

Tips for Professionals Who Work with LGBT Youth

1. **Don't be surprised when a youth "comes out" to you.** They have tested you with a series of "trial balloons" over a period of time. Based on your previous responses they've decided you can be trusted and helpful.
2. **Respect confidentiality.** If a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) or questioning youth shares with you information about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, you have a trust that must be respected. A breach of this confidence has led some to suicide.
3. **Be informed & examine your own biases.** Most of us are the products of a homophobic and transphobic society influenced by misinformation and fear. You can't be free of it just by deciding to; read reliable sources and talk to qualified persons.
4. **Know when and where to seek help.** Know the referral agencies and counselors in your area. LGBT helplines can provide you with professional persons and organizations that are qualified to help. Tell them who you are and what kind of assistance you need. They'll be helpful and fair. You can reach PFLAG NYC's [Safe Schools Program](#) at 646-403-3197.
5. **Maintain a balanced perspective.** Sexual thoughts and feelings are only a small (but important) part of a person's personality.
6. **Understand the meaning of sexual orientation and gender identity.** Each person's sexual orientation and gender identity is what is natural to that person. It is not a matter of sexual "preference." People do not choose to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; they simply are. One's sense of gender identity is a separate issue with unique complexities and challenges.
7. **Deal with feelings first.** Most LGBT youth feel alone, afraid and guilty. You can assist by listening, thus allowing them to release feelings and thoughts that are often in conflict.
8. **Be supportive.** Explain that many people have struggled with these issues in the past. Admit that dealing with one's sexuality or a gender identity that is different from one's birth sex is difficult. There are no easy and fast answers, whether heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender. Keep the door open for more conversations and assistance. Be aware that so-called "reparative therapy" has been discredited by all major mental health professional associations and can be harmful. While some groups promote it, it is not a credible way of offering support.
9. **Anticipate some confusion.** Most youth are sure of their sexual orientation by the time they finish the eighth grade and the same appears to be true with gender identity. But some young people will be confused and unsure. They have to work through their own feeling and insights; you can't talk them into, or out of, being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.
10. **Help, but do not force.** If you are heterosexual or comfortable with your birth sex, you probably do not understand what it means to be different in these ways. Clues for how you can help will come from the young person. Don't force him or her into your frame of reference to make it easier for you to understand.
11. **Don't try to guess who is LGBT.** It is not helpful for you or for the youth you serve. We live in a world of stereotypes that do people an injustice; do not be tempted to perpetuate old myths.
12. **Challenge homophobic remarks and jokes.** Speak up when someone makes disparaging remarks about LGBTQ people, or thoughtlessly uses anti-gay language, just as you would any other slurs. Don't perpetuate injustice through silence.