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Gay or Straight, Youths Aren't So Different

By JANE E. BRODY

This fall, when an 18-year-old Rutgers student killed himself after a live video showing him having intimate relations with another young man was transmitted on the Internet, public attention once again focused on the risk of suicide among gay teenagers.

That risk is hard to measure, in part because so much research has focused on clinical populations — people who sought help or acted out because they were troubled, had attempted suicide or professed suicidal tendencies. That tends to skew the results, suggesting that gay teenagers on average are more prone to suicide and mental illness than they really are.

The good news is that recent research finds more similarities than differences among gay and straight adolescents. For example, studies in Salt Lake City by Lisa Diamond, an associate professor of [psychology](#) and gender studies at the [University of Utah](#), found that young gays had as many friends and were just as popular and socially connected as other teenagers.

The composition of their friendships is somewhat different, she noted. Gay teenagers tend to go out of their way to befriend youths of other races or those who are stigmatized for their looks.

But for gay and straight teenagers alike, Dr. Diamond said in an interview, the chief source of stress is the same: “anxiety about being alone as an adult, about finding the kind of partner they want.”

Finding a Balance

[Studies do suggest](#) that severe emotional distress is somewhat more common among gay teenagers than straight ones. But Dr. Diamond and other experts say the effects of bullying and discrimination are often overplayed in the news media.

“I’m concerned about the message being given to gay youth by adults who say they are destined to

be depressed, abuse drugs or perhaps commit suicide,” Ritch C. Savin-Williams, a professor of developmental psychology who is director of [Cornell’s Sex and Gender Lab](#), said at a recent news briefing. “I believe the message may create more suicides, more [depression](#) and more [substance abuse](#). I worry about suicide contagion. About 10 to 15 percent are fragile gay kids, and they’re susceptible to messages of gay-youth suicide.”

In an interview, Dr. Savin-Williams said: “We hear only the negative aspects from research. We don’t hear about normal gay teens. It’s hard to get studies published when researchers don’t find differences. A large number of studies found no group differences between gay and straight youth, but these have not been published.”

In his book “The New Gay Teenager” ([Harvard University Press](#), 2005), Dr. Savin-Williams noted that it is much easier to get grants to study clinical problems and treatment; only recently have the lives of gay teenagers in the general nonclinical population begun to be studied by developmental [psychologists](#).

These later studies find that straight youths are just as much at risk of being bullied if they exhibit atypical behavior, he said. Bullies react to nonconformity, and they pick up on people’s weaknesses.

“Bullying is less about sexuality than about gender nonconformity,” Dr. Savin-Williams said. “There are straight youth who are gender-atypical and they suffer as much as gay kids. But whether there’s a direct link between bullying and suicide among gay teens has not been shown.”

Rather, recent studies show that the risk factors for suicide are identical for gay and straight youth. These, Dr. Savin-Williams said, include “prior mental illness, depression, [bipolar disorder](#), dysfunctional families, breakups in relationships, suicide in the family and access to means.”

Still, there are also clear signs of continued stress on gay teenagers. [A national study](#) of more than 15,000 middle and high school students published last month in *Pediatrics* found that gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers were more likely to be harshly punished by schools and courts than their straight peers.

‘Life Can Be Good Right Now’

“The negative message that gay teens get — just survive your [adolescence](#) and life will get better — is a disservice,” Dr. Savin-Williams said. “The message should be that your life can be good right now.”

“Many gay youth have excellent, productive, happy lives. When asked, gay youth can come up with a very long list of positive attributes — they’re more artistic, creative, resilient and sensitive to the needs of others. They say they don’t have to be the most popular.”

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org), a national organization established in 1990 to improve school safety for all students, is an important force in fostering acceptance and countering negative images, discrimination and bullying directed at gay teenagers. The network maintains a registry of Gay-Straight Alliances, student clubs that, as of 2008, have been established in 4,000 schools around the country. The first such alliance was proposed by a straight student who wanted to curb bullying and harassment of fellow students who were gay.

Gay teenagers most at risk for serious emotional distress are those whose families have rejected them, Dr. Diamond said. “There’s nothing harmful about keeping their same-sex attraction a secret for a while” if they think their parents will respond badly, she went on. “Often parents are better able to deal with this information when the kids are older.”

Her advice to parents: “Continue to express affection for your kids despite your own feelings about homosexuality. Let them know they are loved and accepted. Hug them, spend time with them, watch movies together.”

Moreover, she continued, parents and teachers often mistake a youngster’s underlying intent in seeking a partner. “They want to find a boyfriend, someone to love,” she said of gay adolescent boys. “These are not sexual concerns, they’re relationship concerns — and they are just as common among heterosexual as homosexual youths. They are classic adolescent worries.

“Adults should take a deep breath and answer their questions, saying something like, ‘I’m sure you’ll find someone who will love and appreciate you.’ ”

As for suicide, Dr. Diamond said: “What most commonly precipitates [suicide attempts](#) in both heterosexual and homosexual adolescents is being dumped by a romantic partner. Kids who lose someone they cared about need to be listened to in a sensitive way, offered support and comfort, and reassured that this is not their only chance of finding love.”

David M. Huebner, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at the University of Utah, has just produced an informational video, “Lead With Love,” that gives parents concrete examples of how to respond when their children come out to them. It can be viewed free at www.leadwithlovefilm.com.

