Bisexual+ Youth: Challenging Stigma and Reducing Disparities

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Learning Objectives

*By the end of this session, participants will be able to:*

1. Define bi+
2. Understand some specific challenges faced by bi+ youth
3. Describe current data on health disparities and risk factors among bi+ youth
4. Identify ways to provide support and resources to bi+ youth
Who Are We Talking About Today?

• Not one single word, but a range of identity space.
• Identities between & outside of the gay-straight binary.
• Non-binary sexualities, multisexualities, bi+ identities
LGBTQ Youth Sexual Orientations

- Gay or Lesbian: 45%
- Bisexual: 33%
- Something Else: 21%

- Ace spectrum
- Bisexual polyamorous
- Graysexual
- Greyromantic demisexual
- Androsexual
- Masexual
- Demisexual
- Sexually fluid abrosexual
- Aegosexual
- Semi-sexual
- Homoflexible
- Abrosexual
- Sexually fluid
- Heteroflexible
- Gynedemisexual
- Asexual lesbian
- Biromantic
- Queer
- Queer greysexual
- Panromantic asexual
- Asexual
- Monosexual
- Sapiosexual
- Sapphic
- Pansexual
- Polysexual
- Biromantic homosexual
- Queer demisexual

One Definition of Bisexuality

Bisexuals are people who acknowledge in themselves the potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree.

-Robyn Ochs
Population Data
What percentage of people in US identify as LGBT?

Gallup, 2020. Based on telephone interviews with a random sample of 15,349 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 states & DC. Each sample of national adults includes a minimum quota of 70% cellphone respondents and 30% landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods.
What percentage of people in US identify as LGBT, by age?

Gallup, 2020. Based on telephone interviews w a random sample of 15,349 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 states & DC. Each sample of national adults includes a minimum quota of 70% cellphone respondents and 30% landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods.

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN | PROJECT THRIVE
How Many of these ID as bisexual?

![Graph showing the proportion of Americans identifying as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual, 2008-2018](chart)

Source: General Social Survey, 2008-2018. Chart by: Tristan Bridges and D’Lane Compton
What happens when people are asked *WHERE* they would put themselves on a sexuality continuum?
There are dramatic generational changes in WHERE people identify

- 0 - Completely heterosexual
- 1 through 5
- 6 - Completely homosexual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>0 - Completely heterosexual</th>
<th>1 through 5</th>
<th>6 - Completely homosexual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
YOUTH DATA

CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance study—United States, 2015

69. Which of the following best describes you?
A. Heterosexual (straight)
B. Gay or lesbian
C. Bisexual
D. Not sure

Includes 89 questions on a variety of topics
Same CDC study, same question, 2 & 4 years later:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Heterosexual (straight)</th>
<th>Gay or lesbian</th>
<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>84.4%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grade 9-12 – United States and Selected Sites, 2015, 2017, 2019.
Less straight.

Less cisgender.

Less binary.

And how we’re using our identity words is changing.

This is the direction in which we are heading.
What is it like to identify as bi+?
So Little Time, So Many Stereotypes

Really gay
Just a phase
In denial
Really str 8
Slutty
Acting out
Promiscuous
2-beer queer
Bi until graduation
Everyone’s bi
Doesn’t exist

Gay in denial
Bi now, gay later
Bad relationship matter
Untrustworthy
SEX SEX SEX
3-somes
Can’t be monogamous
Greedy

Polyamorous
Just experimenting
Obstacles to Seeing Bisexuality

1. We see only the tip of the iceberg
2. Cultural ambivalence about / discomfort with sexuality
3. Binaries are powerful
4. Lack of education/information
5. Hurt people hurt people (horizontal hostility)
Obstacles to Seeing Bisexuality

1. We see only the tip of the iceberg (a perceptual challenge)
Obstacles to Seeing Bisexuality

2. Discomfort with sexuality

• We have a deep cultural ambivalence about sex and sexuality. This can obstruct our vision.

*ero·to·pho·bi·a (ɪ-rō'tə-fō'bē-ə, ɪ-rŏt'ə-) n. An abnormal fear of love, especially sexual feelings and their physical expression.*
Obstacles to Seeing Bisexuality

3. Binaries are powerful.
Obstacles to Seeing Bisexuality

4. Most people simply lack good information.
Obstacles to Seeing Bisexuality

5. Hurt people hurt people (horizontal hostility)
Minority Stress

• Stigma, prejudice and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that can cause stress-related mental health issues and affect job performance.

• The experience of minority stress can include the experience of prejudice, expectations of rejection and discrimination, internalized homophobia/biphobia, and – for those with invisible identities – hiding and/or concealing one’s identity.

• See, for example, the work of Ilan Myer (2003)
Manifestations of Minority Stress

- Increased risk behaviors
- Poorer health outcomes

LGBT people exhibit indicators of higher minority stress than heterosexuals. And within this population, bisexual and transgender people have the highest incidence of risk behaviors and the poorest health outcomes, suggesting highest levels of identity stress.

See, for example, the work of Ilan Meyer (2003), “Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. Psychological Bulletin, 129, 674-697."
Intersectionality

Keep in mind: there is no singular experience of bisexuality or of any other identity. We all have multiple identities, and many people are members of more than one stigmatized group. Thus, individuals experience minority stress in complex, layered and unique ways.

INTERSECTIONALITY
Kimberlé Crenshaw
Experiencing Oppression

“There is no hierarchy of oppression.”
– Audre Lorde

• All oppression hurts. And it plays out in different – and overlapping – ways on different populations.

• If your identity is written on your body, you will have a different experience of oppression than if it is not.
Experiencing Oppression

The specific experience of having an invisible identity:

• Every time I meet a new person, I must decide whether/when/where/how to disclose.

• If I don’t disclose, I know I will be misread.

• Disclosure makes me vulnerable and may put me at risk for teasing, hypersexualization, mistrust, rejection, or physical harm.

• Disclosure is sometimes received as inappropriate or as aggressively forcing my identity into other people’s faces.
Disparities

Heterosexuals

Gays and Lesbians

Bisexuals

Best health in relation to sexual orientation

Poorest health in relation to sexual orientation

Source: Out For Health, Healthy People 2020 Bisexual Fact Sheet
Disparities

Bisexual people report higher rates than heterosexuals in these areas:

• Tobacco use
• Binge drinking*
• Anxiety or mood disorders*
• Depression
• Suicidality*
• Rape*

*Indicates areas where bisexual people have higher rates even than lesbians or gay men.
Seriously considered attempting suicide

... during the 12 months before the survey

Seriously considered attempting suicide

... during the 12 months before the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay/Lesbian</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Center for Disease Control, Youth Risk Behavior Study, 2019. [https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/app](https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/app)
Experienced sexual violence by anyone

... during the 12 months before the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay/Lesbian</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OUTINESS

- Only 4 percent of bi+ youth report that they are “out” to all of their teachers. (9% of LG youth)
- Only 19 percent of bi+ youth report that they are “out” to all of their parents. (29% of LG youth)
- 58 percent of bi+ youth report that they are “out” to their LGBTQ friends. (68% of LG youth)

Bi+ variable includes all youth who selected bi, queer, pansexual, or fluid
FROM HRC’s 2018 study:

• More than half of bi+ youth respondents report that their family has made them feel bad about being an LGBTQ person. (similar to LG youth)
• Only 26 percent of bi+ youth report that they are able to “definitely” be themselves in school. (32% of LG youth)
• 68 percent of bi+ youth report being teased or treated poorly at school because of their sexual orientation. (78% of LG youth)
• Only 1 in 4 bi+ youth always feel safe in the classroom. (31% of LG youth)
• On a 1-10 scale, 87 percent of bi+ youth rate their average level of stress as a “5” or higher. (76% of LG youth)
• 81 percent of bi+ youth say they “usually” felt down or depressed over the past week. (71% of LG youth)

Bi+ variable includes all youth who selected bi, queer, pansexual, or fluid
Experiencing Oppression

• Bi+ (and trans+) youth may experience this stress within the context of the mainstream community and from lesbians and gay peers, creating a feeling of personal and political homelessness, possibly explaining higher levels of minority stress.

• And bi+ people also may be told by gay and lesbian peers that they have it easy and don’t experience oppression, thereby compounding the experience of minority stress. (“Your pain isn’t real.”)
Some of the unique challenges facing bi+ people:

• In addition to the crushing wave of negative stereotypes...
• We are told that it’s EASY to identify as bisexual, and that ours is not a serious or political identity.
• Bi+ folks have a harder time finding resources, communities, and safe spaces.
• Constant and repeated challenges to our identities
• Bi+ folks are more invisible and rarely (well-)represented
• Primary and secondary perceived relationship threat
• Bi+ folks challenge our cultural urge to put things into simple binaries.
• The very fact of our existence is subject to debate. (Ouch.)
Best Practices: Understanding

• Set aside your expectations and assumptions.

• Understand the difference between sexual orientation and sexual behavior.

• Understand the difference – and the complex interaction between sexual identity and gender identity.

• Understand that there are numerous sexual orientation identities and gender identities, including some with which you might not be familiar. If someone uses an identity with which you are not familiar, consider politely asking them to tell you what it means.
Best Practices: Understanding

- Know that bi+ youth experience disparities overlapping with but different from heterosexuals – and, also, from lesbians and gay men.

- Understand that bisexual people in different-gender relationships still face health, mental health, safety and social disparities.

- Understand that individual bisexuals have unique experiences that intersect with other aspects of their identity (race, ethnicity, gender, age, social class, geography, ability, etc.)

- Remember that people may be afraid to come out to you and do everything you can to make them feel safe – and not judged.
Best Practices: Actions

• Use inclusive language, e.g., “same-gender relationship” instead of “lesbian relationship”; “LGBTQ+ family” instead of “gay family.”

• Identify individuals accurately. If someone clearly states that they identify as bisexual, do not identify them as gay, lesbian or straight instead. Remember that being in a relationship does not negate a bisexual person’s identity or history.

• Read up about bisexuality so you can respond to bi+ youth in a manner that is both respectful and informed.
Best Practices: Actions

• Provide a visually welcoming environment by openly displaying flags, posters, pamphlets, books, and other materials that are bi+-specific.

• Develop bi+-specific trainings, flyers, publications and a bisexual-specific curriculum or bisexual modules for LGBTQ+ curricula.

• Look up some of the resources provided at the end of this presentation. Create relationships with local and national bisexual organizations.

• Have a bi flag on hand for Celebrate Bisexuality Day on September 23rd of every year and #BiHealthMonth in March (now!), & a pan flag on hand for Pansexual & Panromantic Awareness & Visibility Day on May 24th.
TO DO LIST (yes, there’s more)

• Review your website and printed materials to make sure they are fully inclusive in language and representation (for example: include images of young people wearing bi & pan pride flags)

• Offer specific programming directed to bi+ youth

• Make it abundantly clear that bi+ youth are welcome

• Interrupt binary thinking, biphobia, bi-erasure and other micro-aggressions when they occur between youth (they do, and they will).

• Have out bi+ people as staff members, volunteers, & other role models

• Do not assume young people’s sexual orientations or gender identities.

• Always hold in your mind that they are growing up in a different historical moment, and that their experience is different from yours.
Thank you!

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Etsy shop: BiProducts
(etsy.com/shop/biproducts)

Bi Women Quarterly is at biwomenboston.org