



Gay teens coming out earlier to peers and family

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By Marilyn Elias

Kate Haigh, 18, a high school senior in St. Paul, recalls attending her first meeting at the school's Gay-Straight Alliance club when she was in the ninth grade. "I said, 'My name is Kate, and I'm a lesbian.' It was so liberating. I felt like something huge had been lifted off my shoulders, and finally I had people to talk to."

Zach Lundin, 16, has brought boyfriends to several dances at his high school in suburban Seattle.

Vance Smith wanted to start a club to support gay students at his rural Colorado school but says administrators balked. At age 15, Vance contacted a New York advocacy group that sent school officials a letter about students' legal rights. Now 17, Smith has his club.

Gay teenagers are "coming out" earlier than ever, and many feel better about themselves than earlier generations of gays, youth leaders and researchers say. The change is happening in the wake of opinion polls that show growing acceptance of gays, more supportive adults and positive gay role models in popular media.

"In my generation, you definitely didn't come out in high school. You had to move away from home to be gay," says Kevin Jennings, 43, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, a national group that promotes a positive school climate for gay children. "Now so many are out while they're still at home. They're more vocal than we were."

Still, many continue to have a tough time. The worst off, experts say, are young people in conservative rural regions and children whose parents cannot abide having gay offspring. Taunting at school is still common. Cyber-bullying is "the new big thing," says Laura Sorensen of Affirmations Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Ferndale, Mich. "Kids are getting hate mail and taunts on MySpace or Facebook."

But as young gays become more visible targets, they also have more sources of help, experts say. In the 11 years since Jennings founded the education network, parents have become more supportive of gay teens, he says. Also, the network has trained thousands of school officials on how to reduce gay bashing.

Schools are more likely than in the past to have openly gay staff members who can help young people, says Anthony D'Augelli, an associate dean at Pennsylvania State University. In a recent national survey, one-third of school psychologists said they had counseled students or parents about sexual orientation.

In the mid-1990s, a few dozen Gay-Straight Alliance clubs were in U.S. high schools; now 3,200 are registered with the education network, Jennings says.

The Internet also has eased isolation for gay teens, offering a place for socializing and support, says Stephanie Sanders of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction in Bloomington, Ind.

Cultural diversity is prevalent

Teens are coming out in an era when more Americans than ever consider homosexuality acceptable. In 2006, 54% found homosexuality acceptable, compared with 38% in 1992, Gallup polls show.

Youths also swim in a cultural sea that's far more pro-gay than ever, says Ritch Savin-Williams, a psychologist at Cornell University and author of *The New Gay Teenager*. From MTV's *The Real World* to *Will & Grace* and Ellen DeGeneres hosting the Oscars, "kids can see gays in a positive light," he says.

The news in December that Vice President Cheney's daughter Mary is expecting a baby with her female partner has even brought gay parenthood into the Bush administration family.

By the time parenthood becomes an option, many homosexuals have known their orientations for a long time. Gay males and lesbians often feel "different" as early as grade school, Sanders says.

Vance Smith, who grew up amid cornfields in LaSalle, Colo., recalls being made fun of and called "gay" as early as first grade. "I didn't even know what it was," he says. "I didn't know why I didn't like 'guy-type' stuff like sports or why I was always more comfortable hanging out with girls. And I didn't know why I should be punished for it." By middle school, "I always had a girlfriend, hoping people wouldn't know." But he couldn't make himself feel heterosexual, Smith says. And nobody was fooled, anyway.

Zach Lundin had been taught in church that homosexuality was wrong. "I spent a lot of time trying to convince myself I was straight," says Lundin, 17, of Kenmore, Wash. At age 14 he told his parents he was attracted to boys. "I said, 'I'm not going to lie to you anymore. This is what I'm really feeling.'"

His father, Roy Lundin, wasn't thrilled to hear the news. "Any parent who says his first reaction isn't 'Oh, no!' probably isn't telling the truth," he says.

"We felt some sadness. We just assumed we'd have a daughter-in-law someday and grandchildren. It becomes your disappointment, but it's a selfish disappointment. Now we've gotten past that.

"There are some parts of it that I'll never be comfortable with," he concedes, "but that doesn't mean I can't support Zach. I love him and I will support him."

A struggle for the parents

How parents deal with such news has a huge effect on their kids' lives, says Caitlin Ryan, a social-work researcher at San Francisco State University who is studying the families of gay young people. Families can move gradually from rejection to warm acceptance once the shock wears off, she says. Parents with strong convictions that homosexuality is always wrong find it hardest to accept their gay teens, she says.

At its most extreme, that means throwing a child out. Nobody knows exactly how many gay teens meet that fate, but a disproportionate share of homeless young people in the USA are homosexuals, a new report from the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** says. Family conflict, including conflict over sexual orientation, is a key reason they're homeless, the report says. Several cities have shelters for gay kids, but there's less help than needed, says Carl Siciliano of the Ali Forney Center, which offers limited housing for New York youths.

Sorensen, who coordinates a drop-in program in suburban Detroit, sees teens from all kinds of families. "Kids from the suburbs drive up in new SUVs their parents bought them. But sometimes they're afraid to come out to parents because of talk against gays they've heard at home. Other kids have to scrounge together bus fare to get here. They all would like to tell their parents and be accepted, but not all of them can."

Not everyone applauds the soaring number of school-based gay/straight alliances and adult-led programs for gay teens. "Homosexuality is harmful to society, and young people have no business committing to a sexual identity until they're adults," says Peter Sprigg of the Family Research Council, a conservative policy group. The council backs a new Georgia law, first in the nation, that requires schools to tell parents about clubs and allows them to forbid their children to participate in gay/straight alliances.

Lobbying is underway to pass similar laws in North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama and Texas, says Joe Glover of the Family Policy Network, a Christian family advocacy group. "Parents shouldn't have to check their rights at the school room door," he says.

Researchers traditionally have emphasized that gay teens have worse mental health and higher suicide rates than straight teens. But Cornell's Savin-Williams says these conclusions are primarily based on small, older studies skewed to troubled youths. A few newer studies suggest teens who are attracted to both sexes may have the worst problems. But most research has grouped them with homosexuals.

Gay kids are more likely than straight teens to think about or try suicide, but there's no evidence they're more likely to kill themselves, says sociologist Stephen Russell of the University of Arizona. He has analyzed findings from a study of 12,000 teens followed up to a decade so far. Those with same-sex attractions are more depressed and anxious, Russell says, but there's also evidence that many who say they're attracted to others of their sex grow up to be heterosexual. He says stigma and prejudice still prompt undue stress for gay kids.

Studies on gay boys predominate, so young lesbians are more of a mystery. Pioneering findings suggest lesbian teens may be different from gay boys in key ways. There's more variability in the age when they realize they're not straight, says Lisa Diamond, a University of Utah psychologist. Unlike boys, most girls also have opposite-sex attractions. And strong emotional bonds are more key in sparking girls' sexual attractions, Diamond says.

She also has ventured into territory rarely trod in studies on gay youths: friendships and romances. "They're adolescents first, and adolescents are obsessed with their friendship networks," she says.

Diamond has kids weigh in on the statement: "I sometimes worry that I'll never be able to find the kind of romantic partner I want." Gay teens worry about this more than straight teens because best friends are usually the same sex, she says. Gays are unique in agonizing over whether to turn friendships into romances, often fearing they'll lose a friend.

Worry about finding a partner was strongly linked to anxiety and depression. When Diamond subtracted this worry, gay teens were no more anxious or depressed than straight teens. "We have to start looking at their whole lives, not just sexual orientation. By focusing on stigma, we may be missing the bigger picture: that they're painfully normal teenagers."

D'Augelli, who studies homosexuality among the young, says many adults might be surprised at the secret that really lurks in the psyches of gay teens: "The remarkable fact is, most are quite conventional. They want long-term relationships. They want children."