

TEEN LINE Reaches Out To LGBT Youth

By Elaine Leader, Ph.D., LCSW

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”....Anne Frank, Diary of a Young Girl

“Some day, maybe, there will exist a well informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child’s spirit.”....Erik Erikson

These statements are the guiding principles that underlay TEEN LINE’s dedication to providing a service that offers a sensitive and positive approach to helping youth deal with the problems and difficulties that confront gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender individuals in our society.

The Facts

- Sexual minority youth and staff members make up about 10% of California’s school population. (*Project Ten, Los Angeles USD*).
- Gay youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people (US government, *Report of the Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide*)
- An estimated 28% of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning (GLBTQ) students drop out of high school.
- 50% of gay youth report that their parents reject them.
- 40% of homeless youth are identified as GLBTQ.

Background

Reliable research indicates that approximately 10% of the population is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. They come from backgrounds that are ethnically, geographically and socioeconomically diverse. Many of the teens who call Cedars-Sinai’s TEEN LINE are in conflict or confused about their sexual orientation. They are torn between a desire to fit in with their mainly heterosexual schoolmates, and a desire to express their budding sexuality. Most of these callers fear rejection from family and/or being ostracized by peers. Many, struggling with issues of sexual identity, declare themselves bisexual.

Depression and Suicide among Gay Youth

Suicide has become one of the leading causes of death among young people and statistics indicate that the risk for suicide is three times greater among GLBT than other youth. In fact, gay youth may comprise up to 30% of completed youth suicides annually. (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1989) Mental health professionals in the gay community have been aware of this correlation for a long time. However, the link between youth suicide and homosexuality has been ignored by the society at large.

In addition to suicide, the risk of substance abuse among gay youth is far higher than for the general population and substance abuse is consistently tied to higher risks of suicide. There are many reasons why these youth are at greater risk, not the least among these is the need to cope with the loss and depression incurred from continuing societal oppression. Traditional support systems are often unwelcoming of gay youth and, in fact, frequently reject, ostracize or ignore their existence. There is, therefore, a great need for organizations that offer a safe atmosphere for the open expression and discussion of the difficulties of establishing a gay identity.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, Project 10, originally begun as a drop-out prevention program, has evolved into a general counseling and educational vehicle for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. The past few years has also seen a rise in the number

of Gay-Straight Alliances in both the public and private sectors. Organized on lines similar to other extra-curricular school clubs these have provided an opportunity for youth to meet with others in a relatively safe space. But despite these advances, there is still much to be done to combat the sense of isolation that these youth experience that leads to feelings of despair, depression and, all too often, to suicidal ideation and attempt.

At TEEN LINE we have been deeply concerned about this issue and have incorporated aspects of our ongoing teen suicide prevention training into our “growing up gay” outreach. The goal of the Sheldon Andelson/TEEN LINE Gay and Lesbian Outreach (GLO) is to educate teens and adults on the difficulties, challenges and even rewards associated with “growing up gay”.

Panels comprised of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth share their personal stories in the classroom setting. While recounting events they also share the feelings engendered from being rejected, their personal fears and despair they may have experienced. Several have made suicide attempts in the past. The panelists encourage discussion of these issues during the presentations. The openness and candor of the presenters is a catalyst to students who might have had similar thoughts and feelings. Students are also taught how they can combat homophobia, harassment and discrimination in their school. Evaluations of this outreach have been uniformly positive both from teachers and students. As for the panelists, their proficiency as public speakers, workshop leaders and self esteem improve immeasurably.

Harassment, Homophobia and Hate Crimes

Homophobia is a prejudice similar to all other prejudices such as racism, sexism and anti-Semitism. Long-term exposure to the stigma and prejudice towards gays and lesbians too often forces an individual to stifle the expression and, inevitably, the realization of their personal and social identity. This results in gay people becoming a minority group. Minority groups that arise out of prejudice suffer unjustified, negative acts by the rest of society. These acts range from mild discrimination and verbal attacks to overt discrimination and, too often, physical violence. Youth are particularly vulnerable to harassment – particularly name-calling, vandalism, overt and covert discrimination.

Frequently adults, including teachers, mistakenly avoid discussion of this subject. Under the misguided auspices of protecting the young from the “threat” or “spread” of homosexuality, much pain and suffering is inflicted on the young who are becoming aware of their need for the very identity he or she is being protected from.

Recently, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2000) completed a national survey of GLBTQ students. A total of 496 youth from 32 states completed the survey. The findings are alarming:

- Over 90% reported that they hear homophobic remarks in their school.
- Almost all reported hearing the remarks from other students, one third from school staff.
- Places they heard the remarks:

Hallways	89%	Gym	75%	Bus	75%
Classrooms	85%	Bathrooms	75%		
- 39% reported that no one ever intervened in the serious incidents.
- Nearly 50% reported they did not feel safe in their school
- 38% reported not feeling comfortable speaking to school staff about GLBTQ issues.
- Experiences of GLBTQ youth were similar across racial/ethnic groups.

One of the TEEN LINE panelists reported that as the only openly gay student at his affluent high school, his car was keyed; he was consistently shoved and subjected to frequent name-calling and verbal harassment. When he went to administration to report that his tires had been slashed in the school parking lot, he was told to “call AAA”. It was not until the boy’s counselor, his mother and the author insisted on meeting with the Principal that any acknowledgment was given of this gay-bashing.

In fact, he stated that without the support from his TEEN LINE “family” and his mother that he might easily have made a suicide attempt during these years.

Disclosure

Disclosure presents difficult choices. “Who can I tell? What will they say? Will they still love me? Will they still accept me?”

The potential responses to these questions cause legitimate fear and/or pain. Disclosing to one’s friends and peers can have devastating consequences for an adolescent. So much importance surrounds acceptance and being like everyone else during this stage of development that the fear of non-acceptance or ostracism is tremendously inhibiting.

The disclosure to the family can lead to responses such as guilt or fear and assignment or denial of blame. Familial actions range from acceptance to enforced treatment to family expulsion. Expulsed, many of these “throwaways” wind up on the streets as a result of being disowned and forced out by their families. Some are forced into prostitution as a means of survival.

Jerry, a talented African-American student at a local Music Academy came out to his mother when he was 16 years old. Since he was an only child of a single parent he was very concerned when his mother insisted that he “stop being homosexual”. Although he attempted to educate his mother by explaining to her that being gay did not change the kind of person he is, she became increasingly distant and kicked him out of the house on his 18th birthday, even though he was still in high school. Jerry became quite depressed at this turn of events, but with the support of Covenant House staff, where he sought shelter, and his friends, he eventually became solely self-supporting. Others have not been so lucky and many end up homeless, living on the streets or in squats.

Toni is a 14 year old transgender. Born anatomically female Toni always thought she was a boy and was shocked at age 10 when she developed breasts and got her period. This was devastating to her. At age 11 Toni made the first of several suicide attempts by cutting her wrists. While in hospital she began experimenting with drugs that other patients smuggled into the hospital. Toni became addicted to heroin. She stopped using heroin but continues to try to escape her depression by using illegal substances despite trials of anti-depressant medications. Confused by the transgender identity Toni came out to her mother as “a butch lesbian.” Still only in 9th grade, Toni has decided that eventually she will opt for hormone treatment and surgery to bring her body more in line with her male gender identity. Although still suffering from depression, on a positive note, she has recently confided to her mother that she is transgender and is seeking specialized help to deal with this.

Joannie, born in Los Angeles of Central American background, was 14 years old when she came out to herself and 16 when she told her mother. Brought up in a strictly Catholic home she was terrified to let her parents know that she was a lesbian. She finally picked up courage to talk with a school counselor after she had been repeatedly harassed and had rocks thrown at her on her way to school. The counselor told her, “You brought it on yourself.” This lack of understanding and fear of being kicked out of her home led to Joannie becoming suicidal. She acquired a gun and had fantasies of either shooting herself or throwing herself off a cliff. She cried herself to sleep every night till one day she picked up the phone and called the TEEN LINE. For the first time she

felt understood and accepted after pouring out her heart for over two hours to a non-judgmental listener. “That call saved my life and eventually led to my being able to tell my mom,” says Joannie. “I also transferred schools and became involved in Project 10 – having a safe place to talk with other kids going through the same stuff really helped.” Joannie subsequently volunteered to participate in part TEEN LINE’s ‘growing up gay’ outreach and, as she became more comfortable talking about her earlier suicidal thoughts, added the Teen Suicide Prevention Program to her volunteers activities. For Joannie, this participation has been her therapy.

A word now about parents. Parents, who are subjected to the same misconceptions and myths as the rest of society, are fearful that their child’s future is foredoomed if they are homosexual or transgender. Some believe that gays cannot be good Christians, lawyers, laborers, politicians or parents. This further drives the individual into a belief of their own “difference” and even “inferiority.” Fortunately, some of these beliefs are changing but much more is needed.

TEEN LINE/Sheldon Andelson Gay and Lesbian Outreach (GLO)

The goal of this outreach is to educate all youth on these issues, providing an opportunity for questions and discussion of the challenges, prejudices, difficulties and, even rewards, involved in “growing up gay.” The format includes a panel of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth who present their experiences “growing up gay” and lead a classroom or youth group discussion on the topic. Research indicates that teens are more receptive to listening and learning about sensitive matters when it is presented by peers.

TEEN LINE has a long-standing relationship with the Los Angeles Unified School District and other area school districts, private schools and agencies serving youth. Since 1981 our hotline has received nearly 300,000 calls from youth with a variety of problems, many of them with questions about sexuality. Our educational publications such as the *Youth Yellow Pages* and teen sexuality brochures have been highly acclaimed. Our teen suicide prevention workshops are highly successful. In addition to working directly with youth we have trained thousands of law enforcement officers on this subject.

TEEN LINE’s credibility and acceptance by teens puts us in a unique position to offer this outreach to the youth of our community. Our reliability and known dependability places us in a special position to be able to provide this educational offering to the schools and youth groups in Los Angeles.

The Challenge

California children are inheriting a society more multicultural and multiracial than ever before witnessed in modern history. With these gifts of diversity, there sometimes comes ugly intolerance of differences. Gay and lesbian youth are often at higher risk for emotional problems, abuse, and neglect – not because of their sexual orientation but because of such intolerance, ignorance, and some people’s inability to accept individual differences. LGBTQ youth face great difficulties growing up in a society where homophobia and heterosexism run rampant. Many may feel isolated at home and within their communities.

Hate-motivated behaviors are becoming more evident on school campuses in too many communities. California schools have a constitutional and moral obligation to protect children on campus and to maintain a safe, secure learning environment. Addressing hate-motivated behavior is an important part of this obligation. However, everyone who has an impact on students and the school community plays a role in dealing with hate-motivated behavior.

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