Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

Human gender and sexuality is complex and involves a number of components, including biological sex (male or female), gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female) and social sex role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behaviour). Sexuality also includes how we feel about other people in terms of emotional, romantic, sexual or affectionate feelings. These feelings and how we behave in response to them are often described as sexual orientation, which has three distinct components including sexual attraction, sexual identity and sexual behaviour:

- **Sexual attraction** – people may be attracted to people of their own gender, to people of the opposite gender, or to individuals of either gender.
- **Sexual identity** – based on their sexual attraction, people may identify themselves as homosexual (attracted to people of their own gender), heterosexual (attracted to people of the opposite gender) or bisexual (attracted to individuals of either gender).
- **Sexual behaviour** – describes whether an individual is sexually active or in a relationship with a person of their own gender, or of the opposite gender.

It is important to note that attraction, identity and behaviour are not always equivalent. A person may be attracted to an individual of the same gender without having a sexual experience with a same-sex partner. A person may also be attracted to someone or involved in a relationship, without wishing to define their sexual identity as homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual.

Categories can seem limiting and may be associated with stereotypes. Labels imply that a person's preferences are already decided, rather than allowing for flexibility in choice of partner, or valuing a relationship between two individuals for its own sake.

The term same-sex attraction may be used to describe someone who is attracted to person of their own gender, whether or not they have defined their sexual identity or engaged in sexual behaviour.

How sexual preferences develop is not well understood. Many theories share the view that sexual orientation is shaped for most people at an early age, through a complex interaction of genetic, hormonal, psychological and social factors. Sexual attraction is not a choice that can be voluntarily changed, but people do make choices about how they express their sexuality and how much information they share with others.

**Society's Views regarding Same-Sex Attraction**

Historically, some societies have been accepting of same-sex relationships, while others have been prohibitive and discriminatory. Often, people who experienced same-sex attraction were forced by society to keep their sexual preferences hidden. A number of religious and spiritual movements also prohibit or discourage same-sex partnerships, which can cause conflict for those who value their spiritual practice but believe in the rights of people who experience same-sex attraction.

In the history of psychiatry, homosexuality was once considered a disorder, because of lack of social acceptance and poor understanding of sexual preferences. Today health professionals recognise that homosexuality is not an illness or emotional problem, although the term was only removed from official lists of disorders in the 1970s.
Australian society has not traditionally been tolerant of same-sex attraction, although this is changing. In recent decades male homosexuality has been decriminalised, anti-discrimination legislation has been introduced, and same-sex attraction is celebrated through events like the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and Pride Week. Despite these changes, many gay men and lesbians still experience discrimination, harassment and violence in a range of settings including work, school and social situations.

Some laws and regulations are also still considered discriminatory. In some states, same-sex partners do not have the same legal rights as heterosexual partners in issues surrounding inheritance, decision making in case of incapacity or death, compensation, superannuation and property division. There is also controversy regarding parenting rights for same-sex couples in terms of access to donor insemination and adoption.

**Same-Sex Attracted Young People**

Studies suggest that around 10% of young Australians experience same-sex attraction, most realising this at or around puberty. Adolescence is a turbulent period for most young people, involving many physical and psychological changes. It is important to be aware that many same-sex attracted young people experience additional challenges.

It takes time for sexual identity to develop. Young people can experience feelings of sexual attraction, sometimes beginning around age 10, long before they assign themselves a sexual identity. Pressure to conform to society may cause young people to question or deny their sexual attraction, even to themselves. They can become confused about their feelings, particularly if sexual attraction of any kind is new to them.

Same-sex attracted young people may feel torn between wanting to let others know about their feelings and denying or suppressing them, for fear of rejection. They may feel a pressure to define their sexual identity yet have difficulty identifying with society’s perceptions of the gay and lesbian community, for example as portrayed in the media.

There are also issues of grief and loss for some, who feel they may lose the respect and love of family and friends. Some young people may feel a sense of loss at the possibility that they may not have children because of their sexual preference. The impact of AIDS on the gay and lesbian community also means that many people will face chronic illness or the grief of losing friends or partners to a distressing disease.

An Australian survey (ARCSHS, 2005) asked 1749 same-sex attracted young people aged 14-21 about their experiences:

- Around one third realised they were same-sex attracted before puberty, 55% realised around the age of puberty and 10% felt they always knew.
- 61% identified as homosexual, 19% bisexual, 1% heterosexual, 18% chose ‘no label’.
- Females were more likely than males to be both-sex attracted and to choose ‘no-label’, and less likely to self-identify as ‘homosexual’.
- Those aged 18-21 were more likely to identify as homosexual (65%) than those aged 14-17 (55%).
- Those aged 14-17 were more likely to identify as bisexual (27%) than those aged 18-21 (14%).
The young people in this study were more sexually active than peers who did not report same-sex attraction and on average were sexually active at a younger age; many were sexually active with opposite sex partners.

Several groups of same-sex attracted young people face additional challenges. Those from rural or remote areas, where there may be fewer gay support networks, may feel the need to ‘escape’ to a more supportive and less isolated community, particularly when first coming out.

Same-sex attracted young people from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly cultures where homosexuality is not accepted, may also be more reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents and may subsequently receive less support from them. Young people who identify with religions that reject homosexuality can struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs with their personal feelings. Many are forced to choose between their sexuality and their religion.

**Homophobia and Abuse**

Homophobia includes discrimination or abuse based on someone’s homosexual identity or sexual orientation. It can negatively impact on the emotional and physical wellbeing of same-sex attracted young people, since resilience is dependent in part on connectedness and trust in other people.

In schools, students who are known to be same-sex attracted may be more likely to experience bullying and have greater difficulty in connecting with others. Young people frequently use words about sex and sexuality in a derogatory way, such as labelling people or objects ‘gay’ or ‘homo’ even if there is no association with same-sex attraction.

A culture of this kind makes it more difficult for a young person to tell others about their experiences and needs to be challenged by schools and teachers.

In relation to abuse and harassment experienced by same-sex attracted young people in Australia, the ARCSHS survey (2005) found:

- 38% experienced unfair treatment on the basis of their sexuality.
- 44% had been verbally abused because of their sexuality, including threats and rumours
- 16% had been physically assaulted because of their sexuality, including rape and hospitalisation due to their injuries.
- Homophobia is often expressed in overtly aggressive ways towards boys, but more subtly in terms of whispers and exclusion toward girls.
- 74% of all abuse happens at school; 49% of same-sex attracted young people did not feel safe at school.
- Young people who had been abused fared worse on almost every indicator of health and wellbeing, compared to those who had not.

Homophobia impacts negatively on both physical and mental health. Research indicates that same-sex attracted young people who have suffered homophobic abuse:

- Experience feelings of depression and anger.
- Feel less safe at school, home, on social occasions and at sport compared to those who have not experienced abuse.
• Experience disruption to school progress – some have problems with truancy or drop out completely.
• Are more likely to experience homelessness. In an Australian study, 14% of homeless young people identified as being same-sex attracted, many saying that their sexuality was the reason they left home.
• Are more likely to engage in unsafe sex, to report a sexually transmitted infection or to have ever been pregnant.
• Are more likely to drink alcohol weekly, to smoke tobacco daily, to use marijuana weekly, party drugs monthly and to have used heroin. Females are more likely to have used marijuana, tobacco and injected drugs than males.
• Are more likely to deliberately self-harm - 35% of same-sex attracted young people had thought about or gone through with self-harm. 42% of females and 21% of males reported cutting themselves, many as a mechanism for dealing with emotional pain.

Many of these risk-taking behaviours occur in combination with one another. Same-sex attracted young people that try to hide or suppress their feelings are also more likely to engage in these kinds of risk-taking behaviours.

However, some victims of homophobic abuse have identified positive outcomes such as feeling stronger and more resilient and becoming politically more aware and wanting to help others. It may be a catalyst for seeking support – those that had been abused were more likely to be in an intimate relationship, to have talked to someone and to have accessed a support group or organisation.

Coming Out, Disclosure and Support

Same-sex attracted young people often think things over for some time before they come out. Coming out is the recognition and acknowledgement of one’s own sexual orientation as a positive aspect of oneself. Disclosure is the act of telling someone else about being same-sex attracted, although this is often termed ‘coming out’ as well.

The average age at coming out is currently around 16 years. Most of the 95% of same-sex attracted young people in the ARCSHS (2005) study, that had disclosed their sexuality, received some level of support from friends, family and teachers.

Same-sex attracted young people of both genders are most likely to disclose their sexual orientation to friends before parents, mother before fathers. Young people are very careful about telling their parents, because they potentially have so much to lose - they are still financially and emotionally dependent on their parents. Negative responses from families can include denial, anger, rejection, verbal or physical abuse and being forced to leave the family home. Disclosure should be done with caution, after planning and counselling. Young people need the ability to cope with hostility, should have other support systems available to them and should consider possible negative reactions before coming out to parents.

There are some young people who feel isolated and unsafe in their day-to-day world and find a place that is more supportive and accepting through the internet. The internet may afford a level of anonymity to young people who are not ready to be completely open about their sexuality. The internet is also an important source of information about homophobia, relationships and safe sex.
Same-Sex Attraction and Mental Health

There are difficulties in estimating the prevalence of mental health problems among those who experience same-sex attraction, due to methodological problems. People who participate in general health and social research programs may choose not to disclose their sexuality because of stigma. On the other hand, recruiting people from the gay and lesbian community specifically may inadvertently select many of those who have had personal difficulties, because of the ease of accessing people via support services or programs. It can also be difficult to prove a link with suicide, because the sexual orientation of the deceased person may not have been disclosed.

However a number of studies do suggest that people who are same-sex attracted or have same-sex sexual experiences are at greater risk of mental health problems. In one study, men who were sexually active with a same-sex partner had higher rates of mood disorders and anxiety disorders than heterosexual men. Women who were same-sex active had higher rates of substance abuse disorders and depression than heterosexual women. A number of studies comparing gay, lesbian and bisexual youth with heterosexual peers also show an increased rate of mental health problems.

Several Australian and international studies also support an association between same-sex attraction and suicide attempts. Studies in the United States suggest that same-sex attracted youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide and some authors claim that same-sex attraction contributes to nearly a third of completed youth suicides in that country. A 21-year longitudinal study in New Zealand showed that gay, lesbian or bisexual youth were 6.2 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual peers.

In an Australian study, same-sex attracted men between the ages of 18 and 24 were 3.8 times more likely to report a suicide attempt than heterosexual men. The mean age of suicide attempt for gay-identified youth was 15-17 years. Most attempts occurred after self-identifying but before having a same-sex sexual experience and before publicly coming out. Same-sex attracted young women are also more likely to attempt suicide than those identifying as heterosexual. The risk may be high for young same-sex attracted people in rural areas, particularly males, perhaps because of a lack of community and family support.

In terms of research, it is difficult to be certain whether same-sex attraction in itself is an independent risk factor for mental health problems or suicide or whether the risk is specifically associated with the abuse and isolation experienced by some same-sex attracted young people.

The ARCSHS study (2005) found that same-sex attracted young people aged 14-21 who had experienced abuse reported a higher rate of suicide attempts, compared to those who had not reported abuse. This suggests that those with more positive experiences of coming out and achieving connection with others may be at a lower risk of mental health problems and suicidal behaviour.

It should be noted that this area is still the focus of research and that some researchers argue against a strong association between same-sex attraction and mental health difficulties. However, the important issue for young people and those who work with them is that experiencing same-sex attraction has profound implications for a young person's wellbeing and may indicate the need for additional support.
For Schools and Teachers

The ARCSHS (2005) survey revealed that school is the most likely place for same-sex attracted young people to experience homophobic abuse. Schools can combat this by adopting a whole school approach with a focus on resilience and trying to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging to their school community. Rather than singling out same-sex attraction as a major issue for separate treatment, try to portray it as one of several social issues of which young people need to be tolerant and aware.

- Have policies that require staff not to discriminate against any minority group, including same-sex attracted youth.
- Encourage a climate of inclusion and acceptance which extends to everyone in the school community, including those with a disability, people from all cultural backgrounds, different religious faiths and those who experience same-sex attraction.
- Enforce policies and procedures against bullying and harassment for any reason, including homophobia.
- Challenge the inappropriate use of language that contributes to a culture of discrimination, such as labels about sexuality, cultural background or appearance.
- Include same-sex attraction and information on sexuality and gender identity in discussions about sexuality, relationships, diversity and social issues; take opportunities to discuss this in an inclusive way throughout the use of films, books or other media.
- Ensure that members of staff are aware of sexually inclusive language - when discussing personal and social issues in class, try to make it clear that you don’t assume that students have only heterosexual relationships.
- Provide counselling and support services which are inclusive of all members of the school community, including those who experience same-sex attraction.
- Provide professional development for staff members regarding contemporary issues which affect young people, including same-sex attraction.
- Promote resilience generally through caring relationships, having positive expectations of young people and by providing opportunities for genuine participation.

When you are working in a school setting, it is possible that a young person may talk to you to disclose their same-sex attraction. They may choose you because they feel comfortable talking to you, because you are a home room teacher, because you teach in a relevant area (such as health or personal development) - or even simply because they like your subject and have come to feel a connection with you.

Here are some suggestions based on a publication from the Department of Education in Tasmania (2002) that you may find helpful. Keep these ideas in mind:

- Active listening - stop what you are doing, give the person your full attention and listen; they need to know that what they are saying is important to you.
- Respect – it has taken this person time and courage to admit their sexual or gender identity to themselves and to you.
- Initial Reactions – you may be upset or surprised to be told this, give yourself a moment to gather your thoughts and try not to react negatively – avoid potentially dismissive or judgmental reactions such as ‘How do you know?’ or ‘It’s just a phase’
- Emotions – ask how they are feeling - coming out and dealing with people’s responses can be stressful or depressing, which may result in self-harm and/or suicide.
• Encouragement and Support – if possible, provide support, encouragement and positive feedback; their decision to talk to you has taken courage.
• Practical support - check to make sure they have accommodation and money; they may have told their parents and been rejected.
• Referral – ask if the young person would like some assistance to access gay or lesbian services or someone else to talk to – but don’t be dismissive. Try to maintain contact with the person and follow up to see how things are going.

The web site for Same-Sex Attracted Friendly Environments (SSAFE) presents some helpful information for schools and teachers: visit http://www.safeschools.org.au

**Selected Support Organisations and Web Sites**

Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service SA - http://www.glcssa.org.au
Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service NSW - http://www.glcsnsw.org.au
Twenty 10 service, NSW - http://www.twenty10.org.au
Working it Out Tasmania - http://workingitout.org.au
LifeLine - 13 11 14 - www.lifeline.org.au
ReachOut! - www.reachout.com.au

**Sources and Further Reading**


