

Different in More Ways Than One.

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

7 The Community

This is complete and utter madness.

I would never have met Patrizia if we hadn't been fighting in the school playground and if Mrs. Gazzi hadn't dragged me all the way to her office because of that.

And here I am now, waiting for her, forever in love, with butterflies in my stomach and fluttering nerves. When I picture her face in my mind's eyes, I feel flushed all over. Teresa can picture Patrizia's deep brown eyes as they look at her with a sparkle, and then narrow to thin slits with joy. Teresa breathes deeply, or else she won't be able to stand up because of all the excitement. The others mustn't find out about them, even if they're gay or lesbian themselves. Her sexuality is her business only. As well, of course, as Patrizia's. She looks down at the courtyard. This is where she kissed Patrizia for the first time.

During the Techno-Party three weeks ago. Her heart still twinges when she thinks about it. No matter what she does to think about other things, she always ends up longing for her peaceful presence by her side.

Teresa sighs. She'd never have thought the world could be so crazy. Her story with Patrizia is so jumbled-up that no-one could ever make sense of it. Teresa lets her eyes drift across the crowd in the café. The lesbians and gays here are really nice people. Mrs Gazzi was right. There is indeed a gay and lesbian centre here in Bologna and she hadn't even known about it. How ridiculous. Her love affair with Patrizia has started here. The first time she had visited the place, her hands sticky with sweat because of her nervousness, she was thunderstruck when she saw Patrizia sitting by the window, in the back.

Patrizia, of all people. She's a lesbian, thought Teresa, between fascination and shock. She had never realised. Patrizia was like a ray of sunshine illuminating her across the room. Teresa didn't look away.

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Framework

First of all

Many heterosexuals are used to reducing the essence of gays and lesbians to their sexuality, but homosexuality is much more than that. Sexual orientation can influence many aspects of life like daily behaviour and role patterns, interests, friends, and hobbies. As gays and lesbians face discrimination in many aspects of their lives, they have formed their own groups and initiatives all around the world. However, there are countries where the religious or political system itself strongly discriminates against homosexual men and women and tries to ban gay and lesbian organisations. Within the EU, groups of different characteristics and sizes exist in all countries.

Basic information

Usually there will be groups for gays and groups for lesbians, but sometimes the groups are open to both. Some of these take the form of “discussion groups” which concentrate on the coming-out process. Here gays and lesbians can meet to find support; they can discuss individual experiences on their coming out to their families and friends, ideas and fears. Other groups work in political or social areas. They fight for gay and lesbian rights, which means for instance the right to marry or have registered partnerships, or anti-discrimination laws. Still other groups concentrate on the education sector. Members of these groups go to schools to talk with pupils about their coming out and what it is like to be gay or lesbian. Over the past several years, more and more groups have been set up in response to special interests like sports teams or groups that just want to have fun. Lesbian and gay magazines have been created. Today you can find the traditional coming-out groups and gay volleyball or karate groups, lesbian dance groups and much more. These groups can have a normative and somewhat exclusive character and may establish rules or behaviour patterns at times, like how to deal with relationships or one-night stands - but usually they tend to be open to all gays and lesbians and are a good first step on the path into the gay and lesbian community.

Apart from these groups, a lot of bars and restaurants concentrate on gay and lesbian customers. Gays and lesbians can meet their friends at these places, get to know other homosexuals, or go out with their partner. They enjoy the atmosphere in these bars where they as gays or lesbians belong to the majority and therefore don't have to explain themselves and don't feel observed in a suspicious way by other guests.

Taken together, these groups, bars, counselling centres and initiatives are called the gay and lesbian “community” or “subculture” or “scene”. There are many rumours and stereotypes about this community. Many parents, teachers and sometimes even young gays and lesbians themselves don't like it and think it is strange and not serious. They also think this community is a sort of ghetto where they might lose the contact with “normality”. Nevertheless, after having been there once, most gays and lesbians find that they like the different places and institutions of this community. They see that the bars are just ordinary places with a gay/lesbian clientele.

All these locations can in fact be a place of encouragement, a place where social norms are reversed, and a protected space where homosexuals don't have to fear being looked at or called names for kissing their partner in public. For many gays and lesbians, this is the only way to meet other gays and lesbians. It is a place where they can learn about new role patterns for their very personal orientation in life and where they can also see different lesbians and gays who may identify as drag queens, leather gays, butches or femmes. The international lesbian and gay travel-guide “Spartacus” lists bars, restaurants, saunas and other institutions worldwide. These institutions seem to be quite similar to each other and represent a rather international community, but many of these locations typically have white, middle class male guests. Other locations do exist in most countries, the customers of which are more heterogeneous, but they are less visible and therefore sometimes difficult to find.

Although the situation in general is improving, most institutions, groups and bars of the community are based in big cities and are very rare in the countryside. That's why many young gays and lesbians often visit the bigger cities and why many even want to relocate there. They expect the anonymous aspect of the city to protect them from prejudice and discrimination.

What does this mean for me?

Ideally, you yourself should go out into the lesbian and gay scene of your city in order to get an idea of what it is. This is the only way you can recommend young lesbians and gays a location or organisation with a safe conscience, and only if it seems to be appropriate to you. Some homosexual bars are open to everyone, whether man or woman, gay or straight. You can go there, see the location, meet new friends and find a place where diversity is not a slogan but a principle which is practiced daily. If you are not sure whether there is a mixed crowd in this place, just ask beforehand. In the bigger cities, there are even gay and lesbian groups for ethnic minorities where people can get to know other lesbians, gays and bisexuals with the same cultural background, which is very hard to do elsewhere (also see the addresses).

Education

Bear in mind

What do you personally think about the gay and lesbian community? Do you have ideas what it may be like? Why do you think this community exists? What advantages does it have? Many people think they know about the gay and lesbian community because they know a few clichés about it. Get to know the gay and lesbian community in your home town or visit a gay/lesbian organisation and ask about their activities.

For many lesbians, gays and bisexuals the community can have the function of a social network where they are able to meet other lesbians, gays or bisexuals, get to know more about them, and where they spend their spare time. The community is important because in it heterosexism cannot develop its full pressure and also the need to behave in conformity to traditional gender roles is less important. For many lesbians, gays and bisexuals it is a very exciting experience to visit a gay and/ or lesbian party for the first time. Most of them feel comfortable, because everyone there feels the way they do and they do not need to explain or justify themselves. Try to imagine how you would have felt as a teenager if only at a few places of your (or of the closest bigger) city you could be absolutely sure not being criticised for your love or sexual orientation.

The “relatives” that lesbians and gays may chose among those people they meet in the community sometimes turn out to be important friendships in which an uncomplicated and open conversation is possible (this is not always the case with heterosexual people because they rarely experience the same type of discrimination). The exchange of similar experiences and mutual support can help lesbians and gays to cope with negative reactions to their coming out in the family or at the working place.

Education

Tools

Fact and Prejudice Web

Aim: to explore the facts and prejudices surrounding the concept of subculture.

Method: Ask the young people what they think of when they hear the term 'lesbian community' and 'gay community'. Write their comments on the blackboard, forming them into a 'word-web' which shows the association lines. Put negative comments in a different colour from positive comments (e.g. negative = yellow and positive = green). Ask why there are more yellow comments than green ones and explore which of these comments are facts, which are stereotypes (judgements which are not congruent with facts), and which are personal opinions or feelings. Check which facts are known about lesbian or gay community and how the young people learned about them. Explain facts about the local community and its history as you go. Close the session by asking whether the exercise made pupils feel differently.

Please note: Be sure to prepare yourself so that you can provide adequate information about the local community. You may consider inviting speakers from a local gay/lesbian/bisexual organisation to provide the young people with inside information on local activities. Also prepare yourself for questions from pupils about 'separatism' and overt demonstrations of homosexuality. In intercultural groups, such questions can be challenged by exploring the more general dynamic of integration. Most minorities find it helpful to have meeting places or a protected room where they can feel comfortable and assert their identity. Thus they may 'integrate' more easily into their surrounding rather than 'assimilate'.

Gay Pride Parade

Aim: To explore the need for visibility of gays and lesbians.

Method: Show a picture of a gay pride parade and ask the students if they know what it is about. Ask for comments. You will probably get some strong negative remarks (for some students, the visibility of homosexuals is unacceptable). Discuss the effects of discrimination and pride on a person's identity. Explain the history of gay pride (see the section on "History & Culture"). Compare ethnic pride with gay pride.

Please note: Many people are shocked by the very special lifestyles sometimes shown at gay pride events and which, naturally, attract a large amount of media attention. During discussions, take into account the distorting influence of the media and the great diversity in homosexual lifestyles.

It's a Straight World...

Aim: To explore the effects of heterosexism and to place the lesbian/gay/bisexual community in this context.

Method: Explain how everyone is raised to be heterosexual. Tell the students this creates a specific situation for lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens and that this exercise is meant to explore how this may feel to them. Give the pupils a few moments to think about this question: “If the world were not heterosexually oriented, but gay/lesbian-oriented, would you go to a 'straight' bar?” As additional questions, you could ask: “What would the 'normal' gay population think about this?” Let the pupils share their thoughts and feelings. As the dialogue progresses, steer the discussion towards how the pupils would like such a situation to be. Then draw conclusions which relate to the current situation: how should heterosexuals think about lesbian, gay and bisexual community institutions?

Please note: This exercise is only possible within the context of a relatively safe group. You can integrate this exercise into a regular subject by asking the students to draw or paint their feelings (arts) or to write a paper on it (language). This personal approach makes it easier to try this exercise in less safe groups, but it demands more of the pupils' artistic or language skills.

Education

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

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

Why do gays and lesbians create their own places? Isn't that a ghetto?

From a young age, gays, lesbians and bisexuals are raised as heterosexuals and are taught that homosexual feelings and relationships are not valued in our society. In order to build up their own identity and self-esteem, they need their own spaces where they can express their feelings without being afraid of mean looks or insults. Over the last 30 years, the number of these spaces has grown. Today, in most big cities, an individual can remain mainly inside the gay and lesbian community without leaving it. There are shops, bars, discos, sports associations and even services that especially address gay and lesbian clients/customers. For a person who is not used to this community, it may seem like a kind of ghetto-life-style. Of course, the gay and lesbian community is not a ghetto, but it is seen as such, because we live in a society where the heterosexual norm prevails. (See also method "It's a straight world")

How can I learn more about the local gay and lesbian community?

The easiest way is to search for information on the Internet. Another and possibly better way is to visit a local gay/lesbian organisation and ask the members for more information about the kinds of activities they are involved in. This is quite important to gain more understanding of what homosexuality is all about. Most people think the homosexual community is just about sex. For example, if teenagers understand the role a gay/lesbian youth centre plays for homosexual teens, they are on the verge of understanding the difficulties homosexuals face within a heterosexual society.

Am I allowed as a heterosexual to visit places that belong to the homosexual community?

In most places, you definitely are. Gay or lesbian centres are nearly always open for those who are interested and people will usually be pleased to answer your questions. Most gay pubs are open for interested people as well, only some nightclubs are "men only" and some lesbian places are opened only for women, but most social places are open to everyone. If you are not sure, just ask.

She simply asked “So you did find out, in the end” when Teresa, drawn to her as if by magic, finally arrived next to the little café table and Patrizia looked at her, confused.

“I’d never have thought that you...” Teresa doesn’t finish her sentence.

“Lesbians are not all alike” comes the laconic reply from Patrizia. “You have loads of clichés in your head”

“But Franca...”

“She’s my best friend. And she’s straight. So what?”

“So, nothing.” Stumbles Teresa.

“Will you come to the Techno-Party with me next Friday? Just with me?”

Patrizia stares at her for some time, with a little sparkle in her eyes that Teresa will learn to understand later on.

Yes, that’s how it all started.

But that was the end of a long process. Teresa’s memories flashback all the way to it.

The girls of the tenth class are standing together in the schoolyard and, as always, are giggling. The only one that Teresa likes is Patrizia, but she wouldn’t be caught dead ever admitting it. On the contrary, she often taunts Patrizia when she meets her. “So, the little lady has squeezed herself into the supertight jeans again and dipped her little face into the paint box?”

“Quit it Teresa, sod off. Your presence is not welcome here!”

“I just so totally couldn’t care less, Patrizia, you know.”

“Oh come”, says Franca “Just don’t pay any attention to the silly cow. Why doesn’t she just get lost?”

“Do you absolutely have to pipe in? “, growls Teresa. “Cause you’re the one who looks like a real whore.”

“Get lost Teresa, before I lose my temper !” Patrizia’s voice sounds dangerously quiet. “Cut it out, save your provocations for somewhere else, do you hear?”

“I was only telling you how ridiculous you look and how absolutely idiotic your conversation is.” Teresa raises the tone of her voice. “Hey look here, isn’t the boy simply adorable? Yesterday in the courtyard he even smiled at me.”

Her tone falls back to normal. “That must have hurt, didn’t it?”

“You’re just jealous because the boys don’t look at you”, counters Franca.

“Wrong Franca, I just won’t let my intelligence go to waste for the sake of a boy. Like you and the other girls do.”

“So why’re you still standing here? If our standards don’t suit you, get lost”.

Patrizia pushes Teresa back. That’s the last straw.

“Cut out the bickering. Have you gone completely mad? Patrizia, Teresa, I want you separated immediately” Mrs Gazzzi holds the girls apart, one hand on each.

“She started, she always does”, pants Patrizia.

“Obviously”, sneers Teresa. “I always do.”

“Patrizia is telling the truth. Teresa should leave us alone once and for all”, declares Franca and stares at the maths teacher.

“Teresa, after the lesson please report to me.”

to be continued

"I would like to show you something. It's in my office, okay?"

Teresa has always liked her maths teacher. She understood something about Teresa, that no-one else noticed.

"You really like Patrizia, don't you?"

"I beg your pardon? How can you imagine such a thing?" Teresa feels as though caught off-balance.

"You remind me of myself when I was your age." Mrs Gazzi winks at her.

"Oh really?" Teresa plays it cool.

"Here we are. Come in. Would you like to sit down?"

"You wanted to show me something?"

"Precisely. A brochure about the Gay Games – just one moment." The teacher rummages through the contents of a desk drawer. "What with you being so sporty, I thought, perhaps next year you'd like to take part. They'll certainly need good volleyball players"

"Hey, just a minute" Teresa looks squarely at the teacher "Are you a lesbian?"

"Yes. Does that surprise you? Why don't you go to the Gay and Lesbian Centre, and try to meet other lesbians? You're always hanging out alone."

"I just don't feel like being gawped at like a sex object."

"Who told you that lesbians are like that?"

"Everybody says it."

"So you believe everything they say. In any case it's not true. Gays and lesbians have many interests. They found sports groups, meet for Game Evenings, make politics together – whatever you want, you can share it with them."

"Volleyball would be enough to start with." Teresa turns and turns the brochure in her hands.

"Okay. Then I'll give you the address of the Gay and Lesbian Centre. Do you have Internet?"

"Sure."

"Here are some Websites that could be of interest to you. You can start with these and go on looking from there. My colleague has just told me about a chat for young lesbians and gays, that should be very good. I'll jot it down for you. So you can see what is going on in real life. You'll see, nobody reduces you to a sex object."

"And you? Are you part of the alternative society?"

"Alternative society is perhaps the wrong terms. I have many lesbian and gay friends. Before going to a nightclub, I check very carefully to see if any of my pupils could be there as well. If they are, I don't go in."

"And why not?"

"Look, my job is to teach you. My private life is something else. It's another world, you see. I don't mix the two. It wouldn't be good. You really do depend on me, and that means a big responsibility, which I take very seriously."

"I see. Thank you very much!"

"It's all right. Have fun at your sports."

the end

Counselling and Health Care

Bear in mind

Ask yourself what you know about the gay and lesbian community, where you got this information and if you have ever joined the community yourself.

When you counsel gays and lesbians, consider that the gay and lesbian community can be a part of the gay or lesbian identity, and might be part of their everyday life. However, some lesbians and gays may not feel comfortable in the community, especially in the commercial part of it because they feel a certain pressure to behave and dress in conformity to most of the others and don't (yet) have enough self-esteem to follow their own inclinations. The lesbian and gay community is not a remedy for the problems of anybody. It can have both positive and negative influences on people. Even those who don't go there often are part of this community and are influenced by its norms and values. They influence the community themselves by not going there and consequently not forming the image of the community.

If you are not gay or lesbian yourself, you should at least visit some of the institutions like a counselling centre and some of the more popular bars. Your clients may not want to explain every detail of the gay and lesbian community to you, so make sure to be informed about the locations, trends and the main gay and lesbian activities in your area. If you work in the countryside, make sure you have some contact addresses to pass on to your clients. You can also contact a "coming-out group" that you can recommend to your clients and that can recommend you as a competent counsellor.

Counselling and Health Care

Tools

Think about the following questions:

- What can you offer if your client feels isolated?
- What can you offer if your client is interested in the gay/lesbian community but feels afraid of it?
- In which other parts of life do communities exist?
- Do the activities/services offered in the community of your city meet the cultural and individual background of your client?
- To which specific groups does your client belong besides the group of homosexuals (e.g. religious, ethnic, gender groups, etc.)?
- Are there groups in your area which match the specific background of your client (e.g. a group for Turkish gay people?)

Gay/Lesbian Social Network

Aim: to help the client reflect on his or her position within the gay/lesbian social network.

Method: Try and find out what images your client has of the community, i.e. gay/lesbian venues, bars and clubs. Do they perceive themselves as being part of the community? Why or why not? Do they associate the scene with negative imagery? Does your client meet socially with other gays and lesbians outside the community?

Please note: Bear in mind that gay men and lesbian women from ethnic minorities do not often frequent the community. This may be because they fear they might feel uncomfortable by being once again in a minority position. It can also be due to prejudice and discrimination encountered within the community.

Counselling and Health Care

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

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

Where can I find information about the gay/lesbian community in my area?

You can find many links on the Internet - just search the homosexual counselling centres. But if you plan to refer clients to a specific institution, it's important that you are well-acquainted with them. Get to know more by making personal contact with the counsellors who work in these centres.

How should I deal with clients who have a bad opinion about the gay/lesbian community?

The gay and lesbian community is more than clichés. What are the client's specific interests? It may be they have a negative view because they have not yet found the support structure they are looking for. Point out the diversity within the lesbian and gay community and encourage them to continue looking into new aspects and services of the community (see also Question 1 in the education sector).

When is it better to recommend that a client stays out of the gay/lesbian community?

Generally the community is very supportive, but there can be situations when the client should concentrate on other things. To avoid disappointment, the client should be informed exactly what to find where.

How can I handle a client who is afraid of the gay/lesbian-community?

Don't force a client to visit the community right away. Discuss the client's needs in detail and work on different ways to satisfy them. Visiting the community is only one way of solving problems, and it is neither a "cure-all", nor "the route to happiness". It may take time before a person finds the right club/bar/group which best suits him or her. But making a first visit to the community may be the first step towards defining a new way of life.

“My friends sometimes ask me why we live in a ‘ghetto’, you know, bars, clubs, sport groups, centres or whatever, catering just to lesbians or gays. To them it seems as if we were building a wall around us, excluding others. But that’s not how I see it. The ‘community’ or ‘scene’ is a place where I can express my feelings without being afraid of insults.”

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