. Boys and girls who have a more expansive sense of self can stay centered and are more secure.

Sexual identity confusion is not uncommon during adolescence. “Approximately 40% of girls experience sexual feelings toward another girl at least once during their adolescent or teen years, and this doesn’t mean they will be lesbians,” says Lynn Ponton in *Daughters, Mind and Body*. Children with a different sexual orientation often are aware early on that they don’t fit in and they are not sure why. It is clear that we can’t truly address bullying without talking about the fear of people perceived as different.

Despite increased awareness of and media attention to sexual orientation, these teenagers continue to face particularly difficult challenges, which include feeling different from peers, feeling guilty about their sexual orientation,

worrying about their parents’ response, and being rejected and harassed by others. The fear of rejection from both society and parents is so strong that keeping the secret can be fatal. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) teens exhibit signs of depression, manifested by isolating themselves socially and finding it hard to concentrate in school. These signs of distress should not be ignored. GLBT youth are several times more likely to attempt suicide than straight teens. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry’s web site, they account for 30 percent of all completed suicides among teens. GLBT teens that do have the courage to “come out” risk being teased mercilessly.

Educators and parents need to be alert to these differences, aware of their significance and knowledgeable about how best to respond. All children have a right to feel safe at school, acknowledged and respected. Integration of a positive adult identity is a challenge for GLBT teenagers because they learn from a young age that being gay carries a stigma. Homophobia is still powerful in American society. Even with many states adopting policies concerning sexual orientation, and the proliferation of gay-themed television shows and increased visibility of noted homosexuals in the media, it is still a struggle to be different and accepted. These rigid sex roles prevent our girls and boys from being themselves.

### PROMISING PRACTICES

- [Safe Schools Coalition](#) has lesson plans and handouts for addressing issues of sexual diversity in age appropriate ways in the classroom. There are also many resources for sexual minority youths and their friends and allies, including greeting cards that can be downloaded.
- [The American Psychological Association's Healthy Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Project](#) was founded "to strengthen the capacity of the nation's schools to prevent the behavioral health risks of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students through knowledge development, dissemination, and application, working with and through national organizations of school stakeholders." Their Web site provides links to national education organizations' policies and the latest research on sexual minority youths, including a link to *Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators and School Personnel*.
- [The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network](#) "strives to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression." More than 1,000 resources related to current events and issues, tools for ensuring safe schools, policies and legal issues, and lesson plans and curricula for the classroom are available from its Web site.
- [Advocates For Youth Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning \(GLBT\) Youth Initiative](#) "works to address homophobia within communities, sensitize youth-serving professionals to the needs of GLBTQ youth and to encourage GLBTQ youth to become powerful advocates for themselves and other youth by sharing culturally relevant information and access to tailored services." Available at this Web site are tips for teachers and teens for dealing with harassment and for creating inclusive programs. Several fact sheets and tip sheets are available for transgender youth and for the adults in their lives.
- [Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays](#) offers support and information for families of LGBT people with more than 400 chapters nationwide. PFLAG offers Safe Schools Training for school personnel.
- [Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere](#) was formed "to engage, connect, and empower people to make the world a better place for children of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender parents and families." The Web site offers a link to "Tips for making the classroom safe for children with LGBT parents," as well as lists of books and films.

### PUBLICATIONS

- [Sexual Orientation and the Public School Teacher](#)  
By Todd A. DeMitchell, Suzanne Eckes, and Richard Fossey. Public Interest Law Journal.
- [Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel](#). This publication offers information about sexual orientation development and resources in order to provide a safe and hate-free environment within schools for youth. The primer discusses sexual orientation development, a survey of efforts in response to sexual orientation, relevant legal principles, and resources to help educators improve services, curricula, and school climates so that the educational and health needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youths, are better served.
- *Sexual Orientation and School Policy: A Practical Guide for Teachers, Administrators, and Community Activists (Hardcover)*  
By [Ian K. Macgillivray](#). This book helps the reader to understand and mediate the debates that arise when gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, intersex, and queer/questioning (GLBTIQ) students and their

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families ask for equal treatment from the schools and are opposed by conservative parents. *Sexual Orientation and School Policy* is a case study of one school districts' attempt to adopt and implement policies that include sexual orientation. This book describes the work of the Safe Schools Coalition who advocate and educate for equal rights for GLBTIQ students. Concerned Citizens, a group of conservative parents, opposed the inclusion of sexual orientation in the policies. The author highlights the factors that either facilitated or impeded the implementation of the policies as well as the strategies employed by the Safe Schools Coalition in educating opponents.

- *Our Worlds in Our Words: Exploring Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in Multicultural Classrooms (Hardcover)*  
By [Mary Dilg](#). In her new book, Mary Dilg brings us into her high school English classroom, where we see students reach across the social, cultural, and economic lines that divide them to build life-long literacy skills.
- *Rethinking Our Classrooms Vol 1 - Revised Edition [Paperback]*  
By [Wayne Au](#), [Bill Bigelow](#) (Author), and [Stan Karp](#) (Author). This revised and expanded edition includes new essays on science and environmental education, immigration and language, military recruitment, teaching about the world through mathematics, and gay and lesbian issues. Creative teaching ideas, compelling classroom narratives, and hands-on examples show how teachers can promote the values of community, justice, and equality while building academic skills.