

CHAPTER 1



# Gay Children, Teenagers, and Adults from Heterosexist Families

**S**exual identity is as much inborn as race and ethnicity. Gay people are born gay just as heterosexual people are born heterosexual. If heterosexual people think about it, they might understand that they cannot change their sexual status. Heterosexual identity is never considered learned or chosen. Imagine straight people describing their sexual identity as an orientation or a preference. It is unheard of.

Many heterosexuals are unaware of the fact that they have never spent a single moment of their lives choosing to *not be gay*. Yet they believe and promote the myth that gay status is learned and can be unlearned and changed. This is why some heterosexuals fear that extending equal rights to the gay community will turn the entire population gay. This fear arises out of the heterosexist myths that are so pervasive and used to keep discrimination in place. In fact, on November 4, 2008, this particular myth helped voters approve Proposition 8, which overturned the legalization of same-sex marriage in California.

How do the lives of gay people change if they have been ostracized by their family, religious groups, peers, and community? For one, many gay people experience increased rates of depression, isolation, neglect, abuse, and feelings of hopelessness. Second, percentages of suicide ideation and acts and drug and alcohol abuse increase. Third, hate and other crimes

against gay people increase and go unpunished because laws protecting gay people do not exist in many states. As a result, the victims feel invisible and are easy targets. Without laws to protect the gay community, it is as if the crime never occurred. Therefore, the crime, criminal, and victim go unrecognized, and the incentive to repeat the crime increases.

Many heterosexuals hold one set of beliefs for the heterosexual population and another opposite set of beliefs for the gay community. For example, many heterosexuals use the terms *sexual preference* and *sexual orientation* to describe gay identity but not heterosexual identity. First, the two terms do not accurately reflect sexual identity. Second, the terms should be stricken from use because they wrongly imply that sexual identity is learned, preferred, and chosen.

After reading the description of symptoms that some gay people have experienced, it is a wonder that people would question the notion that sexual identity is a chosen or preferred lifestyle. Who would choose to be gay knowing that denial of rights, support, and equality are built into each gay person's life cycle? Who would have chosen to be Black years ago, before the civil rights movement, for the very same reasons?

Where do gay people turn when they have been cast out of their families? The gay community has long served as an extended family for all those disowned gay men and lesbians. "Out" and "closeted" gay family members often turn to bars, where meeting other new and potential gay people is easier because they are out and identifiable. Drinking alcohol in gay bars is commonplace because it is a socially accepted thing to do; gay people often feel happy when they are finally surrounded by other out and identifiable gay people; and it is a stress reducer in environs that can trigger high levels of anxiety and homophobia in gay people themselves (due to the effects of ingrained societal heterosexist beliefs).

However, it should not be taken for granted that gay people are automatically comfortable in the company of other gay people. Reeducation in the form of dismissing heterosexist and homophobic myths followed by the incorporation of real and honest gay education must take place with many gay people before they can feel comfortable in the presence of another gay person.

For more than 30 percent of the gay teenage population, social alcohol consumption and drug use increase through time and eventually become problematic by negatively affecting job, social, legal, and psychosocial status. As a result of inadequate support and protection from familial, social, and legal structures, the following is a list of problems that have plagued the gay community: (1) physical abuse, neglect, hatred, discrimination, and harassment experienced in the family of origin, at school, in the workplace,

and in public; (2) vandalism, threats, and assaults in the neighborhood; (3) homophobic verbal attacks such as the use of the words *queer, dyke, homo, pervert, queen, lesbo, and fag*; (4) being murdered, depression, suicide, rejection, and decreased coping skills; (5) lack of adequate services and resources in health agencies and schools needed to treat mental and medical health and education for students on sexual identity and the gay community; (6) increased high school dropout rates due to unbearable discriminatory environs; and (7) increased homelessness and injuries sustained through hate crimes, the use of weapons, and being disowned by family and friends. Often, heterosexist people wonder why the gay population looks and behaves differently than the majority. They do not, however, connect the dots regarding the role that hatred and discrimination play in fueling these problems.

When a gay person comes out, a common response by family, friends, and coworkers is a denial of homophobic attitudes. Take this example of a 17-year-old gay male who came out to his father. This father believed that he was not prejudiced and knew how to handle the situation. The father responded to the coming-out event by saying, "Son, people don't need to know that you are gay. Why can't you keep it to yourself? I don't walk around advertising my heterosexuality. You only bring on more problems by coming out. Begin showing that you are a man by keeping the information to yourself." After knowing and loving his son for 17 years, the father unknowingly began the process of unraveling the bond he and his son shared. He started to damage his son's and his own well-being by the use of prejudicial words and the notion that being gay is shameful and must be kept hidden. Continued damage resulted from the effects of chronic denial of prejudice from the father and family-of-origin members.

Another example of heterosexist mentality is the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The ramifications of this policy can be felt by gay people from childhood through the older adult years and have hurt the gay community by maintaining the community's treatment as second-class citizens; keeping the community in the closet—invisible, separate, and unequal; increasing the percentages of previously incurred psychosocial problems that further damage pride and livelihood; and negatively reinforcing the majority's homophobic stereotypes and discriminatory behaviors.

The "don't ask, don't tell" policy is a long-held tradition of discrimination against gay people that is used in more places than just the military. Most parents are not prepared for their own child to be born gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Most parents are not educated on how to raise a gay child. Rather, parents usually only know what they were taught as children and adults, that is, prejudice and discrimination against gay people.

This false education includes the denial that their child is gay, the parents ceasing to talk with their child when finding out that he or she is gay, talking to the gay child as if he or she is a pariah, trying to convince the child to keep their gayness to themselves, encouraging the gay child to seek clinical help in disavowing their gayness and acquiring heterosexual identity, or even disowning their gay child.

The damage done to a gay child by this verbal and nonverbal communication and acts of discrimination are severe and often require years of therapy to treat. There are also parents who mistakenly believe that they did something wrong to make their child “this way.” This idea tends to put the focus on the parent at a time when the gay child needs the attention and support more than ever. Parents cannot make their children gay. However, parents’ negative feelings about homosexuality can pave the way for gay children to internalize the disease of heterosexism and homophobia by teaching the growing gay child to be prejudiced against gay people and by discriminating against their child because of his or her gay identity.

Some parents are often filled with conflicted feelings when finding out that their child is gay. They feel grief and guilt over the loss of their “straight” child yet simultaneously feel love for that same child. The grief and guilt were caused by heterosexist and homophobic teachings, which then caused the parents to isolate themselves. As a result, they were left with little or no exposure to gay education, other parents of gay children, and help for their complicated feelings. Consequently, this long-held oppressive view is truly a disease that affects the heterosexual community as much as it does the gay community. Honest and truthful gay education needs to be established and made accessible to all gay parents, parents of gay children, and heterosexual families in order to obliterate the disorder once and for all, as well as its deadly affects on family life.

When, in the above-listed example, the father told his son that he did not walk around advertising his heterosexuality, nothing could be further from the truth. Heterosexual people proclaim their heterosexuality in subtle and obvious ways every day in conversation. When straight people converse about their husband or wife; their engagement, marriage, or divorce; who they are dating; their sexual activities; honeymoon, vacations; relationship problems; health insurance, taxes; or the present they bought for their spouse, they are simultaneously “outing” their heterosexual identity.

Gay men and lesbians know that many heterosexuals do not know that they are relating their sexual identity in their everyday conversations. Heterosexuals are not attacked daily for being heterosexual. Consequently, there is no need for heterosexuals to think about their sexual identity. They

are, for the most part, on automatic pilot when it comes to communicating on this topic.

There is no reason for heterosexual consciousness to be raised since their sexual identity is considered “the norm” and operates in a comfort zone daily that is not questioned. Gay people, on the other hand, live in a world of impending danger due to gay discrimination. Gay identity is thought about daily by gay people, which helps increase gay consciousness on sexual identity in ways that straight people do not experience or ever think about.

To a certain degree, heterosexual and gay people develop different mind-sets, different senses, different sensitivity levels, and different verbal and behavioral communications due to the way heterosexist and homophobic teachings affect homosexuals differently than heterosexuals. Gay people feel their inner core attacked in response to heterosexist and homophobic upbringing. Straight people, more often than not, sense that heterosexism and homophobia are wrong, and not true, but repress this knowledge in order to continue to think like the mainstream and not make societal waves.

Gay people know when they are being discriminated against and whether that discrimination is blatant or subtle. There are people too who unknowingly discriminate against gay people. Discrimination is not always a conscious decision. Denial is an example of a defense mechanism that cultivates discrimination and prevents people from consciously realizing that they are discriminating when in fact they are.

Both heterosexuals and gay people share the acquisition of heterosexist beliefs and homophobia from their family of origin and society. These learned false attitudes, beliefs, and fears and then cause a certain percentage of both gay and heterosexual people to avoid gay people. It is much harder, however, to keep prejudices intact when heterosexist people become friends with a gay person and, as a result, disprove the stereotypes through that actual contact.

Prejudice to pride is a journey that tracks heterosexist education acquired through childhood and the good that can come when people let go of those old ways of thinking and use the knowledge gained through gay and lesbian studies to have healthy and positive interactions with people of all sexual identities. The prejudice-to-pride journey is traveled by heterosexuals and gay people alike, because the majority of people are raised to be heterosexist and homophobic. Indeed, the prejudice-to-pride journey involves suffering.

It is not easy to become aware of, acknowledge, and admit that one’s past and present consist of beliefs and actions that are false and hurt others and self. It is difficult to face the truth that others have suffered due to one’s own prejudicial words and discriminatory behavior. Suffering as a response

to this admission is a healthy response and can be the beginning of the newly educated person's embrace of gay people. This suffering helps facilitate the grief, loss, and bereavement of the prejudicial and discriminatory self toward gay people and fosters the growth of the newly loving, respectful, and empathetic self toward gay people.

When I look back to the late 1960s, the time of the famous Stonewall Riots and fast forward to present day, I see and feel the advances made toward gay inclusion and equality. I see and experience more people from all walks of life traveling on the path from prejudice to pride. I see the difference in people's reactions to the words *gay* and *homosexual* in the sense that people react more positively to the former term and less positively to the latter term. I see instances of heterosexual family members rejecting gay discrimination and educating others to do the same. I see more positive changes in people's cognitions, feelings, and behaviors toward gay people. These positive grassroots changes are what eventually help laws to be enacted that continue to eradicate discrimination, and increase equality for everyone.

Those traveling the prejudice-to-pride path know what it feels like to admit to having hurt someone due to their past prejudices. They know the shame, guilt, and upset it causes within. They know the importance of locating and stopping the prejudice and discrimination and replacing the ignorance and fear with loving and respectful thoughts, feelings, and acts. The prejudice-to-pride journey is a humbling experience. It is an ever-emerging, eye-opening, and enlightening experience. It is an experience that lends itself to increased civility, compassion, consciousness, and conscience among all families and people. It is truly a religious, spiritual, and educational experience, with love as the guide.