



Gender Identity and Expression

Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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Written by: Kathy Nesteby

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

“How do we deal with our girls who are acting like they are lesbians?”

This question is on the rise in recent months. In my experience, it almost always comes with the assumption that the young woman is not, in fact, a lesbian at all. While that may end up being the case, it is ineffective and potentially harmful to begin by taking this for granted.

Due to an absence of research on the topic of lesbian behavior in adolescent females in juvenile justice and human service systems, we are forced to begin with theories about adult women prison populations. Because these are theories, they do not encompass the fact that some women in prison simply are lesbian.

Three commonly held theories related to adult women:

- 1) Subculture: Group values and norms arise from attempts to cope with negative aspects of the setting.
- 2) Deprivation: Behaviors and attitudes are viewed as reactions to being deprived of loved ones.
- 3) Importation: Behaviors and attitudes are shaped by previous experiences, primarily exploitation or abuse.

A fourth, less commonly held theory:

- 4) Gender Fluidity: Previously heterosexual women discovering in prison that they are attracted to women.

The inmates themselves give a variety of reasons including love, sex, companionship, passing the time and curiosity, with economic support being the reason most frequently given.

Overlapping these theories with our knowledge of gender identity, gender and adolescent development allows us to begin to understand this issue.

- A) Relationships of any sort are the single most significant priority for females.
- B) Teen years are a time of upheaval and trying to figure out where you ‘fit.’
- C) Non-heterosexual youth can identify their own sexuality despite common adult beliefs to the contrary.

Because we cannot possibly know the “why” for lesbian behavior based solely on our subjective observations, the first response of staff when confronted with this situation needs to be deliberate rather than suspicious. It is safer and far less potentially damaging if you simply assume that the young women in question are lesbian. Lesbians are found at a higher rate within the juvenile justice and human service systems than in the general population. Even if it turns out the young women are not lesbian, they may have serious underlying reasons for their behavior. Perhaps they are coping with past sexual abuse in the only way they know how. Neither of these situations warrant treating young women as if their feelings and resulting behavior is ‘wrong’ or taken lightly simply because it is occurring with a same gender person.

On the other end of the spectrum, teenagers are developmentally prone to blindly following their peers. They are also highly curious and inclined toward risk-taking. The desire to fit in or be rebellious may motivate their behavior - all normal tendencies for adolescents. Premature alarm or an overly punitive response does not help them work through this developmental stage. Guidance and support do.

Adult overreaction can cause a young woman who is lesbian/questioning to hide who she really is and a young woman who is trying to fit in by being rebellious to exaggerate those behaviors.

Ultimately, programs/staff can take steps to prevent or mitigate problems related to gender identity.

- ~ Have a program/agency policy that clearly states lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth will be treated equitably. Share with new participants and staff members.
- ~ Examine policies that restrict young women's affectionate contact with others. Are they too strict?
- ~ Train staff about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. Staff must set aside personal feelings.
- ~ Treat a romantic relationship between young women the same as you would treat a relationship between a young woman and young man. Are they off-limits? Is only physical contact limited? Relationships that can be observed by staff and openly discussed with the young women involved can yield helpful information regarding their personal issues. Relationships that are banned simply escalate or go underground.
- ~ Don't underestimate the possibility that she may truly be a lesbian or questioning her gender identity.
- ~ Don't assume the young woman is lying, faking or trying to "get attention".
- ~ Openness and acceptance on the part of staff signals to lesbian/questioning girls that it is a safe place for them and at the same time signals to young women seeking to use it as a tool to antagonize that there is little shock value to be had among staff.

"An Analysis of Inmate Explanations for Lesbian Relationships in Prison". International Journal of Sociology of the Family. Volume 30, Number 1. Fall 2002. 66-77.

"Hidden Injustice: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Juvenile Courts". Legal Services for Children, National Juvenile Defender Center and National Center for Lesbian Rights. 2009.

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Kathy Nesteby, Coordinator
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915
Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov
www.women.iowa.gov/girls

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
Lucas State Office Building
Des Moines, IA 50319