

Your teen's sexual orientation

During adolescence, teens learn to relate to their peers as friends and potential romantic or sexual partners. This is a normal part of teen development. Sexual thoughts can be intense or confusing. No matter what your teen's sexual orientation is, it's important to let your teen know you love them unconditionally and accept them for who they are.

What is sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to physical or emotional attraction that one feels for another person. Teens have a sexual orientation even if they aren't sexually active yet. People usually consider themselves in one of the following ways:

- **Heterosexual** means attracted to people of the opposite sex. Sometimes this is called "straight".
- **Lesbian** refers to women attracted to other women. **Gay** usually refers to men attracted to other men, but can also be used to describe women attracted to women as well.
- **Bisexual** means attracted to two or more sexes.
- **Pansexual** means attraction where sex, gender or gender identity isn't taken into account at all.
- **Demisexual** means not experiencing sexual attraction unless there is a strong emotional connection.
- **Asexual** means lack of sexual attraction to others.

What is it like for teens who are exploring their sexual orientation?

When people reveal they are non-heterosexual, it is often called “coming out.” The process of discovering sexual orientation can start:

- with fantasies or dreams,
- when a person realizes they are attracted to someone of the same gender,
- with a feeling that they are different from friends and classmates, and/or
- with a sexual experience.

These feelings can cause uncertainty for a young person, which could be made worse by:

- the social stigma that can come with being non-heterosexual,
- a lack of knowledge,
- a fear of how friends and family might react,
- a fear of being rejected by friends and family,
- a lack of non-heterosexual role models, or
- having few opportunities to socialize with other teens with similar feelings.

What should I do if I think my teen questions their sexual orientation or has just come out to me?

This can be a confusing time, but also an exciting time for your teen as they become more open with who they are. Here are ways you can help:

- Love and support them. Let your teen know that they are loved no matter what their sexual orientation.
- Wait until they are ready to talk. Some people are not ready to announce their sexual orientation until they are adults. Some teens will tell a sibling, cousin, or friend before they tell a parent.
- Recognize their courage in speaking out.
- Be open-minded. Avoid judgment and blame.

- Continue to do what you have always done together.
- Ask what they need from you. They may just want you to listen and be positive.

Sometimes, parents bring their teen to the doctor wanting a “diagnosis.” There is no blood test to determine sexual orientation. It is not a disorder.

How can I help my teen feel more comfortable talking about their sexual orientation?

- The most important thing is to let them know that you love them.
- Be available and open-minded if they want to talk, but don’t force the issue.
- Consider talking about sexuality after you’ve watched a show or movie together, or read a book with a non-heterosexual theme.
- Encourage them to talk about sexual health with a paediatrician, family doctor, other health care provider, or a trusted adult. They may also be able to help them find ways to deal with any peer pressure, harassment, or bullying.

If my teen is not heterosexual, will they have health issues?

Just being non-heterosexual does not have any health risks. However, non-heterosexual teens are at a higher risk of depression and suicide.

- All sexually active teens should be regularly tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Anyone who has unprotected anal sex has a high risk of STIs. Safer sex practices, such as using a condom, help reduce the risk of infections.
- Encourage your teen to talk to a trusted health care provider about all options for safer sex.
- Both boys and girls should get the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. It is usually given between 9 and 13 years of age and ideally before any sexual activity starts. A teen over 13 years old can still get the HPV vaccine. Speak to your health care provider for more information.
- Pap tests are recommended for all women in their early to mid-20s.

- Fears of judgement, rejection, or bullying can lead non-heterosexual youth to keep their sexual orientation secret, even from friends and family. They may be at greater risk of emotional problems like anxiety and depression. Be supportive and love your child unconditionally.

Where can we get support?

In many communities, youth groups provide opportunities for non-heterosexual teens to talk to others going through the same thing. Mental health professionals can also help them (and you) cope with the difficult feelings of developing a sexual orientation. They can also help youth find ways to deal with any peer pressure, harassment, and bullying.

Many Canadian cities have a chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), an organization that has helped many parents whose children have come out to them.

Additional resources

- Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
(<http://pflagcanada.ca/pflag-chapters/>)
- Coming Out (The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada)
(<https://www.sexandu.ca/lgbttq/coming-out/>)
- Sexual Orientation and Supporting Children and Youth who are LGBTQ & Questioning (CHEO)
(http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/LGBT_youth_en)
- LGBT Youthline
(<http://www.youthline.ca/>)
- Native Youth Sexual Health Network
(<http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Adolescent Health Committee



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