

BOX 3.26 INDIRECT AND GENTLE AS A FIRST COURSE

- Put up gay-positive posters, "Safe Zone" stickers, or event announcements. Leave support service literature on information carrels, books and articles in the office or classroom. (Note: These strategies are vital in schools, like Lubbock High in Texas, where community-based support group postings on general school bulletin boards are prohibited.)
- Take opportunities to show you do not assume everyone is heterosexual.
- Use inclusive language and refer specifically to gay/lesbian people in conversation with students and parents.
- Use nongendered pronouns when referring to student relationships and parents.
- Use the same terms that the student uses to denote his or her feelings and orientation.
- Assure confidentiality. (This assurance may not be possible in the context of suicidality or substance abuse where reporting is mandated. Discretions needed in deciding which underlying details of the problem should be divulged.)

Note: To avoid both assumptions and labels, counselors and health care providers might ask, "Are you sexual with men, women, or both?"

disclosure indirectly. (See box 3.26.) Students have been known to come out first to a teacher who is not their own, just because they have heard that he or she is "cool about gay stuff."

Frequently students themselves are indirect. (See box 3.27.) Counselors can ask about relationships or start a conversation about the constraints of conventional gender roles. Or they can be more forthright by asking "Are you wanting to talk to me about sexuality?" Or, "Are you concerned that you might be gay/lesbian/bisexual?"

Question 22: When teachers or counselors ask such questions, aren't they putting the idea of being gay in a student's head?

It depends on how teachers and counselors ask the questions. Even when struggling students appear to want an authority figure to tell them what they are, the adult shouldn't do it. The answer might seem obvious and still be inaccurate. And

BOX 3.27 HINTING AT HOMOSEXUALITY

- dressing or behaving in a gender-defiant manner;
- lingering in the nurse's office with no apparent medical problems;
- referring to a gay "friend";
- wanting to talk about sex repeatedly;
- relating a distant homosexual event in their own lives;
- showing no interest in dating, while being otherwise gregarious and/or involved in academics or extracurriculars

even getting at the truth requires strategic thinking. Trying to relieve a student's distress with, "Don't worry. You're gay. That's wonderful! Let's talk about what your life will be from now on," could panic him or her back to the closet.

Working sensitively with each student, counselors need to balance two approaches: support and encouragement to come out versus restraint that could be interpreted as fear or negativity. (See box 3.28.) The goals are: to help struggling adolescents rid themselves of internalized homophobia and deal with social stigma, family reactions, and other responses to their sexuality; to encourage them to celebrate and cultivate their homosexual potential; and to advise them that sexual orientation is not static nor is identity fixed.

Question 23: Will adolescents really accept the idea that they don't need to label themselves?

Some earnestly take the stance, "I'm not gay, straight, bi, or queer—I'm just me." But others find it hard to adopt that position, even if they understand the theory behind it. After all, students live in a real world that puts stock in such categories. Because sexuality labels have consequences, most young people scrutinize themselves and others for signs of their position on the spectrum of sexuality.

Then, there are those who already "know" they are gay or bisexual and want affirmation from a counselor. A student who is looking for self-love, confidence, and a glbt community does not necessarily want to hear restrained advice about meaningless labels and sexual fluidity.

As much as educators may want to protect young people from the stifling aspects of all identity constructs and to free them to their own individuality, they should not discourage the positive consequences of group affiliation: solidarity and pride. There's plenty of time for identity deconstruction later on and for finding the right balance between unique individual and group identities.

BOX 3.28 RESPONSES TO THE PERPLEXED**POOR**

- Gosh, let's not jump to conclusions.
- No one's sexuality is certain in adolescence.
- It's probably just a phase you're going through.
- If you pay too much attention to these feelings you might make yourself gay.
- Bisexuality is just the latest teen fad, right?
- What will your parents think?
- This will totally change your life.

IN SHORT: It isn't real; it will pass, and don't, for heaven's sake, act on it.

BETTER

- Like you or not—gay, straight, bi, queer, or undecided.
- Your life holds joyful possibilities whatever your orientation.
- Sexuality can be fluid over time, but it's also important to understand your feelings now.
- Since you seem uncertain about how to characterize your feelings, let's look at each possibility.
- Sexuality labels seem important, but they are less important than the quality of your love relationships.

IN SHORT: It may be real for you now; it could be right for you for a long time, perhaps all your life. Live the experience, but don't obsess on any others.

more than another's heterosexuality should be. Every aspect of identity can be acknowledged as subject to further development and yes—fluidity.

Openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual educators are happy when students come out successfully. But when some young people judge homosexual identities as rigid and irrelevant, some of us cringe. Part of our purpose has been to make sexual orientation a nonissue, but we don't expect to hear that "gay, out, and proud" is passé. Like many women and people of color, we continue to be partly self-defined by our oppression. Still, we don't have to abandon our politics in accepting with understanding and good humor our students' right to call themselves "queer" or whatever else they prefer.

And we must still direct them toward positive information and role models (including career role models). They should be helped with family and peer ties. They should be encouraged to make the most of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual potential, to explore the gay world, tend to new relationships, and stay healthy.

Question 25: How should counselors respond to students who want to change their sexuality?

Gentle, cautious skepticism is demanded. The American Psychiatric Association maintains there is no evidence that sexuality "conversion therapies" work and some indication that they are harmful. Although some highly motivated individuals can change their behavior for short periods of time and deny their attractions, they often suffer great anxiety and depression as a result. A far better counseling approach is to reduce internalized homophobia and stress self-acceptance.

Still, some therapists tout cures for homosexuality, often religiously based, and aimed tellingly at men more than women. These "cures" get a lot of press attention. (See box 3.29.) Even less rabidly homophobic therapists think conversion therapies should be offered to patients who are unhappy with their sexualities.

BOX 3.29 CURES

I wanted this [exorcism] to work so bad. I ignited and squeezed and tried to shove this homosexuality out of me. I remember afterwards, going out for fast food and trying to catch myself. It's gone. Yeah, it's gone. But it wasn't. . . . When people say they're happy being married, they're really saying, "I'm acceptable to myself and to the people around me. I don't think they'll feel that way in the long run."

Jallen Rix in Barry Yeoman, *Gay No More: Psychology Today*, March 1999.

Question 24: How should counselors support homosexual young people who adamantly reject labeling?

They should try to determine the source of the rejection. Is it the perceived inadequacy of narrow categories or is it homophobia? Are students wisely avoiding a trap that limits their self-definition and relationship potentialities? Or are they merely finding a sophisticated defense from stigma? In a homophobic culture, it would be a stretch to believe that shame has nothing to do with it. Therefore the main thrust of a counselor's response to adolescents who are just coming out should be congratulatory and enabling. These teens need release from internalized homophobia and defenses against prejudice. They need consolation over their losses and help seeing a future. Their gayness shouldn't be a straitjacket any

They do not seem to understand that the source of their patient's problem is shame, not homosexuality itself.

Teens who are distressed by their homosexuality could be advised to cultivate their bisexual potential, if they have one. But that course requires an honest exploration of the range of their desires, not the purging of its gay elements. Those who want to be bisexual as a way to cling to some shred of "normalcy" need to get a grip on internalized stigma.

Question 26: *Are there topics that teachers and counselors should be sure to cover?*

One can easily imagine a starting list of topics for discussion. (See box 3.30.)

BOX 3.30 COUNSELING TOPICS: A CHECKLIST

- Express gratitude for the confidence.
- Assure confidentiality. (Perhaps not possible where reporting of sexual activity or substance abuse is mandated.)
- Assess whether the student needs immediate extended counseling or if disclosure is enough for the time being.
- Make sure to see the student again, but do not assume that sexuality must be the focus of every subsequent interaction.
- Refer to the positive aspects of being gay/lesbian (solidarity, loving relationships, perseverance, diversity of the community, rich history and culture).
- Guide the student to sources of information and confirmation regarding these happy prospects.
- Discover the extent of disclosure to others and explore the consequences of coming out in various settings, including safety and shelter issues, reporting of harassment, stigma management, and possibilities for further support like referral to school or community-based groups.
- Ask about relations with family, teachers, and peers.
- Explore feelings about lost heterosexual identity and expectations.
- Discuss relationships, including courtship and breakup.
- Discuss alcohol and drug use.
- Discuss safe sex practices and the motivation to engage in them.
- Discuss resources for researching gay-supportive colleges, e.g., *Findings*, an LGBT-Friendly Campus: A Guide for Counselors Advising GLBT Students Pursuing Higher Education (www.glsen.org), *The Professor* Review (www.review.com).

Because there is so little depth in the media about same-gender relationships, it's helpful for adolescents to think about their past, current, and potential partnerships. How have they been or might they be different in their dynamics from heterosexual ones? Because many teens still think being gay means giving up the idea of having children, they need to know about possibilities for creating families of choice.

Young people should have access to good books and media treatments of LGBT relationships. Gay publishing now offers serious magazines, fine fiction, sociological and psychological studies, and a stream of self-help books, some for adolescent readers. (See appendix B.)

Substance abuse counseling must include the role of bars in the gay/lesbian community. It must also probe the underlying psychological needs that drive gay teens to alcohol, drugs, and tobacco use. Although some elements of substance counseling are common to people of all orientations, some strategies have been developed for gay young folks in particular. (See appendix B.)

AIDS counseling and education must be consistent, detailed, clear, and frank. It should reflect the real practices and interests of adolescents. Fearful or flip, teens need adults who are seriously concerned for them, yet relaxed and good humored. The curriculum cannot be limited to anatomy, degrees of risk, condom use, or abstinence. Like effective pregnancy prevention programs, HIV education should be understood in relation to the factors that influence sexual practices: self-esteem, love, communication, oppression, and cultural conditioning. An open, pluralistic, respectful environment must be created for students to take account of their sexual lives and responsibilities.

If any topics lie beyond the counselor's knowledge or comfort level, she or he should refer students to someone better prepared to help, in either the school or the community. Lists of such resources should be available to all personnel. They may include health, counseling, and drop-in centers, advocacy groups, and shelters.

Some community agencies provide targeted services for sexual minority youth, such as: GED preparation, adult mentoring, family counseling, and residential options, including group homes, supervised independent living, and placements with gay and lesbian foster families (e.g., Twin Cities Host Home Program, Minn.; Safe Homes, and the Home for Little Wanderers, Mass.; Green Chimneys, N.Y.; L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, Calif.).

Question 27: *Why do some gay and lesbian youth seem to go overboard expressing their sexuality?*

Of course there are issues of propriety regarding any expression of sexuality, but let the judges consider the following: gay people are regularly accused of flaunting their sexuality by merely correcting the assumption that they are straight.

Those who are squeamish about public displays of homosexual affection may be charmed by similar shows of heterosexual puppy love. This double standard is not only inherently discriminatory; it also ignores the genuine needs of sexual minority youth to be open. Coming out is a key element in healthy identity development. Even well-intentioned teachers wanting to shield students from homophobia may hurt them by overemphasizing caution.

Advising these young people how to navigate coming out without neglecting other emotional, intellectual, and practical needs requires delicacy. These are adolescents in the throes of first love—love for themselves and perhaps another—and little else may matter for the moment.

Some also throw themselves full throttle into the movement for glbt social justice. That is both morally admirable and self-enabling. Of course, when their social life or activism interferes with other important tasks, like academic achievement, counselors can help them recenter and prioritize.

Question 28: What kinds of behaviors can teachers expect of students in the "pride stage" of gay identity development?

These adolescents are exhilarated to be out of hiding and are revved up for cultural exploration. They want to try out different styles, join affinity groups, and be around colorful people. Like their straight peers, they often identify by means of dress, comportment, musical tastes, and other interests. Lesbian identity signifiers include butch, femme, earth mother, jock, lipstick lesbian, baby dyke, bad girl, and vanilla. Boys might label themselves clone, jock, prep, raver, club kid, or drama queen. Many are not wedded to any one appearance or affiliation, and are eclectic in their search for costume, demeanor, community involvement, and erotic preferences.

They are looking for intimate friends as well as sexual partners. Sometimes the former become the latter and vice versa. Girls seem better at adapting to such changes. Boys, on the other hand, might have difficulty forging deep nonsexual friendships with other gay males. Those boys who have been taught to equate homosexuality with sex may have trouble sorting their affectional needs from their sexual ones.

Youth without access to social groups of glbt peers may end up going to bars and dating older partners. Age differences are not necessarily problematic but still worth discussing with a counselor. Significant inequalities in power, income, sexual experience, and worldliness are hard for a teen to negotiate.

Gay and lesbian youth need guidance and encouragement in these explorations. They require consolation for mistakes and heartbreaks. Unlike their heterosexual counterparts, who have likely had a head start with sexual roles and relationships, they are just starting. (See box 3.31.)

BOX 3.31 WHAT TO ADVISE THE NEWLY "OUT"

- **Relax and be patient.**—This is just the beginning.
- **Be proud but prudent.** (The closets is okay. When danger threatens.)
- **If you are harassed and allies report to the authorities and demand justice.**
- **Be safe with sex and substances.**
- **Don't let yourself be exploited.** Say no to anything that makes you uncomfortable.
- **Nightlife is exciting.**—on weekends.
- **Activism is great.**—and so is doing well in school.
- **Remember your family needs you too.**
- **If you're feeling down,** talk to friends and counselors.
- **Keep your sense of humor.**

Question 29: Do sexual minority students do better with gay or lesbian counselors?

Some youth (and adults) prefer a counselor who is more likely to share their perspective and experience. They assume he or she will be more empathetic. Youth especially are wary of negative judgment, but of course heterosexual counselors can earn their trust. When counselors, gay or straight, talk frankly about how they have dealt with their own homophobia, they contribute to two goals: earning the student's confidence and giving him or her permission to work on the vestiges of shame that nearly all sexual minority youth must exorcise. When students want a role model to mentor and advise them, a gay teacher or counselor can be most effective.

Teachers who have not had counselor training require preparation for these tasks. They need not only understand the issues but also be familiar with the techniques. They should be alert for attempted manipulation by emotionally needy, possibly angry adolescents. Sexuality counseling in schools is risky terrain, not only because of conservative opposition, but also because teens can misread intentions and cross boundaries. Teachers must not shrink from this crucial role, but they should be prudent and sensible. (See box 3.32.)

Question 30: How should gay and lesbian students be counseled about coming out to their families?

Counselors should discuss with glbt students the extent to which they have already come out to their families and how the latter have responded. (See

BOX 3.32 MORE CAVEATS

- When a student self-identifies as gay, don't jump to conclusions about his or her experience.
- Alert a colleague or supervisor to what is going on.
- When advisable, do not meet privately with a student unless another adult is within view.
- Be clear about boundaries.
- Allow students to talk about their intimate lives, but don't share details of your own. Discuss sexual behaviors without personal attribution, suggest readings, etc.
- Let the young person have the floor, as much as you can.
- If you are gay, don't let yourself be idealized.
- The more identities you have in common with the counselee, the more careful you should be about overidentification in both directions.

box 3.33.) Hiding from one's family is damaging, but coming out to them, even with a counselor's help, can also have negative results. These consequences can range from shaming and harassment to outright violence and expulsion from the home. The counselor must broach these possibilities. If the family is likely to respond drastically and the student might be left without support, safety, and shelter, it might be better to keep the secret. The student should be counseled and referred confidentially. (See box 3.34.)

Conservative religious families are often less accepting, but liberals might not react as well as counselors expect. They could be less progressive about sexuality than about other social issues, or their attitudes might change where their own children are concerned, or they could fear for their child's well-being. (See box 3.35.)

Even students who don't anticipate dire results might worry about hurting or disappointing their parents. A child could be afraid to come out if another sibling has already done so. They might anticipate another painful scene or be aware of lingering disapproval for a sister or brother that they dare not bring upon themselves.

Learning about successful coming out experiences of others with similar family backgrounds can help both counselors and students anticipate some issues. They could prepare by enacting a family members role-play. When advising discretion and planning, the counselor should also stress the healthy aspects of coming out—reasonable risk-taking, growth promotion, and improved communication—applied in the family context.

BOX 3.33 COMING OUT TO FAMILY

A Checklist

- Has the student come out to any or all family members?
- Might some know and pretend not to?
- If they know, are they accepting?
- How does the student think accepting family members really feel?
- Is the family open with extended family, friends, etc.?
- How do unaccepting family members behave toward the student?
- Are there other gay people in the family? How are they treated? Have you spoken with them?
- Why are you coming out to your family right now? If you're coming out in anger or spite, wait. If you're tempted to come out during a family event, choose a quiet time instead.
- How have your relations with family members been until now?
- Are there other conflicts or stresses in the family right now?
- Are you confident enough in your own sexual identity to be self-assured with your family?
- Can you be as loving and patient with your family as you want them to be with you?
- Do you have pamphlets or other resources to give your parents and do you know where they might go for support?

BOX 3.34 THE PARENTAL NOTIFICATION DILEMMA

- President Bush's education reform bill of January 2002 allows gay youth to seek school-provided physical and mental health services without parental notification.
- Referrals to outside services are not covered by this law.
- Prior state and local laws and policies may muddle the issue.
- Counselors should confer with administration in advance of any real case on how to act in the best interest of the child when the risks of parental involvement seem dire.
- Mandates for reporting suicidality or depression need not include the supposed reasons for the problem.
- When an administrator cannot assure student confidentiality, the counselor is left to conscience. He or she might quietly or indirectly provide the student with a list of community services (hotlines, mental health centers, etc.)

BOX 3.35 THE SHAKEN LIBERAL

When my son told me he was gay at 9, I played baseball with him more often to get him to sign up for sports. I signed him up for karate so he could at least defend himself. I coached him on being more masculine. I called in being more assertive, told him to speak in a gruff voice, told him not to flail with his hands when he was talking. I hated myself for trying to make him into something he wasn't, shaming him for the things he was. Buckling under what society considered "normal" and therefore OK, Burl was afraid he might end up beat up someday, maybe even dead. I'm still afraid of those things.

Mary Olson, *Homosexuals Deserve Loving Sexual Relationships*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, August 14, 2000

At the end of this anticipatory process, the decision is always the student's to make. If he or she opts for disclosure and expects ejection, prearranged housing and support must be available. This is no simple matter. When adolescents are thrown out or need to be rescued from abusive homes, counselors may have trouble finding appropriate long-term placements.

Question 31: Should students come out to all their family members?

They generally start with someone they think will be sympathetic, often a sibling. GLBT youth could welcome the chance to strategize with one relative about coming out to others and to have an ally when the time comes. More mothers are confided in than fathers are, especially by sons. It may indeed be easier to find a toehold of support before taking on the whole family project, but there are still risks in selective disclosure within families. Usually discrete relatives might divulge the confidence for reasons they think are the child's best interests. Even when they don't tell, their well-intentioned advice might be wrong.

When some family members know and others don't or pretend not to, honest relationships are splintered. This avoidance conspiracy requires the student's acquiescence. The family claims to be interested in the child's life, but both family and child are careful not to ask or tell anything too honestly. Lovers are treated and pose as friends, and so on. There is no intentional malice in these deceptions—just relatives doing what they think they should to spare feelings and avoid dissension. This path may seem best, but it is disastrous in the long term. Because sexual orientation is not trivial, promoting a charade invites dishonesty

in family relationships at many levels. Most importantly, gay adolescents conclude they cannot be loved for who they really are and waste energy in self-monitoring and pretense. Concealment itself ends up being more alienating than the perthaps difficult truth.

Of course, coming out to some family members may be more intimidating than sharing with others. Older people in general are more conservative about sexuality and therefore might be less tolerant. Or, they may be inclined to pity because they think homosexuals must still lead sad and shameful lives as outcasts. On the other hand, some family elders might agree with progressive social developments or just have matured beyond harsh judgments in general.

Young siblings, on the other hand, may lack the understanding and maturity to handle the news well. Even older ones could be baffled or angry over the prospect of losing their friends. They may worry about their own sexuality and what others think they are. These fears are natural and need to be addressed.

If they are welcome, extended family members who have experience with coming out issues or are even gay themselves could be invited into the counseling conversation with the immediate family. On the other hand, counselors should not accede to parents' requests to bring in extended family to pressure their children to give up their so-called lifestyle.

Previous family experience with homosexuality can also make counseling more difficult. For example, great empathy and tact are required in talking with a parent who is divorced from a gay spouse or in including a closeted relative in the conversation.

Question 32: How should schools counsel families of gay and lesbian students?

Extraordinary discretion and sensitivity are required in broaching sexuality issues with parents or other family members of glbt and questioning students. A family may want to accept their child's homosexuality but may still be uncomfortable with it. They should know that such adjustments take time, like the coming out process itself. If popular misunderstandings and bad psychological theories have influenced them, they may think their child's homosexuality is their fault. They may also fret about negative responses from other family members, friends, neighbors, and church communities.

Parents may go through a grieving period, mourning the child they thought they had and some of their expectations of him or her. Yes, the child is still their child, but with this revelation, he or she may indeed seem to be a stranger. Some who ostensibly take the news well and offer their embrace are still surprised by aftershocks of grief. It may take from six months to some years to process this information. (See box 3.36.)

Yet grief must end, as must denial, guilt, anger, and regret. The family should be helped to learn more about gay and lesbian life, renew their appreciation and

BOX 3.36 GRIEF AND RECONCILIATION

For a few years after my son Adam came out to me, Father's Day was a day of mourning, the day when I was reminded of what I lost. He was going to be the captain of the football team... the stud that I bragged about... the husband... the father of the children I would cherish... [T]oday I realize that all those dreams I had weren't really for Adam. They were for me... Father's Day has changed for me. It isn't any longer about what I lost, but what I gained: the ability to love my son unconditionally.

Jeff Ellis, "It Took Years, But Dad 'Very Proud' of Gay Son," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 16, 2002.

Even 10 years since [Maria Ortiz] came out, [her Cuban refugee parents] sometimes struggle with the idea that Maria won't be marrying a man and having children with him. It is like a death of a daughter," [her father] Heriberto says. "All your expectations die and you have to learn something new."

Martha Irvine, "Revelation Forever: A Father's Relationship with Parents," *Associated Press*, October 2, 2002.

revise their expectations of their child, and reaffirm their love. Researchers describe six stages of family adjustment: shock, denial, guilt, expression of feelings, return to rationality with varying degrees of acceptance, and, finally, true acceptance. Adolescents should be advised to be patient with their families. (See box 3.37.)

The goal in counseling family members should be complete and equal inclusion of the gay student in the family. Restrictions on dress, dating, sexual activity, and so on should be no different from what they are, or would be, for straight siblings. Communication should be encouraged. "I accept what you are, but I don't want to hear about it" is not a proper family resolution. Nor should family members be voyeuristic. Like other adolescents, sexual minority youth deserve some privacy. The rest of the family must understand that gays and lesbians want to feel loved as much as other family members are and that they want to have their relationships equally respected. The social customs celebrating heterosexual dating, courtship, and union (Valentine's Day, proms, weddings, anniversaries, et al.) must extend to gays and lesbians too. And when breakups and other disappointments come, they deserve the same consolations.

BOX 3.37 WHAT TO REMIND SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH ABOUT THEIR FAMILIES

- It took you time to adjust to the discovery of your own homosexuality.
- Family members need to express their feelings and be heard before they can move on to better understanding.
- Finding out a loved one is homosexual can shake one's confidence in an entire belief system.
- Family members may feel guilty that they did something wrong or that their child has suffered without their knowledge or comfort.
- Each family member moves at a different pace.
- People sometimes regress in the progress they were making toward acceptance, but usually recover.
- Most gay/lesbian people themselves spend years working out their internalized homophobia.
- They may be having trouble expressing it, but they still love you.

Even though some families and cultures want LGBT youth to keep quiet in exchange for tolerance, it is not wise to counsel adolescents to be satisfied with such conditional love or second-class family status. They are a source of pain and resentment over the long term. At the same time counselors must appreciate that racial, religious, and cultural identities are not always easily abandoned in favor of sexual liberation. As the powerful 2000 film *Trembling before God* illustrates, gay Orthodox Jews don't feel any less Jewish than gay or lesbian. So for some, it is not about "quitting the club that won't have you as a member." Many sexual minority people agonize over the "impossible" choice between one piece of their heart and another. (See box 3.38.)

Question 33: What help can counselors offer to apparently accepting families?

They need to know how to educate themselves about gay and lesbian life. They may want help examining their own attitudes more deeply or devising strategies for inclusion of their gay child in family affairs. They might need support for disclosing to others—what has been called the "coming out" process of the family. (See box 3.39.) Like parents of LGBT children whose adjustment seems more tentative, they would be well advised to join a group like PFLAG. (See appendix C.)