



**Out &
Proud
Program**

fact sheet

Risks, Challenges and Survival Techniques of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Two-Spirit, Gender Non-Conforming, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

LGBTQ youth are an invisible minority because they are socialized to hide or deny who they are. Few youth will conform to societal stereotypes or be recognized as LGBTQ by service providers. As a result of societal stigmatization and the fear of general discrimination, LGBT youth are learning and using survival strategies to conceal their true identities, while their heterosexual and gender conforming peers are generally proceeding through their developmental stages.

LGBTQ youth come from every racial, ethnic, social, economic, and religious background. Nearly all are children of heterosexual and gender conforming parents.

1. RISKS

LGBTQ youth are at high risk for:

Suicide

- LGBTQ youth are 3-5 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.
- 20-35% of lesbian and gay youth attempt suicide.
- 50% experience suicidal thoughts.
- 30% of completed youth suicides are by lesbian and gay youth.
- celibate gay male youth are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (based on a 1997 study in Calgary).

Family violence and disruption

- 50% of all LGBTQ youth report negative parental responses when their sexual identity is revealed or discovered.
- Of youth who experience physical violence due to their sexual orientation, 50% report physical violence at the hands of their family members.

Running away or being thrown out of home

- 25% of youth whose parents react negatively to their sexual orientation are disowned and forced to leave home.
- 40-50% of youth living on the street identify as being LGBTQ.
- About 40% of LGBTQ street youth report having had some involvement with the Child Welfare system.

**Fostering Safe Spaces For People Of All Sexual And Gender Diversities:
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgendered, Intersex,
Queer, Questioning And Others**



Developmental delays, academic under-achievement and school drop out

- Occurs as a result of the hostility and violence, or threat of it that is the frightening and daily reality for all LGBTQ youth.

Extreme social isolation

- Because of rejection, inability to meet others in the LGBTQ community, and withdrawal due to ostracism, rejection, bullying or fear of exposure.

Difficulties in establishing intimate interpersonal relationship skills

- As a result of lack of social interaction, lack of ability to have meaningful relationships, lack of role models, and increased likelihood of being a victim of deprivation and abuse as a result of their orientation.

Sexual exploitation

Prostitution and/or Sexual Exploitation

- most LGBTQ youth do not have access to opportunities to socialize with their peers and, as a result, may be vulnerable to those who would exploit them.

Mental Health Concerns

- Low self-esteem as a result of being part of a minority which is a stigmatized and discriminated against.
- Low self-esteem may prevent a youth from recognizing or acknowledging exploitation when it occurs.
- Depression is extremely high among LGBTQ youth.

Sexually transmitted infections

- Research by the AIDS Committee of Toronto found that young gay men are at an extreme risk for HIV infection as a result of:
 1. lack of information in a language they can understand
 2. misinformation
 3. difficulties developing meaningful peer supports and relationships
 4. low self-esteem
 5. a feeling of youthful invulnerability
- Young gay men are therefore likely to engage in high rates of unprotected sexual activity, one of the risk factors likely to cause infection.

Pregnancy

- In an effort to “prove” heterosexual orientation.

Substance misuse

- Used as a way of “medicating” the pain of victimization and isolation.



Institutional neglect and/or abuse

- The failure to recognize the existence of LGBTQ youth as a vulnerable, high risk population results in their needs remaining unmet, and the perpetuation of their invisibility, social isolation, low self-esteem, lack of support, and negative environment.

Unsuccessful CAS placements

- Due to the lack of provider knowledge and understanding regarding the unique needs of these youth.

Lack of specialized services

- As a result, most LGBTQ youth will not seek assistance as they are afraid they will be condemned and their experiences misunderstood if their sexual orientation or gender identity is disclosed.

2. CHALLENGES FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

LGBTQ youth face a double hardship

- to understand who they are
- to accept themselves
- to face potential rejection from loved ones
- to find their place in a society that gives no guidelines or labels them as “sinners, perverts, and deviants”.

Not only do they struggle to survive adolescence, but also to develop a positive identity in the face of widespread stigmatization and discrimination.

Most youth who are told that LGBTQ people are sick, bad or wrong believe it. As a result, LGBTQ youth must engage in an often life-long process of “unlearning” this negative information in order to develop a positive sense of self.

3. SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES (Gibson 1989)

(1) To hide

- The loneliness of hiding often causes serious harm to these youth’s mental health and social development.
- A consequence of hiding means they must suffer fears and low self esteem alone in silence.
- They are the unknown victims of every homophobic assault and remark they witness as a result they become increasingly afraid to associate with others and withdraw socially to avoid potentially dangerous situations.
- They may spend a great deal of time alone, suffer chronic depression, have no life context that makes sense to them, and may think about and/or attempt suicide when the pressure is to



much to bear.

(2) To deny their identity

- These youth have internalized the idea that being LGBT is wrong and dangerous to their physical and mental health through media, schooling, community, religion, politics, family etc.
- They attempt to conform to accepted social roles of heterosexual and gender conforming youth, in order to “prove” their heterosexuality, or gain acceptance.
- Often these attempts to conform fail because their underlying feelings of attraction or their natural way of expressing their gender remain unchanged.
- Consequences include pregnancy, high risk of emotional or behavioral problems, feelings of hatred and rage that can be turned against themselves or others, and suicidal thoughts or behavior may result when the youth begins to recognize their LGBTQ orientation.

(3) To be open and accepting of their LGBTQ identity

- These youth form a smaller but more visible segment of the LGBT youth population.
- There are few role models and little social support to assist them with this process.
- They remain at high risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior because of pressures and conflicts they face with others regarding their LGBT identity.
- They may be forced to leave schools and families to survive on their own prematurely.
- They are at risk for becoming involved with street involved youth which places them at high risk for sexual exploitation, sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and substance misuse.
- They often cannot rely on adult LGBTQ community. The fear is that the adults are recruiting into the LGBTQ lifestyle or worse are sexually exploiting them.
- With appropriate support this group has the best chance of resisting the emotional & social health and maturing into fully functioning, contributing, healthy and happy adults who are at peace with themselves.

The key to the ability of LGBTQ youth to survive adolescence:

- Develop a positive identity and mature into fully functioning, contributing members of society by the removal of prejudice and discrimination towards LGBTQ people.
- Their existence as an LGBTQ youth needs to be acknowledged and their voice heard.
- Adults need to take up their cause.
- Systemic barriers that work against their needs being met must be removed.
- Families, educators, social service agencies and health care providers need to provide these youth with accurate information about sexual orientation issues.
- Like all young people, they are entitled to appropriate adult and sometimes professional support, to assist them in the process of growing up in a world that includes and affirms LGBTQ people.