

## Responding to Coming Out

An essential element of your policy will be a Code of Practice or Procedure for dealing with a young person who discloses being LGBT or for a young person who discloses they are questioning their sexuality. A procedure means that staff with little or no experience have a format to follow which can remove any feeling of apprehension when dealing with this subject.

*Teachers, youth workers and volunteers should be aware that 'coming out' can be a very difficult process for many young people. The young person has probably debated this issue for a long time before approaching you and has possibly anticipated a favourable reaction based on your past behaviour and language.*

- Outline the confidentiality policy (in case the young person discloses information that will need to be acted on). Reassure them of confidentiality in all other matters. If you feel you do need to share information Inform the young person of the circumstances the information may or may not be shared, to whom it will be shared and for what purpose. Obtain consent where appropriate and respect the young person's wishes if they do not wish information to be shared
- Create a safe space by ensuring you will not be interrupted by the telephone or other people.
- Stress that LGB issues are not just about sexuality. There are also emotions and wider relationships with friends and family to work through. Again reassure them of confidentiality.
  - Sometimes young people can feel pressure to be 'out' – explain that, whatever stage they feel they are at, they can take things at their own pace.
  - Encourage them to think about why they want to tell other people.
  - Encourage them to consider the responses they might expect from friends and loved ones.
  - If they are worried about the responses encourage them to explore how they can deal with this situation.
- Offer them the opportunity to talk about their feelings with another appropriate person such as the school counsellor, a youth worker or telephone helpline etc.
- Reassure the young person that there is nothing wrong with being lesbian, gay or bisexual (without being patronising)

- Remain positive. Throughout these young people's lives they have been forced to hear that heterosexuality is the normal and the correct way to be. Hearing and seeing negative depictions of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people leads them to internalise these negative feelings. By being positive and offering your support, you are offering lesbian, gay or bisexual pupils an invaluable resource of hope
- Be aware of non-verbal communication as the young person may hear one thing but see another in your body language.
- Offer contact details for support organisations.

If a young person discloses that they are *questioning* or are *confused* about their sexuality, go through the above steps and:

- Reassure them that it is normal for young people to question their sexuality as they develop and establish their identities. With time they will come to know and feel comfortable with their sexual orientation
- Reassure them that they may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. Explore with them their understanding of what sexual orientation is and what these labels mean

Sexual orientation refers to who we are attracted to – emotionally, physically and sexually

A **heterosexual** is a person who is attracted to and has feelings towards someone of the opposite gender

A **gay man** is attracted to and has feelings towards another man

A **lesbian/gay woman** is a woman who is attracted to and has feelings towards another woman

A **bisexual** is someone who is attracted to and has feelings towards both men and women; however, not necessarily equally or at the same time.

