

Different in More Ways Than One.

Providing Guidance for Teenagers on Their Way to Identity, Sexuality and Respect

2 Relationships

Her hands shaking, Almira grabs the telephone. The writing blurs again and again before her eyes. In a few seconds her life has been destroyed, as though by bombs.

“Hello, Julie Bäcker speaking?”

Almira sobs uncontrollably.

“Almira, is that you? Good heavens, what happened?”

“I have to go back to Kosovo.”

A breathless silence at the other end. “My God”, whispers Julie, ages later.

“Stay where you are darling, I will be right there in a moment.”

“They can’t just simply deport you. You’ve been living here for eleven years.

That’s almost half your life” Julie, bewildered, keeps reading over and over the notification from the Aliens’ Registration Office.

“They say the war is over”, whispers Almira. “But my family originally comes from Bosnia, and they’d make my life a living Hell if I went there. And if they ever find out that I’m a lesbian they’ll kill me,” Almira looks at her girlfriend.

“In Kosovo too, people were murdered. I saw them beat up my sister and my cousins, and threaten to kill my uncle. Death awaits me there. There is no further education there for me, no home, no love. Only violence, only destruction. I can’t go back, Julie.”

“No, of course not. We’ll find a way, Almira. I love you, I won’t let you go. Never, do you hear me?”

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Framework

First of all

Contrary to popular myth, lesbian and gay relationships are not essentially different from other types of relationships and offer as much diversity as heterosexual couples (no two couples function in the same way). One difference, though, is the fact that in most societies, homosexual partnerships are far less accepted than heterosexual ones. In most EU member states, there are less or no legal rights for homosexual partnerships. Having to live in a society that considers their couples less worthy than others creates additional obstacles for many homosexuals in their everyday lives.

Another difference comes from the fact that it is impossible in a gay or lesbian couple to function on the basis of the traditional division of gender roles. In a lesbian or gay couple the partners have to find a way to interact together which is not based on standard role patterns, much more than in heterosexual couples. This is a chance and a challenge because it enables both partners to express their individual desires and abilities. The values ascribed to men and women are generally different and entail an unequal social status. It can be difficult for two men or two women to construct a satisfying relationship because of the way that they are expected to behave towards other men or women: more negotiation between the partners is needed, for instance for the division of tasks and household chores.

The effects of a partnership between men or women is not only restricted to the two adults involved. Many children have two mothers or two fathers, inside a “rainbow family”. Recent scientific research shows that these children do not become bi- or homosexual more frequently than other children in heterosexual homes. However, they may experience bullying by their intolerant surroundings.

Basic information

What does partnership mean? The answer is determined by many things like religion, culture, national laws, education, social norms and personal values. In some cultures and societies, the choice of relationship is more influenced by a collective point of view and by family values while in others it can be more influenced by the value of individuality. This cultural difference can have significant implications for some people coming from a conservative cultural background. Such a background tends to put a strong emphasis on family and community whereas society in general has a more “individualistic” thinking. For lesbians and gays coming from such background it can be difficult to live a gay and lesbian way of life while at the same time maintaining a good relationship with their families. The family is more than just the people who raised them; they are also the ones who provide the necessary protection to make the child strong enough to face the challenges of life.

Relationships today are in state of a flux. There are more varied forms of relationships for homo- and heterosexuals than 30 years ago: getting married, staying single, living apart but as a couple, even same-sex registered partnership. Diversity means liberty but it also creates the need to make a choice. Young people ask themselves: How can I know which type of relationship is right for me? Today, laws creating homosexual marriages or partnerships exist in the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands (for more detailed information get in touch with lesbian and gay organisations either local or at European level like ILGA-Europe). But up to now there are only limited possibilities for gay and lesbian couples to move inside the EU and still be recognized as a couple in another country.

What does this mean for me?

For young gays, lesbians or bisexuals, it is very important to meet others who share their experiences in order to get an idea of the different ways one can be involved in a relationship. With this experience, they realise that they can actively create their relationships and develop their own way of life.

- Show through your own attitude that you respect diverse partnerships and consider it as a value to society if two people take care for each other.
- Be sensitive towards same-sex relations between young people, regardless if they are of a romantic or sexual nature or not, and encourage the youngsters to be respectful and friendly when dealing with each other. Be supportive - even brief statements inside the class or in public can be helpful.
- Support the parents of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. If the parents can't accept their children's partner, this places a significant stress on their sons and daughters.
- Sex education should deal not only with biology, but should also focus on the emotional aspects of partnership and gender identities. Try to remember that some of your students may experience difficulties fitting in accepted genders and/or roles. Moreover, sex education should not present homosexual issues separately from heterosexual ones. This only serves to reinforce the division between different forms of sexual orientation and encourages young people to see one as "normal" and the other as "deviant". Instead, sexuality should be presented as encompassing different types of sexual orientation and identities wherein hetero- and homosexuality are but two of many examples.
- When dealing with intercultural questions, the basic principle should be to accept other views, even those that seem strange in your personal opinion: being respectful towards others is the best way people can live together. To insist that young people must come out in order to have satisfying same-sex relationships is counter-productive. Focus instead on offering support and trying to play down the need for clear identification.

Education

Bear in mind

Each of us is involved in many different types of relationships at the same time: with our parents, friends, teachers, etc. Each of these relationships is unique and changes over time. The word “partnership” means something different to everyone. Some want it to be full of excitement, others want to be close to someone, to feel safe and secure, to regain energy. What is right for one person is not necessarily right for another and an arrangement that is suited to a given person today perhaps won’t be as well-suited tomorrow. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to have a relationship. The type of relationships people choose and the way they shape their lives within that relationship must be negotiated between the two partners. You are invited to consider your own relationship and the relationship between two men or two women. Take your time to answer the following questions. It may also be interesting to look at the corresponding paragraph in the counselling section below.

- What do you think defines a happy relationship? What do you think is your partner’s opinion about this? What does your partner think that your opinion is about it?
- Have you ever seen two men or two women kiss or hug each other or hold hands? What was your reaction to this? Why did you react in that way?
- How did you know what you were looking for in a relationship? How did you imagine a relationship looked like day-to-day? What role have examples and traditional role patterns played in the shaping of these images?
- What kind of division of roles or tasks do you practise in your current (or did you practise in a past) relationship? Do you feel comfortable with it? What do you think is your partner’s opinion about this? How has the division of tasks been negotiated?
- What advantages do you see if there are two persons of the same sex in a relationship? What problems can arise?
- How do your personal values affect your teaching?
- How do you imagine fidelity? Do your views have an influence on your lessons?

Education

Tools

Love story

Aim: to explore the representation of gay or lesbian relationships in the media, to educate pupils about the influence of media on public opinion

Method: Find an example of a homosexual love story in a youth magazine (ask your pupils to bring an example to class; if they cannot find a story, a photo can be used to get started). Take a critical look at the content of the story contents and discuss this in class. Questions: What is the general function of a love story in general? How are homosexual relationships represented in this story? What information concerning gays, lesbians and their relationships does it provide? Does it stereotype certain people, certain roles? Etc.

Please note: The exercise works well with pupils aged 14 or older. The exercise fits well inside a larger sequence of lessons about the media. Journalism should be critically analysed in its function and appearance: Who writes texts for magazines? How? Who gives them information? What is “good” journalism?

If the pupils criticise the story as being too conventional or as portraying stereotypes, they can develop their own story with their own photos.

Hetero, Homo, Bi: Pros, Cons, and Stereotypes

Aim: Identifying stereotypes, comparing different forms of partnership

Method: Split the pupils into small groups and distribute a paper divided into the following categories: Man-Woman Relationships, Two-Man Relationships, and Two-Woman Relationships. In the small groups, the pupils are asked to consider the advantages, disadvantages, and commonly known stereotypes for each relationship category. The results should be written on the paper and are then discussed in a plenary session.

Please note: The exercise is appropriate for pupils aged 14 years or older (this exercise works best if they have had relationships of their own or if they have observed the experiences of others). The teacher can go deeper into the pupils’ replies by asking “Where have you seen examples of this?” The stereotypes should be questioned in a critical way and the restrictions of human perception should be explained.

The Joneses, the Johnsons and the Johns

Aim: To recognise that the concept of family can take different forms

Method: There are different families with similar sounding names (for instance Jones, Johnson and John etc.). All families have the same number of members (father, mother, son, daughter, etc.). Every pupil receives a card with an identity written on it (the Johnson father, the Jones daughter, etc.); the identities are memorized and the cards handed back. When the group is given the sign to start, the members of the same family have to find each other and then pose for a family photo. Every family demonstrates its pose in front of the others; the pupils outside the group can then try to guess who represents who in the family. A second round of the exercise is then held. This time some cards are changed unbeknownst to the participants. Some families now have different combinations: in one family there are two mothers or two fathers, others are single-parent families, in another the ex-lover of a family member can be integrated. Possible questions for a group discussion include: What was your reaction when you realised that there were two mothers or two fathers in your group? Do you know someone who lives with two mothers or fathers? What is a family? What is important for you in a family? What different forms of living together do you know of? What is necessary for you to feel “at home”? How do you want to live later in your life?

Please note: The exercise is suitable for pupils aged 11 or older. It is very important that the pupils don't realise that the identities written on the cards have been altered for the second round – to avoid discovery, you might want to use a second set of cards. In the second round, the pupils may initially be irritated if they think the teacher has made a mistake with the identities (“you put too many mothers in one group!”) You may have to tell them this was planned in advance.

Education

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the counselling and health care sector.

Who is the “man” who is the “woman” in a same-sex relationship?

The notion that there is a “man” and a “woman” in a gay or lesbian relationship is a cliché based on heterosexist notions. Because there are two women or two men, people think that one of them has to fit into the role model of the other sex. In a gay or lesbian relationship, the idea of forcing one of the two men into the traditional role of a woman, or one of the two women into the traditional role of a man to describe their behaviour or character does not make sense.

Do same-sex relationships last longer than heterosexual relationships?

Relationships between men and women last for as long or as short as homosexual relationships do. Some can last for only a few weeks while others may go on for many years or even “forever”. The only difference is that a homosexual relationship is rarely encouraged by society or by the partners’ families. This lack of acceptance and external support can make it more difficult for the couple to solve problems within the relationship.

Do gays and lesbians cheat on their partners more often than heterosexuals?

Scientific research has shown that a large majority of young people want to live in a stable relationship and would be happy to grow old with their partner. In this sense, gays, lesbians and bisexuals are no different from heterosexuals. Of course, the ideal of an “everlasting love” is difficult for anyone to reach. People no longer remain with one partner until death like they used to. Instead, people are more likely to change stable partners once, twice, or several times during their lifetime. Researchers call this behaviour “serial” or “sequential monogamy”.

In which ways are same-sex relationships discriminated against?

Same-sex relationships are discriminated against in many ways. They face discrimination in a legal context because in most countries, same-sex couples are not legally recognized. This implies a series of limitations, in inheritance laws, visiting rights in hospitals, or in housing, for example. Society discriminates against lesbians and gays because there are still many people who think that a gay and lesbian lifestyles are not as good as heterosexuals. And they are discriminated against in terms of visibility, since they are only rarely mentioned in schoolbooks for instance.

“What happened, Almira? You have been staring at the walls for weeks. You were given a six in three subjects. And I really thought you wanted to achieve something here in Germany. If you continue this way, you’ll never get an apprenticeship”.

“It does not depend on me”, says Almira softly. “I have no future in Germany.”

“Nonsense”, fumes the teacher. “Of course it depends on you. If you really want to achieve something, you will do it. But of course not with this performance. It’s too bad Almira, I was wrong about you.”

If you only knew that I’m a lesbian, you’d probably approve of the deportation notification one hundred percent, thinks Almira and puts away her work, quietly.

“But surely something can be done against a deportation notification,” Julie looks at her classmates defiantly, as they leave the lecture room after the lesson.

“Hey, the war in Kosovo is over, Julie. All these people, they’ve been here long enough. You’d better look for another girlfriend” Georg grins maliciously. Others nod.

“What kind of people are you?” Julie looks around, shocked. “And you want to become educators?”

“Oh honestly, you only want to prevent this deportation because you fancy her, don’t you?” , pipes up Karin.

“You have simply no idea of what war and trauma can do to a person, even years later”, replies Julie.

“I think you’re overdoing it way too much again, Julie. As always.” Georg leans back nonchalantly.

“In school nobody understands me. I feel so lonely. The teacher thinks I’m lazy.” Almira shows Julie the messed-up German essay.

“The students are just as bad”, sobs Julie with resignation. “They couldn’t care less what’s going on here.”

“Why don’t we look for help on the Web?”

“Almira honey, that’s a wonderful idea!”

Moments later they sit in front of their computers, with great concentration.

“Support Group for Refugees, here it is” says Julie suddenly. “Exactly what we were looking for.”

“And see here,” laughs Almira. “I’ve found a European Chat for young Gays and Lesbians.”

“Smashing,” smiles Julie. “I’ll call up the Support Group, ok?”

“In the meantime I’ll enter the URL of the Triangle – Chat.”

“Appointment at the Support Group in one hour”, announces Julie.

“The Chat is open.” Fascinated, Almira types something in.

“Show me.” Julie takes a seat next to her.

to be continued next page

<Almira> *hello, I am a lesbian living in Germany, soon to be deported back to Kosovo. What can I do?*

<Mark> *Hey, I'm from the Netherlands. If you have a German girlfriend, marry her. Should be possible, according to the German Life-Partnership Law, if you are both over 18.*

<Julie> *Hey, I'm the girlfriend. Do you really mean it? That would be great. We're both over 18. But we have to go now. Should we keep you posted?*

<Mark> *Absolutely. Nice chatting with you. See ya.*

<Aaron> *I'd also like to be updated. You can meet me here often in the Chat.*

<Almira> *Great. Thx, we'll be back. Cheers.*

"I'm afraid it doesn't look very good for the refugees from Kosovo. Our authorities don't want to understand, that minority groups like Bosnian Muslims still have a hard time there." The counsellor looks steadily at Almira. "What's more, you're a lesbian. Sending you back there is irresponsible."

"If we got married – according to the new Life-Partnership Law – we could avoid deportation?" Julie's voice sounds imploring.

"Yes, that would certainly be possible. According to § 23 of the Aliens' Law, after the marriage Almira would be entitled at first to a limited Residence Permit for three years, then she'd get a limited renewal, and in eight years' time she could apply for German citizenship."

"But what would happen to my parents?", asks Almira.

"It would not prevent your parents from being deported", says the advisor softly.

"I can't stay here without them", sobs Almira. "Without my parents I can't live here."

"You should come here with your parents. We'll do everything we can to save them." The advisor hesitates. "Is it because you're in love that you want to get married, or is it just an attempt to save Almira?"

"I love Almira", replies Julie. "Perhaps I wouldn't have come to this idea without this threat but now I see it as a great opportunity."

"I don't want to lose my parents", whispers Almira. "I don't know if they'll ever understand, me marrying a woman."

"Almira, for you going back to Kosovo would be the end. You've grown up here, you've spent more than half your life in this country, your whole socialisation has taken place here, you're used to this culture, you want to get an education. You love a woman. To have such a life in Kosovo is unthinkable. And then there is the trauma that you and your parents have gone through. There is no chance to get a therapy there. Returning to Kosovo means a whole new trauma for all your family. You told us that some members of your family were badly beaten up and received death threats before your very eyes."

Almira weeps silently. "Both my parents have gone through this. Mum tried to protect me. She is strong. But Dad went to pieces. I cannot leave Mum alone with him. Dad needs us both."

"Do your parents know, that you and Julie want to get married?"

"Perhaps they'd put up with that, but they couldn't stand to be separated from me. For my Dad it would be the end."

"There must be a solution for you and for your parents, Almira. I can't promise you anything. Marrying Julie would certainly save you. And we must save you."

The advisor smiles encouragingly at Almira. "Come tomorrow with your parents. Together we'll fight for them."

the end

Counselling and Health Care

Bear in mind

Along with positive feelings, every relationship, even a heterosexual one, includes anger, stress, and different expectations between the partners. Because they are afraid of losing their partner, some people bind themselves too close to them; they want to possess and control their partner. In many partnerships, fidelity has a special importance, yet everyone defines fidelity in a different way. Can someone be called faithful if they spend a lot of time on their own without their partner? And what if someone has a one-night-stand? As people define fidelity differently, this can cause trouble. You are invited to consider your own relationship and the relationship between two men or two women. Take your time to answer the following questions. It may also be useful for you to first have a look at the corresponding paragraph in the education section above.

- When did you first realise that there were different forms of living together than those you learned about in your family? (These can include gay/lesbian relationships, your family's views on love and on relationships, etc.) Are you looking for a partner who corresponds to or differs from these ideals?
- Do you think that lesbian and gay relationships are as fulfilling as heterosexual relationships? If yes, how do you think they manage this? If no, why not?
- Are there problems in relationships which you would describe as typically male or typically female? Are there any typical differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals in dealing with problems in their relationships-? How could these problems be solved?
- What impact can an uncertain legal status have on a relationship? How must it be like for the partners involved to know that a large part of society would rather their relationship didn't exist?
- How do your personal values affect your counseling? How do you view fidelity? What influence does this have on your counseling?

Counselling and Health Care Tools

Question of Scales

Aim: These questions help the couple to formulate their expectations at the beginning of the counselling process.

Method: Independently from each other, two partners give their responses to a series of statements according to a scale graded from 1 to 10 (1 = lowest value, 10 = highest value). First they give their own reply, and then they also indicate what they think their partner would reply. The scales can be prepared on a flip chart by the counsellor before the session. Some examples for possible statements (these need to be reformulated into two phrases – one for each polar opposite):

- the chances that we will be still a couple in one year's time are very low/very high
- the resources we have to cope with a crisis together are many/are few
- after the common counseling sessions, our problem will become bigger/smaller (easier to deal with/more difficult to deal with)
- I can personally contribute few/many things to solve the problem
- My partner can contribute few/many things to solve the problem

Please note: The use of circular questions helps to clarify each partner's point of view (e.g. What do I think? What do I think the other thinks? What do they think I think?) For this to be effective, it is important that counsellors pose the questions in the same way to both partners. The answers to these questions show in which direction client-oriented counselling can continue. If the partners formulate different opinions, it is important to work on their common aims. In the second step, changes can be anticipated by asking the partners what could happen if a rating on the scale changes (i.e. if a rating goes up). A homework assignment for the couple in between sessions could be to ask them to pretend for one or several days that the positive changes had already happened.

Social surrounding as support

Aim: Represent the social surroundings of gay and lesbian couples and work on sources of support in order to find solutions for problems.

Method:

1st step: Set Up

The couple is asked to set up a system with different coloured figures or symbols. These symbols represent themselves and persons belonging to their social surrounding (members of both families, particular persons that are important to one or to both partners, their children, former partners, counsellors, etc).

2nd step: Perception

The partners name the persons they set up during the set-up phase and explain the system from their point of view.

3rd step: Questioning

- How static/ dynamic is the system?
- Where are the limits between the persons in the system?
- Which links exist?
- Who has contributed to stabilising the relationship in the past and how?
- Who was involved in finding solutions to the problems?
- Who supports the fact that the couple has sought out counselling and how?
- Which of the persons identified in the exercise best knows how the partners could cope with their current crisis?
- Who would benefit the most if the partners' relationship was stabilised during the counselling process?

4th step: Anticipating changes

The partners are invited to change the way the relationship is presented in terms of figures and symbols, and to move them to a different place. What exactly would change then?

Please note: This exercise focuses attention on the human resources available to support the couple.

The representation of real persons with neutral symbols should not lead to interpretations of each individual's role. The point of the exercise is to look at the system as a whole.

Counselling and Health Care

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the education sector.

What impact does an unequal legal situation have on same-sex relationships?

Same-sex partnerships do not enjoy the same legal rights as heterosexuals do. This can affect the relationship in many concrete ways. For example, if one of the partners dies, the other can be thrown out of their common apartment if she/he is not the official contractor. A same-sex partner cannot always follow her or his partner to another EU country like in a heterosexual couple, because many member states still deny same-sex couples equal residence or social support rights. Furthermore, same-sex couples are often not encouraged or supported by others and must solve most of their problems by themselves. This lack of acceptance is generally a source of stress for lesbians, gays and bisexuals. It has even more impact if it comes from the closest family members. A hostile surrounding binds the partners closer to each other and leads to isolation. Lesbians often suffer from double discrimination, because women and men are still not treated equally in many societies.

How does the everyday life of same-sex couples differ from that of people in a heterosexual relationship?

It can differ if their family, friends, neighbours, or colleagues have a problem with homosexuality. The fact that homosexual partners usually have to declare or justify their homosexuality in public also makes big a difference compared to heterosexual couples. Homosexuals have to declare and “label” themselves instead of “just going on with their lives” the way heterosexuals can.

How can I help a boy or a girl who is desperately trying to find a same-sex partner?

To help them avoid isolation, it might be a good idea for a young person to join a gay and lesbian youth group because there are many boys and girls with a similar orientation. To join a gay and lesbian sports association, volunteer group, etc., can be helpful if the young person is already beyond the age limit of youth groups. People living in geographically isolated regions may not have such groups in their area. In such cases, however, the Internet can be a help. But be careful when making contacts via the Internet – anonymous users may not be who they claim to be.

Am I gay/lesbian or bisexual if I have been in a relationship with a person of the same sex just once (or twice)?

Most teenagers (boys more frequently than girls) have sexual experiences with the same sex (for example, mutual masturbation). This is common even for those who define themselves as heterosexual. If you fall in love with someone of the same sex, perhaps you are bisexual, which means you can fall in love with men and women. People call someone gay or lesbian if he or she falls in love exclusively with other men or exclusively with other women (see also Chapter 6 “Sexualities”). Nowadays, the need for clear identities seems to be less important. It should be more important for people to listen to their own feelings and to be happy with their partner regardless of that person’s sex.

“I often think some people have very strange ideas about gay relationships – as if they were unlike other partnerships. My partner and I live together, we eat and go out and sleep together. We make plans for our future. Sometimes we have different opinions and we quarrel but my partner really means a lot to me.”

Imprint

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Editor

Ministerium für Gesundheit,
Soziales, Frauen und Familie des
Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen,
D - 40219 Düsseldorf

Internet version

www.diversity-in-europe.org

Authors

Pascal Belling, Flora Bolter,
Peter Dankmeijer, Martin Enders,
Margherita Graglia, Karen Kraan,
Stefan Timmermanns,
Wolfgang Wilhelm

Stories

Adriana Stern

Evaluation

Rutgers Nisso Groep, Floor Bakker,
Ine Vanwesenbeeck

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