
Which Gay Teens Attempt Suicide?

A study detailed in *Pediatrics* (1) pinpoints some key elements associated with the risk of attempted suicide in homosexual teenagers. "Compared with non-attempters, attempters had more feminine gender roles, and adopted a bisexual or homosexual identity at younger ages. Attempters were more likely than peers to report sexual abuse, drug abuse, and arrests for misconduct."

The researchers say that suicide attempts appear to be related to "'coming out' at a younger age, gender atypicality, low self-esteem, substance abuse, running away, involvement in prostitution, and other psychosocial morbidities." In 44% of cases, subjects attributed the suicide attempts to "'family problems,' including conflict with family members and parents' marital discord, divorce, or alcoholism."

Similarly, Saghir and Robins reported in 1973 (2) that youthful suicide attempts in a group of homosexual adults were "often in association with a history of childhood gender-atypical behavior or emotional disturbance."

Two key points can be inferred from these studies. First, that treatment for Gender-Identity Disorder of Childhood (GID), which is now under strong attack from within the psychological profession, may indeed be therapeutic for prevention of suicide attempts in adolescence. Gay and feminist advocacy groups have been lobbying for deletion of the diagnostic category (3). In contrast, clinicians such as Kenneth Zucker and Susan Bradley believe that it is ethical and therapeutic to help children become more comfortable with their biological

maleness or femaleness and to alleviate the emotional and family problems often associated with childhood gender nonconformity. (4)

Also, since early gay-self-labeling is associated with attempted suicide, it seems *unwise* to encourage young people to label themselves as gay during the volatile teenage years. The teen years serve as a transitional phase when affectional, emotional and identification needs can be eroticized. "No service is done to our children by offering them lifestyle options before they are properly able to make informed choices about them," says Dr. George Rekers, professor of neuropsychiatry and a specialist in psychosexual disorders at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine. (5) ■

(1) "Risk Factors for Attempted Suicide in Gay and Bisexual Youth," by Gary Remafedi, James Farrow and Robert Deisher, vol. 87, no. 6, June 1991, pp. 869-875.

(2) *Male and Female Homosexuality: A Comprehensive Investigation*; Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins, 1973.

(3) The American Psychological Association *Monitor*, June 1997.

(4) *Gender Identity Disorder and Psychosexual Problems in Children and Adolescents*, 1995, New York: Guilford Press.

(5) Rekers, G., ed. (1995) *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexual Problems*. N.Y.: Lexington Books.