

Different in More Ways Than One.

Providing Guidance for Teenagers on Their Way to Identity, Sexuality and Respect

3 Different Lifestyles

“Alexander, do me a favour, give me the invitation to the Parents’ Evening, please. Hans would like to come and he wants to make a note of the date.” Flabbergasted, Alexander stares at his father. “Oh, come on, Dad. Why does Hans have to come with us?”

“We’ve been living together for five years. Hans is like a second father to you, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but – honestly, can’t you go there just with Mum anyway? That’d be miles better, really.”

“Darling, being gay is quite normal. You see Mum only every second weekend and the everyday things, your homework – Hans and I look after everything that concerns you. Don’t we? At your school, they should have gotten the idea by now, Hans is just as responsible for you as I am. He has permission to write letters to the school for you, and to talk to the teachers about your achievements. All in all, he’s more for you than I myself. I don’t want to hide Hans, or disavow him.”

“Yeah, sure, I understand that. But even so, it doesn’t have to become common knowledge. My life’s already stressing enough without this. You always think that accepting homosexuality is easy for every single person on Earth – just because Hans and you know thousands of lesbians and gays. Believe me, the school is a complete desert in this respect. I can already picture the teacher standing in front of me. Her face will be full of spite, she’ll smirk, but why, of course, she’s completely tolerant,” groans Alexander.

“Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a little, Alexander?” His father looks at him closely. “Hans and I’ll get it right. The time will come when your miserable journey through this desert will draw to an end.”

“Okay, then I’ll go and get myself buried. By the way, Hans has pinned the invitation to the Parents’ Evening on the wall,” sighs Alexander.

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Framework

First of all

There are many images of lesbian, gay and bisexual lifestyles, but many of them are distorted and prejudiced. Negative stereotypes of gays, bisexuals and lesbians are usually based on quite traditional views of gender and sexuality.

Stereotypes include the image of gay men as being promiscuous and incapable of long-term relationships, of bisexuals as bigamists who are sexually out of control and of lesbians as radical feminists who are frustrated with men. In Europe, many traditionalist religions consider homosexual orientation as something sinful, or as a lifestyle that is obsessed with seduction, in a way similar to an addiction.

Many of these negative stereotypes are based on a very distorted and biased image of the lesbian and gay community. Opponents of certain lifestyles tend to selectively stress some extreme features which they can then present as scandalous, while forgetting or even denying the positive aspects.

Basic information

For lesbians, gays and bisexuals, it is important to make a difference between the basic feeling of same-sex attraction and the creation of a lifestyle: lifestyles are chosen, feelings and sexual orientation aren't. A 'lifestyle' refers to the way a person wants to live her or his life. A lifestyle can encompass aspects of identity, sexuality, relationships, work, housing, etc, but it is a very individual matter that cannot be related to a group of persons in general. In the EU, gays or lesbians have developed many different 'lifestyles'. For some, the anti-discrimination aspect is paramount. By organising themselves, wearing symbols and promoting equal rights, they live an activist lifestyle. For others, social contact, romance or sex can be the most important aspects. They have developed a subculture of meeting places and events which specifically cater to these needs.

Many people share the desire to have one permanent and 'romantic' monogamous relationship. It is not because a teenager is lesbian or gay that such a relationship is impossible, but this is only one of many options. Contemporary societies, with their social and economic mobility, offer much more diversity and freedom for the individual to express her or his particularities, especially concerning gender roles, than used to be the case. With this greater diversity in identities comes a great need for mutual tolerance, acceptance and flexibility among all people.

As acceptance towards homosexuality increases, lesbians and gays are not forced to hide their homosexuality behind a heterosexual marriage and traditional family, like they used to. As a result, there are more and more lesbian women and gay men who have long-term relationships or raise children. Research shows that children raised in such situations do not lack warmth or role models. However, these children do suffer when laws make good parenting difficult (e.g. by making adoption difficult for gays and lesbian couples) or when significant others treat them in discriminatory ways.

What does this mean for me?

For lesbians, gays and bisexuals as well as heterosexuals, a better balanced perspective of lifestyles and diversity would be beneficial to everyone. This should be considered in the wider context of diversity along the lines of gender, cultural background and other social differences, like age, disability and religion.

First of all, laws and regulations on all levels should provide for more diversity. Consider for a moment how your organisation or the people around you deal with different lifestyles. For instance do application procedures, training and work regulations cater for equal treatment for men and women, for couples and individuals?

Furthermore, counselling should help teens explore their feelings and needs. It should empower them to create their own lifestyle. Finally, education should provide an overview of lifestyles and discuss distorted images. It should encourage teens to make their own choices.

Education

Bear in mind

It is important to acknowledge to yourself and to your students that dealing with differences is not always easy; it is not something that will be learned overnight. Take your time and give pupils space to process new ideas.

As an educator, it is necessary to examine your own opinions about diversity and homosexual/bisexual issues. About 70% of the impact of teaching is linked to your personality. If you teach your pupils about a variety of lifestyles, but at the same time demonstrate that you don't approve of lifestyles which differ from your own, your students will not take you very seriously.

Ask yourself these questions:

- How do you feel about differences in general?
- What lifestyle(s) do you like or prefer? Why?
- Where are your limits and why?
- How do you feel about people who do not approve of your lifestyle? How would you like to be treated by them?
- How do you feel about the diversity in lesbian, gay, bisexual lifestyles and those of other ethnic groups?

As a next step, you should prepare yourself to hear about the feelings and opinions of your pupils. The questions listed above are interesting for them, too. Ask yourself if you can imagine their answers, before you begin to discuss with them.

- What will they think?
- How will they react to the topic of diversity?
- How will you feel while working on diversity with them – comfortable, insecure, threatened?

Education

Tools

Defining normality

Aim: To clarify the relativity of the concepts of “normal” and “abnormal”, “in-group” and “out-group” and to discuss the risks of exclusion based on declaring someone an ‘outsider’.

Method: Collect a series of pictures of different men and women. Ask the pupils to arrange in a line so they constitute a continuum from “normal” to “different”. Discuss where the division between normal and abnormal lies (this will usually differ from person to person). Discuss why this differs. Steer the pupils toward a discussion of the definition of ‘normal’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘different’. Explain the concepts of “in-group”, “out-group”, “insider” and “outsider”. These are all subjective standards. As we define who is an insider and who belongs to the in-group, we automatically exclude others. Discuss the effects of exclusion and how to deal respectfully with differences, including differences relating to sexual preference.

Please note: This exercise is suitable for youngsters who are able to take a step back from their own view and for those who are used to thinking from an individual viewpoint. Those pupils who have formed ‘collective’ cultures will find this difficult and will look to the reactions of others. To counter this, the discussion can focus more on differing group or cultural opinions.

Integration of diversity

Aim: To integrate lesbian, gay and bisexual issues into regular school subjects.

Method: In your subject area (math, history, geography, literature, social sciences, health) try to integrate examples of lesbian, gay and bisexual lifestyles within the regular lesson. For example, in a mathematics exercise, you can use the example of two women living together who have to calculate the number of tiles they need to finish their bathroom. When possible, mention homosexual historical figures or cultural examples of lesbian, gay and bisexual lifestyles (see also the map ‘History and Culture’). In a health curriculum, go into the fun and risks when gay boys and lesbians have to deal with coming out issues.

Please note: This kind of integration is only possible when your school already accepts homosexuality, at least to some extent. Otherwise, mentioning such examples will create quite a stir in the classroom and will require a specific discussion. It is usually necessary to begin with a general discussion on homosexuality before you can use such examples.

Labelling exercise

Aim: To explore the mechanisms of stereotyping and labelling and to find out how labelling reinforces stereotypical behaviour.

Method: Glue a label with a stereotype (e.g. 'lazy', 'rude') on the back of every participant. Don't let the labelled participant see what is written. Pupils may look at other people's labels, but should not reveal them. The participants now have to carry out a simple collaboration exercise (e.g. the group has to choose a recipe and cook a meal. They have to decide who will do the shopping, who will cook, who will do the dishes, etc.). During this exercise, they have to react towards each other in accordance to the stereotype which is on their back, without actually telling each other what is written there. Stop the exercise after a few minutes and discuss the effects. Usually the participants get very frustrated and many start to behave like their label says. This is how stereotypes work. Expand the discussion towards lesbian, gay and bisexual labels.

Please note: This exercise works best when the students know and trust each other to some extent. With new groups, there is a risk of disrespect or giving intentional or unintentional offence. Do not give the most negative stereotypes to people who are already excluded within the group.

Education

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the counselling and health care sector.

How far can I go in teaching other opinions than my own?

You should not teach all “other opinions” – and it is impossible - but it is relevant to know the main social discussions and viewpoints on subjects like sexuality and homosexuality. You are allowed to state an opinion, as long as you create space for pupils to voice their opinions as well.

How do I deal with opposing views to diversity in my group?

Welcome this as an opportunity for discussion. The ground rule is: “all opinions are valid as long as they are expressed with respect for others and defended in a serious way”. Ask the students to explain and explore their positions and promote curiosity about other views.

How do I deal with parents who expect the school to promote their preferred lifestyle?

You need to explain to parents that it is the task of the school to teach respect to all pupils and parents. This includes teaching about how to deal with diversity. Ask the parents how they teach their children to show respect; in turn, share your methods with them.

“Good morning everyone”, Mrs Steiner greets her class and glances over the pupils’ heads. Alexander squirms restlessly back and forth on his seat. As his eyes meet those of the teacher, Alex stiffens like a stone pillar.

“Now then,” begins the teacher, drumming her fingers on her desk. “Alexander, wouldn’t you like to tell us something about your two fathers, and about how you manage?”

Thirty-two pairs of eyes are fixed on Alex.

“I manage all right” cries out Alex and his voice sounds squawky, raven-like. “Two fathers? What does she mean? ”, asks Kathrin, who just doesn’t understand when she’s putting her foot in it.

“Alex?” The teacher raises her voice and looks at him provokingly.

“What does it mean?” Suddenly Alex loses his temper. He stares at his classmates, straight in their eyes. “My father is gay. He loves another man. So I have two fathers and one mother.” He wants to make his voice sound proud, but in reality it trembles suspiciously.

“But it’s perverse”, cries out Erkan. “Revolting. In their place, I would creep in the darkest corner of the earth and pray I become normal again, instead of standing out like that. Yuck!”

“My father’s normal,” says Alexander with a quiet voice.

“Are there other opinions about this?” Mrs Steiner looks around.

“It’s possible to undergo treatment”, remarks Kathrin.

“My father does not have to undergo any treatment,” hisses Alexander.

“He’s absolutely okay, and so is Hans. People like you, who don’t accept this, you are the ones who need a therapy.”

“What do you want?” Erkan stands up menacingly. “What the Hell are you saying? Come here, twit, I’ll show you who’s normal and who isn’t, you revolting faggot.” He grabs Alex by the shoulders and shakes him.

The class is still. Mrs Steiner runs her fingers through her shock of hair, but stays glued on the spot, and drops of sweat form on her brow.

Koray stands up deathly white. “Excuse me” he whispers. “I’m feeling sick.”

“Sissy”, hisses Erkan at him, and spits in despise on the floor between Koray and Alex. “One more perverse word, man, and you’re dead,” Erkan warns Alexander, before slamming a powerful punch at him. Alex resists the blow without dropping to the floor through sheer luck.

“That’s not acceptable, Erkan”, says the teacher, helplessly. “Now you apologise to Alexander and you, Koray please sit down again.”

“Me? Ask a perv for forgiveness?” sneers Erkan. “He’s the one who must apologise to me, Mrs Steiner, just to make matters clear.”

“Nowadays homosexuality is absolutely normal”, says Mrs Steiner uncertainly. “Alexander’s father can’t help it if he’s become that way.”

“Alright, I’m leaving now, that’s quite enough for me, Mrs Steiner,” whispers Alexander. Before Mrs Steiner even tries to say anything, he has already left the room.

to be continued

“It’s really very nice of you, to receive me on such short notice.” Mrs Steiner, embarrassed, stares at the tips of her shoes.

“Mrs Steiner, it seems to me that Alexander is in a very difficult position within his class – didn’t you ever talk about homosexuality in your class before?”

“It’s not part of the teaching programme,” replies Mrs Steiner with an almost defiant look on her face.

“Yes, unfortunately”, admits Mr Wyler, the advisor. “So we’re agreed. Next week I’ll be attending your lessons.”

There’s absolute silence in the class.

“I’m very pleased to be with you today. I won’t bore you with figures, but it’s not quite unavoidable – sorry folks. But you don’t have to write anything for me”, grins Mr Wyler and some of the pupils, boys and girls, grin back at him.

“About one in every ten young people is homosexual. Hmm... in your class that would mean about two pupils. Imagine you couldn’t talk about it to each other, that you always had to hide for fear of being excluded.” Mr Wyler considers the class for a few moments “Some of you must have a very good idea of what it feels like to be excluded, don’t you?”

“But you don’t have to flaunt it – being different, I mean,” says Erkan softly.

“Human beings all differ from one another”, says Mr Wyler. “Surely, there are lesbians and gay men who live openly – who have fought for the right to live like that, to be allowed to marry, and to be able to get common custody for their children. Just as there are homosexuals who tell no-one about their feelings. Some marry a partner of the other gender and live their feelings for the same sex only in secret. There are lesbians and gays who live in communities, some who live together without marrying and others who want to live alone, even if they do have a relationship with someone. Not much difference, really, with respect to heterosexuals.”

“But the important thing is that two human beings truly do love each other. That’s what’s important”, Alexander dares to say.

“A nice final word for this lesson”, pipes up Mrs Steiner.

“Just in case one of you wants to talk to me about it, I’ll leave my telephone number here.”

In the courtyard Mr Wyler turns around once again. “Hey, you were sitting in that class, right?”

Koray nods. “Thank you, Mr Wyler. Maybe I’m one of those three. I’d like to come to your counselling hour some day.”

“Sure,” says Mr Wyler.

the end

Counselling and Health Care

Bear in mind

If you counsel lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers or their relatives, it is very important to know your own opinions about different lifestyles. Everyone has their own preferred lifestyle and thinks that others are less appropriate. If you are not aware of your own views on this, you won't be able to counsel lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers without unconsciously judging certain lifestyles. To be more aware of your own view on the diversity in lifestyles, consider the following questions:

- What kind of lifestyle do you personally prefer?
- Did you 'choose' this lifestyle yourself or were there other factors 'pushing' you to choose it?
- Why have you chosen this certain lifestyle for yourself?
- Who disapproves of your lifestyle? Why? How do you deal with this?
- Which lifestyles are easy for you to respect? Which ones aren't? Why is that?
- What is your more general attitude towards difference and diversity? Does this fit in with your opinion about the issues facing lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers? If not, why are they different?
- Do you know enough about the issue of lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers in different cultures?
(This is relevant because a client who grew up in a fundamentalist context will have a completely different approach concerning homosexuality than a client coming from a more liberal family .)

Keep in mind that there are many different ways to enjoy a fulfilling life. Some lifestyles may be totally new to you, so don't be surprised if your clients have original approaches.

Counselling and Health Care

Tools

To start off, here is some information about the diversity in lifestyles of lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers that counsellors should be aware of:

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers lack positive role models. This may lead them to feel insecure towards homosexual lifestyles.
- On the other hand, to be a lesbian, gay and bisexual teenager can be a positive challenge. If a young person does not fit in with heterosexist role models, they should re-think their lifestyle. They may discover that a lesbian/gay lifestyle can give them much more personal freedom than fixed role behaviour does.
- Lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers often look for role models that suit them. This may lead to stereotypical gay or lesbian behaviour.
- Show your client that there is no objective rating of lifestyles. It is important to make it clear that the main standard for their lifestyle should be their own happiness.
- Find out about local self-help groups where people with the same lifestyle can meet and exchange experiences.
- Many young lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers fear that they will not have a family like heterosexuals do. This is often connected to their unhappiness with their current life. Many of them change their opinion when they realise that they can be very happy the way they are.

Two Chairs

Aim: To explore inner needs and external expectations, and the tension between the two.

Method: Arrange two chairs face to face. One chair symbolises external expectations, the other one represents inner needs. The client sits first on one chair, then on the other, and tries to feel only the things that the chair symbolises. How do they feel on the different chairs? What would they tell a person on the other chair?

Please note: Whether you feel comfortable with your lifestyle often depends on the expectations of your environment and whether you try to live up to them or not (this is especially true when you are a lesbian, gay or bisexual teenager).

The Mirror

Aim: To explore self-images.

Method: The client should close his/her eyes and imagine sitting face to face with their own reflection in a mirror. What would he/she criticise about this person's lifestyle? What would he/she admire?

Please note: This method works on two levels: You can relate to the physical look of your client (this is what most teenagers will do at first) or you can relate to characteristics, inner feelings and behaviour, which may be more important for dealing with the subject of lifestyle. You have to make sure that the client visualises him-/herself as the opposite person in order for the method to work.

The Fairy Godmother

Aim: To explore unconscious or oppressed needs and fantasies about the future.

Method: The client should imagine that a fairy godmother comes to him or her and asks how he/she wants to live. How does this feel and what prevents your client from really living like this?

Please note: It is quite important to check if the fears of your client correspond to a reality. Even if they don't, you have to take these fears seriously, otherwise your client will feel misunderstood.

Counselling and Health Care

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the education sector.

How can I avoid judging certain lifestyles if I personally disapprove of them?

In most situations, we are judgemental of another lifestyle because we can't imagine what it is really like. Remember that you don't have to follow other lifestyles, and be aware that some people may find your way of life strange, too. It is only natural for you to prefer one lifestyle over another and not to consider them equal for yourself. Keep in mind that your own opinion towards lifestyles only fits your own life and that things may look completely different from someone else's point of view.

How do I deal with a client who is unhappy with his homosexual lifestyle in general?

People who are unhappy with their homosexual lifestyle often have not had the opportunity to experience it as an alternative way of being happy. They need to know that there is not only one way of living as a homosexual. You can tell them about the diversity of lifestyles and how many different ways there are to live a happy life, outside of the well-known clichés.

How can I help clients to find other people who want to have the same lifestyle?

There are many self-help groups representing different lifestyles in almost every city. Become better acquainted with them; contact your local gay or lesbian centre to find out more information about them.

How can I tell the client about all the possible lifestyles available to them if I don't know them myself?

You do not need to know about all the different types of lifestyles. There are so many that this is virtually impossible and it's up to your client to find out for her-/ himself what she/ he likes anyway. Be supportive of her or him while she/he is questioning. It is enough to show your client that there are many more ways of living than the traditional family with two children and a dog and that there are many ways to live happily.

“My mother is living with her second common-law husband without being married. My sister and her husband have two children. My brother is single. And four weeks ago I met my first girlfriend. How do I want to live my life?”

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