The Unique Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

Data from 1990 through 2002 indicates that approximately 5% of American adolescents (ages 13-18) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). Sexual orientation is often misinterpreted as synonymous with sexual behavior and has thus allowed educators, health care providers, and even parents to leave LGBTQ youth misinformed and unaware of important sexual and reproductive health issues. While some gains have been made regarding knowledge and attitudes about LGBTQ youth, there remain many disparities in access to both education and services that adversely affect the health and well-being of these youth.

FAST FACTS

Sexual Behavior

- LGBTQ youth are more likely than heterosexual teens to have had sexual intercourse, to have had more partners, and to have experienced sexual intercourse against their will.2

- Instances of high-risk sexual behaviors, substance use before sex, and personal safety issues are reported by lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth more frequently than heterosexual youth.3

Heightened Risk of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI), HIV, and Pregnancy

- Studies suggest that lesbian and bisexual teens are twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to experience unintended pregnancy. Additionally, young lesbians may attempt to hide their sexual identity through intentional pregnancy.5, 6

- As compared to their heterosexual peers LGBTQ teens are at an increased risk of STIs, including HIV.3

- Like all teens, LGBTQ youth need accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive information regarding sexual and reproductive health. However, they may not be receiving this. In one study, 84% of young lesbians reported feeling that they were at zero risk for HIV and STI and only 21% had ever suggested safer sex practices to a sexual partner.7

Difficulty Accessing Information, Education, Services, and Support

- In a study exploring factors that affect the lives of transgender youth, the teens specifically noted four problems:
  - Lack of safe environments
  - Poor access to physical health services
  - Inadequate resources to address mental health concerns
  - Lack of continuity of care-giving by families and communities.8

- After coming out to their families, many LGBTQ youth are thrown out of their home, mistreated, or made the focus of their family's dysfunction, making it difficult to communicate openly about safe sex, teen pregnancy, etc.9

- Sexual orientation is among the three most likely topics to be excluded from a sexual education course, along with abortion and how to use condoms.10

- Less than half of health teachers "formally teach" about issues pertaining to homosexuality. This is regrettable considering that LGBTQ youth taught using gay-sensitive instruction report fewer sexual partners, less frequent sex, and less substance use before last sex than those who were taught using more common means.11, 5

- An analysis of popular human sexuality textbooks found few references to any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. Those references that were found were negative.12
Health care providers often fail to provide LGBTQ patients with adequate information regarding safer sex, know their patients' sexual history regardless of reported sexual orientation, and screen for STIs. As a result of past negative experiences dealing with health care providers those who identify as LGBTQ are oftentimes less likely to obtain regular STI testing and treatment.

Success Tips for the Inclusion of LGBTQ Youth

- Educate yourself. Learn as much as possible about sexual orientation, gender expression, culture, homophobia, and sexism and be aware of your own attitudes and biases.
- Do not make assumptions. Realize that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity can not be known based on appearances alone and use inclusive, gender-neutral language in order to highlight this.

Provide safety and support. Let teens know that they are accepted by your organization and thus will be guaranteed confidentiality, free of harassment, and granted support they may not receive elsewhere.

RESOURCES

Healthy Teen Network: www.healthyteennetwork.org
Advocates For Youth: www.advocatesforyouth.org
Gay and Lesbian Medical Association: www.glma.org
The National Coalition for LGBT Health: www.lgbthealth.net
Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: www.pflag.org

References