

CHAPTER 5: SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Everyone has a sexual orientation—that is, we are romantically and sexually attracted to either men, women, or both—and an estimated 10 percent of the population is not heterosexual. Women who have sex with women and men who have sex with men may identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual—or they may not use any label at all. Although we do not know precisely what determines a person’s sexual orientation, we do know that it is formed early in life, is not chosen by the person, and cannot be changed, although its expression is often sublimated because of social taboos and homophobia.

It is important to discuss sexual orientation with young people, as many will experiment sexually with friends of the same sex or may have crushes on friends, acquaintances, or celebrities of the same sex. They should know that such encounters or thoughts are a natural part of being human and do not necessarily mean that they are gay.

Being gay is not a deviation or illness, but in many countries, homophobia and discrimination drive gay people to hide their sexual orientation from public view because they fear repression and violence. Many suffer in silence and secrecy, and some pretend to be heterosexual, marrying and having families to conform to social expectations. Homophobia puts gay and lesbian youth at particular risk for violence, discrimination, depression, and self-destructive behaviors, like drug and alcohol abuse or suicide. They may also engage in unprotected sex and are more likely to experience sexual health problems, such as unwanted pregnancy (young women questioning their sexual orientation may have sex with men) and STIs, including HIV/AIDS. In teaching about sexual orientation, we are seeking to dispel myths with accurate information and to fight hatred, ignorance, discrimination, and violence by building empathy and tolerance.

Teaching Tips

- Be knowledgeable, accepting, and comfortable with this topic before teaching it. If you cannot be, identify someone to teach in your place and carefully screen them.
- Sexual orientation is an extremely sensitive topic. Consider carefully how the community (parents, religious leaders, others) may feel, and work with them to avoid negative reactions.
- Prepare this topic carefully, but do not be overly hesitant about addressing it. If you meet a lot of resistance, work to educate adults in your community before undertaking work with young people.
- If possible, get information about the terms and ways in which gay and lesbian communities in your country or culture define themselves and integrate those definitions into your lessons. In many countries, it is important to include groups such as “men who have sex with men” and “women who have sex with women” because people may not identify with the terms “gay” or “homosexual” even though they have sex with people of the same gender.
- Select your approach based on your community’s ability to handle it. Find out what myths and misunderstandings are common in your community and integrate them into your lessons. Consider the following questions: Are homosexuals completely or nearly completely invisible? Are there any groups working for gay rights? If you cannot teach about homophobia directly, integrate it into other lessons, such as those about stereotypes, diversity, and tolerance. Include examples of homosexuals and homosexual couples.
- If possible, address this topic in different parts of your program to allow participants time to absorb the information.

- Be aware that some young people in your class will be struggling with their sexual orientation and you will not know who they are. Always be sensitive to their feelings.
- Do not tolerate discrimination based on sexual identity in your classroom.

Content Considerations

- One of the most effective educational approaches is to have speakers talk to your group. Many young people may never have met an openly gay person. Personal stories are also a very effective way to help participants understand the lives and realities of all people. Contact gay rights groups in your country or in the region to see if they have speakers or stories about growing up. If no stories are available locally, use some from another region or country, and discuss why there are no local stories (for example, by pointing out that this is one of the effects of homophobia).
- Teach about all sexual orientations and identities, not just homosexuality. Heterosexuality is one orientation and can be used to help people understand how people experience others.
- Identify any resources (organizations, hot lines, websites, etc.) in your community or country and give this information to all participants.

SELECTED LESSON PLAN 5.1: EXPLORING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

SOURCE

“Exploring Sexual Orientation,” by Paticia Barthalow Koch, *Filling the Gaps: Hard to Teach Topics in Sexuality Education*. Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), New York, 1998. Reprinted with permission of SIECUS. 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350. New York, NY 10036. www.siecus.org

Suitable for ages 15 to 18

Summary

This is a clever, thought-provoking lesson that emphasizes that sexual orientation is not just about homosexuality. By turning the tables and asking questions about heterosexuality that are usually only asked about homosexuality, participants are exposed to prejudice and misinformation that exists against homosexuals and sexual orientation in general. A discussion of participants’ reactions to this experience deepens understanding of sexual orientation. It also stresses key messages and values that enhance acceptance and empathy, for example, that sexual orientation is just one part of who we are, that people, whatever their sexual orientation, share more similarities than differences, and that discrimination is unacceptable.

Teaching Notes

- Read over the questions and make sure that they reflect common ideas or thoughts about homosexuals in your community.
- If you use questions 7 and 9, make sure that the responses do not reinforce gender role stereotypes or imply that gay people do not have children.
- Think about the key points that you want the lesson to bring out, and add any questions that would extend your participants’ understanding. For example, you might want to stress that people do not choose their sexual orientation.

Adapting the Lesson

- Adapt the questions on the worksheet so that they reflect the situation where you live, for example, question 8.
- If you cannot reproduce the worksheet, you can either write the questions on the blackboard or read them out as your participants answer.

EXPLORING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

by Patricia Barthalow Koch, Ph.D.

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RATIONALE

When sexual orientations are considered, homosexuality is often the only one examined, reinforcing the idea that being gay/lesbian is “different” while heterosexuality is taken for granted as “the way to be.” This activity fosters increased learning and understanding about sexual orientation.

AUDIENCE

Senior high school

TIME

One class period

GOALS

To help participants:

- Gain more information about sexual orientation, while recognizing there is a lack of knowledge in this area
- Uncover misconceptions and stereotypes about sexual orientation
- Explore one’s own feelings, beliefs, and values about sexual orientation
- Understand other people’s points of view, attitudes, and values
- Develop an ability to empathize with others

MATERIALS

- *Questions for Exploring Sexual Orientation Worksheet*
- Pens and pencils
- Paper

PROCEDURE

1 Introduce the activity by saying that the group is going to talk about sexual orientation. Many times when the issue is addressed, only homosexuality is discussed. This reinforces the idea that homosexuality is “different” or “abnormal,” and that heterosexuality is

simply taken for granted as “the way to be.” By turning the tables on the discussion, we can learn and understand more about sexual orientation in general.

2 Distribute the *Questions for Exploring Sexual Orientation Worksheet*. Tell participants that they are to think about the questions and write down their thoughts and feelings to each question on a separate sheet of paper. (Allow for ample time during the session to complete the exercise.) Assure students that they will not have to share their answers to any of the questions unless they want to do so.

3 Bring participants together into a large group. Process with the group by asking these questions:

- What was the hardest part of this exercise? The easiest?
- Did your responses to any of the questions surprise you?
- What are some of the myths or stereotypes implied by the questions? Are these myths/stereotypes usually about heterosexual or gay and lesbian people? Why do you think that is?
- Many of the questions are commonly asked of gay and lesbian people, but rarely of heterosexuals. What was it like to have the questions asked about heterosexuals? How would your answers have been different if the questions were about gay and lesbian people?

Be sure to explore the following concepts in the discussion:

- Little is known about the cause(s) or development of any sexual orientation. Theories about what determines sexual orientation include physical factors such as genetics and prenatal influences, sociocultural influence, psychosocial factors, and a combination of all these factors.
- People, regardless of their sexual orientation, share more similarities than differences.
- There are many more dimensions to a person than his/her sexual orientation.
- Stereotyping or labeling is unfair and harmful.
- All people should receive fair and equal treatment.

QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

- 1.** Define heterosexuality.
- 2.** How can you tell if someone is heterosexual (straight)?
- 3.** What causes heterosexuality?
- 4.** It is possible that heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of others of the same gender?
- 5.** The media seems to portray straights as preoccupied with sexual intercourse. Do you think so?
- 6.** Do you think straights flaunt their sexuality? If so, why?
- 7.** Who assumes the dominant role and who assumes the passive role in a straight relationship?
- 8.** 40 percent of married couples get divorced. Why is it so difficult for straights to stay in long-term relationships?
- 9.** Considering the consequences of overpopulation, could the human race survive if everyone were heterosexual?
- 10.** 99 percent of reported rapists are heterosexual. Why are straights so sexually aggressive?
- 11.** The majority of child molesters are heterosexuals. Do you consider it safe to expose children to heterosexual teachers, scout leaders, and coaches?
- 12.** Are you offended when a straight person of the other gender “comes on” to you?
- 13.** When did you choose your sexual orientation?
- 14.** How easy would it be for you if you wanted to change your sexual orientation starting right now?
- 15.** What have been your reactions to answering these questions? What feelings have you experienced? Why?

SELECTED LESSON PLAN 5.2: SEXUAL ORIENTATION

SOURCE

“Session 8: Sexual Orientation,” *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Grades 7–9*, by Pamela M. Wilson. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999. Reprinted by permission of the Unitarian Universalist Association. www.uua.org

Suitable for ages 12 to 15

Summary

This lesson is an excellent model of a positive, factual approach to a controversial topic. It offers a very good introduction to sexual orientation with several different exercises, including readings, a short lecture, and a myth-fact game. The lesson introduces the concepts of homophobia and discrimination and prompts participants to rethink myths and feel greater empathy for homosexuals. Although the lecture is not interactive, it is used effectively in this case to provide new information, to set the tone of the discussion, and to emphasize key values. The introductory Word to Leaders is excellent, and a very good set of definitions of terms is provided in Leader Resource 10.

Teaching Notes

- If most participants do not know much about sexual orientation, the MythInformation Game will give them more information.
- Identify any resources available in your community or country, in case you need to make a referral.
- If your participants have access to the Internet, identify and provide addresses for websites that young people may find helpful. Make sure such sites will be accessible, as they may be blocked by a filter program.

Adapting the Lesson

- Substitute the readings with readings from your culture, country, or region if at all possible.
- Read over Leader Resource 9, Myth/Fact Statements and Answers, and select the ones that you want to use. Eliminate or replace those that are not relevant to your situation, such as item 11; or those that may not be widely believed where you live, such as item 12. Adapt answers to reflect information from your country, such as the number of heterosexual couples that get divorced in item 15.
- Make sure the myth-fact statements reflect the major myths that exist where you live. Possible additions include: “I don’t know any gay, lesbian, or bisexual people” and “Homosexuality is a mental illness and can be cured.”
- Please note that this lesson is excerpted directly from a larger sexuality education guide, and therefore contains minor references to materials not included in this manual (e.g., certain items in Session-at-a-Glance on the second page).

SESSION 8 **Sexual Orientation****A WORD TO THE LEADERS**

Given the intensity of feelings about sexual orientation, this can be a very challenging session to conduct. The facilitators must have: (1) knowledge about same-gender relationships—current findings, statistics, and research; (2) self-awareness; (3) comfort with the topic; and (4) an attitude of acceptance regarding homosexual and bisexual orientations. If this session is poorly facilitated, it could actually reinforce and/or increase feelings of homophobia among participants.

As a first step in your preparation, ask yourself the following questions:

- How comfortable am I with the issue and the content?
- How comfortable am I with my own sexual orientation?
- What are the politics of this issue in my organization?
- Do I have the support of my colleagues? Of my supervisor? Of the administration?
- How will I react if a participant “comes out”?

If your answers to these questions are vague or leave you with feelings of anxiety, identify an experienced educator from your local Planned Parenthood, AIDS Action Council, or gay rights organization to facilitate this session for you or perhaps co-facilitate with you.

Try to anticipate any controversies that may arise during or after this session. Some individuals in your organization may believe that sexual orientation is not an issue—“We don’t have any of ‘them’ here” or “Why do we have to talk about this? Everybody is welcome here.” Others may say the discussion is immoral and inappropriate. Still others may question your sexual orientation—“Is there something about you we don’t know?” You may face some resistance, but you will also be taking one step toward creating a more just and welcoming environment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in your community and in our society.

Because of your leadership as a heterosexual ally or as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person, one or two very brave participants or staff persons may “come out” to you. It is important to respect their confidentiality and to respond with acceptance. Do not push these individuals to “come out” to others in the organization. In fact, encourage them to think carefully about the pros and cons of “coming out” and to make a thoughtful, rather than impulsive, decision. If someone is ready to “come out” more fully, he or she will appreciate your support.

Communities of color (African Americans, Latinos, etc.) sometimes have especially intense feelings against homosexuality. These feelings may be based on deep-seated religious beliefs or on the idea that homosexuality is really a “white thing.” The incidence of homosexuality is the same across racial lines, and gay men and lesbians of color need special support. Facing discrimination on the basis of skin color and

sexual orientation can be traumatic. Often, gay people of color stay deep “in the closet” in order to maintain acceptance in their racial community.

SESSION GOALS

- To define homophobia (bias against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people) and describe the impact of homophobia on the mental health, safety, productivity, and quality of life of gay people, their families, and friends.
- To identify and reject myths about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual orientations.
- To explore personal attitudes and values about gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientations.
- To increase feelings of empathy for individuals who have grown up with feelings of attraction toward members of their own gender.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this session, participants will be able to:

- Describe their attitudes about gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientations.
- Define the terms *sexual orientation*, *homophobia*, and *heterosexism*.
- List three negative impacts of homophobia.
- List at least three myths about homosexuality.

SESSION-AT-A-GLANCE

Reentry and Reading (R&R)	15 minutes
Lecturette: Beliefs About Sexual Orientation and Homophobia	15 minutes
MythInformation Game OR Values Voting	25 minutes
Guided Fantasy	20 minutes
Preparation for Guest Speakers	10 minutes
Reflection and Planning for Next Session	5 minutes

MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Writing paper, index cards, and pencils

For MythInformation Game

- Leader Resource 9, Myth/Fact Statements and Answers, Leader Resource 10, Definitions, and Leader Resource 11, Resources on Lesbian and Gay Youth

For Values Voting

- Leader Resource 12, Sexual Orientation Values Voting Statements

For Guided Fantasy

- Leader Resource 13, Guided Fantasy

PREPARATION

- Read this session and discuss your feelings and beliefs about the topic with your coleader. Discuss how you will handle difficult or sensitive situations. Decide together how you will divide leadership responsibilities. Note that there are diverse opinions about appropriate language for discussing this topic. Some leaders may prefer the word *homosexual* as an umbrella term for gay and lesbian people. This may be especially true for those living in Canada. Others may prefer the distinct terms *gay men* and *lesbians* but also feel comfortable using *gay* as an umbrella term for both genders. This curriculum utilizes the latter approach. Although some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have reclaimed the term *queer* and use it as an umbrella term, we recognize the significance for many people but avoid the term because it can also be offensive.

For the Lecturette: Beliefs About Sexual Orientation and Homophobia

- Write the following outline on newsprint:
 - Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals live, work, go to school, and play among us.
 - Homophobia exists.
 - Heterosexism also exists.
 - Homophobia hurts.
 - Ignorance is the enemy.
 - Everyone has the right to his or her beliefs.

For the MythInformation Game

- Review Leader Resource 9, Myth/Fact Statements and Answers, and Leader Resource 10, Definitions. Familiarize yourselves with this information so you can supply facts in your own words without reading answers from the answer sheet.

For the Guided Fantasy

- Practice reading it aloud slowly with feeling. It takes about eight minutes to read.

For Reflection and Planning for Next Session

- Write the following on newsprint:
 - When this session began, I...
 - I never knew that...
 - I'd like more information about...
 - Some things I'm going to do differently are...
- For the next session (Guest Panel), contact a speakers' bureau from your local gay rights organization to locate the right speakers for your group. Ideally, you want a teenage or young adult gay man, a lesbian woman, and a bisexual person from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that are similar to the majority of your participants. Make it clear that you need three people with whom participants can relate, preferably people with much speaking experience who are comfortable with adolescents.

Prepare speakers by reviewing your goals, providing a description of the group and suggesting an outline for the session. Such preparation can mean the difference between an informative exchange of ideas and feelings and a very uncomfortable

experience. Find out how much experience the speakers have had with teens. Give them any feedback you have received from your group.

Ask the guest speakers to prepare an outline for their remarks that includes: occupation, current lifestyle (coupled? children?), family background, first awareness of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual, experience growing up gay in this society, exposure to harassment or discrimination. Ask speakers to limit their formal remarks to about 10 minutes each so there will be plenty of time to respond to participants' questions. Brainstorm with the speakers strategies for dealing with any difficult questions you anticipate.

Encourage the speakers to talk about their everyday lives in addition to their attitudes and feelings about being gay. Being able to see and interact with the guests is one of the most valuable learning experiences of this session.

Session Plan

R&R

15 Minutes

1. *Reentry*

Welcome participants and help them reenter the program by asking the following questions:

- Who had an experience with someone different from you since last session? What was that like for you?
- What's new in your life? What's going on that you'd like to bring up with the group?

2. *Question Box*

Take a few minutes to answer any questions from the Question Box.

3. *Reading*

Explain that today's session focuses on the issue of sexual orientation. Ask someone to define sexual orientation or give a brief explanation yourself. Read or have volunteers read the following essays from the book *One Teenager in Ten: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth*, edited by Ann Heron (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1983).

I am sixteen and gay. When I started to come out, I only told one straight girlfriend. Later everyone, including the whole school and town, knew. Many of the boys I knew as friends turned out to be the opposite. They stayed away from me in school and called me "queer," "fag," and "punk." Most of my best friends are girls. I am glad that everyone knows because as the days go by it gets easier.

I didn't realize I was gay until I was in the fifth grade; I am now in the tenth grade. My first experience came when I'd invited a boy my age to our home. We did nothing more than kiss.

When I first told my girlfriend, I hadn't planned on it. We were going to a basketball game and there was this guy on the bus who attracted me so I told her to ask him if I could talk to him. He said nothing, so I never did. I told her because she's very trustworthy and understanding. She wasn't surprised because she knew of a girl who was this way also. Everyone else found out about me when I wrote a letter to this same boy about a month later. I dropped the letter

by mistake, and another boy, who doesn't like me, found it and told everyone. They talked about it around their parents, and it went on and on.

Afterwards, things got so intolerable, I told my best friend that I planned to take pills and I did. She told my brothers and sisters and they told my mother about the pills and also how I had written a letter to a boy. My mother said anyone who likes the same sex is sick. She thought I was mixed up and she sent me to a counselor. I am still going now, each Monday. I guess my mother realizes things won't change and she seems to have accepted it. (My father left home when I was born and died six years later.)

Some good has come from all this. My mother and I seem to have gotten closer. People see me the way I am; I'm more myself than I've ever been in my whole life.... —Allen, 16, Gillett, Arkansas

I had trouble admitting to myself that I was gay—so, for a long time, telling others was out of the question. I had known for quite some time about my sensitive feelings for other girls, but it wasn't until I was seventeen that I first told someone. Somehow, after that, that someone no longer wanted to associate with me. The one thing which annoyed me extremely was that she even turned other friends against me. Unfortunately, ignorance can cause ridiculous behavior.

I live with my father and he hadn't known about my being gay; he wouldn't have even considered it. But he found out over the holidays. He found out through my cousin who is gay himself, but ashamed to admit it. Pretty soon I felt like everyone knew. It was both easy and difficult. Easy, because I didn't have to face telling anyone, and difficult because most of the people around me were very bigoted, especially my father's girlfriend. She made me go see a therapist thinking that I could be "cured." She laid all this crap on me about how gays are all sick in the head. Considering all the years we've known each other, I thought she'd be supportive, but she alienated me for weeks. The tension was really mounting and I was desperately trying to come up with a solution.

Now the one thing I believe is that a person must be true to him or herself, but for my own reasons I had to lie about my being gay. I told her that I was probably just going through a phase. This, you must understand, was to ease the hostility around me. But I knew that it was not, and is not, a phase. Since I've been "found out" (I didn't come out), I have been placed under all types of restrictions; no driving the car, not being allowed to see my gay friends, and not being allowed to see my lover. We had to break up, as you can imagine—hesitantly, I might add.

Straights and adults say, "How can teenagers know their own minds, let alone know that they're gay?" Well, that is where they're wrong! It's hard, as I'm sure most of us realize, going to school, being gay, and restraining the feelings we want so much to show. Straight friends can't possibly know and can't even begin to understand the emotional aspects of being gay. As a result, we end up having very few friends at school and our sensitivity about every matter is heightened. There's no escaping the fact that such narrow-minded people exist. The best thing is to build your self-confidence in who and what you are. Avoid those who simply cannot deal with "our" issue.... —Liza, 17, Los Angeles, California

Invite reactions to the readings and lead a discussion. Make the following points:

- It's okay to be confused or thrown off at the beginning of this session.
- Many of us are very ignorant about issues of sexual orientation because we have never had the opportunity to obtain information or to talk openly with people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- These readings may be the first opportunity you've had to hear the stories of gay and lesbian teens.

Ask the group:

- What do you think of Liza and Allan?
- How do their lives sound to you?

LECTURETTE: BELIEFS ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND HOMOPHOBIA

15 Minutes

1. Post the newsprint you have prepared and explain that there are six beliefs upon which this session is based. Review the following points *briefly* and informally.

Encourage some two-way communication during the lecturette.

- *Gay and lesbian people live, work, go to school, and play among us.* Ask, "How many of you know someone who is gay?" When many but not all hands go up, say, "Probably even those of you who didn't raise your hands know someone. You just don't know that you know them." Sexuality educators have estimated that 1 in 10 people are gay or lesbian. Other estimates are lower. The numbers may be lower, or they may be higher. It doesn't really matter, because a significant number of real people are affected. This means that someone in your elementary school, high school, family, Boys or Girls club, neighborhood, etc. was/is gay.
- *Homophobia exists.* Homophobia is discrimination and bias against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Although homophobia literally means fear of homosexuals, the word is generally used to describe all acts of hatred, ridicule, discrimination, and exclusion aimed at gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Homophobia can range from very violent acts such as beating or murdering gay people to subtle behaviors such as telling antigay jokes or supposedly imitating a gay man by walking around with a limp wrist.
- *Heterosexism also exists.* Heterosexism is the assumption that everyone around us is heterosexual and/or should be. Most people assume, for example, that teen women have boyfriends and that teen guys have girlfriends or that they are looking. If a very nice person doesn't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, sometimes friends might try to play matchmaker. For a guy, someone will say, "Hey, I want to introduce you to my sister or my girlfriend." Unless the guy fits some stereotype, no one ever considers that he might not be interested in girls. Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is better than homosexuality or bisexuality.
- *Homophobia hurts.* The acts of hatred or exclusion that many gay people experience are emotionally and sometimes physically painful. Most gay, lesbian, and bisexual people work hard to hide their sexual orientation from other people because they want to avoid the hatred, gossip, jokes, and violence. It takes quite a bit of energy to censor every word that comes out of one's mouth. Heterosexuals can talk freely at school about what they did over the weekend. They can mention their boyfriend's or girlfriend's name without fear. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people spend a lot of mental energy hiding, energy that could be used more productively in school or on the job.

Family members and friends of gay people also feel uncomfortable in a setting that is homophobic. Suppose somebody tells a “fag” joke and everyone laughs. How does someone who is gay or has a gay brother, sister, mother, or father feel?

Homophobia also directly hurts heterosexuals. It keeps them from doing certain things that might be perceived as gay and keeps them from knowing gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

- Ignorance is the enemy, and silence is a tool to maintain ignorance. Most of us do not learn much accurate information about gay people when we are growing up. Ask, “How many of you have a book in your home that explains what it means to be gay? What about a book at school or a pamphlet in the rack outside the counselor’s office?”

Ignorance breeds fear. When we don’t understand something we are often afraid of it. [Give or ask for some examples of how ignorance breeds fear.] Then, fear breeds hatred or avoidance. If we are afraid of something, we avoid it, and we even start to dislike it, because it makes us feel uncomfortable. For example, many of us do not know much about people with physical disabilities. A blind man at a picnic is often ignored because people do not know what to say or whether they should tap him on the shoulder and ask his name or grab his hand and shake it during an introduction. This ignorance makes us uncomfortable. Some people may even wish that the blind man had stayed home so he does not make everyone else feel uncomfortable. But once you have spent time talking to this man and finding out how he wants to be treated, you will probably feel more comfortable with him and with the next blind person you meet.

- Everyone has the right to their personal and religious beliefs about homosexuality. *However, no one has the right to oppress or treat someone unfairly because of his or her sexual orientation.* In school and work situations, individuals who are very different have to learn and work together. The issue in public school and work settings is not what you believe, but how you treat others.

2. End the lecturette with the following questions:

- Which of these beliefs do you accept? Why?
- Which do you challenge? Why?

EXPLORING ISSUES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

25 Minutes

Choose MythInformation Game OR Values Voting.

MythInformation Game

1. Remind the group that points of view are often formed from ignorance or from a lack of information. Tell participants that they will have an opportunity to sort out facts from myths regarding homosexuality by participating in a fun myth information game.
2. Divide the group into two or more teams.
3. Post a sheet of newsprint divided into columns. Ask each team to choose a name for itself. Write the team names at the top of the columns.
4. Explain the rules:
 - I will read a series of statements.
 - You will take turns being the spokesperson for your group. When it is your turn, you must decide whether the statement is a fact or a myth.

- Team members may talk among themselves briefly, but the spokesperson must give the answer.
 - A correct answer earns a point.
5. Read a statement to the first player from one team. Once an answer has been given, state whether the answer is correct, and if so, record a point on the newsprint. Then, have the team explain their response.
 6. Draw upon Leader Resource 9, Myth/Fact Statements and Answers, and Leader Resource 10, Definitions, to correct any misinformation that surfaces in the discussion. Allow a few minutes for discussion of the statement and provide additional information as appropriate.
 7. Continue by reading the next statement to the first player on the next team and alternate until all statements have been discussed.

NOTE: You can vary the procedure for this activity by having each group nominate a permanent spokesperson who gives all the answers for that group. Or, you might eliminate the teams if you want to avoid competition. The competition does add some energy, however.

Leader Resource 9

SESSION EIGHT

MYTH/FACT STATEMENTS AND ANSWERS

1. Homosexual behavior is unnatural.

MYTH. Anthropologists Ford and Beach found that homosexual behavior is present in every species of mammal that has been carefully studied. Since human beings in all cultures, animals, and insects engage in sexual behavior with the same gender frequently and in significant numbers, it cannot be considered unnatural.

2. Gay and lesbian people can be easily identified by the way they look and act.

MYTH. While some gay people do fit stereotypes, most do not. There is no way to know for sure if someone is gay unless he or she tells you. For example, heterosexual guys who have characteristics that some people regard as effeminate are often labeled as gay. The way a person carries himself or herself is not what makes a person gay. What makes a person gay is the strong internal feelings of romantic and sexual attraction to members of the same sex.

3. People choose their sexual orientation.

MYTH. People do not choose to whom they are attracted. Feelings of attraction are discovered rather than chosen. Most experts today believe that sexual orientation is determined early in life and influenced greatly by biological factors.

4. Parents are the major influence on whether their child is straight or gay.

MYTH. Heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual children are raised in all kinds of families. Studies have been unable to show that any particular style of parenting leads a child to be gay or straight or that the sexual orientation of the parent is a factor. More than 90 percent of the children who live with a gay parent have a heterosexual orientation. Likewise, the vast majority of gay people have been raised by heterosexual parents who wanted and expected their children to be heterosexual. The fact is, children seem to develop their sexual orientation independently of their parents.

5. Gay people can become heterosexual if they really want to and work hard at it.

MYTH. Although many attempts have been made, efforts to change the orientation of gay and lesbian people have failed overwhelmingly. People who view homosexuality as an illness have sought so-called cures, but there is no cure because being gay is not an illness. Gay people have been able to change their sexual behavior but not their sexual orientation. This means that the gay men and lesbians who behave heterosexually are acting in deep contradiction to their innermost feelings, a practice that usually leads to psychological turmoil and pain.

6. Lesbians are at much lower risk of getting STDs than gay men or straight women and men.

FACT. Lesbians are typically at very low risk for all sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. This is largely true because lesbians tend to be more monogamous than heterosexual couples and gay men. Also, lesbians do not engage in high-risk behaviors, such as penis-vagina intercourse or anal sex. Of course, other STDs can be transmitted through oral sex if one partner has a disease, and if lesbian women engage in heterosexual intercourse or other high-risk behaviors, they are as vulnerable to infection as anyone else. However, compared with other groups, lesbian women have very low rates of STDs.

7. Most lesbians want to be men and gay men want to be women.

MYTH. Lesbians are biological women who see themselves as women who are romantically and sexually attracted to other women. Gay men think of themselves as men loving men. People who are born one sex but feel psychologically that they are actually the other sex are called transsexuals.

8. If you've had a pleasurable sexual experience with someone of the same gender, that means you're gay.

MYTH. The question often arises, "How do I know if I'm gay?" Sexual orientation has nothing to do with wanting to be the other gender. It is also not the result of having one positive experience with the same gender. It is very possible for someone with a heterosexual orientation to enjoy a sexual experience with someone of the same gender, often by fantasizing about a heterosexual partner. A person is gay if his or her primary feelings of romantic and sexual attraction are for members of the same gender. Sexual orientation is all about feelings. It is important to note that some people who have these feelings choose not to act on their feelings and may not call themselves gay or lesbian.

9. Gay people generally become aware of their feelings when they are teenagers or even younger.

FACT. Most gay people say that they knew that they were "different" at an early age. They knew that they had special feelings for specific members of their same gender, that their crushes were homosexual and that they could not relate to the excitement surrounding heterosexual relationships in society.

10. There is no such thing as a true bisexual. Bisexuals are generally confused about their sexuality or they are exploring.

MYTH. Bisexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation. Some people have the potential to achieve sexual and emotional satisfaction and fulfillment with members of both sexes. Bisexuality is a lifelong orientation, although relating sexually to both sexes may be limited to a particular period in a bisexual person's life. Some experts believe that the majority of human beings are bisexual. However, many people never tune into the homosexual side of their attractions. Some people have bisexual feelings but do not identify themselves as bisexual. Bisexuals tell us that they feel like they are in two closets because they are often not accepted in either the gay or straight community.

11. The United States Constitution protects a gay person from being fired or denied housing solely on the basis of his or her sexual orientation.

MYTH. The United States Constitution provides no civil rights protection on the basis of sexual orientation. In other words, there is no national law that prevents employers, landlords, or service providers from discriminating against someone because she or he is gay. However, as of 1999, there are specific nondiscrimination laws in ten states (California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin.) In all other states, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is legal. In Canada, however, a federal antidiscrimination law includes sexual orientation in the categories named in the Human Rights Code. Provincial school boards also have antiviolence codes that define violence to include harassment due to sexual orientation.

12. The majority of people in the world with AIDS are heterosexual.

FACT. As of 1998, this is not yet true in the United States, but the trend is headed in that direction. The largest increase in rates of HIV infection in the United States are among heterosexual women and teenagers. In Canada, the largest increase in rates of HIV infection are among teenagers, young adult women, and IV drug users.

13. The majority of child molesters are heterosexual.

FACT. Over 90 percent of reported child molestations involve adult heterosexual men and young girls. The adult is usually someone the child knows and trusts, often a member of the family.

14. In a lesbian or gay relationship, one partner plays the male (“butch”) role and the other plays the female (“femme”) role.

MYTH. In most same-gender relationships, the partners do not play roles. They do not try to mimic heterosexual relationships. One person is typically more outgoing than the other. Either person is likely to initiate sexual activity, although as in any relationship, one person may be more interested than the other. Even in heterosexual relationships, couples are getting away from playing rigid roles based on gender.

15. Gay and lesbian relationships seldom last.

MYTH. Gay and lesbian people, like straight people, have many different kinds of relationships. Some last and some don't. The myth is that it is rare to see long-term relationships among gay or lesbian couples. There are, however, gay couples who have been together for 20, 30, 40 years, and longer. Among heterosexual married couples in the United States and Canada, almost 50 percent end in divorce. Relationships don't always last among heterosexual or gay couples.

16. Gay people can't have children.

MYTH. Gay men and lesbian women are very capable of having children, although not as a result of having sex with their same-gender partner. Many gay people are parents as a result of an earlier heterosexual relationship or marriage. Some lesbian women choose to become artificially inseminated or to become pregnant by a male friend (sometimes a gay man who also wants to be a parent). Other gay people adopt children or raise a child who needs a home. Parenting is a very important life experience for many gay men and lesbian women.

Leader Resource 10

SESSION EIGHT

DEFINITIONS

SEXUAL ORIENTATION The deep-seated direction of one's romantic and erotic attraction toward the same sex (homosexual), other sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual). Sexual orientation is a continuum, not a set of absolutely distinct categories. People do not choose their sexual orientation; they discover their feelings of attraction. The only choice is whether or not to act on those feelings. Some people's feelings vary over time.

HOMOSEXUALITY Romantic and sexual attraction to and/or behavior with members of the same gender. It's normal, not an illness, and has no known cause.

BISEXUALITY Romantic and sexual attraction to and/or behavior with members of both genders. It's normal, not an illness, and has no known cause.

HETEROSEXUALITY Romantic and sexual attraction to and/or behavior with members of the other gender. It's normal, not an illness, and has no known cause.

GAY A descriptive label assigned to people, most often men, who are romantically and sexually attracted to members of their own gender. The label *gay* is used often as an umbrella term for both gay men and lesbians, especially in the United States. The term became popular in the late 1960s as a symbol of self-acceptance and self-affirmation.

LESBIAN The term of preference for most gay women because it offers an identity independent from men. The term originates from the island of Lesbos in the Aegean Sea, which was the home of the Greek poet Sappho, who was a lover of women.

LIFESTYLE This term is used to describe the way individuals lead their lives. For example, some people like living in the country. Others like the city life, using public transportation, and taking advantage of all the city has to offer. The word *lifestyle* is sometimes used incorrectly to describe a person's sexual orientation, as in "She is living a gay lifestyle." This usage is problematic because gay people live many different lifestyles. Being gay, in and of itself, is not a lifestyle any more than being heterosexual is a lifestyle.

BI A slang term for people who accept their bisexual orientation and identify (define) themselves as bisexual. Bisexuals face misunderstanding and discrimination from gay and heterosexual people.

TRANSVESTITE Individuals who enjoy wearing the clothes of and appearing as the other sex. Also known as cross-dressers. Most are heterosexual men. Some gay people enjoy drag and camp as liberating humor.

TRANSSEXUAL Men and women who feel their true identity is that of the other gender and that they have been born with the wrong set of sexual organs. Many transsexuals have sex-change operations. Transsexuals may be gay, bisexual, or heterosexual, in the same way that the general population may be.

HETEROSEXISM Powerful cultural assumption that everyone is heterosexual or should be, that heterosexuality is the only normal, right, and moral way to be, and that anything else, therefore, is abnormal, unnatural, and wrong.

HOMOPHOBIA The fear and intolerance of homosexuality, lesbians, and gay men. Homophobia is the problem, not homosexuality. Even gay people may internalize homophobia.

BIPHOBIA Fear of intimacy with and closeness to people who do not identify with either a heterosexual or homosexual orientation. Bisexuals confront bias from both the gay and heterosexual communities and often feel that they are in two closets. Bisexuals are sometimes seen as trying to have it both ways or as homosexuals who haven't admitted it yet.

HETEROPHOBIA For some homosexual persons, the fear or distrust of heterosexuals and anything associated with heterosexuality; often based on negative life experiences.

IN THE CLOSET Being totally or partially secret about one's gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientation; often necessary due to self-denial, discrimination, and/or antigay violence. Keeping the secret takes incredible energy and often causes psychological pain.

COMING OUT The never-ending process of becoming aware of one's homosexual or bisexual orientation, accepting it, acting on it, and telling others about it. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people often are only partially "out."

GAY PRIDE Although gay people began to organize politically before the Stonewall Rebellion in June 1969, that event marked the official beginning of the Gay Rights Movement. On June 27, 1969, the police were making a routine raid on the Stonewall Bar on Christopher Street in New York City. Until that time, when police raided gay bars, they typically were paid off by patrons who didn't want to risk public exposure. However, on this day, the Stonewall patrons refused to cooperate and resisted harassment. Eventually, bricks were thrown at the police who barricaded themselves inside the building. News reports of the ensuing three-day riot spread rapidly, and "Gay Power" became a new civil rights cry throughout the country. Since then, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and heterosexual allies work for justice and celebrate Gay Pride month during June. Pride activities include parades, educational programs, concerts, and other inspirational events.