



## ***Coming Out Guide for Educators: What to do if a student comes out to you***

Coming out is different for everyone. Some people might choose to come out earlier in life, while others choose to come out later. But whatever the timing, coming out is never easy, especially for young adults and teenagers who are still trying to find out exactly where they belong and how they fit into society. It can also be difficult to know how to react or what to say if a student should happen to come out to you. It is important to make the student feel comforted, validated and proud, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. We have put together some tips for educators just for this purpose.

- **Control any reaction of surprise when a student comes out to you.** If a student comes out and tells you it is probably because they trust you. They may also have realized that you are there to help them regardless of their sexual orientation. Recognize that not everybody comes out in the same way. They may be testing the waters by having a discussion with you.
- **Anticipate some confusion.** Some students will be confused and unsure of their sexual orientation. They have to work through their own feelings and insights. You can't talk them into, or out of being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.
- **Refrain from guessing a student's sexual orientation.** It is not helpful for you or for the students you work with. Stereotypes harm everyone. Refuse to perpetuate old myths about stereotypical characteristics pertaining to sexual orientation.
- **Respect confidentiality.** Remember - when a student shares information with you about his/her sexual orientation, it is because the student trusts and respects you. Guard their trust in you. Refrain from revealing anything they say to you to someone else (staff, parents or students).
- **Thank the student** for trusting you with such information, and reassure them of **confidentiality**.
- **Help but do not force.** Clues for how you can help will come from the student. To whom and when a student decides to come out to is up to the student, and not up to you. Forcing a student to come out is counter-productive. Be prepared to support whatever decision the student makes. Coming out is a life long process and each person has to constantly decide to whom and when they will come out.
- **Be informed and examine your own biases.** Homophobia and trans-phobia are products of social misinformation and fear. Educate yourself by reading reliable sources and talking to qualified individuals.

- **Know when and where to seek help.** Become informed about referral agencies and counselors in your area. Help lines provide professional personnel and organizations qualified to help. If you feel uncomfortable discussing issues about sexuality and sexual orientation with the student, suggest someone with more experience such as the Student Support Counselor, Adolescent Care Worker or a staff supervisor of a “Gay-Straight-Alliance” group.
- **Maintain a balanced perspective.** Sexual thoughts and feelings are only a small (but important) part of a person’s personality. Refrain from assuming the student wants or needs to talk about sex. They may just need to talk about their identity or stance.
- **Deal with feelings first.** Most students who come out feel alone, afraid, and guilty. You can assist them by listening, allowing them to release feelings and thoughts that are often in conflict.
- **Understand the meaning of sexual orientation.** Each person’s sexual orientation is what is natural to that individual. It is not a matter of sexual “preference.” People do not choose their sexual orientation; they simply are. Refrain from asking the individual to pick a label.
- **Be supportive.** Explain that many people have struggled with this in the past. Admit that dealing with one’s sexuality is difficult. It defies easy and fast answers, whether heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or transgender. Keep the door open for more conversations and assistance.
- **Challenge homophobic remarks and jokes.** Like racial slurs, disparaging homophobic remarks promote hate, create fear and violate the Ontario Human Rights Code. If we are silent, our silence perpetuates further injustice, and sends the message that you condone such damaging comments and jokes.

Certain parts of text adapted and edited from PTS November 2010 (Pink Triangle)