



## **Guidelines on Working With Sexual Minority Youth**



### **Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth should not have to conform to rules that do not apply to other youth.**

If there is a rule against affectional behavior, such as kissing, holding hands, or necking, it should apply equally to both heterosexual and sexual minority youth. Likewise, dress codes should also be applied equally. For example, if heterosexual males are permitted to wear earrings, gay males or transgender youth should also be permitted to wear earrings.



### **Verbal or physical abuse against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth must be prohibited.**

In a social service setting, behaviors ranging from simple disclosure of sexual orientation to cross-dressing can cause major problems. Heterosexual peers may react with verbal, physical, or sexual abuse of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth — or youth who are perceived to be gay.

Such abuse must be treated as abuse, and handled in the same way any other violent or abusive situation is handled. The abusive act, and not the sexual orientation of the person being abused, is the issue. Sexual minority youth need to be supported when conflicts with other residents arise.

Other times, sexual minority youth may aggravate the situation with hostile acting-out behaviors designed to elicit a response. Such behavior has been identified as a coping strategy in many minority groups. In all cases, sexual minority youth must be protected from violence, even when violence occurs because of the individual's provocative acts; but such youth must also be counseled about the meaning of their own behavior. At the same time, social service providers should avoid labeling or penalizing behavior that would be acceptable if done by a heterosexual youth.



### **Do not isolate sexual minority youth.**

Social and emotional isolation are among the most serious problems faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. Such isolation has been linked to elevated rates of depression and suicide, substance abuse, and other harmful behavior. Isolation in the name of "protecting" a sexual minority youth will only reinforce feelings of shame and inferiority. Instead, social service providers should educate those fellow youth or staff who may be having a difficult time accepting gay youth, and should ensure that sexual minority youth are fully integrated into all aspects of the program.

## **SMYAL**

**A Safe Place to Be Who You Are**

**410 7th Street, SE  
Washington, DC 20003-2707**

**202-546-5940 Tel  
202-544-1306 Fax  
202-546-7796 TTY  
www.smyal.org**



## **Guidelines on Working With Sexual Minority Youth (Continued)**



**Education and training about sexuality, including information about homosexuality, should be directed toward all youth.**

All youth need access to accurate information about sexuality, including information aimed at busting myths about what it means to be gay. Leaving out information about sexual minority youth because such information might be perceived as controversial or because you have assumed that all the youth are heterosexual will only heighten the invisibility, isolation and sense of shame felt by sexual minority youth. Too often, sexuality education excludes information relevant to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth, with the result that they feel discounted and do not gain the information needed to make healthy choices.

### **For More Information:**

Both available through the National Resource Center for Youth Services or Central Toronto Youth Services:

Opening Doors: Making Substance Abuse and Other Services More Accessible to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth; Bonnie Simpson, 1994.

No Safe Bed: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth in Residential Services, Carol Anne O'Brien, Robb Travers and Laurie Bell, 1993.

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