

Issues for Working with LGBT Adolescents

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Presentation Summary

Caitlin Ryan provided an overview of clinical development and practice issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adolescents and substantiated an urgent need for increased training for those working with LGBT youth. Ms. Ryan's recent research offers empirical support that in rejecting families, LGBT youth demonstrate more depressive symptoms, increased suicidal ideation, and increased risk of HIV. Among LGBT adolescents, out-of-home LGBT adolescents are at highest risk as a result of unwelcoming and impermanent placements and not having support for being who they really are.

Congruent with an earlier onset of puberty, the average age of coming out has been steadily decreasing over the years, making LGBT youth much more visible within the community. Unlike previous studies with adult participants, current research suggests that most gay and lesbian adolescents first become aware of same-sex attraction at age 10 and self-identify as lesbian or gay between the ages of 14 and 16.

Ms. Ryan cautions against treating LGBT youth as "special." It is important that we recognize that LGBT youth face the same developmental experiences as other youth: those of race, sexual identity, gender identity, and the normative risks of adolescence resulting from challenging the system and constant experimentation. However, understanding the social context for LGBT youth is essential before the needs of LGBT adolescents can be appropriately addressed, including knowledge of stigmatization of sexual identity, internalized shame, the impact of the AIDS epidemic, and the multiple stigmas experienced by LGBT youth of color.

As the age of coming out has become younger, it is especially important to evaluate the impact of family support and rejection on LGBT youth. To date, little research has been done to study the families of LGBT youth or services to families to support LGBT youth. Though LGBT youth are now more visible in the community, the gay community is often stratified by generations, and youth lack successful models of aging throughout the life course. As stigma itself can have a strong impact on identity development, help-seeking behaviors, and increased risks for negative health outcomes, Ms. Ryan stressed the importance of considering factors that promote resiliency and coping. Her work highlights the importance of developing curriculum and training to support families and LGBT youth to become more resilient.