Tips for Relating to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Queer & Intersex Youth

People who work with youth cannot assume that all youth are heterosexual:

Be open.
Be supportive.
Be informed.

You could save a life.

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you."
—Romans 15:7

We Invite Your Participation!

Parents Reconciling Network is an extension ministry of the Reconciling Ministries Network. For more information, to join, or to send support, contact us at:

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Find us on Facebook!

Does Your Ministry Include Gay Youth?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex youth often face rejection, hatred, and violence when they reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are frequently confronted with negative messages about their sexual orientation or gender identity, even in church. We are working to change that!

We’re Working to Make Church a Safe Place for Our Youth

The Parents Reconciling Network (PRN) believes it is time for United Methodist parents to connect in a local and nationwide program of support, advocacy and witness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) individuals. We are helping congregations and the entire church realize that change is coming, justice will prevail, and our United Methodist Church must be open to all of God’s children ...including ours!

A Working Vocabulary

Bisexual: Sexual, emotional and affectional attraction to both men and women.

Choice: A false assumption that most people choose to be heterosexual or homosexual.

Coming Out: Sharing one’s sexual orientation with others, an important step in self acceptance and in achieving emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

Conversion or Reparative Therapy: An attempt to convert a homosexual person to heterosexuality by religious or psychological counseling. Such therapies have been discredited by the American Medical Assoc. and the American Psychological Assoc. as unsuccessful and destructive.

Gay: A homosexual man; can also refer to any homosexual person.

Gender Identity: The inner sense of being male or female, which sometimes conflicts with one’s biological gender.

Lesbian: A homosexual woman.

LGBTQI: Abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and intersex.

Heterosexual: Sexual, emotional, and affectional attraction to members of the opposite sex.

Homophobia: Irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals.

Homosexual: Sexual, emotional and affectional attraction to members of one’s own sex.

Internalized Homophobia: A sense of shame and self-hatred about one’s own homosexuality, caused by being taught that same-gender orientation is wrong.

Intersex: A person who is born with external genitals, internal reproductive systems or chromosomes which are not typically male or female.

Queer: A term “reclaimed” by youth to describe those who feel outside societal norms of sexual or gender identity. It is a fluid label to acknowledge difference.

Sexual Orientation: Enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction ranging along a continuum from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality. Most scientists agree that sexual orientation is the result of complex biological, genetic and hormonal factors.

Transgender: Someone whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth.

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**Tips for Supporting the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity of LGBTQI Youth**

1. **Appreciate when a young person comes out to you.**

   Coming out is scary. The LGBTQI youth has probably tested you with a series of “trial balloons” over a period of time. Based on your previous responses, he or she decided you can be trusted, but there is still fear of rejection, ridicule and abuse. When someone comes out to you, your primary task is to commend them for their courage and honesty, thank them for trusting you, and continue caring for them. Because the suicide rate among LGBTQI youth is significantly higher than that of the average population, your support might just save a life.

2. **Respect confidentiality.**

   When a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer or intersex youth shares his or her gender identity or sexual orientation with you, you have received a confidence which must be respected. Breaching this trust can be emotionally and physically damaging.

3. **Be informed and examine your own biases.**

   Most of us are products of a homophobic, gender rigid church and society, influenced by fear and misinformation. You can’t be free of that just by deciding to be. You must educate yourself. Read reliable sources and talk with qualified people.

4. **Know when and where to seek help.**

   Familiarize yourself with the supportive referral agencies and counselors in your denomination and area. LGBTQI helplines and support groups can connect you with experienced people and organizations.

5. **Maintain a balanced perspective.**

   Sexuality and gender identity make up a small but truly important part of every person’s identity. Your LGBTQI youth is still the same person you have known and loved for years.

6. **Understand the meaning of sexual orientation and gender identity.**

   One’s sexuality is morally neutral, neither good nor bad in itself. People do not choose to be heterosexual or homosexual, they simply are. Additionally, one’s gender identity (their inner sense of being male or female) is a separate issue with unique complexities.

7. **Be supportive.**

   Because of religious, societal, and familial pressures to be heterosexual or true to their assigned gender, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth feel alone, afraid, and ashamed. You can assist by listening with care to their feelings and concerns, offering a supportive and non-judgmental presence, and reminding them that they are made in the divine image and are beloved by God. Be sure to connect the young person to LGBTQI resources, support groups, gay/straight and transgender/intersex alliances.

8. **Anticipate some confusion.**

   While many youth are aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity by the time they finish the eighth grade, this awareness takes years to fully integrate. Because LGBTQI youth receive so many messages that their orientation or gender identity is sinful and must be resisted, they often experience considerable confusion and may even attempt to deny their sexuality or gender identity. No one can be talked into or out of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. You can be most helpful by affirming that same-gender attraction and behavior is as normal, natural, and moral as heterosexual attraction and behavior. Similarly, no one can be talked into or out of the gender they identify with, even if it is not the one assigned at birth.

9. **Help, but do not force.**

   If you are heterosexual and comfortable with your own birth gender, you probably do not fully understand what it means to be different in these ways. Clues for how to help will come from the young person. Don’t force him or her into your frame of reference to make it easier for you to understand. Be open and patient.

10. **Challenge homophobia.**

    Always function as if there is an LGBTQI youth in your midst (even if you don’t think there is), and speak up whenever you hear anti-gay jokes or disparaging language. Your words and example will send the message that homophobic and transgender offensive remarks will not be tolerated and that you are affirming of LGBTQI people and their families. You will also signal to LGBTQI youth that you are a safe person with whom to talk. Don’t perpetuate injustice and ignorance by remaining silent. Be as open to diversity as Jesus was in his time.

   “We believe that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church and society.”

   —United Methodist Book of Discipline (¶161F)