



# Sexual Identity

A Guide for Parents

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Dear Parents,

This pamphlet was created as a resource for parents of adolescents who are struggling with questions concerning their sexual identity. The Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity is a scholarly institute committed to studying issues related to sexual identity and being a resource to the community concerning such issues. After being contacted by a number of parents with questions and concerns about their adolescents dealing with what are sometimes challenging and confusing experiences, we thought it would be helpful to create a condensed resource for parents.

We recognize that this may be a difficult time for your family and for you as parents. We want you to have some understanding and practical tools that might help you and your family at this time. It can be overwhelming sorting through the massive amount of information available via technology and other sources. This pamphlet was designed to provide you with a direct and concise summary of information pertaining to sexual identity among youth. We have a similar resource for youth.

We hope that you find this information helpful.

Best Regards,

ISSI

## Special Considerations for Parents

There are a number of unique considerations many parents deal with when their child discloses to them that he or she has same-sex attractions. We need to note at the outset that the considerations are truly unique and vary considerably from family to family based on several variables. For example, age is an important consideration. Is your son 13? Then different concerns will be more salient than if he is 17. Similarly, how your child approaches you and experiences of same-sex attraction will be important. Is she saying, “I am gay and wanted you to know who I really am”? Or is she saying, “I experience same-sex attractions and am sorting out what that means”? Because of these different considerations, we can only really highlight some of the major themes that come up for families and encourage you as parents to look at your specific situation with the help of a trusted guide.

## Emotional Challenges

The emotional reaction to the disclosure alone can be confusing and overwhelming. Many parents experience different reactions such as disbelief, sadness, guilt, and sometimes anger. Again, the degree to which a parent feels these emotions may be related to whether the disclosure is a request for encouragement and support about experiences of sexual identity confusion, or whether it is an expression of pride in an identity label with implications for behavior and relationships.

In addition, this is a good time to recall that your teen may be in a very different place with the subject of homosexuality—he or she may have been wrestling with this for a long time, and is only now bringing you into the loop.

Although this resource is focusing on parents of adolescents, we have also known parents of young adults who have similarly strong emotional reactions when they learn that their twenty-something or thirty-something is identifying as gay.

Another emotional challenge is tied to feelings of guilt.

It is not uncommon for parents to question, “What did I do wrong?” or “What did I do to cause this?”

Parents may find themselves engaging in a vicious cycle of “what ifs.” So if you are reading this and have been struggling with guilt, with a

series of “what if” questions running through your mind, please know that you are not alone. The approach we take at ISSI does not focus on the “what ifs” of parenting. Rather, we want to come alongside you as you try to sort out your many feelings and figure out how best to be a resource to your teen.

It is important for parents to allow themselves to walk through a process of grief. Parents must come to terms with what their teen’s sexual identity concerns mean for their family. There may be a sense of a loss of dreams, such as in the case of having grandchildren through traditional means. Parents also often feel isolated from others. They may feel unable to speak with other family members, friends, or other individuals in their lives they typically look to for support due to fear of stigma or embarrassment. In our view it is important that parents identify safe, trusted people with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings.

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Finally, attend to your marriage and turn toward each other rather than away from each other during this time of stress. To help with this remember that it is not uncommon for parents to have mixed feelings of love and disappointment, concern and guilt, and so on. Often one parent comes to reflect the dominant expression of one emotion (e.g., anger), and this can lead the other parent to take the lead in expressing another emotion (e.g., concern). What can happen is that a conflict can ensue between the parents who may actually share some of the same feelings but to different degrees. Talk with each other and keep communication open as you sort out the range of emotional responses you have at this time.

### Relationship Challenges

Depending on their child’s age and the persistence of their child’s sexual attractions, parents will have to deal with different life events and choices. For children who are in the pre-teen or early teen years, it is helpful for parents to be a support for their children and to identify resources as they attempt to sort through all that they are experiencing in regards to their sexual attractions. For children who are in mid- or later teen years, parents still need to focus on being a support and identifying trustworthy resources, while also recognizing that different questions may arise regarding behavior and relationships. For example, at this point and even later (in a child’s adult years), it is not uncommon for families to negotiate family rules or standards in regards to same-sex relationships. This might include rules about time away from home with friends, dating relationships, access to various social networks, and so on.

Some parents feel stuck trying to sort out how to love their son or daughter while not saying or doing things that might condone same-sex relationships. This takes tremendous

Difficult family issues such as these may benefit from the help of a trained mental health professional.

emotional energy and complicates relationships that may have previously been viewed as “low maintenance”, which can increase a parent’s sense of loss.

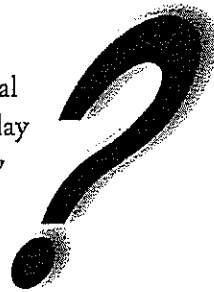
It is also okay to ask for the space you need as parents to make decisions. There is sometimes so much pressure on parents to respond in ways that may go against their principles. It may be helpful to take time to think through your beliefs and values and find ways to communicate these in the context of love and regard for your son or daughter.

These are difficult issues for families to navigate and come to a place of mutual understanding on many issues. It may be beneficial to seek the help of a trained mental health professional to help you as a family tackles these challenging issues.

### Sexual Identity

#### Description of Sexual Identity: What is it?

The term sexual identity refers to how individuals identify themselves, typically with respect to their sexual attractions. Some of the most common words used today are “gay”, “straight”, and “bi”. However, sexual identity is not as simple as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on. We believe that sexual identity can be



influenced by many things that mean different things to different people. Some of these things that impact sexual identity might be: biological sex (whether the person was born male or female), gender identity (how masculine or feminine the person feels), sexual attractions (towards the same or opposite sex or both), intentions (how the person intends or desires to act), values (the person’s beliefs and values about sexual behavior), and behavior itself (what the person does with the intentions and attractions that person has). Essentially, sexual identity and how it forms over time can be a fairly complex aspect in and of itself—not to mention that it is combined with other complex parts of a person to create that person’s entire personal identity.

#### Background to Sexual Orientation, Identity

Many times when people talk about someone who has a homosexual orientation they try to pinpoint why. You may have heard of the “nature vs. nurture debate”. This is the common “biology (genes) vs. environment” debate. At this point there is no conclusive research that fully supports either of these views. All of the research that has been done up till now on the topic of how and why people have homosexual and bisexual orientations is inconclusive. Some studies are not well designed. Other studies are well designed but have not been replicated (the findings have not yet been shown by another team of researchers). And some findings may be suggestive of differences due to biology or might conversely be the result of patterns of behavior. Currently scientists do not know why people end up with same-sex attractions or homosexual orientations. What is known is that there seems to be many reasons, which can be different for each individual.

In other words, there are multiple pathways to an endpoint. For some folks it might be that they have a “push” from biology that when combined with life circumstances they may become curious or emulate gay role models they know or admire. This does not cause them to experience same-sex attraction; however, it may contribute to them thinking of themselves as gay and integrating their feelings toward the same sex into a gay identity. Others may get there by a different set of circumstances. We know a teen who says she grew up in a home that was not stable, and after her mom and dad divorced and because of some of the abuse she went through, she did not feel attracted to the opposite sex. The point is that each person has a different set of circumstances in his or her life that have varying meanings for the individual. But in all honesty, no one really knows how or why a person has attractions to the same sex or has come to develop a homosexual or bisexual orientation, so we are not going to focus on trying to give you the final word on how your son or daughter got to where they are. What we do want you to know is that you are not to blame!

Now that you know what sexual orientation and sexual identity are, let us tell you why we talk about sexual identity and not sexual orientation. Sexual orientation tends to refer to consistent (regular) and persistent (continued over time) attractions that a person has. At this point we do not feel there is adequate research to support saying that most people can change their orientations (the most optimistic research out there says there is about a 30% chance of positive results from trying to change orientation, but those positive results were not the same for everyone and may not have always been change of orientation). Focusing on changing orientation can be pretty draining for some people, particularly if they have already tried to change or have been praying for change and are getting discouraged. We also do

not want people to think of it in “all or nothing” terms—as in they either experience change or they identify as gay.

This brings us back to sexual identity: We can help young people sort through the concerns that they have and help them figure out how they want to live their lives. We can help them pull all of the parts of

their identities together in ways that make sense to them and fall in line with their values and experiences. Sexual identity takes sexual orientation into consideration along with all those other things above. Some people decide that since they have a homosexual orientation they will take on a gay identity; they essentially integrate their feelings of attraction to the same sex into a

**Neither biology  
nor environment  
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a homosexual  
orientation!**

gay identity. Others feel that even though they have these attractions and orientation there are other things in their lives, generally their religious beliefs, that are more important to them and they decide to not take on a gay identity. Deciding on whether to adopt a gay identity or not (and deciding what the word “gay” means to them) is what we want to help people figure out.

### Clinical Description

Many individuals who find themselves having same-sex attractions experience confusion. However, some may not have any confusion about their experiences and just need to know where to go from there. Others may have internal conflict because of their religious or cultural beliefs or values. Someone else might experience something completely different. Each person is unique in his or her situation but most have some similar experiences as others.

Many of the people who end up incorporating their attractions into a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity say that they have good relationships, are able to get and keep good jobs, do well in school, and so on. However, researchers have found that there are more instances of individuals who identify as gay (when compared to those who identify as heterosexual) experiencing depression, anxiety, and other negative emotions as well as being at a higher risk for substance misuse, contracting sexually transmitted infections, and so on. Many professionals today believe that the higher rates of negative emotional experiences like depression, anxiety, and suicidality are due to the way society disapproves of homosexuality. They go on to say that if society would change the way it views homosexuality and accept it, these rates would be no different than those of the general population. People who take this view might say that helping people identify as gay publicly might be a positive thing in that they will have access to some support that they might not otherwise have. However, public identification as gay may also put them at risk for more discrimination and may further an identity that for some people may be premature.

Another important area to consider is that of non-monogamy and relationship instability. Research has found that non-monogamy is more common for gay males. Some people say this is true because of a lack of

“It is likely that young people who experience same-sex attraction, even if they have not chosen to identify as gay, are having some negative feelings and may possibly be having difficulty in relationships.”

social support (like gay marriages not being accepted in most places). Others talk about a real difference among individuals who identify as gay in that they can be committed to emotional faithfulness but not physical or sexual faithfulness.

Researchers are finding trends in the ways that individuals who identify as gay experience their lives from an emotional and relational standpoint. Once they find these trends they then have to try to explain why they are finding what they are finding. Whatever the causes, it is likely that young people who experience same-sex attraction, even if they have not chosen to identify as gay, are having some negative feelings and may possibly be having difficulty in relationships. As parents you can begin to see why it is important for young people to have others around them who they can talk to—people they can trust. Parents have an opportunity to be tremendous sources of support. Other key people may include friends, youth pastors, and maybe counselors.

### Milestone Events

Milestone events are major events that, when people look back at their lives, can be seen as markers or signposts in their lives that carry meaning. We understand that each person is unique, but we are trying to provide a young person with the best understanding of key milestone events for the majority of individuals who are in the same boat as he or she may be. We believe that young people are in a time their lives when it is common for people to search for congruence—they want their beliefs, values, thoughts, behaviors, and desires to line up and have some semblance of order. Often, people who are having similar experiences are also starting to look for and give meaning to



their lives in relation to their identity—including sexual, religious, and cultural identities.

The general consensus is that in this process individuals follow a progression that looks like this: (1) awareness (typically of feeling “different” than others and this is typically tied to attractions toward the same sex), (2) engagement in same-sex behavior, (3) labeling oneself as homosexual, (4) disclosure of a gay identity to others, and (5) relationship with another member of the same sex. The table below outlines the average ages at which an individual may work through the process of sexual identity development.

**Table 1. Average Age Range in Years at Time of Milestone Events**

Population	Awareness	SSB	Label	Disclosure	Relationship
Christian*	11-14	15-18	17-19	17-19	17-19
Gay Identified**	8-11	12-15	15-18	17-19	18-20

**Note:** Awareness = first awareness of feelings of same-sex attraction (SSA); SSB = same-sex behavior; Label = first labeling of oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; Disclosure = first disclosure to another person; Relationship = first relationship with the same sex. Many participants in the Yarhouse et al. study did not engage in SSB or label themselves as gay despite reported SSA. But for those who did, we report the average age of milestone events.

\* Study of Male and Female Christian Young Adults by M. A. Yarhouse, S. Stratton, J. Dean, & H. Brooke, “Sexual minorities: Christian college students and their sexual experiences.” Executive Summary Report, Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, 2007.

\*\* Study of Male Gay Identified Young Adults by E. M. Dube and R. C. Savin-Williams, “Sexual identity development among ethnic-minority male youths,” *Developmental Psychology*, 1999, Vol. 35, No. 6, pp. 1389-1398.

Although the people in these studies state that they experienced same-sex attraction at a young age, most do not label themselves as gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual for many more years to come. We have found this to be particularly true when we have looked at religious identity

as a key factor in the lives of the individuals. The beliefs and values they hold may delay decision-making about sexual identity for longer. In any case, most people move through cycles of confusion, denial, minimization, frustration, and fear before even acknowledging their struggle to anyone else or settling on a sexual identity.

We have found that as young people struggle with feelings of same-sex attraction and how to make meaning of them, they often reach out to a select few for support. Most often, they will disclose first to close friends. After these friends they will most often disclose to trusted adults like youth pastors, counselors, or teachers. They might also share with a sibling. The third group of people these youth often tell are their parents. So it is important to understand that you may be learning about your teen’s struggle and dealing with your own reaction while they have been struggling with it for several months or even longer.

Now, you may be asking yourself what would it mean for your son or daughter to “come out” to you. We at ISSI talk about coming out a bit differently than you have probably heard of before. Typically in the gay community coming out is treated as synonymous with identifying oneself as gay. Most of the time when people in the gay community talk about homosexual feelings or same-sex attractions, they tend to lump it into one category and simply say a person is gay. It ultimately equates the person’s feelings of attraction with his or her identity. But that isn’t accurate in our experience. We find it much more helpful to talk about a person’s experiences of same-sex attraction rather than about identity. So we talk about coming out as finding safe people with whom young people can share the fact that they experience attractions toward the same sex.

As with anything that's really complex it is impossible to say that your son or daughter is going to go through the same milestone events in the same order as other people who experience same-sex attractions. But it can be helpful to see general markers that may carry meaning for your child.

## Counseling

### Assessment

We are now going to turn our attention to counseling. Many people find it helpful to talk to someone about sexual identity concerns, and you may decide that meeting with a counselor is a good next step. In this section we are going to talk to you about what you might expect from counseling, how your counselor might work with your son or daughter, what topics might be covered, and so on.

If your child were to go to see a counselor he or she would probably go into the office for an initial interview before starting any kind of therapy. This is called as assessment. This interview asks questions to best understand who the individual is, where he or she has been, and what that person is going through. It is similar to a conversation with a medical doctor who is doing a check up asking about all facets of someone's life. The difference is that this interview looks at a number of factors that might figure into the individual's concerns. This helps determine what the primary issue is and helps the counselor see the big picture—which may include any other issues on top of what your son or daughter thinks the problem is. Like we mentioned above, these other problems are sometimes part of a person's experience and can take the form of symptoms of depression and/or anxiety.

Generally a counselor is supportive and encouraging. The counselor will talk about the things your son or daughter wants to talk about, but because the issues you are dealing with are so controversial each



counselor may respond differently—in ways that he or she thinks are in your son or daughter's best interest. Some may choose to focus more on your child's other concerns than on the fact that he or she is concerned about experiences of same-sex attraction.

Here at ISSI we would encourage a counselor to undertake the same general process described above. We believe this can help you create a plan for counseling specifically suited to your son or daughter's needs. We encourage counselors to use some kind of measure of an individual's quality of life. This allows your child to share his or her overall satisfaction with how things are going, as well as reflect on specific areas—it helps us get an idea about a range of issues in your child's life. We also encourage counselors to get more information on a young person's sense of his or her own sexuality, as well as the messages heard at home, from friends, and from the media about sexuality. Counselors should also ask your child about how much attraction is being felt toward the same and opposite sex.

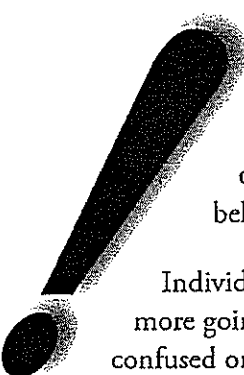
These tools and many others have been developed to help people create a language for what they have been experiencing and working through. ISSI counselors will typically avoid making judgments about what is normal and abnormal. They will instead work to help people, in a sense, reflect on their experiences, beliefs, and values, and help them find the language to tell their stories. This will help them understand how language shapes their perspectives and world views. We would encourage a counselor to then help them work through how and what language best captures their experiences.

## Diagnostic Issues

Something to keep in mind while you are reading all of this information is that homosexuality is not considered a mental disorder by the major mental health organizations. Prior to 1973, mental health professionals had a diagnosis in their manual of mental illnesses that stated homosexuality was a disorder. But that is not the case any more. Even though people have these attractions and may have sexual encounters with someone of the same sex, this does not mean that they are mentally ill. However, if people have same-sex attractions and are experiencing conflict, confusion, or frustration because of those attractions, or because their religious convictions oppose same-sex sexual behavior, then there are ways for professionals to understand their experience.

One of the diagnoses in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) mental health professionals can use to make sense of these types of situations is Sexual Disorder NOS (not otherwise specified). This category can be for a number of concerns, including “persistent and marked distress about sexual orientation.” Essentially this means that people are troubled by their sexual attractions and/or orientation.

The other diagnosis that talks about the problems they might be experiencing would be called an Identity Problem. This one is used when individuals are uncertain about more than one of the key areas of their identity, like their religion, sexual orientation, being an adolescent, which group to belong to, moral values, etc.



Individuals might receive other diagnoses if there is more going on in their hearts and minds than just being confused or troubled by sexual attractions or orientation. If

they are more sad or anxious than usual they might be diagnosed with a disorder that takes into account depression or anxiety. It is pretty common for people who have same-sex attractions or a homosexual orientation to experience such negative feelings, or to even struggle with substance use (e.g., nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, etc.). Some people say they might have these other concerns because of rejection they might feel from others or because these are the ways they cope.

Since 1973, homosexuality has not been considered a mental disorder by the major mental health organizations.

## Intervention

After the information gathering part—the assessment phase that may lead to a diagnosis—counseling moves on to the intervention stage. If a counselor were to address your child’s concerns over same-sex attractions instead of just treating the other issues he or she might have, there are a few different ways that a counselor might work with you. Many counselors do a supportive approach and may think of your son or daughter as essentially gay, encouraging him or her to think in that way. This is called “gay affirming” therapy or what we refer to as “gay integrative” therapy. We call it this because it would essentially assist a young person in integrating experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity.

Other counselors might recognize your child’s religious conflicts and assist your son or daughter in stopping behavior that might place him or her at risk for STDs or some other concerns. We talk about this as celibacy-based therapy or chastity-based therapy because the focus is on changing behavior. Changing behavior may be helpful because of

health risks associated with sexual behavior outside of the context of a monogamous relationship. There may also be benefits with delaying sexual behavior insofar as behavior may lead a young person to claim an identity earlier than what might otherwise occur.

Some counselors might recognize your child's conflicts and offer counseling (or a referral to another counselor) intended to change his or her sexual orientation. This type of counseling is currently controversial and

many mental health organizations have expressed concerns about it, suggesting that sexual orientation cannot change or that it might be harmful to attempt to do so.

The research here is again not particularly well-designed, but some

studies do suggest that some people report a change in their behavior and (in some cases) their own sense of their orientation. The research on potential harm in trying to change is also poorly designed. Some people have said it was harmful to try to change; others have said it was helpful.

Still other counselors might focus more on your child's sexual identity, much like we do here at ISSI. The focus of sexual identity therapy is to help young people figure out how to live their lives in ways that are consistent with their beliefs and values. Put differently, we essentially assist young people in helping their behavior and identity line up with their beliefs and values. This approach also considers

“ The focus of sexual identity therapy is to help young people figure out how to live their lives in ways that are consistent with their beliefs and values. ”

how they identify themselves and their sexual preferences privately (to themselves), as well as publicly (to others). In this approach we would encourage young people to move towards congruence between their values and actions.

We help young people reach congruence by having them think about the messages they have received about same-sex attraction. We talk to them about how various stories have been told to them and how these stories came to make sense to them. For example, one of the main metaphors young people might hear today is the *discovery* metaphor. The message in this metaphor is that a young person already is *gay*, and that he or she is coming to discover this about him- or herself. In contrast, the *integration* metaphor acknowledges that the individual experiences same-sex attractions but suggests that what matters now is what is done with the attractions being experienced. A young person can integrate them into a *gay* identity, or can decide not to. We also know some people who decide to identify as *gay*, but they transform the meaning of the word *gay* because they choose not to engage in same-sex behavior. Remember that the popular meaning of “*gay*” suggests behavior—that attractions lead to behaviors, which express who you “really are”. Some people decide that “*gay*” means that they have these attractions but they decide not to engage in behavior for personal or religious reasons.

In the end we would want to work with your child on writing a story for his or her life, regarding behavior and identity, that is more congruent with his or her beliefs and values. To do this we would highlight the meanings that your child is making out of the fact that he or she is attracted to the same sex. Do

It is a challenging process to make meaning out of same-sex attractions and experiences...but new language and insight can be helpful.

attractions mean that someone is a different kind of person—and is it best to distinguish types of people based upon their feelings of sexual attraction? Or do the attractions exist but not make up who your son or daughter is as a person? And there are many other possible ways to make meaning that might shape your child's overall sense of self and identity. But in the end, your son or daughter gets to decide how to edit his or her life's story based on personal beliefs, values, and feelings about sexuality, and how your child wants his or her life to proceed from this point on.

All of this can be a pretty challenging process, no doubt. But counseling like this not only gives people a new language and insight for managing their sexual identity, it also transforms how people look at their lives as a whole.

### New Developments in the Field

In many respects the study of sexual identity development and synthesis is a relatively new and exciting area of research. Many models exist to try to explain how sexual identity develops over time among people who experience same-sex attraction. Yet we continue to learn so much by conducting research in this area. Several research projects are underway through ISSI and others to further our understanding in this area. ISSI will be disseminating research and practical resources as they are developed. It is also important that individuals and families affected by sexual identity concerns continue to stay involved in the developments in this area. Individuals and families willing to participate in ongoing research projects (involving sexual identity development and synthesis, religious coping, sexual identity therapy, and so on) taking place at ISSI should contact the following address:

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