

GAY AND LESBIAN ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Introduction

"Are you out to your family?" it's a question that almost inevitably arises in the process of getting to know another gay or lesbian person. Families supply physical and emotional sustenance, connect us with our pasts, and provide a context within which we learn about the world, including attitudes and mores of our society (Berzon, 1992). A gay or lesbian young person's family is very important. Some believe that homosexuality is a threat to the family, as if it were intrinsically antithetic to the idea of family life.

Nothing, however could be further from the truth. Gay and lesbian youth need to be part of their families as much as any other children. Given the stigmatizing status that homosexuality still holds for many in society, the family is one place where a gay or lesbian young person most needs to feel accepted. Most gay and lesbian young people hope that their family, those who know them best, will see that they are the same persons they're always been.

All gay and lesbian people grow up within a family context, which in most cases is usually heterosexual and heterosexist. Viewed within an ecological framework, growing up gay or lesbian in a heterosexual family, is by its very nature, a transactional process where the young person correctly perceives that there is not a "good-fit" - unless the family is not homophobic. Having to keep secret one's sexual identity and affectional preferences

creates stress that is a result, not of the individual's homosexuality but of society's homophobia. Growing up in a system where one cannot be or say who they truly are, places them in a position where they are in a constant state of having to negotiate life within a hostile environment.

Utilizing an ecological perspective of social work practice to work with gay and lesbian young people and families offers a broad conceptual lens for viewing family functioning and needs. Germain (1979) who led the development of this perspective in social work, noted that "practice is directed toward improving the transactions between people and their environments in order to enhance adaptive capacities and improve environments for all who function within them" (Germain, 1979, p.8). As such, practitioners need to seek to influence the direction of change in both the person and the environment. With respect to the a gay or lesbian young person within a family context, changing the environment means educating families and assisting them in dealing with homophobic attitudes.

Consider the following example:

Darren is a 15 year old, Jamaican youngster who has been sent to the United States to live with an aunt after his mother died. His aunt, who is diabetic, who works full-time and has three other adolescents to support in her home. Darren is depressed because of his mother's death and in addition is dealing, in silence, with his own emerging gay identity. While cleaning the house one afternoon, his aunt finds a letter that he wrote to a boy in school. Enraged, confused, and armed only with religious and culturally pejorative notions about homosexuality, even worrying that Darren's homosexuality might be contagious and put her own children at risk, she tells him that he is sick and needs help.

From this brief sketch, one can begin to see how and why this family is in crisis. There are numerous stresses in this environment. The economy requires that the aunt works to support her family despite her chronic illness; the young man is grieving over his mother's death, his own relocation to a new environment and dealing in silence with his own emerging gay identity. Add to this case the cultural factors, in that, the Jamaican culture has a particularly negative view of individuals (even family members) who are homosexually oriented and the fact that the young man was "found out" and did not chose to disclose his orientation and it is easy to see how this young person may become the target of his family's anger. As this example suggests, many personal, family, and environmental factors converge and interact with each other to influence the family. In other words, human behavior is not solely a function of the person or the environment, but of the complex interaction between them.

All too often, however, despite the increasing emphasis on family-centered social work practice (Hartman & Laird, 1983) there is a tendency for practitioners to see gay and lesbian youth primarily, if not solely as individuals rather than as members of a family of origin and as possible creators of their own families systems (either families of choice or biological families) at a later point in their lives. By not acknowledging that "human beings can be understood and helped only in the context of the intimate and powerful human systems of which they are a part," of which the

family is one of the most important (Hartman & Laird, 1983, p. 4), practitioners miss out on many important opportunities for fostering more positive relationships between gay and lesbian youngsters and their families.

This chapter, based on the author's analysis of the existing literature, qualitative data analysis from interviews conducted with gay and lesbian adolescents and their families (Mallon, 1994a, in press), and twenty years of clinical practice with young people and their families (Mallon, 1994b), examines the experience of lesbian and gay adolescents and their families through an ecological lens. Such a perspective creates a framework where individuals and environments are understood as a unit, in the context of their relationship to one another (Germain, 1991, p. 16). As such, this chapter examines the primary reciprocal exchanges and transactions that lesbian and gay youth and their families face as they confront the unique person:environmental tasks involved in a society that assumes all of its members are heterosexual. The focus of this chapter is limited to an analysis of the gay and lesbian adolescent within the context of their family system. As such the author explores the following areas: the effects of sensing differentness; the effects of developing a false self due to the socialization process of hiding; an examination of the means by which adolescents adapt to their identity and finally, to examining the effects of being "found out" or "coming out" within the framework of the family system.

Recommendations for social work practice with lesbian and gay adolescents and their families are presented in the conclusion of the chapter.

A Review of the Literature

The published theoretical models that describe the coming out process (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Minton and McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1993) have for the most part ignored the role that families have on this aspect of their child's development. There is a sparse, but growing body of literature (Anderson, 1989; Bozett, 1989; Bozett & Sussman, 1989; Borhek, 1983; Silverstein, 1977; Strommen, 1989) which is more explicit in highlighting the significance of families in the lives of gay and lesbian young people.

Anecdotal evidence has often portrayed the families of gays and lesbians as uncaring and cold-hearted individuals, who immediately throw their child out, once their child discloses their gay or lesbian identity to them or once they are "found out." While this characterization may, unfortunately be true for some gay and lesbian people, this should not be misconstrued as being ipso facto in every case. Sources, especially those that are written by the parents of lesbian and gay people, (Borhek, 1979, 1988; Dew, 1994; Fairchild & Hayward, 1989; Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986; Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, 1990) address parental reactions to their child's disclosure from a more

balanced perspective. Berzon (1992), Brown (1988), Browning (1987), and Shernoff (1984) have all made significant contributions which have addressed some of the salient clinical issues for gay and lesbian people and their families. Although the empirical literature on the topic is scant, there are two notable exceptions, the work of D'Augelli and Hershberger, (1993) and the research of Savin-Williams, (1989).

Inasmuch as a great deal of the literature focuses on the actual moment of disclosure for the adolescent and his or her family, the awareness for the young person, that there is not "a good-fit" within their family system begins long before this point.

A Sense of Differentness

It has been well documented (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Schneider, 1988) that homosexual orientation may first be manifested during adolescence. Several researchers (Money, 1980; Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Sullivan & Schneider, 1987) however, agree that sexual orientation is set before a child enters school, and that it is immutable and not subject to change thereafter.

In retrospective studies (Bell, et al, 1981; Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Mallon, 1994a) lesbian, gay and bisexual adults recalled experiencing a sense of "differentness" as early as age four. For some children, though not all, as gender atypical behavior

does not necessarily indicate one's sexual orientation, this sense of differentness is manifested by gender non-conforming behaviors or by children expressing gender non-conforming ideas. Young people who act on or verbalize such feelings, usually find that their behaviors and expressions are quickly squelched by a distressed relative or family member. One young man recalled how his mother made an issue of his perceived difference:

My mother would say things like: "stop being a little girl; you're such a little sissy; I'm not raising a little girl"; or she'd say, "I'm not raising a little punk". She'd tell me "You better go out there and start acting like a boy and stop acting like a little girl." It was always this kind of thing. At that point, I didn't understand what she was saying, when she said I was acting like a little girl, I didn't see myself doing anything that was different from what any of the other little boys were doing. But she saw a difference and she would always criticize the way I walked, the way I talked. A lot of things that I just naturally did irked her. I thought I was just acting normal [March, 1993] 1

1 All quotations are taken from interviews the author conducted with gay and lesbian adolescents and their families. The bracketed information specifies the date of interviews in which the quoted comment was made. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the clients.

As implied by the quotation above, and as evidenced by the numerous coming out stories heard in this writer's practice, there is anecdotal evidence which suggests that some of the parents of gay or lesbian children instinctively sense that their child is "different." De Vine (1984), from a family systems perspective, offers a coming out model for the family which describes the family system as advancing through a series of states of awareness and acceptance of their family members gay or lesbian identity.

The first of these states, identified as *subliminal awareness*, clearly resonates with one mother's recollection of sensing her child's differentness:

We noticed early that Joshua was different. He was not a rough-and-tumble, fearless boy with an ardent interest in match-box cars and balls, who skinned his knees climbing trees or pretended to be a six-gun wielding cowboy. He was timid and gentle and liked nothing better than playing house and make-believe games with the girls in the neighborhood. "He's artistic," I told myself, uneasy with the other word that was running through my head: "effeminate" . . . Like many parents, I fell prey to fears that my son's differences meant he would grow up to be *one of them*, a homosexual (Tuerk, 1995, p. 18).

Gay identity acquisition, which may begin for some in childhood, occurs, clearly within a family context, over a number of years.

Although adult lesbian, gay or bisexual persons often recall feeling different from their peers and from their family during childhood, this differentness is not attributed to sexuality until years later.

Socialized to Hide

Most young people internalize society's ideology of sex and gender at an early age and also have opportunities to observe society's dislike and disapproval of lesbian and gay people. A child of four or five, knowing that they are different from the other members of their family, in many cases, tacitly or implicitly told not to be different, determine via their negative transactions within their milieu, that they do not have a goodness of fit with their environment. As all children are eager to please their

parental figures, most develop adaptations which assist them in masking their difference. This process, labeled as passing by some (Berger, 1991; Brown, 1991; Goffman, 1963), more appropriately for children and adolescents described as hiding, by others (Martin, 1982, Mallon, 1994a), represents a major person:environment life stress for the young person.

Living within an environment which promotes stress and is hostile to their very existence causes many lesbian and gay youths to search for ways to cope with their identity. Hiding one's orientation, the choice which almost all young gay and lesbian people initially select, leads to the development of a false sense of self (Shernoff & Finnegan, 1991). Lesbian and gay adolescents may feel inauthentic, as if they are living a lie, feeling that peers and their families would not accept them if they knew the truth about them (Goffman, 1963).

Fearing rejection, some young people will hide their sexual orientation as long as is possible. As adolescents focus shifts from the home to peer socialization, many begin to feel a normal distancing between them and their families. Gay and lesbian adolescents, sometimes, however experience an abnormal distancing for fear that their parents will discover their secret. Hiding, becomes a destructive falsehood for the lesbian, gay and bisexual young person and can lead to the development of a variety of maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Adaptation Strategies For Living in a Hostile Environment

Malyon (1981) provides a useful model for examining how lesbian, gay, or bisexual adolescents may adapt to an emerging homosexual identity. His model identifies three possible solutions:

- a) repression of same-sex desires
- b) a developmental moratorium in which homosexual impulses are suppressed in favor of a heterosexual or asexual orientation
- c) homosexual disclosure and the decision to mobilize same-sex desires (p. 326-327).

The young person who represses same-sex sexual desires chooses the most primitive and least satisfactory adaptation to an emerging homosexual orientation. While the repressed youngster may successfully "push down" or hide his or her gay or lesbian feelings during adolescence, in response to environmental and familial pressures and stresses, these impulses almost assuredly resurface later in life.

The young person who suppresses homosexual unfolding during adolescence declares a temporary developmental moratorium. These youngsters often exhibit identity formation which is cropped as they attempt to "fit into" the heterosexual culture by adopting its values and role expectations. Frequently this is expressed through overachievement and overcompensating for feelings of inadequacy and unacceptability. Some young people may attempt to brace the suppression of gay or lesbian feelings by involvement in

heterosexual marriage, others, make superhuman efforts to become the "perfect" child or the "best little girl or boy in the world".

Sexual feelings are sublimated into positive or negative obsessions; sports, academics, clubs, or drugs, alcohol, or by engaging in other high risk behaviors.

This adaptation represents a state of chronic unrest and disequilibrium, as such, it is not uncommon to find identity issues reemerging in the 30's and 40's. After years of suppressing same-sex sexual desires, the adult who did not address these desires during adolescence, could experience what Malyon labels, "the second epoch of a biphasic adolescence" (p. 327). This second phase is quite literally, a re-living of adolescence which was suppressed through hiding during biological adolescence.

Such suppression of lesbian, gay or bisexual impulses during primary adolescence can result in an "interruption and mitigation of the process of identity formation" (p. 328). Coming out, after adolescence prompts another phase of growth, similar to that which is usually exhibited during age-appropriate adolescence, it's goal being the integration of "previously compartmentalized and rejected sexual and intimate capacities" (p. 328).

The young person who decides during adolescence to disclose their lesbian, gay or bisexual identity often feels alienated and neglected by peers as well as by their families. Disclosure however also has many positive features. Some theorists

(Sullivan & Schneider, 1987; Hunter & Schaefer, 1987; Malyon, 1981) have suggested that coming out as an adolescent can assist the young person in achieving, maybe for the first time in their young lives, a goodness of fit with their environment. Clearly, the disclosure of one's homosexual orientation facilitated by coming out, can be framed as positive adaptation which is a rebalancing process between the youth and their environment (Germain, 1991).

Disclosure to Families of Origin

Most gay and lesbian young people are reared by people who are heterosexual, as such, most parents have no prior preparation for dealing with their child's sexual orientation. Families primarily convey strong heterosexual messages; that is, that heterosexual relationships are the only valid and appropriate life goals. As such, most heterosexual adolescents grow up within a societal context that is understanding of their lives. As they become aware of their sexuality, most young people are supported by families who encourage and discuss dating and attraction to the opposite gender. In contrast, the adolescent who is gay or lesbian, by and large, does not have such environmental nourishment, as they lack familial and cultural role models. Additionally, since gay and lesbian adolescents are different from other members of their family, their socialization process, as contrasted with the socialization process which occurs within people of color communities, does not offer a nurturing

environment for them to develop a pride in their culture and or teach them adaptive behaviors for coping with oppression and discrimination. This socialization deficiency frequently leaves young gay and lesbian people unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with a societally discredited status (Hetrick & Martin, 1987).

Feeling isolated, scared and different, such stigmatizing experiences, which are analogous to racism, sexism, ageism, classism and anti-Semitism cause a great deal of stress for the gay and lesbian adolescent which, in many cases, lead to coping complications (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). Savin-Williams and Rodriguez (1993) note further that lesbian and gay male youth of color face additional stress in developing a mature identity because they must integrated their ethnic, cultural, and racial background with their sexual orientation and identity. For many gay and lesbian young people, the stress of negotiating a life within a hostile environment is directly related to the lack of family support.

While the bulk of the professional literature which addresses the issue of gay and lesbian people and their families, focuses on parental reaction to disclosure by a child, empirical evidence (D'Augelli and Hershberger, 1993, p. 433) suggests that most young people do not first come out to their families. In fact, the majority of gay and lesbian people (73%), disclosed first to a friend. Mothers were first told only 7% of the time; fathers, or both parents were told 1% of the time.

Disclosure to Siblings

Researchers have focused very little attention on the effects of disclosing to siblings. Jones (as cited in Strommen 1989) suggest that sibling reactions are similar to those of parents, however there is generally no guilt or self-blame reported on the part of the sibling. Jones also suggests that gay and lesbian youth disclose to family members incrementally, one at a time, with the emotionally closest members being told first. Brown (1988) concurs with Jones noting that before a family member's homosexual identity is discovered or disclosed, various coping strategies are negotiated between the individual and his or her family. These include: (1) distancing, emotionally and/or geographically from the family of origin; (2) a tacit agreement between the individual and the family that no one will discuss the individual's personal life; and (3) disclosure to one parent or sibling who is supportive, with the understanding that the individual will not tell other family members. The comments of one young man confirm this last strategy:

When I finally decided that it was time to come out I first told my sister whom I am closest to in my family. I kinda knew that no matter what I told her, that she would not reject me, so I figured that I would test the waters with her. When I told her that I was gay, she said "hey, you're my brother and I love you no matter what." That made me feel great and then when I told my mother about five months later it was easier. When I told my mother, told her that I had already told my sister and that she could talk to her if she wanted to talk to someone about this. I think that helped her too [June, 1995].

If siblings are among the first to be disclosed to, their reactions, as illustrated by the above data, could, as Strommen (1989, p. 43) noted, "play a key role in determining parental reaction" possibly lessening its severity. Research on sibling-parent interaction in reaction to disclosure is an area which should be pursued for future research.

Disclosure to Other Relatives

The family of origin does not consist solely of parents and siblings. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews are also important members of the family system which should be factored into the process of disclosure. Grandparents as the senior members of the family system have influence that extends to many members of the family, as such, it is possible that grandparents could play a significant role in this process (See Griffin, Wirth & Wirth, 1986, Chapter 7).

In many cases, however, families are vested in "keeping their family business" within their families. In these instances, it is not uncommon if a member of the immediate family discloses, for some family members to ask that gay or lesbian family member not disclose to other members of the larger family system. One young person spoke explicitly about the personal dilemmas that this request creates:

Whenever my relatives visits from the Dominican Republic, my mother always warns me not to talk about being gay. She always assures me that it's not because she can't accept it, but, as she says, "know you those people, they would never

understand and then they'd all go back to La Capital and tell everyone." When I assure her that I don't care and tell her that I'm out to everyone, she then says, "could you please just do this for me?" I usually agree, but it makes me feel like I'm always having to go back in the closet to please my family. I don't like that part of it. [February, 1994].

Disclosure to Parents

Nonetheless, it is parental reaction to the disclosure of homosexual orientation that can cause the most stress for gay and lesbian youth. Dealing with a child's gay or lesbian identity can create stress, tension and emotional problems, provoking a hostile reaction even in families which are generally supportive and open. While many families develop effective coping devices to adjust to their child's disclosure, other families are completely unprepared, and react in a very unpredictable and negative manner, which may lead to family system malfunction.

Parental perceptions of their child's sense of differentness points to two common reactions as identified by Strommen (1989). The first is that most parents, unfamiliar with homosexuality, apply their negative conceptions of gay and lesbian identity to their child. The second aspect of this parental perception is powerful feelings of guilt and failure. Rothberg and Weinstein (1996) add that they have found one of the biggest problems for families with a gay or lesbian family member is embarrassment.

A range of responses to a family member's disclosure is perhaps a more appropriate characterization, as captured in this description

by Rothberg and Weinstein (1996):

When a family members comes out there are a multitude of responses. At one end of the spectrum is acceptance, . . . but rarely, if ever, is this announcement celebrated. Take for example, the announcement a heterosexual person makes to his or her family of origin of an engagement to marry. This is usually met with a joyous response, a ritual part and many gifts. The lesbian and gay man does not receive this response. Instead, the coming out announcement is often met with negative responses which can range from mild disapproval to complete non-acceptance and disassociation. These responses, though usually excepted, cause considerable stress and pain for the lesbian and gay person seeking parental approval (p. 81).

Some families, particularly families with strong religious convictions, may openly condemn homosexuality, unaware that their own child is lesbian or gay. Blumenfeld and Raymond (1988) note that families with strong religious convictions often support their views of their religion even against a family member. Personal biases, particularly cultural or religious biases which view homosexuality negatively, can make "coming out" to parents a painful experience for many youth as evidenced by this young person's story:

Everybody in the family knew that I was gay. The only person that didn't agree with me being gay was my mother, of course. Everyone else that I thought was not going agree, did agree. My mother said that she hated me and to this very day she tells me that it is against God's will and it's against his proposition and when the day comes for him to take over the world again you're going to suffer and I don't want you to suffer cause you're my son, my oldest son and I don't want anything to happen to you, you know. And I will be telling her, Mommy I know, I understand but this is something that I am and you know, I believe if there's a way that God wants to help me or whatever, that it's not right, then he will help me, but right now I don't think that this is actually bothering God because I believe that back in the Roman days things like this used to happen and if it's a sin that I'm sorry and to this very day she yaps at me about it when I come to her house [March, 1993].

Although some families might not openly denounce homosexuality, "the absence of discussion sends a negative message" (Browning, 1987, p.48) as illustrated by this quote:

It's really difficult to be a lesbian teenager and to live at home. My Mom and I never talk about the fact that I'm a lesbian. Sometimes the silence really gets to me [February, 1993].

Families provide many opportunities for their children to receive positive reinforcement, approval and validation for their heterosexual orientation. Heterosexual children rarely have their identity itself challenged as unacceptable. It is one thing for an adolescent to rebel against his or her parents, it is understood and accepted to some degree in most cultures, but what a young lesbian or gay youth fears most is that their families will reject their personhood and that it will result in the destruction of their relationship with them, as this young person's story illustrates:

When I told my parents I was gay, my father just stared at me and my mother just cried. It was really painful. When I realized that my own family couldn't accept me, my own flesh and blood, I thought, why should I expect the rest of society to cut me any slack. I felt hopeless, disillusioned and worthless. My own family . . . how could they do that to me, be so cold, so uncaring, it was as if they were saying they didn't care if I lived or died. I don't think I'll ever get over that [March, 1993].

This fear, real or imagined can prevent a lesbian or gay young person from fully developing their identity. If the lesbian or gay young person feels secure and has had prior, positive

experiences discussing difficult issues with their families, then he or she may choose to come out to his or her parents. Parental reaction to a child's disclosure can be a positive experience increasing the level of intimacy and honesty with parents, as confirmed by this young man's story:

My Mom always knew. When we finally sat down and "had the talk" and I said "Mom I have to talk to you," she said, "I know, you're gay, right?" I was so relieved. I had heard from so many of my friends how terrible their experiences were and even though we have always had a positive relationship, I was scared that she would not be able to deal with me being gay and it would ruin everything [June, 1995].

Unfortunately, for most young people parental disclosure is not the positive experience that this young person had. For many, it is a negative experience that can include anger, denial, guilt, or insistence on therapy to "change" the young person's orientation. Griffin, Wirth, and Wirth (1986) confirm that initial parental reactions to disclosure can include: breaking contact with their child; trying to change their child; ignoring the issue; or accepting reality.

In some cases, young people do not have the opportunity to voluntarily disclose as they are "found out" by family members who "discover" their "secret". In these cases, verbal harassment or physical abuse by family members, as represented by this young person's story, are commonplace.

My mother found out that I was gay when she found gay magazines that I had hidden in my room. She went crazy, she

started beating me, cursing at me and kept asking me why do you want to be gay? Why do you want to be a homo? Why do you want to be a faggot? Don't you want a family and don't you want to make me a proud mother? I said I didn't want a family and I didn't want a wife and she slapped me across the face. Then she gave an extension cord to my step-father and he took over and started beating me [March, 1993].

Parental disclosure or "discovery" can also lead to expulsion from the home, as this young person's story illustrates:

One day my father heard me talking on the telephone to a guy who I had met. When I got off the phone he just went crazy on me, he started slapping me and saying that he didn't raise me to be no faggot. He told me to get the hell out of his house and literally threw me out the front door. I was devastated. I didn't know where to go, I had no place to go. I walked the streets for a long time and then I called and a friend who let me stayed at his house. My friend told me about a shelter for young people and I went there. They helped me to get into a group home and that's where I am now. I've tried to call my parents, I would really like to talk to them, but they won't take my calls [May, 1995].

Disclosure or the silence that surrounds a family's inability to talk about sexual orientation can cause the young person to leave voluntarily, sometimes prematurely, to seek out a niche, with a better fit, as this young person did:

I didn 't tell my Mom that I was a lesbian. I just wasn't sure that I could and even if I did, I wasn't sure how she would react, so I just started staying out late, staying at friend's houses, you know, kinda distancing myself from her and then eventually I just moved in with a friend. We still talk, and sometimes I visit her, but I just can't live there anymore [June, 1995].

While such a move might be seen as a step toward healthfulness in exiting a hostile and stressful environment, such a move may

also have deleterious effects in that it separates young people from their families and requires the premature assumption of adult responsibilities and social roles (Mallon, 1994a; Malyon, 1981). A frequent consequence of this choice is either homelessness, foster care placement or survival prostitution. Neither of which promise a very positive outcome for young lesbian or gay people (Mallon, 1992). In the worst possible scenario, silence or disclosure can lead to suicidal ideation or gestures (Hunter & Schaecher, 1987).

Some parents may erroneously believe that it was their role modeling that determined their child's sexual orientation. What did I do wrong? is a common self-blaming refrain. Parents may also worry about being blamed by people in the community. The reality is that when a member of the family system comes out, the entire system is forced to come out as well (De Vine, 1984).

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no question that many families undergo a transformational process when they learn that a family member is gay or lesbian. The question is, will the change make the family system stronger and draw its members to a closer and more honest relationship, or will the disclosure generate the sort of conflict that destroys the system and marks its members for the rest of their lives.

As many families view disclosure or "discovery" as an intense

familial crisis, families will need support, encouragement and accurate information during and after a child's disclosure of homosexual orientation. Without appropriate supportive interventions a family member's disclosure of homosexuality may lead to a complete deterioration of the family system (Savin-Williams, 1989; Strommen, 1989). Practitioners who are educated to the stresses and strains that lesbian and gay youth encounter in the larger heterosexual context, are in a good position to offer counsel and empathy. The following are some guidelines, which are adapted from previous work published by (Berzon, 1992; Rothberg & Weinstein, 1996; Shernoff, 1984; Silverstein 1977) for practitioners who are assisting gay and lesbian young people within the family context:

1. The first place to start is to ask the family member if there are any other family members who are lesbian or gay.
2. The practitioner should also explore how open or how closed the family system has generally been to new ideas and new people.
3. The practitioner should also ask how the family system has dealt with new and unexpected information historically. She questions can provide insight into the family's flexibility and may assist in determining which family members will be supportive and which will not be.
4. The practitioner should ask the client a series of questions such as: Who they feel most close to? Who have they confided in and who has confided in them? Who do they perceive to be the most liberal members of the family and who will handle this information best? and How does the family grapevine work? Such exploration might help the individual to decide who might be the most supportive family member to disclose to initially, if they choose to disclose. Rothman and Weinstein (1996) and Shernoff (1984) both recommend the use of genograms and eco-maps as useful tools in this process, helping the individual to graphically depict family systems. These tools allow for matter of fact questioning which can assist in gathering sensitive information.

5. Practitioners should be available to role play the disclosure process with clients. They should explore with the client several perspectives and offer feedback and suggestions on how the transaction can be accomplished more smoothly.

6. Practitioners should help clients to see that coming out to family members is not a one time situation, but a process. As individuals and their families disclose on a continuum, clients should be encouraged to consider first disclosing to a family member with whom they are emotionally closest.

7. Practitioners should assist clients in developing a plan for orchestrating the disclosure to the family.

8. Practitioners should be available to support and meet with parents and other family members. Shernoff (1984) notes that at the outset, this situation usually requires crisis intervention strategies. At the point of being "found out" or the point at which the young person "Comes out", parents themselves are usually so needy for emotional support that they might be unavailable to parent the young person. Therefore, the time immediately following the confirmation that their child is gay or lesbian is when they require the greatest amount of nurturance and support from both their child and the practitioner. Siblings will also need assistance during this time and should not be neglected in the process. Encouraging them to explore feelings, providing them with information, so as to educate them, and making them aware of support groups for families such as, PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is an important part of this process.

9. Practitioners should remain available to assist both the family and the individual in negotiating this process.

Although our knowledge of how families respond to the gay and lesbian identity of family members is at best incomplete, there is corroborating evidence that disclosure is beneficial to psychological well-being and maintaining a goodness of fit with one's environment (Schneider, 1988). There are however many questions that also remain unanswered. Some of these are: Is a family's reaction different if a family member's disclosure is accidentally "found out" rather than disclosed? What effect does

that have on the young person? Does initial disclosure to a sibling assist one in disclosing to parents at a later time? What is the role of grandparents and other relatives in the process of disclosing one's identity?

As gay and lesbian individuals are generally not viewed as having families, a gay or lesbian identity presents a unique situation for the family system. Practitioners who are aware of and who are able to respond with empathy and knowledge are best situated to assist families in remaining intact and in helping them move toward healthfulness.

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