

## **Heterosexual Service Providers Working With Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth**

Although heterosexual service providers are often called upon to work with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth there are sometimes questions about whether they should. The answer is clearly “YES”, providing heterosexual service providers take steps to ensure they are knowledgeable, informed, and aware of their limitations. There are some advantages of skilled heterosexual service providers:

- in some communities or settings, there are no lesbian, gay or bisexual service providers to whom these youth can be referred;
- there may be a pre-existing trusting relationship which will enhance the ability of these youth to open up and trust;
- receiving validation and support from heterosexual adults is important in helping these youth develop a positive sense of self;
- a young person struggling with issues of same-sex attraction may be afraid of contact with lesbian, gay or bisexual service providers;
- heterosexual service providers may have more credibility with parents of these youth than lesbian, gay or bisexual service providers.

In situations where young people experience a great deal of shame about their sexuality, or would benefit from positive role-modeling which could be provided by lesbian, gay or bisexual service providers who are “out” and comfortable with their sexuality, it may be more helpful to refer to them.

### ***What can I do, as a heterosexual service provider, to work effectively with lesbian, gay or bisexual youth?***

1. Contextualize your work from a framework of oppression.
2. Own your limitations – heterosexual service providers can’t have “member knowledge”; declare your own sexual orientation when relevant.
3. Educate yourself – about sexuality, adolescent development, issues and risks facing this population; your client shouldn’t have to educate you.
4. Examine your own biases, both overt homophobia and more subtle heterosexism.
5. Recognize risks, but don’t label or pathologize; be careful not to over treat or under treat.
6. Get comfortable with current language and terminology, including same-sex sexual practices.
7. Don’t use a heterosexual paradigm and assume it applies to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.
8. Be aware of diversity among lesbian, gay and bisexual people (based on sex, culture, class race, religion); don’t assume they are all the same.
9. Understand that these youth have a range of needs, so become knowledgeable about lesbian, gay and bisexual community, culture and resources.
10. Pay special attention to issues of confidentiality.
11. Get good supervision, including input from lesbian, gay or bisexual people.