

Helping Parents Accept Their Children's Sexual Orientation and Identity

Paul Thompson and Beth Peak Thompson

At lunch in a restaurant with her mother and older sister, a sixteen-year-old girl nervously worked up the courage to tell them something about herself. The water and iced tea arrived and they talked about school. The server brought chips and salsa to the table and they chatted about church. About halfway through the enchiladas, the girl blurted out, "I'm bi!" She began to sob and her mother and sister stared. Her mother, the first to speak, smiled and lovingly told her daughter, "My goodness, honey, it's OK. That's fine. We still love you."

A seventeen-year-old-boy walked into the family living room to talk to his mother and father. He had been putting off this conversation for an entire year. He knew he could not wait any longer. He said he had something to tell them. He cleared his throat a few times. After some hesitating he said to his parents, "Um, uh, well, I'm um, I'm gay." His mom, suddenly experiencing panic, wondered aloud, "What did I do wrong?" His dad yelled, "No son of mine is going to be gay." Angry words were exchanged and after a few minutes, the boy was put out of the home in which he had lived his whole life.

More youths than ever before are speaking out and revealing to others who they are and how they feel as sexual beings. These youths, these beloved creations of God, are helping educate the rest of us regarding what it's like to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and straight. A lesbian is a female who is sexually attracted to other females. A person who identifies as gay is a male who is sexually attracted to other males. The word *gay*, however, is sometimes used to refer to homosexual, bisexual, and transgender persons in general. A person who identifies as male, but whose body is that of a female is transgender. Likewise, a person who identifies as a female, yet has the body of a male, is also transgender. A bisexual is one who is sexually attracted to both males and females. A person who is sexually attracted to persons of the opposite sex is known as straight or heterosexual. Some youths report that they are bisexual, gay, lesbian, or transgender. Some report that their own sexual identity is not at all clear to them and that they are questioning it and are curious about it. Some report that their sexual identity shifts over time.

This variety of sexual orientations has likely existed throughout human history. It can seem, however, that our society is in the early stages of seeing and engaging in public conversation about it. The first kiss between two women on prime time television was in 1996. The first lesbian kiss on daytime television occurred in 2003. Great media attention accompanied both events. This education has come at a tremendous cost. Some youths who have been willing to let others know that they are other than heterosexual have been bullied, ridiculed, rejected, ignored, neglected, or killed. It is understandable then, that some young people would be hesitant or unwilling to reveal their developing sexual identities. As long as there are negative responses to someone who is other than heterosexual, there will be youths who cannot and are not willing to reveal who they are.

Being bisexual, homosexual, transgender, heterosexual, questioning, straight, or a combination of these is neither good nor bad. One is not better or worse than another. Living an authentic life related to one's sexual identity can be easy, unbelievably difficult, or somewhere between the two. Not all transgender youths are rejected by their families and forced from the home. Not all straight youths have families who lovingly support them. All youths, no matter how they identify sexually or what their sexual orientation, deserve to thrive in an environment where they are respected and cared for, and nurtured by adults and peers who regard them as children of God. Supportive communities offer safe places for youths to discover, discuss, and perhaps wrestle with these developing feelings. Making one's way through puberty and adolescence is challenging and difficult. Adolescents need support and guidance from good role models, observant and attentive adults, and appropriate sexuality education.

What might this support look like?

Assure youths that they are loved and accepted. Tell and show them often. For some youths, eventually getting to a place of self-understanding and acceptance regarding their sexual orientation can involve a lengthy and difficult process. From this love and acceptance, develop open communication and trust. Listen to your youths. Let them tell you about who they are what they're feeling regarding their sexual orientation.

Ask them to help you understand what they're feeling. Ask them what questions they have and what help they might want or need from you. Then provide answers and help as you can. Keep in mind that not all teens have the same questions, nor need or want the same kind of, or any, help.

Respect teens' right to express themselves honestly. If that is uncomfortable for you, then do your best to work through it. Your discomfort is not their fault, nor is it their responsibility to make you feel comfortable.

Respecting rights, however, does not mean that it's acceptable for your teen to engage in all sexual behaviors. The teen's family, the church, and adults who nurture teens are obligated to provide good, sound sexuality education for them. This involves learning about making good decisions, respecting one's self and one's body, and learning about possible consequences regarding sexual behavior. Be proud of your youths for who they are and who God is calling them to be in all aspects of their lives.

In the first chapter of Genesis, we are assured that all humans are made in God's image. "So God created humankind in [God's] image, in the image of God, [God] created them; male and female [God] created them. God blessed them. . . . God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good." We are all a part of God's beloved creation. The 6' 5" high school freshman boy, the brown-haired thirteen-year-old girl with the beautiful singing voice, the straight goalkeeper on the soccer team, and the transgender little girl are all created by God in God's own image.

As disciples of the one who lived on earth and was the fulfillment of the ancient law, the one who is the new covenant, Jesus Christ, we seek to understand and remember that God calls us into relationship with God and each other. In the Reformed tradition, we are to extend God's grace to all of God's beloved. We are all included in God's covenant; no one is outside the loving embrace of God.

Parents are not to blame if their adolescent child is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Neither are they responsible for their adolescent's heterosexuality. There is no known cause for any particular orientation, nor is there a known way to change one's own or someone else's sexual orientation. Rejecting who the young person is by trying to change him or her can cause great harm.

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender is not the entire identity of the adolescent. He is still a talented guitarist. She still loves to read. They still love to go on mission trips and help others. They are who they have always been; it's just that adolescence brings many changes, and one's developing sexual identity is a part of the changes. Getting safely through adolescence always has included the development and realization of a variety of sexual identities.

God created and individually loves each adolescent, no matter his or her sexual orientation. It is the responsibility and obligation of all adults to uphold and live out the baptismal promises made to the child, the family, and God. Christ calls the church to be a place of loving acceptance and welcome. The seventeen-year-old bisexual girl, the eighteen-year-old straight girl who when she was fifteen thought she might be gay, the sixteen-year-old boy who said he thought about what it would be like to date a guy, and the fifteen-year-old boy who is crazy about girls all bring value and blessing to the body of Christ, the church. All young people belong to the body, no matter their sexual orientation. They are all lovingly made in the image of God and are vital to God's creation.

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