

Suicide Prevention and LGBTQ Youth

Over the past two decades, America has become increasingly aware of the diversity of gender identity and sexual orientation in our society. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth and adults have become more open and visible. This coincides with a desire to be treated equally whether they are attracted to the opposite sex or same sex and whether or not they conform to traditional gender norms. LGBT visibility has not stopped the harassment, bullying and, at times violence against people who do not or are perceived to not fit the dominant norm for sexual orientation. Today many LGBTQ youth continue to face social exclusion and harassment resulting from homophobia. Yet they are coming out in increasing numbers and at younger ages across Maine and the US. This is especially true in those schools and communities that create an atmosphere of acceptance and safety.

What we know:

- Exact rates of suicide in LGBTQ youth are not known due to the difficulty in identifying the sexual orientation of an individual who dies by suicide. Many people, especially youth, are not open about their sexuality and therefore efforts to obtain accurate rates of suicide related to sexual orientation face this barrier.
- We know from the results of numerous studies, LGBTQ youth are 1½-3 times more likely to report suicidal ideation and 1½-7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (SPRC, 2011).
 - LGBTQ youth are not at higher risk for suicide or other negative outcomes based solely on their non-dominant sexual orientation. The increased risk results from the degree of stigma, prejudice and discrimination associated with minority sexual orientation as experienced by the negative reactions of their family, peers and the society at large.
- LGBTQ risk for preventable negative outcomes, including suicide, are heightened by:
 - **Parental Rejection:** LGB youth who come from highly rejecting families are 8 times as likely to attempt suicide as those who report family acceptance and support of their sexual identity (Ryan C, Huebner D et al, 2009).
 - **Negative or hostile school climate:** Nearly 9 out of 10 GLBTQ youth in a self-selected survey reported experiencing harassment at school and almost 2/3 reported feeling unsafe due to their sexual orientation (2009 National School Climate Survey by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network {GLSEN}).
 - A Massachusetts review of the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that LGB students were:
 - 4 times as likely to have skipped school because they did not feel safe,
 - 2.5 times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon
 - 3 times as likely to require medical attention due to a physical fight.
 - **Disclosing sexual orientation at a younger age** leads to increased substance abuse and a higher risk for suicide, running away from home, legal problems and school drop-out(SPRC, 2008)
 - **Stigma, discrimination and victimization from peers, adults and schools or other institutions.** LGBQ students face frequent victimization, including bullying, harassment and violence, at 4 times the rate of their non-gay peers (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002).

Protective Factors for GLBTQ Youth

Fortunately, the majority of LGBTQ youth do not attempt suicide or die by suicide. Efforts to understand the factors that are protective against suicide and other high risk behaviors have consistently identified several key supports. For school age LGBTQ youth, family-connectedness and support, the presence of other caring adults, and a safe school climate are key ingredients supporting their safety and stability (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006)

What can be done to increase the protective factors for LGBTQ youth

- **Increase peer acceptance and positive peer relationships:**
 - Interventions to address building positive school climate are best initiated during the middle school years. Many LGBTQ youth report regular and ongoing peer exclusion, harassment and, at times active bullying at school and in the community. The middle school years are most difficult with prejudicial attitudes peaking in 9th grade and decreasing through the high school years.
 - Youth who report having a LGBT friend have lower negative attitudes toward LGBTQ peers and are less accepting of bullying and harassing behavior from their peers.
 - Schools with active Gay-Straight Alliances and other protective policies have students who are more accepting of diversity. The social environment shapes attitudes more strongly than their peer group (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006).

Creating Safe School Environments

The educational and social environment in which LGBTQ students spend their days greatly influences their stability, mental and emotional health. Schools should take positive steps to ensure that the elements creating a safe school environment are in place for all students, and specifically protecting LGBTQ youth. These steps include:

- Developing non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies and practices that specifically include actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.
- Providing staff with awareness education regarding diversity issues including LGBTQ students and training on methods for intervention in the face of harassment.
- Creating, encouraging and sustaining school-based opportunities for regular positive interaction between LGBT and non-LGBT students (often called gay-straight alliances).
- Providing information, resources and support at school on LGBTQ issues in curricula and student services (Russell, 2010).

The Importance of Family Support

In the same way that family rejection of a LGBTQ youth based on their sexual orientation or gender identity expression significantly increases the risk for verbal and physical abuse, substance abuse, homelessness and suicidality, so can the positive support and acceptance of family aid in the healthy adaptation of a youth emerging into their sexual identity. Recognition of the importance of family support and the need for practices, and interventions to increase family support and connection are becoming increasingly recognized as a vital link in the positive development and well-being of a LGBTQ youth (Ryan et al, 2009). Some family behaviors identified by the Family Wellness Project that promote the well-being of a LGBT youth include:

- Family members who talk with a youth about his or her LGBT identity and support that identity even though they may feel uncomfortable
- Connecting the youth with a positive LGBT role model
- Requiring other family members to respect the LGBT youth
- Welcoming your LGBT child's friends and partner into your home
- Supporting your child's gender expression in dress and style
- Believing that your child can have a happy life as a LGBT adult (Ryan, 2010).

Resources for LGBTQ Youth and the Adults in their Lives

School Resources for Creating Supportive Environments for LGBT Youth

- **GLSEN Educator; The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network** www.glsen.org/educator . The educator sub-site of GLSEN provides numerous resources for education professionals looking to create positive school environments.
- **The Trevor Project:** www.thetrevorproject.org . A national organization dedicated to lowering the risk of suicide through promoting the acceptance of LGBTQ youth. Contains a section specifically for educators.
- **Safe at School: Addressing the School Environment and LGBT Safety through Policy and Legislation.** nepc.colorado.edu/publication/safe-at-school. A 2010 publication from the National Educational Policy Center addressing policy recommendations and model legislation supporting school safety.

Resources for LGBTQ Youth and their Supporters

- **PFLAG**(National Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays) www.pflag.org National organization for education, advocacy and support for families and friends of LGBT persons. Chapters are available in all states. Check website for local chapters and educational materials
- **The Trevor Project:** www.thetrevorproject.org . **24 hour Hotline 1-866-488-7386** A national organization dedicated to lowering the risk of suicide through promoting the acceptance of LGBTQ youth. Services include a 24 hour hotline for LGBTQ youth.
- **National Youth Advocacy Coalition** www.nyacyouth.org National advocacy organization for LGBT youth. Youth conferences and education.
- **Maine Civil Rights Team Project** http://maine.gov/ag/civil_rights/in_schools/civil_rights_teams.shtml A project of Equality Maine and the Maine Attorney General's Office, The Civil Rights Team Project (CRTP) is a school-based preventative program to combat hate violence, prejudice, harassment and bias in the schools. The CRTP builds a collaborative of students, faculty and community advisors who work together to create a safer environment for all students and to lower incidence of hate language in the school community
- **Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD)** <http://www.glad.org/rights/maine/> A New England-based advocacy and legal initiative organization working toward anti-discrimination and equality for LGBTQ people.
- **GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network)** <http://www.glsen.org/downeastme> <http://www.glsen.org/southernme> With chapters in Southern and Downeast Maine, GLSEN works with schools to start and sustain Gay-Straight Alliances to create and improve healthy school climate for all students.

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