



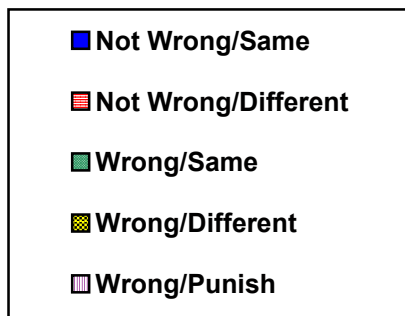
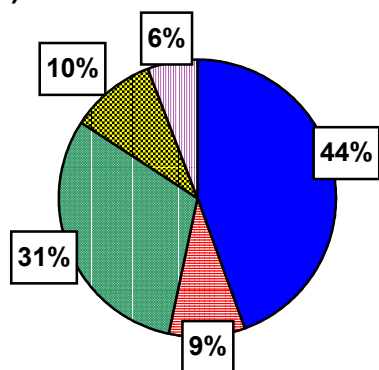
Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Sexual Orientation

December 2003

Forty-five percent (45%) of the teens surveyed in the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (Fig. 1) report that they do not think homosexuality and bisexuality are wrong and would treat homosexual and bisexual people the same as everyone else.

Teens' Attitudes About Homosexuality and Bisexuality (Fig. 1)



Nine percent (9%) do not think homosexuality and bisexuality are wrong, but would treat homosexual and bisexual people differently from everyone else. Forty-seven percent (47%) of respondents believe homosexuality and bisexuality are wrong with 31% saying that they would still treat them the same as everyone else, 10% saying they would treat them differently and 6% saying homosexuals and bisexuals should be punished for their behavior.

Sexuality is a topic that many parents and teens find difficult to talk to each other about, especially when the discussion focuses on sexual orientation. The term “**sexual orientation**” refers to how a person experiences sexual and emotional attraction for another person. An individual can have a **heterosexual** orientation (attracted to people of the opposite gender, “straight”), a **homosexual** orientation (attracted to people of the same gender, “gay” or “lesbian”), or have a **bisexual** orientation (attracted to people of either gender). Our thoughts and feelings about sexual orientation are colored by our personal experiences, our religious beliefs, our political ideology, and other factors.

Teens will, as part of their normal development, explore their sexuality. They may feel confused about the feelings they are experiencing and may question their sexual orientation.

While the 2001 Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey did not ask students to identify themselves as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, it did ask, “**How much do you worry about feeling confused about whether you are straight or gay?**” Seven percent of teens (412 respondents out of 5704 total) reported they worry at least a little about being confused about their sexual orientation.

Gay/Lesbian and Bisexual Teens at Risk?

The data at left demonstrates that a significant portion of teens (25%) say they would either treat homosexual and bisexual teens differently or feel they should be punished for their behavior. Males are much more likely to report that they believe homosexuality and bisexuality are wrong, that they would treat gay or bisexual people differently, and that they think gay or bisexual people should be punished. Mistreatment by peers can range from teasing and bullying to physical violence and can lead to depression and serious harm to teens struggling with their sexual orientation.

Everyone is entitled to his or her personal and religious beliefs about sexual orientation. However, no one has the right to injure, harass or treat someone badly because of his or her sexual orientation.

What do I do if my child thinks he/she is gay?

First realize that gay and bisexual teens need the same things all teens need- the love and support of their family, the opportunity to learn and grow in a safe environment, and a community that is responsive to their needs. (See past editions of **Parents Make a Difference** for tips on supporting teens through adolescence.) This could be a very difficult time for you and your child. The school counselor, your health care provider, mental health professionals, and your clergy may be of help as you sort out your feelings and strive to learn how to support your teen. Your local library should also be able to help you locate materials to educate yourself on issues facing gay and/or questioning youth.

The following organizations provide resources and advocate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and their families.

Rainbow Alliance for Youth of Wisconsin (RAY)
<http://www.diverseandresilient.org/youth/raygroups.asp>
(414) 390-0444

The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth
<http://outproud.org/>

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
<http://pflag.org/>

Worry about Sexual Orientation vs. Suicide (Fig. 2)

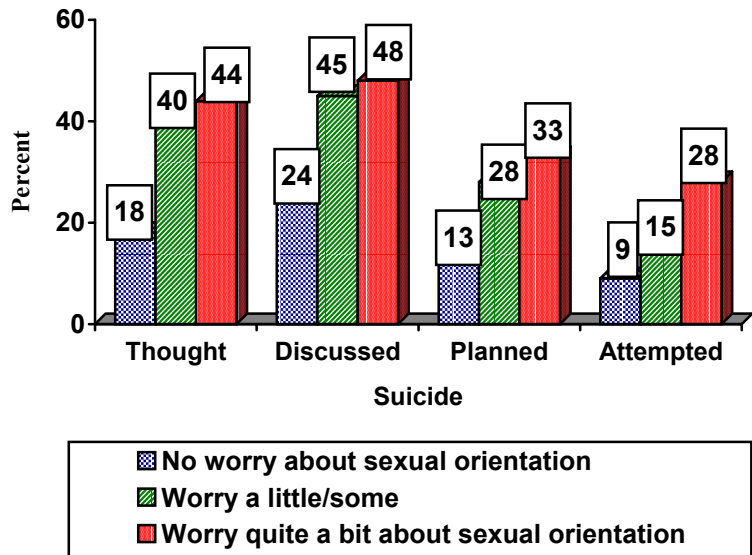


Figure 2 above details how teens who are worried about their sexual orientation are much more likely to report having had suicidal thoughts than those teens who are not worried about their sexual orientation. In addition, those teens who worry “*a little*” or “*some*” about their sexual orientation are approximately twice as likely to have discussed, planned, and attempted suicide than those teens that do not worry about this issue. Those who worry “*quite a bit*” about their sexual orientation are over three times as likely to have attempted suicide as those who do not worry about this issue at all. Eleven percent (11%) of those teens who worry “*quite a bit*” about their sexual orientation say they thought about killing themselves “*all of the time*” during the month prior to the survey. (See the November 2002 issue of **Parents Make A Difference** for more information on depression and suicide.)

If you suspect a teen is depressed or suicidal, **get help.**

- **First Call for Help** out of La Crosse has a toll-free number available for the tri-state area, **1-800-362-8255.**
- **Unified Community Services of Iowa and Grant Counties** has a 24-hour emergency number, **800-362-5717.**

Remember: PARENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE!!

“Parents Make a Difference” is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This series is adapted from the UW-Extension “Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” series. This issue was written by Christina Kenney, UW-Extension Grant County, and edited by Ruth Schriefer and Deb Ivey UW-Extension Iowa County, and Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette County. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391.

Past editions of **Parents Make A Difference** available on the web <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/parentresources.html>