

...but words DO
hurt: stories
from glbtt
youth

A User's Guide

ACLRC



ACLRC
Alberta
Civil Liberties
Research
Centre

**...but words DO hurt:
stories from GLBTT youth**

A User's Guide

by the
Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre

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GLBTT VIDEO USER GUIDE

1. Overview/Introduction

Many people think that they do not know anyone who is gay. But that is a myth. With as many as 10% of the population identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual, we must all know people with this sexual orientation. Even more hidden are people who are transgender. Yet statistics show that 3 – 10 % of people feel that their birth gender does not match their psychological gender (Ettner, as cited in Carroll, Gilroy & Ryan, 2002). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and transsexual (GLBTT) people can be found in all age groups, in all cultures, ethnic groups, religions, and in people with physical and mental disabilities.

Often young people learn about being GLBTT through inaccurate or hateful stereotypes. At an early age, these youth learn that one of the best ways to insult another young person, whether that person is straight or GLBTT, is to accuse them of being a “Lezzie”, a “faggot” or a “sissy”. Sometimes these taunts and insults can worsen and become physical violence. These and other forms of harassment and discrimination interfere with students’ abilities to learn, to be themselves and to feel safe. Insults, slurs, and name calling about being GLBTT are far more commonplace than any other attacks in the school environment.

The Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre produced this video and user guide to address the legal obligations of teachers, students and schools. However the video and guide cannot cover everything you need to know about GLBTT youth. The Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre has also produced an online Guide (*Freedom to Be*) which contains more information and activities on the subject.

It is illegal to discriminate against anyone on the basis of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. This video examines discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The young people who have shared their experiences in the video hope that once viewers have

seen this video that they will be more understanding of the issues that GLBTT youth face, and will realize that it is not okay to tease, discriminate against, or physically harm GLBTT youth. We can all learn valuable information from the lived experiences of these Canadian youth who are all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or transgender.

These young people told us that during their teenage years, they knew that they were different from their peers; either they knew they were not heterosexual, or their gender identity did not match their birth gender. However, they had no one with whom they could discuss their feelings and questions. They also describe some of the discrimination and harassment that they and others suspected of being GLBTT experienced. None of our interviewees were “out” while in school. The environment was not safe for them to tell others about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Our young interviewees, who now identify as transgender or transsexual, also talk about the identity conflicts they experienced before coming to realize that they were males trapped inside of female bodies. We refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and transsexual young people collectively as GLBTT throughout the video.

These young people have chosen to openly come out on screen so that viewers might understand the issues that GLBTT youth face. They hope that the video will demonstrate how harmful it is to taunt, tease and harass youth who are GLBTT or perceived to be so. This behaviour is seen as discrimination under human rights law; it violates ethical codes of conduct, and causes permanent psychological harm to fellow human beings.

Sexual orientation describes the gender of the person to whom you have an enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction. Gender identity on the other hand, describes the gender with which you identify deep inside. We all have a sexual orientation and a gender identity. However many youth do not think about these concepts unless they or someone close to

them, have come out. While sexual orientation and gender identity are complex concepts, scientists believe that they are each set at birth.

2. IDENTITY

For every one of us, identity is a deeply felt, personal sense of who we are as individuals. For a youth to come out and come to terms with being GLBTT involves a deep, honest, and difficult examination of his or her self and innermost feelings. This can be upsetting even if it provides youth with some relief at finally defining their identity.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth follow a developmental path that is both similar to, and quite different from that experienced by heterosexual youth.

All young people face certain developmental challenges, such as developing social skills, thinking about career choices and fitting into a peer group. GLBTT youth must also cope with messages and acts of discrimination, harassment and violence in their families, schools and communities.

GLBTT young people have limited resources to help them along the path of discovering their full identity and few opportunities for observing positive role modeling by adults due to the pervasive bias in mainstream society that makes GLBTT people unaccepted and largely invisible. For this reason, the experiences of these young people often include isolation, fear of stigmatization and lack of peer or family support.

In order for young people to develop a positive GLBTT identity, it is essential that they are exposed to positive role models, both peer and adult. Young people need to see people whose lives demonstrate that being GLBTT is not a barrier to being happy, productive and respected by peers.

3. GROWING UP DIFFERENT

Many GLBTT adults say that they knew that they were different from other children from an early age, in some cases as early as 5 years old. All youth are aware of their sexuality during their secondary school years, but for those that are gay, lesbian or bisexual this awareness is far more likely to develop in isolation and fear. Young people from small towns or rural communities often have no resources on which to rely for their questions and exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity. Media information, for example, television shows and newspaper articles and reports represent the only information they can get and is often wrought with stereotypes and misinformation.

4. SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND THE RIGHT TO A SAFE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The risk of suicide for gay and lesbian youth is high. For example, gay male youth are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual male youth, according to a 1996 University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work Study. Gay youth are two to three times more likely than their heterosexual classmates to attempt suicide, to be kicked out of their homes or to run away, to drop out of school and to abuse drugs and alcohol. This is because they are constantly subjected to a learning culture of personal threat, risk and danger. At least 30 percent of adolescents who commit suicide are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Gay, lesbian and bisexual students are more likely than their straight peers to a) miss school because they are afraid, b) be verbally or physically threatened by other students, and c) to have their belongings vandalized.

Schools have a legal responsibility to create and maintain a safe school environment that is free from discrimination, harassment and violence. And Teachers in Alberta and many other provinces are ethically bound to treat all students equally and fairly, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Yet, bullying and harassment are major issues for GLBTT students. Some teachers who are not overtly homophobic may unwittingly

condone homophobic behaviour by their silence. Some supportive teachers, who promote a classroom culture of acceptance and inclusion, do address these issues in the classroom but not with the support of pro-active curriculum.

5. COMING OUT

“Coming out” refers to the process of acknowledging one’s sexual orientation or gender identity and disclosing this information to others. This process is different for every young person. For many gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, coming to terms with their sexual orientation can be a confusing and difficult process. For transsexual youth, resources are even more hidden and less accessible and so the process can be wrought with fear and a sense of helplessness. Some transsexual people come out as gay or lesbian first because they know they are different but they do not know why. It is only later in their development that they happen across the information they need to recognize their true gender identity.

Coming out is further complicated by the negative myths and stereotypes about GLBTT people that abound in society. There are few role models to help young people appreciate their unique identities. Often GLBTT youth absorb society’s homophobic and transphobic beliefs and this makes it even more difficult to acknowledge they are GLBTT themselves.

Even once these youth have accepted themselves, revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity to others is an ongoing challenge. Coming out is not one single disclosure. It is a continuous process and it involves disclosure over time to family, friends, peers, co-workers and others.

Young people often find themselves caught in a hurtful and difficult Catch-22 situation. If they conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity, they feel confusion, shame, guilt and isolation. If they come out as GLBTT, they risk rejection, harassment and abuse. Thus it is easy to understand why young people often go to great lengths to conceal their

sexual orientation and gender identity at a personal cost to their self esteem, mental health and wellbeing.

There is a misconception that being GLBTT is an issue concerning only able-bodied white people. This misconception deeply affects all youth because it limits their understanding of the issues, and prevents GLBTT youth of colour and disabled youth from accessing necessary resources.

Coming out is more multilayered and complex for GLBTT young people of colour. They experience the negative impact of homophobia and racism from the mainstream society, as well as homophobia and intolerance within their own ethnic or racial groups. If these youth manage to find a GLBTT community, they sometimes continue to feel isolated if that community does not share their ethnic or racial diversity.

Young people with physical and mental disabilities, in addition to experiencing homophobia and ableism, often face attitudes that discount them as sexual beings and deny that sex, sexuality and disability are interconnected parts of their identities. This coupled with the limited access to basic sexuality information and the homophobic rejection they often encounter from their own disability communities, create additional barriers to exploring sexual orientation and gender identity, and to coming out.

6. FAMILY SUPPORT

It can be very difficult for a young person to tell parents and family members that he or she is GLBTT. This young person risks rejection, insults, physical and emotional abuse and even homelessness when they come out to their family. Gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide, to be kicked out of their homes, to run away, to drop out of school and to abuse drugs and alcohol. Some parents will even force their children to see a therapist or religious leader in the misguided hope that they can be “cured”. This

can have damaging psychological effects, one of which is low self-esteem.

Even if parents and siblings eventually become supportive they will often ask uninformed and inconsiderate questions such as, “Are you sure?” and “Have you tried the opposite sex?” Some families will even devalue the youth’s experience by saying “It’s just a phase.” Many are told categorically that it is wrong to be GLBTT and consequently life becomes extremely difficult within the family unit.

Young people who do not fit neatly into their assigned gender whether they identify as transgender, transsexual or not, face many barriers both in and out of school and may be forced to leave home or school.

Although some families will recognize from an early age that a young person’s gender behaviour is atypical, these families may be unsympathetic or lack the understanding of the complex issues surrounding gender identity. For example, they may encourage a boy to play gender stereotypical sports like football or a girl to wear gender-typical clothes, such as dresses. This response misses the main issue of transsexuality; that regardless of how a youth looks, he or she feels different, deep inside, from their birth gender.

Receiving family support is difficult for transsexual and transgendered youth, particularly if parents consult a family physician who is uneducated in the area of gender identity and transsexualism. Even when parents are supportive, they may feel that transsexual youth are not old enough to make the decision to have hormonal therapy or surgery.

Some GLBTT youth are thrown out of the family home because their parents cannot accept their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Most of these youth are not emotionally, financially or socially ready to leave their families and live on their own, but this is the harsh reality that they face. Rural youth, in particular, are at risk for dropping out of

school, running away from home and finding themselves in urban centres with no means of support.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS: HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

Provincial Human Rights legislation and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Most human rights statutes, including the one in Alberta, have been interpreted to include protection of gender identity for transsexual people.

Each one of us has the human right to live in a free and just society without experiencing discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religious beliefs, colour, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, family status, or source of income. And equally importantly, each of us has the responsibility to see that the human rights of others are not violated. Name-calling, bullying and violence against GLBTT people violate their right to live in a society free from harassment.

Many GLBTT young people live in fear of being assaulted and harassed. Often the reason behind these attacks is simply that the youth is GLBTT or perceived to be GLBTT. Attacks can take the form of vicious verbal assaults, verbal taunts including name-calling, physical and emotional intimidation, and physical assault and other young people perpetrate most of this violence.

Publicly funded schools have a legal responsibility to create and maintain an inclusive environment for all students, including GLBTT students. However, many GLBTT youth are forced to stay in the closet while in school, for fear of suffering the violence, discrimination and harassment just described.

8. WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO

Within the school system teachers, administrators and staff have the power and a legal responsibility to provide an educational environment that is free from discrimination and harassment. Teachers can help to foster an inclusive and respectful learning environment by creating and providing opportunities for students to openly discuss equality issues.

Counsellors are in an excellent position to support GLBTT students, to be role models of acceptance and to create and provide a safe environment in which students can explore their sexual orientation and gender identity and any related questions.

Teachers, administrators and counselors also need to examine and be clear about how their own feelings, attitudes and biases towards these students might affect their sensitivity to and understanding of the issues. At the same time GLBTT students need to be aware that they may not receive a warm reception from every adult they approach within the school environment. Students should try to find a safe and accepting adult before they disclose any information about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Together everyone can work to create a safe school environment through actions such as promoting zero tolerance, challenging name calling and harassment, and sponsoring the formation of Gay/Straight Alliance groups or support groups for GLBTT students in school. These groups create a safe place for students to discuss problems related to their sexual orientation and possibly gender identity.

9. SOME RESOURCES

1. HIV Community Link, Calgary, Alberta.

Phone: (403) 508-2500 Fax: (403) 263-7358

Website: <http://www.hivcl.org/>

- 2. Campaign for Positive Space** – addresses discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity and seeks to create a more welcoming place for all those who study, work and live at the University of Calgary.

Website: www.ucalgary.ca/positivespace

3. Positive Space Mount Royal University

Mount Royal College GLBT group.

Phone: (403) 440-8904

E-Mail: Monique Verhoef mverhoef@mtroyal.ca

4. Calgary Outlink Centre for Gender and Cultural Diversity

Phone: (403) 234-8973 Fax: (403) 261-9776

Website: www.calgaryoutlink.ca

- 5. The Q Centre** – University of Calgary – University of Calgary's campus group for academics, students and staff that may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning their sexual orientation. Provides support, referrals and information.

P: (403) 220-4460

E-Mail: qcentre@ucalgary.ca

Web: <https://www.su.ucalgary.ca/programs-services/student-services/the-q-centre/>

6. PFLAG Canada (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

Website: <http://www.pflagcanada.ca/en/index.html>

7. Pride on Campus – Red Deer College’s GLBT Student Group for the Community of Central Alberta.

Phone: (403) 343-1877 (Students' Association ~ you may leave a message)

Red Deer, Alberta.

8. Alberta Teachers’ Association Gay Straight Student Alliances

Website:

<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity%20and%20Human%20Rights/Sexual%20Orientation/Gay-Straight%20Student%20Alliances/Pages/Index.aspx>

9. Women’s Centre of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.

Phone: (403) 264-1155 Fax: (403) 264-1203

E mail: info@womenscentrecalgary.org

Website: <http://www.womenscentrecalgary.org/>

10. Some Websites for youth:

www.youthsafe.net

www.youthco.org

10. SOME COMMON MYTHS

Myths, mistaken beliefs, half-truths and generalizations fill our everyday lives. Many of them create and perpetuate prejudices that can lead to acts of discrimination. Discrimination can be hurtful and destructive to others and even to us. A fundamental truth about gays and lesbians is that they are attracted to individuals of their own sex.

1. Myth: Gay men are effeminate; lesbians are masculine in appearance and mannerisms.

Fact: This is a dominant stereotype about gay men and lesbian women. Mannerisms and appearance are not indicators of sexuality. The majority of gays and lesbians show no outward expression of their sexual orientation (Bain, 2000).

2. Myth: Sexual orientation can be changed.

Fact: We cannot change our sexual orientation just as we cannot change our genetic makeup. The American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association and other Mental Health Professional Associations state that homosexuality is not a mental disorder and cannot be changed.

3. Myth: I do not know any GLBTT people

Fact: You don't know any GLBTT people who are out to you. A significant percentage of the population is GLBTT. 10 % of the population identifies as gay, lesbian or bisexual and 3 - 10 % of people feel that their birth gender does not match their psychological gender.

4. Myth: Gay men are child molesters.

Fact: Research shows that the vast majority (90 - 98%) of sexual abusers of both boys and girls are heterosexual men. (Bain, 2000)

5. Myth: Bisexuals can't make up their minds.

Fact: Bisexuals can make up their minds. They fall in love with the individual person. They are attracted to both sexes in varying degrees. (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2000)

6. Myth: HIV/AIDS is a gay disease.

Fact: HIV/AIDS knows no boundaries. Around the world it affects equal numbers of men, women and children. Everyone needs to learn about and practice safe sex. It is behaviour rather than sexual orientation that puts people at risk (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2000).

7. Myth: Lesbians and gay men do not make good parents.

Fact: Children raised by lesbian or gay parents are no more likely to have problems than children raised by heterosexual parents or guardians. There is no evidence to suggest that children are harmed, psychologically or otherwise, by having openly lesbian or gay parents. The biggest problem that these children face is homophobia in other children (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2000).

11. SOME STATISTICS

(Source: M. Luhtanen, *Freedom to Be* The Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2016)

- Gay and lesbian youth are three to four times more likely to attempt suicide. The average age at first suicide attempt was 13.
- Gay male and bisexual youth in Alberta are 14 times more at risk for a serious suicide attempt than a heterosexual male youth.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth are five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be targets of violence and/or harassment.
- One in five gay and lesbian people reported, in one survey, suffering physical violence at the hands of family members because of their sexual orientation.
- Between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or transgender.
- Almost 40 percent of gay and lesbian youth in one survey had dramatically low self-esteem.

12. DEFINITIONS

Bisexual	Someone who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females and who may form a sexual and affectionate relationship with either sex (Rainbow Resource Centre, 2000).
Coming out	A process of acknowledging one's sexual orientation or gender identity to oneself and disclosing it to others. This process is different for every person and generally occurs on three levels: personal (to oneself), private (to family and friends) and public (at work or in the community at large). Coming out is an ongoing process throughout one's lifetime.
Discrimination	Unfair treatment of a person or group, usually because of prejudice about that person's race, ethnic group, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or other characteristic.
GLBTT	The term used in the video to refer to people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or transsexual.
Gay	A man who falls in love with and /or is sexually interested in /attracted to members of the same sex. This term is often preferred in the gay community to the term <i>homosexual</i> .
Gender Identity	One's internal and psychological sense of oneself as male or female, or both or neither (regardless of sexual orientation); people who question their gender identity may feel unsure of their gender or believe they are not of the same gender as their physical body. (GALE)

Heterosexism	The belief in the inherent superiority of heterosexuality over other patterns of loving. This privileges heterosexuals, and oppresses GLBTT communities and denigrates alternate sexuality and genders. A heterosexual person might assume that everyone is straight and therefore ignore the existence of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.
Heterosexual	Someone who falls in love with and/or is sexually interested in/attracted to members of the opposite sex. Also referred to as 'straight'.
Homophobia	Fear or hatred of GLBTT persons. Gay-bashing is a form of homophobia. Homophobia can deter heterosexuals from forming close, personal relationships with members of their own sex because of fear of being perceived as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The negative feelings, attitudes and actions that some people hold towards sexual minorities is often manifested in prejudice, discrimination, harassment and acts of violence.
Human Rights	Universal moral rights which belong to everyone. They include the right to life, liberty and a decent human experience. Human rights also include all of the political, social and economic rights for people to live dignified lives.
Lesbian	A woman who falls in love with and/or is sexually interested in/attracted to members of the same sex. This term is often preferred in the lesbian community to the term <i>homosexual</i> .
Out	To be open about one's sexual orientation. An ongoing process.

Outing	The public exposure of someone's sexual orientation or gender identity without his or her knowledge or permission.
Prejudice	A judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without thoughtful examination of the facts and issues. Prejudice often manifests itself as irrational hatred or dislike of a particular group, race or religion.
Queer	Originally a derogatory label used to refer to gay and lesbian people or to intimidate or offend heterosexuals. This term has recently been reclaimed by some GLBTT people as an inclusive and positive way to identify all people targeted by heterosexism and homophobia.
Sexual identity	How a person identifies him or herself; i.e. straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Not always the same as sexual orientation. Someone can be primarily interested in members of the same sex but for personal or cultural reasons not think of themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. (Education Wife Assault, GALE).
Sexual Orientation	<p>An enduring emotional, romantic, sexual attraction that a person feels toward another person. Innate direction of attraction and desire for intimate emotional and sexual relationships with the same gender (gay, lesbian), opposite gender (heterosexual), or either genders (bisexual).</p> <p>The direction of your sexual interest or attraction. Everyone has a sexual orientation – straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.</p>

Stereotype	A standardized mental picture or assumption about certain individuals or groups. A stereotype assumes that all members of a group share some general quality.
Transgender:	An umbrella term which means to cross traditionally accepted gender roles and is used to describe transsexuals, female and male cross-dressers, transvestites and drag queens.
Transsexual:	An individual who presents himself or herself and lives in the gender “opposite” to their genetic/physical gender at birth. A transsexual is someone who may psychologically feel like the other sex and has somehow been trapped in the wrong body. Transsexuals may be heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual in their orientation.
Two-spirited	People of aboriginal or First Nations heritage who may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or transsexual; were historically accorded special and positive status, in many parts of North America, before colonization. The term is being reclaimed by members of these communities that may identify with a sexual orientation apart from heterosexuality.

13. VIDEO DIALOGUE – ...but words DO hurt: stories from GLBTT youth

Jasmine: I had no inkling before I was sixteen, and then, there was a girl....

Definition on screen:

Sexual Orientation: An enduring emotional, romantic, sexual attraction that a person feels toward another person of the opposite sex, same sex, or either sex.

Paul: My friend said to me that it would be totally, just out of the blue that it would be totally cool with him if any of his friends were gay. And that sort of just gave me the support I needed to come out to start coming out to people...

Definition on screen:

Coming Out: the process of coming to terms with one's sexual orientation or gender identity, and deciding whether to share this information.

Lucas: While it's been scary, it's also been a huge relief to start coming out as transgendered.

Scott: I knew since the beginning of time, my time, that I was a boy.

Definition on screen:

Transsexual/Transgender: An individual who does not identify with his or her birth gender. Someone who may psychologically feel trapped in the wrong body.

Joel: I definitely experienced a lot of harassment. It was never physical, it was always verbal and it was always comments directed towards me in class, usually the words queer or fag.

Definition on screen:

Homophobia/Transphobia: Irrational fear or hatred of gay, lesbian and bisexual people or transsexual or transgender people.

Scott: I was by no means very feminine, at all you know. I always got into arguments with my Mom about that because I'd be getting ready for something special and she'd be trying to dress me up in a dress and I'd be like "I don't wanna, I don't wanna!"

Definition on screen:

Gender Identity: an internal sense of oneself as male, female a blend of both or neither. Sometimes people identify as transgender or transexual.

Sara: They're everywhere around me and I'm not the only one. I'm not this freak of nature.

Definition on screen:

GLBTT: the acronym we use in the video to talk about young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, or queer.

NIKKI (Host): Many people assume that they do not know anyone who is gay. But with as many as 10% of the population identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual, we all know people with this sexual orientation. Even more hidden are people who are transsexual. Yet statistics show that 5 - 10 % of people feel that their birth gender does not match their psychological gender. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual people or GLBTT can be found in all age groups, ethnic groups, religions, and in people with physical and mental disabilities.

GUILLY (Host): Often young people learn about being GLBTT through inaccurate stereotypes. At an early age, these youth learn that one of the best ways to insult another young person is to accuse them of being a "lezzie", "faggot" or "sissy". Harassment interferes with a student's ability to learn, to be themselves and to feel safe.

did you know... gays were burned in medieval times simply for being different, they were lit on fire using bundles of sticks, called "faggots"

GUILLY: The Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre produced this video and user guide to address the legal obligations of teachers, students and schools. The youth in this video are all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or transsexual.

FACES AND NAMES OF GLBTT YOUTH (VIDEO PARTICIPANTS) – Lucas, Jarrod, Scott, Jasmine, Paul, Joel, Sarah.

GUILLY: These young people told us that during their teenage years, they knew that they were different from their peers; either they knew that they were not heterosexual, or their gender identity did not match their birth gender. However, they had no one with whom they could discuss their feelings and questions.

NIKKI: We all have a sexual orientation and a gender identity. However many youth do not think about these concepts unless they, or someone close to them, have come out. While sexual orientation and gender identity are complex concepts, scientists believe that they are each set at birth.

Jane Oxenbury – Psychologist: There are many theories about sexual orientation. In general though what we have come to, is to understand that sexual orientation is predetermined, in utero, it is who we are and is how we come to be as we grow up.

did you know... scientists believe that sexual orientation is determined by a mix of gender, hormones and social factors.

IDENTITY

GUILLY: For every one of us, identity is a deeply felt, personal sense of who we are as individuals. Youth that come out as GLBTT have gone through a deep examination of their innermost feelings. These youth have had to think long and hard about their identity and the words they use to describe themselves.

Sarah: Normally the term I use to describe myself, is just queer.

Paul: I self identify myself as gay.

Jasmine: I use the term queer mostly.

Joel: I'm gay.

Lucas: I just started kind of questioning gender stuff and started identifying as transgendered.

Scott: Right now because I'm in between, two genders, I would say, I would classify myself as transgendered.

Jarrold: I really identified with the word queer because I felt that I could define my sexual orientation but let it be unique to me.

NIKKI: Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth follow a developmental path that is both similar to, and quite different from, that experienced by heterosexual youth.

Jane Oxenbury: Young people or adolescents are dealing with a great number of changes developmentally, body changes, peer pressures, family changes around who they are and how they are looked at. In general the most important change is the consolidation of their identity as an individual at that time within their life.

GUILLY: All young people face certain developmental challenges, such as developing social skills, thinking about career choices and fitting into a

peer group. In addition to this, GLBTT youth must also cope with discrimination, harassment and violence in their families, schools and communities.

GROWING UP DIFFERENT

NIKKI: Many GLBTT adults report knowing that they were different from other children, as early as 5 years old. All youth are aware of their sexuality during their secondary school years, but for those that are gay, lesbian or bisexual this awareness is far more likely to develop in isolation and fear. Young people from small towns or rural communities often have no resources on which to rely for their questions and exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity. Television shows and newspapers represent the only information they can get, and these are often wrought with stereotypes and misinformation.

Sara: I always felt just different. Um, I felt different from my family and from my friends, I always thought maybe I was adopted or from another culture and no one was telling me.

Scott: I just always knew that, from my first memories, you know, of knowing what gender was and identifying with a particular gender. I always, I just felt like a boy. **Photo of Scott as a girl on screen.**

Jarrold: I think that I was kinda fortunate that I never went through a questioning process. I just always kinda knew, even from the youngest age. Even when I was playing pretend with my friends and my siblings and stuff like that, you know, I'd never be the person that was married to a woman, I would always be, I'd either be single or I'd be married to a man.

Sara: I think at first like when I was first coming out, I was really, I was at an age when I was really susceptible to media images, and I was like "Why am I not growing up to be one of the cast of "Friends"? It's not supposed to be like this."

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

GUILLY: Schools have a legal responsibility to create and maintain a safe environment free from discrimination, harassment and violence.

Melissa Luhtanen – Human Rights Lawyer: Teachers are covered by the Alberta Teachers' Association Professional Code of Conduct and that Code of Conduct includes that they cannot discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

GUILLY: Some teachers who are not overtly homophobic may unwittingly condone homophobic behaviour by their silence. Others, who are supportive in promoting a classroom culture of acceptance and inclusion, do address these issues in the classroom, but not with the support of pro-active curriculum.

Glyn Hughes – Teacher: Teachers need to be empathetic, understanding, non-judgmental. I think teachers have to address issues that come up in the classroom related to gender. There are students who want to talk to teachers; they want to hear what we have to say.

did you know... *70% of students hear gay slurs every day at school.*

Lucas: I don't know, I got pretty depressed for a while in high school.

Sara: ... and I was going to have to write an essay about why homosexuality was wrong and I wouldn't write the essay and if I didn't write the essay, I wouldn't finish the course and if I didn't finish the course I wouldn't graduate, and so I left the school system.

Jarrold: My guidance counsellor, I remember going to him and talking about the fact that I can't deal with all this harassment and all this name calling and stuff like that and his advice was that well maybe I should try and butch it up a little or try and act more masculine and be more

involved in sports and stuff and I was like “Well, no, because that’s not really what I am into.”

COMING OUT

NIKKI: The “coming out” process is different for every young person. For many gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, coming to terms with their sexual orientation can be a confusing and difficult process. For transsexual youth, resources are even more hidden and less accessible and so the process can be wrought with fear and a sense of helplessness. Some transsexual people come out as gay or lesbian first because they know they are different but they do not know why.

Scott: I by no means identified as a lesbian and that was the only option for me to come out as, you know and so for me it’s like “Can’t do it, don’t want to do it, well what’s the other option? Shut up.”

Lucas: I came out as gay pretty late I guess. I was about twenty when I started questioning sexuality, and I came out and thought that that fit and then I guess it wasn’t until then that I kinda, that I even knew what transgendered was. I never even really heard the word or I never knew that that existed or was a possibility and then when I started hearing and learning more about it, I realized how much that kind of fit how I was feeling. **Photo of Lucas as a girl on screen.**

Scott: I can honestly tell you that because I know now that I am transgendered, I hated the idea of being a lesbian because that’s not who I was. I have to say the most freeing experience for me was the moment when I realized I am transgendered; I am a man in a woman’s body.

did you know... *GLBTT people exist in every culture. Some people with disabilities are GLBTT.*

GUILLY: Coming out is further complicated by negative myths and stereotypes. For instance, bisexual youth are told that they are ‘fence

sitters' unable to decide if they are heterosexual or not. In reality a bisexual youth chooses a partner because of who the person is and not because of their gender. Often youth absorb society's homophobic and transphobic beliefs and this makes it even more difficult to acknowledge their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Jarrold: I was always the brunt of you know certain name calling or derogatory terms and stuff like that and it was very frustrating because I was you know I was at a point where I was like I wasn't even certain that I felt like identifying with the word gay. I knew that I was attracted to people of the same gender as myself, but I didn't want to fit with that negativity or that bad you know the bad thing that was being used, the bad words the bad identity that was being used, but it felt like my peers or people around me, fellow students had already made their minds up for me.

Paul: I had just turned eighteen and until about a week prior I had firmly believed that I would never come out until I had moved out because I thought that I would be kicked out of the house and everything else. And then about a week before I came out to my mother, we were sitting around in my friend's basement and my friend said to me that it would be totally, just out of the blue that it would be totally cool with him if any of his friends were gay. And that sort of just gave me the support I needed to come out to start coming out to people and I started with my mother 'cause I figured that she would be the most supportive person in my life.

Jarrold: The thing that I found very supportive from my friends is that they didn't change at all.

Jasmine: The first person I came out to was my Mom. And I was seventeen. I was just a little bit over seventeen and I had it all planned out. I bought her this book and sat down with her and I told her. I didn't want to be sneaking around, I didn't want to be lying to her and I wanted to be really honest so I went directly for the hard stuff.

Joel: The experience of coming out first to the first person which was my Aunt was a release of some kind. I can't really explain it but we were washing dishes and she made a comment and I laughed and she said, 'You're like that you're gay right?' and I said well why you think that and she said, "Joel I know'.

Lucas: I came out as being gay to my parents three years ago and I didn't tell them in the best way. It was at Christmastime which is a big no-no, and they took it pretty hard.

Scott: I remember calling her on the phone that day and just telling her... She was making dinner and so I called her and she goes "I'm just making dinner" and I said well you know what, okay well call me back when you're done because I have something to tell you. I said it's really big and you have to come with an open mind. And so I hung up the phone and ah I was all nervous, like "Well here we go, here we go, game face on, you know type of thing." And, she told me when she hung up the phone with me that first time that she knew exactly what I was going to tell her, "She said Oh my God Tammy is going to tell me she wants to be a man".

did you know... *over 56% of students hear daily negative remarks about gender expression, including comments made by students, staff and teachers.*

FAMILY SUPPORT

GUILLY: A young person coming out to parents and family members risks rejection, insults, physical and emotional abuse and homelessness. Some parents will even force their children to see a therapist or religious leader in the misguided hope that they can be "cured". This can have damaging psychological effects, one of which is low self-esteem.

Our interviewees were fortunate to have understanding and supportive family members with whom they could share their early coming out experiences. However some parents still had difficulty coping.

Jarrold: My mother's reaction was very, very negative. She was very, very dramatic. She kept hoping that I could be cured. You know, she kept saying that, she took a religious standpoint and she said that if I wanted to get better I could.

Sara: My Mom has definitively been supportive. She is happy for me as long as I am in healthy relationships no matter what gender or what race or what religion or whatever um the person I am with is.

Joel: The support range was definitely minimal at first. And I think that after time they slowly started to get used to it. I knew that I could always talk to them but it wasn't really something that I felt comfortable talking to them about.

NIKKI: Even if parents and siblings eventually become supportive, they will often ask uninformed and inconsiderate questions such as, "Are you sure?" and "Have you tried the opposite sex?" Some families will even devalue the youth's experience by saying "It's just a phase." Many are told categorically that it is wrong to be GLBTT and consequently family life becomes extremely difficult.

Jane Oxenbury: We're finding that many kids who don't get the support from family, friends or schools are ending up either in care or on the streets, which means that they're beginning to act out in order to function in this world or perhaps they have been kicked out of their own homes and they have not been accepted.

did you know... *GLBTT youth are 14 times more likely to consider suicide. In one study, 77% of transgender youth had seriously thought about suicide.*

GUILLY: Some parents may recognize from an early age that a young person's gender behaviour is atypical, but will still encourage gender-scripted behaviour. This response to a transsexual youth misses the main

issue; that regardless of how a youth looks, he or she feels deeply different from his or her birth gender.

Scott: I have always known that I was male. I guess when I was younger, I wouldn't say so much physically in my body, but I knew up here (gesturing to his head). I was by no means very feminine at all. I always got into arguments with my Mom about that because I'd be getting ready for something special and she'd be trying to dress me up in a dress and I'd be like, "I don't want to, I don't want to."

HUMAN RIGHTS: HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

GUILLY: Provincial Human Rights legislation and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Most human rights statutes, including the one in Alberta, have been interpreted to include protection of gender identity for transsexual or transgendered people.

did you know... South Africa was the first country to include a ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation.

NIKKI: Each one of us has the human right to live in a free and democratic society without experiencing discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and other grounds.

On screen: The Human Rights Act protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

NIKKI: And equally important, each of us has the responsibility to see that the human rights of others are not violated. Many GLBTT youth live in fear of violence, name-calling, bullying, intimidation, and physical assault.

Doug Jones – Police Officer: Gay youth are often targeted with hate crime. Since 1995 it has been unlawful to commit a crime motivated by hate

towards... because of sexual orientation. And just recently laws have changed that now provide protection against the promotion of hatred towards the gay, lesbian community. I think what is interesting about or important to note about hate crime is that crimes that are committed that are motivated by hate are treated much more seriously in court. Sentences are enhanced by the judge when proof that the motivation was hate.

GUILLY: Publicly funded schools have a legal responsibility to create and maintain an inclusive environment for all students, including GLBTT students. However, many of these youth are forced to stay in the closet, while in school, for fear of discrimination and harassment.

did you know... a Gay–Straight Alliance is a group that students organize in schools to promote equality and a safe, respecting space for all students.

Jasmine: Sometimes people say stupid things and it hurts.

Jarrod: I wasn't out at all in high school; I wasn't I wasn't even really comfortable with the idea of my sexual orientation in high school because of the negativity around the word gay and stuff like that.

Sara: I didn't understand why they were hurting me, like why were they calling me names and throwing things at me. It just wasn't justified.

Joel: Well, I was definitely scared to go to school, you know, for the general most part. I always feared like lunch hour and rece.., not recess but breaks.

Lucas: I guess, they always have the saying 'Sticks and stones can break your bones but words will never hurt you', but words do hurt. That's for sure.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

NIKKI: In order for young people to develop a positive GLBTT identity, it is essential that they are exposed to positive role models, from friends and adults. Youth need to see people whose lives demonstrate that being GLBTT is not a barrier to being happy, productive and respected by peers.

Sara: I'm really hoping that I can grow up and have a career and a partner and just have a life, in the same way that straight people have lives and be able to make choices about that and not feel like I have to be afraid of being discriminated against. And not feeling like I have a narrower range of choices in what I want to do with my life.

Joel: And as far as society, my hope is definitely that high school becomes something that kids specially ones that are gay do not have to worry about and go through the same type of negative experience that I think a lot of kids in high school go through nowadays.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

GUILLY: We also asked our young interviewees to talk about what they would like **YOU** to do to combat discrimination. Here is what they said.

Jarrold: What I ask of you is to not put up with me don't simply tolerate me. Accept me for who I am.

Jasmine: Try to think about looking at people as individuals and not grouping them in to people who are queer or people who are not Caucasian, or people who are women or whatever.

Paul: If there is one thing I want anyone to do, would be just to treat gay and lesbian people like you treat everyone else.

Sara: Understand that sexuality isn't a choice and no one would choose to be discriminated against or harassed

Joel: It's not a decision that we make. It's not a choice. It's just something that we have and that we need to be treated equally just like everyone else.

Scott: Is just be tolerant, accept everybody.

Lucas: Try to understand that everyone is different and that everyone has different experiences. And we're all different but we're all people and we all want to be loved and accepted.

NIKKI: Teachers can help to foster an inclusive and respectful learning environment by creating and providing opportunities for students to openly discuss equality issues. Counsellors can provide a safe space for youth to talk about their sexual orientation and gender identity.

GULLY: Adults need to examine and be clear about how their own biases might affect their understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity. At the same time GLBTT students need to be aware that they may not receive a warm reception from every adult they approach within the school environment. Students should ensure they are speaking to a safe and accepting person before they disclose any information about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Working together we can create a safe school environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Glyn Hughes: For teachers we've got to understand that these young people are grappling with a very serious issue. They are finding their identity.

Doug Jones: What everyone needs to realize is that we are all born who we are and that it's important for everyone to educate themselves about diverse communities including the gay / lesbian community.

Jane Oxenbury: Very important that our acceptance and our support be there for all these children so that then they can embrace their identity and their sexual orientation no matter what it is.

NIKKI: GLBTT youth are no different than heterosexual youth in that we are all unique human beings; we all have challenges and failures, difficulties and celebrations, anger, sadness and happiness. We all need to make decisions about how we live in truth with compassion. Whatever your personal opinions about GLBTT may be, showing these youth respect for finding and living their truth, is a first step to gaining respect for your own uniqueness.

14. VIDEO PRODUCTION INFORMATION

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Joel Salomons

Lucas

Paul Sereda

Sarah McIntyre

Scott Green

And to:

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Melissa Luhtanen

Carrie Neilson

Jane Oxenbury

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Nikki Barran

Guilly Ura

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Location Sound

Greg Phillips

Producer/Director

Fred Fountain

Produced by the Learning Commons, University of Calgary for the Alberta
Civil Liberties Research Centre.

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<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity%20and%20Human%20Rights/Pages/Index.aspx>

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