

In the System and In the Life

Case Studies

What Would You Do If I Was Gay?

By Gina

I remember sitting on the couch next to my dad watching the news on TV when I was about 10 years-old. There was a report about a gay and lesbian parade going on in New York City. I did not know what it meant to be gay. I asked my father and he told me, "That's when two men or two women love each other like a boy and girl do." "Why would someone want to do that?" I asked. Without looking at me, he answered, "Well, they can't help it. Gay people are just born like that, like having brown eyes." "Oh," I said, thinking that it sounded really weird. But then I became worried. What if I turned out to be gay? So I said to my dad, "What would you do if I was gay, Daddy?" He jumped up and looked at me and said, "Why?" "I was just wondering," I answered, sorry that I had asked at all. "Well, you would still be my daughter," he said, sitting down again. But for some reason his answer didn't make me feel any better.

A few years later, during my freshman year in high school, I met Jennifer. We became very close, but I knew the way I felt about her was very different from the way I felt about my other close friends. Soon I began to realize that I liked her as more than just a friend. It was very scary for me to think about because I'd heard how the girls in school would talk about "lezzies" and the disgusting things they did.

That summer, because I couldn't handle the feelings I was having, I ended my friendship with Jennifer. But I still felt like I had to tell someone. I decided on my friend Linda, who I looked up to like an older sister. Sitting in her room one day I sort of hinted around the subject, afraid that she was going to squeal the minute I brought it up. Finally, I just spit it out: "Linda, what would you think if I, uh, said that I, um, well if I liked, like, another girl?" I was very embarrassed, very ashamed of what I had told her and very afraid of her reaction. But she said, "That's not gross at all. Do you want to talk?" Linda made me feel much better and helped me find a support group where I could talk about what I was feeling.

Discussion Questions:

1. Gina's father says he would still accept her if she were gay. But Gina writes, "But for some reason, his answer didn't make me feel any better." Why do you think she felt that way?
2. When Gina realized how attracted she was to Jennifer, she ended the relationship. Why do you think she did that?

3. Have you ever had to end a friendship because you couldn't be yourself around that person? If so, and if you had to do it over, would you still end the friendship? Why or why not?
4. Was your coming out experience similar to or different from Gina's?
5. Linda and a support group helped Gina accept herself. Have you ever participated in a support group?
6. Has a friend ever helped you through a difficult time? How?
7. What other things come up for you from reading Gina's story?

Don't Be Ashamed Of Who You Are
By Lorraine

There are gays and lesbians in group homes (and everywhere) who have to face being called “faggot,” “dyke,” and “queer.” Threatened by homophobes (people who are afraid of gays), they have to stay “in the closet” for fear of what people will think of them. But 19 year-old Delores, one of my good friends, is not afraid to say she’s a lesbian. She has taught me that phrases like “homophobia,” “straight people,” and “in the closet” are ridiculous. We live in the same group home. Delores is a great friend to hang out with. Here’s my interview with her:

Q: How long have you been in foster care?

A: Since I was 15.

Q: What are the best aspects of the group home?

A: I don’t have to be home any more. Coming to this group home was a relief for me.

Q: How old were you when you found out you were a lesbian?

A: Nineteen.

Q: How did the group home residents react when you told them you were a lesbian?

A: They were like, “Oh, OK. Next. We’ve known for so long.” But I think it’s really sad how when some people find out you’re a lesbian, that is all they think of you.

Q: What does the term “in the closet” mean?

A: It means different things for different people. But ultimately what it means is that you know you’re a lesbian or gay or bisexual and you keep it a secret. But I think it all comes down to shame.

Q: So you weren’t afraid to reveal your identity?

A: At first I was a little bit afraid ‘cause I was afraid of what they were going to think. I was also ashamed that I was Dominican and so dark. But then it hit me, “Delores, you are who you are. Don’t be afraid of it. Don’t be ashamed of who you are.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about a time when you had trouble accepting something about yourself—your appearance, your weight, being lonely, etc. Why was it hard to accept that aspect of yourself? Did you eventually become more comfortable with that part of you? Why or why not?
2. For Delores, going into foster care is a relief from the abuse she suffered at home. Do you think it’s more common for youth to feel relief or anxiety when going into care? Why?

3. The group home residents were accepting of Delores after she tells them she's gay. If you've come out, was your coming out experience in foster care similar or different from hers? How?
4. If you're not gay, how have youth in your group home, foster home, or agency reacted to kids who have come out?
5. Delores says learning to accept herself as a dark-skinned Dominican helped prepare her for the discovery that she's gay. How is accepting your race or ethnicity similar to accepting your sexuality? How is it different?
6. What other things come up for you from reading Lorraine and Delores's story?

Too Shy to Say HI
By Eugene

I'm sitting in a corner of a mostly gay café when I notice a cute guy sitting across from me. Hoping that he's glancing at me too, I look again. Our eyes meet, but I quickly turn away. I'm feeling nervous, so my stomach tightens. Still, I take a chance and look back. He's still looking! Taking this as a sign, I walk over to sit next to him and say... well, that's when I get stuck. It doesn't matter though because in reality I'm still sitting in my chair, too shy to approach my admirer.

I've had a few experiences like that, unsure of myself and too afraid of rejection to make the first move. There are gay spots where some guys will go up to people and ask them out immediately. Sometimes I wish I had the guts to do that. Some of my insecurities hinder my ability to approach guys. Throughout my life, there have been people who said they would be there for me but then they left. I'm also insecure about my body and feel unattractive most of the time.

When I see someone I'm attracted to, a series of thoughts runs through my head. I ask myself: "What happens if he says yes? Will we hit it off as friends? If we started dating and it gets serious, will it last? Is he ready for an actual relationship?" After these initial questions, I begin to wonder if he's feeling and thinking the same things I am. And a lot of these guys aren't interested in each other's feelings. Instead, the hook-ups are for fun, for a one-night stand. I don't have a problem with others having casual sex, but I'm not looking for that. I want someone who wants to become close friends before anything serious begins, so that when there are hard times we will still have a bond that's be hard to break.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a time you were attracted to someone but were too shy to talk to them or to make your feelings known. Why weren't you able to talk to that person? How did it feel to be around him or her? Were you able to make your feelings known? Why or why not?
2. Eugene has a lot of anxieties and insecurities about approaching guys. He says he feels unattractive, worries about being rejected, and doesn't want just a one-night stand. Which of his worries about dating do you relate the most to? Why?
3. Dating is stressful for everyone. What might make it even more stressful for gay teens?
4. Whether you're gay or straight, how hard is it for you to approach people you're interested in dating? What might make it easier?
5. What other things come up for you from reading Eugene's story?

Gay On The Block...Gay In The Group Home
By Jeremiah

Because I'm 6'6" and hefty, people often think I should be a ballplayer of some sort. But once you get to know me, I'm no ballplayer. In my old neighborhood, guys would always call me out of my house to play basketball, knowing that was not what I liked to do. When I missed a shot they would ridicule me and call me "faggot."

It's true. I'm gay. I act a little bit feminine. When I'm happy, I like to guy shoes. I also like to read romances and family-oriented books. My favorite book is *Mama* by Terry McMillan. It's about a divorced black woman with five kids who's having problems being accepted into society. In fact, I've been different my whole life. I first realized I was homosexual at an early age because when I was around 5 or 6 I would see boys and think, "How cute." My favorite toy was Christmastime Barbie. I would never do anything that boys did, such as sports, play fighting or singing to rap music.

I could never understand why anyone would harass me for that. I used to think, "So what if I'm gay? So what if I'm different? Accept me or don't because I'm just me." I couldn't understand why boys wanted to bother to fight me when they didn't know a damn thing about me. But they did. I think those boys did what they did because of their own insecurities, because they wanted to prove that they were manly.

One night I went alone to catch a bus to go to a party. I was wearing dark jeans and a matching jacket. My mother had spent a lot of money on that outfit. All of a sudden a partially-opened bottle of urine hit me and got all over me. Some straight guys think doing something like that to a gay guy is creative. They all hurried away and I screamed and cried because of all the money my mother had spent on the outfit. Then I felt the same way as always—puzzled as to why I had to be their victim. I thought the world was against me and that no one cared.

One person who helped me survive was my grandma, who raised me. From my grandma I learned strength, courage, patience, love, heartfulness and to treat all people the same no matter what. She grew up in a time when blacks weren't accepted and woman weren't allowed to vote. My grandma saw so much—the Great Depression, both world wars, segregation, lynchings, civil rights. Some people who have lived through hard times grow closed and bigoted. By my grandma had a strong sense of herself and that made her open-minded to different things in life. She encouraged me to do what I thought was right and what would make me happy and she told me that she would always love me.

Three months after I came into foster care because she was ill, I received a call from her. She said, "I love you dear, and don't let no one turn you around." Shortly after that she died. I loved her dearly and I miss her.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a time when someone in your life supported you during a rough time. What did that person do and why did it help? Why do you think they supported you?
2. According to Jeremiah, why did the boys in the neighborhood tease him? In general, why do you think some people pick on gays and lesbians?
3. Have you ever suffered the kinds of abuse that Jeremiah suffered in his neighborhood? If so, how did you survive it?
4. Why was Jeremiah's grandmother so open-minded toward his being gay?
5. What does his grandmother tell him to make him feel better about himself?
6. Is there someone in your life who provides the kind of support that Jeremiah's grandmother did? Have you ever provided that kind of support to someone else? How?
7. What other things come up for you from reading Jeremiah's story?

Trapped!
By Mariah

Being transgender isn't always easy, especially when you're in a straight group home and you're the only one. I'm a guy but I've felt like a female my whole life. And when I dress the part I look a lot like a female, too. I'm 14 years-old and before my grandmother told me, at around age 6, I didn't know I was a boy. I felt and thought like a girl. I liked to wear my hair in a pony tail and I liked dressing in girls' clothes. When I was growing up, everyone knew me and my family and they didn't bother me.

But when I went into foster care it was a different story. The first group home I was in was terrible and so were a lot of the other group homes I've been in. I had at least two fights a day. The boys did stupid things like throw rocks at me or put bleach in my food. Once I was thrown down a flight of stairs and I've had my nose broken twice. Often the staff were bad, too. They would stand there while the kids jumped me and one time one of the staff jumped me with the kids. Another staff even told me to kill myself to be out of my misery.

After these things happened I would make fierce, nasty faces or I would just ignore people. And later, when I got to go to my room, sometimes I'd just sit there and cry or I'd read a book or listen to music to block things out of my head. I used to think, "What's so bad about me?"

I was bouncing around from group home to group home. But then at one home there were staff and kids who made me feel really good about myself. Some staff taught kids that they should respect me, and that helped the kids to be more open-minded. I was even able to date openly. Everything changed and I finally felt safe and content.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a time when you felt completely alone with no family or friends who could understand or support you. Why did you feel so alone? What was most difficult about it? Were you eventually able to feel connected to people again? Why or why not?
2. Mariah felt different as a child because of her gender expression. Did you ever have feelings of being different as a child? What were the feelings like? How did you deal with them?
3. What was your reaction to the way staff treated Mariah? How could they have treated her better?
4. Why do you think some people have trouble accepting transgender people?

5. How do you feel about transgender people? Do you know anyone who identifies as transgender or whose gender expression crosses lines society has established? Do you know how they've been treated by others? By you?
6. Are there aspects of your own gender that you would feel comfortable expressing if you felt safe in doing so? What sorts of things might make you feel safe enough to express your gender identity in ways not typically associated with your biological sex?
7. What other things come up for you when you read Mariah's story?

Kicked Out Of My Foster Home Because I was Gay
By Shameek

During my first four years in foster care I was in nine group and foster homes. My ninth home was different from the others because I had just “come out” as a gay person and I was worried about being accepted by my new foster mother, Sharon. When I first moved in with Sharon and her two biological daughters, I kept to myself. I felt close to Sharon but not close enough to tell her that I was gay.

Before I moved in with Sharon I came out to my social worker and she thought Sharon would be an excellent foster parent for me because Sharon had once been in the system, was young, and could probably accept my sexual identity.

One night at a gay club I was introduced to Bridgette. We only said hello but I thought about her throughout the rest of the night and continuously through the week. The next week I ran into Bridgette at another gay club. We danced, drank and at the end of the night we exchanged numbers. After two weeks of talking on the phone we went out. She took me to get my hair done and brought me flowers.

Sharon, who had been so worried because I didn’t have any friends, became so happy I now had Bridgette that she encouraged me to see more of her. But even though I was sure I was gay, I felt like I still had to hide it from my foster mother. One time Bridgette and I went out and she brought me flowers. When I got home, Sharon said to me, “You told me that you were going out with Bridgette, but you went with a guy and he brought you flowers.” Nervously, I agreed with her, wondering how long this charade would last.

Somehow or other Sharon eventually found out that Bridgette was gay and assumed that I was gay also. To this day I don’t know how she found out, but after she found out, she told my social worker that she didn’t want me in her house anymore because she was afraid I would try something with her 12 year-old biological daughter. I immediately became angry because I would never invade her daughter’s privacy like that.

The moving didn’t bother me because I had moved nine times before that and had learned not to get close to anyone. I didn’t want to stay in Sharon’s home if she didn’t trust me.

In the meantime, I noticed Bridgette had started to drift away. I asked her why our relationship was ending and she explained that it was because she had destroyed my relationship with my mother. I was ashamed of being in foster care, so I had told Bridgette that Sharon was my real mother. Now I couldn’t tell her that Sharon was my foster mother because Bridgette would think that I didn’t trust her enough to tell her the truth in the beginning.

But since that incident, I have been honest at the beginning of my relationships. I tell them that I'm in foster care. I'm presently in kinship care with my grandmother. She doesn't know I'm gay because she wouldn't accept it due to her religious beliefs. I can't afford to have her kick me out because I'm 19 and there is no place for me to go.

As for Sharon, I think she was wrong for making me leave because of my sexuality. I think agencies should warn prospective foster parents who are willing to take teenagers that they might have a gay teen in their home, and should give them training in how to deal with those types of situations. No one should have to live a lie for fear of being moved.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a time when you had to hide something about yourself because of fear of what others might think. What did you have to hide? How did it feel to hide it? How did it affect your emotions and your relations with others? Did you eventually stop hiding? Why or why not?
2. Why does Shameek's social worker think Sharon will be a good foster mother for her?
3. What might Shameek's social worker have done differently in order not to put Shameek in a situation where she felt like she had to hide her sexuality?
4. If you were in Shameek's shoes, how would you have handled the situation with Sharon? With Bridgette?
5. Shameek felt like she had to hide both her sexual identity and her foster care identity. Which do you think is harder to hide? Why? What is similar about being gay and being in foster care? What is different about them?
6. Do you think it's fair that someone feels as though they have to hide parts of themselves in order to have a place to live? What do you think about that?
7. Do you think it's difficult for people who learn to hide parts of themselves to have honest and trusting relationships as they get older? Why?
8. What other things come up for you when you read Shameek's story?

