

Study Guide for **GAY YOUTH**

30 Minutes

“Gay Youth” should not be shown in a casual or unplanned manner. We suggest that you make it part of a larger unit, perhaps on prejudice or stereotyping or part of a unit on human sexuality.

Before you begin, read the essay that begins on page 4 to familiarize yourself with issues and questions that may arise. See the last page of this study guide for a list of resources.

Before Showing the Video...

Prepare for the video by asking your students to answer anonymously in writing the following questions. After they have written, collect their responses and use them for your own information. It should also be interesting to compare their comments to what the students say after they have seen “Gay Youth.”

If you use the student comments in class to begin your discussion, **ASSURE STUDENTS THAT YOU WILL NOT DISCLOSE WHO WROTE THEM.** You’re after honesty.

- What are some slang words that you know that apply to gay and lesbian people?
- What are your personal experiences with gay and lesbian people?
- What do gay and lesbian people look like?
- What feelings come up for you when homosexuality is discussed?

- If you found out that your best friend or a member of your family was gay, what would you do?

After Showing the Video...

After you show “Gay Youth,” ask students to write again. Give them the option to be anonymous. Do this **BEFORE YOU HAVE A FORMAL DISCUSSION**. Ask them to write about what they learned from watching “Gay Youth.” Collect.

Questions based specifically on the video for discussion and/or writing:

- How many different stereotypes did you see in the video?
- What were the effects of prejudice, specifically homophobia, on these young people?
- What role did religion play in Bobby Griffith’s life? In his mother’s life? What evidence did you see of Bobby’s low self esteem?
- What aspects of Gina’s experience allowed her to survive? Who else in the video had positive experiences?
- In what ways are the young people in this video invisible?
- What was the role of parents and relatives in the lives of these young people?
- 30% of youth suicides in the U.S. are gay and lesbian; gay and lesbian youth are three times as likely to abuse drugs and alcohol as heterosexual youth; one fourth of all homeless youth are gay and lesbian. What does the video show are some possible reasons for these statistics?

- What is your reaction to these quotes from “Gay Youth”?

Bobby: “I wish it was June 24, 1963 [his birthday] all over again so I could try again. But I know it would probably turn out the same.”

Gina’s mother: “I think that it’s within. When they say they’re gay, I’m sure they fought it, too. They don’t want to be different because being different is harder.”

Julie, Gina’s friend: “When I think of Gina, I don’t think of Gina the dyke; I think of Gina my friend.”

Gina: “It takes so much more energy to hide. It’s just so much easier to be natural, but it’s a big step to take.”

Bobby’s mother: “These kids are an equal, lovable, and valuable part of our community.”

Homosexuality: The New Frontier in Sexuality Education.

Andrew J. Humm, *Director of Education, The Hetrick-Martin Institute, New York, New York*

The following essay is reprinted with the permission of ETR Associates, Santa Cruz, CA. It was originally published in Family Life Educator, volume ten, number three, spring 1992.

Gay and lesbian communities—plagued by an epidemic of bias-related violence predominantly perpetrated by teenage males—are turning to schools in their towns and cities to develop programs and curricula that will break the silence about homosexuality, relieve the isolation of gay and lesbian youth, and reverse the anti-gay prejudice of young people, whose primary education about sexual orientation is often based on myths and stereotypes.

School districts are beginning to take the initiative in this area. In Los Angeles, schools operate a counseling and support program for gay and lesbian youth called Project 10. In San Francisco, each school is required to designate a “gay sensitive” staff member to whom students can turn if they have concerns.

In Seattle, where a mayoral task force on gay and lesbian youth called for greater outreach to this population, teams of volunteer educators speak in the schools. Fairfax, Virginia, integrates homosexuality into the family living/sex education curricula. And the New York City Board of Education passed a resolution in 1989 mandating that all curricula and programs be revised to reflect diversity on a variety of bases, including sexual orientation.

If you are trying to stimulate a classroom discussion on homosexuality, you have a number of choices. But first, as with any controversial issue, be mindful of administrative guidelines before you introduce the topic in your classroom.

You can and should integrate information about homosexuality into general discussions on human sexuality—but be prepared for the many questions that mentioning the topic can generate.

Some educators invite representatives of gay and lesbian organizations to be guest speakers. They share their stories with students and respond to questions. Other educators, particularly those in very conservative districts, introduce the subject in the context of a debate between supporters of gay and lesbian rights and opponents. Or supporters and opponents could be scheduled on different days.

However you approach the topic, you need to be versed in the current thinking and research. The twenty questions that follow are the ones most commonly asked about homosexuality by high school students. When discussing the topic, give students the opportunity to submit written questions anonymously in addition to participating in the classroom discussion.

Twenty Questions and Answers About Homosexuality

1. What is sexual Orientation?

Everyone has a sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation is the emotional and physical attraction a person feels for the other and/or same sex, Orientation to the other sex is called heterosexuality, to the same sex,

homosexuality, and to both sexes, bisexuality. You know your sexual orientation by knowing who “turns you on,” that is who you want to be with in a special, intimate and loving relationship.

2. What makes a person homosexual?

We don't know the answer to that question any more than we know why most people are heterosexual. About 10% of all men and women are exclusively homosexually oriented—that is, they are only sexually attracted to the same sex. Another 30 % of men and 18% of women have some adult homosexual experience, but primarily see themselves as heterosexual. A few see themselves as bisexual, able to feel attraction to people of both sexes.

Homosexuality is not a character defect or mental illness. (The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973.) It is the capacity to have a sexual and/or emotional relationship with someone of the same sex.

No reputable psychiatrist believes now that having a homosexual orientation is a mental illness. But many other people see those who are different as sick. In the field of psychology, homosexuality used to be discussed in courses on “Abnormal Psychology.” People used to look for “reasons” why a person was homosexual. Homosexuality was said to be caused by everything from overprotective mothers to being molested as a child.

Today, through scientific research and the empirical evidence of millions of gay and lesbian lives, we know that homosexual people can be just as psychologically healthy as heterosexuals. Homosexuality is now seen as a natural variation in human sexuality. It is how you adjust to your

sexual orientation that determines the degree to which you are mentally healthy. If you hate yourself for being gay, that is clearly unhealthy.

3. Can a person who is homosexual change and become heterosexual?

Before homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders, psychiatrists often told their gay patients that therapy could help them alter their sexual orientations. Some of these patients did succeed in changing their behavior, i.e., they learned how to function heterosexually. But there is no documented case of a successful change from one sexual orientation to another.

4. Do Homosexuals dislike the opposite sex?

A person who is gay or lesbian does not dislike the other sex. He or she is sexually attracted to some members of the same sex and does not have the capacity—or has a very limited capacity—for sexual attraction to the other sex. Homosexuality is not the result of failed relationships with the opposite sex. Close and loving nonsexual relationships between gay people of one sex and people of the other sex are quite common.

5. Do male homosexuals want to be female and vice versa?

Being homosexual has nothing to do with being confused about one's sex. Most gay men are perfectly secure as males, most lesbians are secure as females. A person who wants to be the other sex—or who is born very much “in between” on the gender spectrum—is a transsexual.

6. Why do homosexual people want children?

Many gay men and lesbians have children—some from marriages to or relationships with partners of the other sex, others through adoption or alternative insemination. Being gay or lesbian has nothing to do with the instinct or capacity to be a parent.

7. Will children of gay or lesbian parents grow up to be homosexuals?

The children of gay moms or dads turn out to be homosexual in the same percentage as the children of parents who aren't gay. The sexual orientation of a parent has no effect on the sexual orientation of a child. Remember, the vast majority of gays and lesbians grew up in homes where both parents were heterosexual. In fact, few gay and lesbian youth have the opportunity even to meet an openly gay person during their formative years.

8. Can parents do something that causes their child to become homosexual?

Again, this question comes from the myth that an overprotective mother and a distant father cause a male child to be homosexual and vice-versa for a female. Parents are a big influence on their children. They are role models for how to behave as a couple. But a parent cannot influence a child's sexual orientation any more than he or she can change the child's eye color. Sexual orientation is innate.

9. How do most parents react when they discover that their child is homosexual?

Unfortunately, many parents reject their child when they find out that he or she is homosexual. Because many parents grow up believing homosexuality is morally wrong and/or

sick, it is the last thing they want their child to be. Many believe they can make their gay son or lesbian daughter change by rejecting them.

Young people who realize that they are homosexual are not advised to tell their parents about their gayness unless they have a means of support and another place to live. The reaction of parents can vary from acceptance to expulsion from the home or violence—and it cannot be predicted.

If parents do reject a child after discovering his or her homosexuality, the young person should work with a sympathetic counselor on an appropriate response—keeping the family together if possible, counseling them together if willing.

Today, many parents are learning to accept and embrace their gay children. Some get help from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a self-help support group with chapters throughout the United States and in some foreign countries.

10. Do homosexuals molest children?

This question comes out of the myth that gay people “recruit” young people by molesting them. Being sexually violated is a terrible thing and can hurt a person emotionally, but it does not have anything to do with a person’s sexual orientation. Over 95% of adults who sexually molest children are heterosexual.

The act of taking sexual advantage of children of either sex is neither a heterosexual nor homosexual act. It is the action of a pedophile (someone who is sexually attracted to children).

11. In a gay or lesbian relationship, does one partner play the man and the other play the woman?

There was a time when gay couples tended toward playing the roles that heterosexual partners played. But just as heterosexual men and women are less likely to assume traditional roles in today's more enlightened world (such as men working outside the home and women keeping house), most gay and lesbian partners are working to equalize their partnerships rather than play roles.

12. How do homosexuals make love?

The ways in which two people enjoy each other sexually is not that different for homosexuals and heterosexuals. They kiss, hug, caress, stimulate, stroke, and pleasure each other genitally and in many other parts of the body.

13. What does "in the closet" mean?

When people conceal their sexual identities from others, they are said to be hiding "in the closet."

Many people who have partners of the other sex are proud of their relationships. They hold hands in public, introduce their lovers to their friends and keep a picture of their partners on their desks. Some are married in a ceremony attended by relatives and friends.

From a very young age, however, many gay men and lesbians hide their identities to avoid being rejected by peers and parents. The "coming out" process is one of accepting oneself and then sharing the truth of your gay life with others—first a community of supportive gay people and then family, co-workers, and non-gay friends.

Coming out does not mean telling everybody else what you do in bed or marching in a demonstration. It means being honest about your identity in ways that heterosexual people take for granted.

14. How could people still be homosexual? Aren't they worried about AIDS?

A person cannot change his or her sexual orientation out of fear of AIDS. Unfortunately, many gay men contracted the HIV virus in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Once they learned (in 1984) how it was spread, they learned how to enjoy sexual relations safely, i.e., without transmitting the virus.

A lot of people blame gay people for AIDS and that creates more animosity toward and discrimination against gay people. But AIDS has also brought a lot of gay people out of the closet and into the forefront of the fight against AIDS and bigotry.

15. At what age does a person become gay or lesbian?

Most gay men and lesbians will tell you that they knew that there was something “different” about themselves as young as age four or five, but they had no word for their feelings. Most studies indicate that a person’s sexual orientation is set either before birth or within the first year of life.

Most people awaken to their sexuality in early adolescence. But a young person who feels attracted to the same sex often denies those feelings at first—sometimes for several years. It usually takes many years to acknowledge to oneself and accept being gay or lesbian.

16. Why do homosexual people call themselves “gay” and “lesbian”?

The use of the word gay for homosexually oriented people originated in 18th century England where female prostitutes were called “gay girls.” Since male prostitutes were almost exclusively homosexual, when the “gay” label was attached to them it took on connotations of homosexuality.

In this country for a very long time the word “gay” was used as a code word among gay men and lesbians. The modern gay and lesbian movement began with the Stonewall Riots in New York’s Greenwich Village in 1969. The groups that were formed during that time all put the word “gay” in their titles.

Lesbians take their name from the Greek island of Lesbos where, in ancient times, the poet Sappho wrote love poems about her love for other women.

The word “homosexuality” was coined by some gay German doctors in the 19th century. Today it is seen as too clinical a term to be used as a noun.

There are some radical gay men and lesbians today who call themselves “queers,” a term which is often used to put down gay people. They reason that taking the word on themselves will take the sting out of it. But the vast majority of the community uses the term gay and lesbian at present.

17. If a person has just a few homosexual experiences, does that make him or her gay?

What you do doesn’t matter as much as how you feel. Prior to this time of gay and lesbian liberation, many people knew in their hearts that they were attracted to people of the same sex, but they led totally heterosexual sex lives as a cover.

Similarly, people can engage in homosexual sex, but if they feel heterosexual inside, that's what they are. Heterosexual people in prison, for instance, will sometimes have same-sex partners while incarcerated and go back to partners of the other sex when they get out.

18. Is homosexuality against the law?

As late as 1992, sexual acts between two people of the same sex were still illegal in 24 states including Massachusetts, which has a state gay rights law and has sent two openly gay men—Bamey Frank and Gerry Studds—to the United States Congress. In some states, these archaic anti-sodomy laws also outlaw non-vaginal intercourse between heterosexuals (including married couples in a few states).

While most states with sodomy laws do not enforce them, they remain on the books and can be invoked at any time. In 1986, the United States Supreme Court upheld (by a 5–4 vote) the conviction of a Georgia man, Michael Hardwick, who was having sex with a man in his own bedroom when a police officer entered his house on another matter and arrested him. [However, in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003 the Supreme Court ruled 6–3 that sodomy laws are unconstitutional.]

In most major cities—New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Chicago and about 200 others—it is illegal to discriminate against gay men and lesbians in employment, housing or public accommodations. Four states—Hawaii, Connecticut, Wisconsin, and, as noted, Massachusetts—also protect gay rights. [Add to the list California and Vermont.]

19. Isn't homosexuality against God?

It is true that most major religious sects teach that homosexuality is morally wrong. Many Jews and Christians cite the Bible's Old Testament Levitical Code which says "that if a man lie with a man as with a woman it is an abomination; they shall be put to death." Almost nobody still believes that people should be put to death for homosexuality, but many religious people cling to the idea that God disapproves of homosexuality.

Many religions today are making great progress toward embracing their gay and lesbian members. There is a national gay and lesbian Metropolitan Community Church within Christianity in most American cities. The Unitarian Church performs ceremonies of holy union for gay couples. The Episcopal Church ordains gay and lesbian priests and Reform Judaism ordains gay and lesbian rabbis.

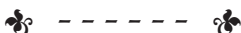
20. Why do people hate homosexuals so much?

People hate and fear what they don't understand. Most of what we know about gay and lesbian people is based on misinformation and/or stereotypes. We use disrespectful words like "fag" and "dyke" without really thinking of the people behind the names. We hear that gays molest children or lead irresponsible lives. It's not surprising that so many people develop a fear and hatred for gay people.

Young people who discover that they are attracted to members of their own sex also hear all these negative things. As a result, they at first deny to themselves that they could be one of "those people." As they get older, many hide their behavior to fool others and themselves into believing that they're not gay. Most young gay men and lesbians don't

come out until they are out of high school. Some take even longer to accept themselves.

As more and more gay men and lesbians do come out in more and more places and professions, myths about gay people are being replaced by facts. Although the AIDS crisis has been a terrible tragedy to gay communities, it has also taught the larger society that gay people are real people who can be tough, resilient, responsible and compassionate.



Resources for Educators

Free Your Mind Ellen Bass/Kate Kaufman, 417 pp. Resource of practical strategies for gay, lesbian, bisexual youth and their allies. (Harper Collins, 10 East 53rd St., NY, NY 10022)

Tackling Gay Issues in Schools: A Resource Module edited by Leif Mitchell, 207 pp. Includes teacher-friendly curricula, staff activities and more. (GLSEN Order Dept, 121 W 27th St., # 1003-B, NY, NY 10001/212-627-7707)

Organizations

Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network (GLSEN). Promotes respect for all members of the school community regardless of sexual orientation. 121 W 27th St., Suite 804, NY, NY 10001/212-727-0135/glsen@glsen.org

Parents Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) Local support groups nationwide. 1012 14th Street, N.W, Suite 700, Washington, D.C. 20005, Phone: (800) 4-FAMILY (24 hours, 7 days a week.)

Resources for Young People

Growing Up Gay / Growing Up Lesbian: A Literary Anthology edited by Bennett Singer, 317 pp. Coming of age stories by James Baldwin, Audre Lorde and others. (GLSEN Order Dept., 121 W 27th St. #1003-B, NY, NY 10001/212-627-7707)

Jocks: True Stories of America's Gay Male Athletes Dan Woog, 265 pp. Stereotype-breaking personal accounts by gay athletes. (GLSEN Order Dept., 121 W 27th St. #1003-B, NY, NY 10001/212-627-7707)

Coming of Age in America: A Multicultural Anthology edited by Mary Frosch, 274 pp. Stories as rich and diverse as the authors: Dorothy Allison, Eugenia Collier, and Julia Alvarez. (GLSEN Order Dept., 121 W 27th St. #1003-B, NY, NY 10001/212-627-7707)

One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America Keith Boykin, 273 pp. What does it mean to be both black and gay in America? (GLSEN Order Dept., 121 W 27th St. #1003-B, NY, NY 10001/212-627-7707)

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