



When a student ‘comes out’

“Coming out can be a time of both positive and negative experiences”

However, for many young people struggling with sexual identity in a predominantly heterosexual environment, this time is full of negative feelings and psychological effects.

When a young person is coming to terms with their sexuality, ***it’s most important that they are supported to come out only when and if they are ready.*** Coming out is not always a safe option for some young people, so they should never be forced to come out.

Why do young people need to come out?

Young people only need to come out because of the dominance of heterosexuality and its acceptance as the norm. They only need to come out because family, friends and others have made the wrong assumption about them and their sexual identity. Therefore coming out is a process that is imposed on SSAY. Heterosexual people don’t need to come out because most people assumed they were heterosexual anyway.

It can be a vulnerable time...

When a young person comes out they may be very vulnerable. They may have picked up a whole lot of homophobic messages from their environment and think they are sick or perverted – this could make them feel depressed and isolated and feeling like they have a bleak outlook for the future, especially if they think their parents and friends will react badly. When a

young person is thinking about their sexuality, it is extremely important they have someone safe to talk to and that they get accurate information. It is also really important to assess a young person's risk of suicide.

Positively affirm the young person...

It's really important to affirm the young person's feelings about their attractions, even if they are not sure or are confused about their feelings. You may be the first person this student has talked to about their same sex attraction so it's very important that the response they get from you is positive.

What NOT to say to a student

When a student discloses to you, the most important response you can provide is a non-judgmental or gently enquiring one. It is NOT OK to say things like:

- How do you know?
- Are you sure
- It's probably just a phase you're going through, you'll probably get over it

How to support a student

- Respond in a positive way
- Provide the young person with accurate information, including the fact that around 10% of young people are attracted to people of the same sex
- Advise the young person of resources that exist (Eg. internet sites, videos, books, etc...)
- Talk to the young person about referral to an organisation that will provide support for same sex attracted young people
- If you don't have any of this information yourself, offer to get it for them
- Carefully discuss how the young person is feeling about themselves and who else would be safe to talk to
- Discuss the young person's thoughts about coming out to others – never encourage them to come out – they need to assess what the consequences may be

Some questions for a young person to consider

SSA young people need to think through the issues and the potential impact of disclosing their sexuality. Some questions you could ask to assess the safety and readiness of a SSA young person in coming out:

- Can you sit down with your parents and talk openly about your sexuality?
- Should you tell them in a letter?
- Should you ask one of your siblings or a close friend to break the news?
- Should you tell just one parent and not the other?
- Should you let your parents know about your sexuality by dropping hints, or simply by introducing your partner and letting them draw their own conclusions?
- Do you think your friends would accept your sexuality?
- Would it be safer not to reveal your sexuality (and possibly your relationship)?
- What alternative financial resources are available to you if your family asks you to leave home?
- What is happening at home at present? Are there other issues of concern that your parents are dealing with?
- Have you considered your motives before telling your parents?
- In case there's a negative response, are you sure there are supportive friends/people for you to depend on?

Adapted from

1. STEP Manual: An educational resource for those working with Indigenous, Refugee and Same Sex Attracted Young People (2001) The Victorian Child and Adolescent Mental Health Promotion Officers & Christine Farnan.

2. Not Round Here: Affirming Diversity, Challenging Homophobia Rural Service Providers Training Manual (1993) by Kenton Penley Miller and Mahamati.