

Gay Teens and Smoking

At Least the Camel Doesn't Call Them Names or Kick Them Out of the House

While the overall percentage of teenagers who report using tobacco is surprisingly high, the percentage of gay teenagers who use tobacco is even more of a shock - according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention(CDC) in their Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a whopping 59% of teenagers that classified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual reported using tobacco (compared to 35% of straight teens). Of this group, almost half tried their first cigarette before age 13, a figure greater than the percentage of straight teens. Gay teens are also four times more likely than their straight counterparts to use smokeless tobacco products.

In fact, according to the CDC study, gay teens are significantly more likely than straight teens to engage in high-risk behaviors across the board. The YRBS found that 50% of gay teens had engaged in more than five risky behaviors compared to only 25% of straight teens.

Much media attention was given to the YRBS finding that more than one third of gay, lesbian or bisexual respondents had attempted suicide in the past year, three times more than straight teens. In other findings, 68% of gay teens reported being in a fight, 32.7% had been threatened with a weapon and 27% had engaged in sexual intercourse.

In addition to the high incidence of gay teens smoking, 59% reported using alcohol before the age of 13, 37% had tried marijuana and 17% had tried cocaine. The 1995 survey (currently being updated) did not cover popular club drugs like Ecstasy and Special K, but anecdotal evidence suggests that their usage rate among gay teens is high as well.

Like many teens that use tobacco at an early age, gay teens continue using it as they get older. A 1999 study conducted by Dr. Ronald Stall at the University of California at San Francisco found that overall 48% of gay men reported smoking (compared to 27% of all American men). The rate was higher among those in the 18 to 24 age group - 50% of gay men in this age range reported smoking. At all educational levels, Dr. Stall found that gay men smoked more than the general male population.

What is it about growing up gay that causes such a high percentage of teens to pick up the tobacco habit? And how are the tobacco companies using their marketing muscle to recruit new smokers by exploiting the gay experience?

Sexual orientation is one component of a person's identity, along with culture, ethnicity, gender and personality. It develops over time, so different people realize they are gay at different times in their lives. Although the majority of people realize they are gay at an early age, there are many instances where someone older who has considered him or herself straight realizes or accepts that he or she is gay.

There is no universally accepted figure for the percentage of the overall population that is gay, but it is clear that homosexuality is something that touches almost everyone whether they know it or not. Although many have said that it is inflated, the most popular figure in the media is 10%. At that percentage, one in four families has an immediate family member who is gay, and most families have at least one gay or bisexual person in their extended

family circle.

The number of gay teens is harder to pin down, and in all likelihood, the few figures that are available are underreported. With all of the inner sexual turmoil that occurs during adolescence, many teens are simply unsure whether or not they are gay or just questioning their sexuality. Also, because homosexuality is still generally frowned upon or at the very least not encouraged, some teens that are certain about their orientation are reluctant to admit it in a survey. The state of Massachusetts added a question about sexual orientation to the CDC's YRBS and found that high school students who did not label themselves "heterosexual" classified themselves as follows:

<i>Gay or Lesbian</i>	0.6%
<i>Bisexual</i>	1.9%
<i>Not sure</i>	1.5%
<i>None of the above</i>	3.7%
<i>Skipped the question</i>	9.3%

Whatever their number, gay teens grow up on the same emotional rollercoaster that all teenagers ride on. However, their ride is marked by unique challenges due to their sexuality.

Most gay teens live with a great sense of confusion over their sexual identity. Because sexual orientation is something that develops over time, many teens struggle with the notion of labeling themselves for a number of years. The lack of positive reinforcement from society and especially their own families cause many teenagers to hide their gay inclinations in an effort to force themselves to be straight. Those teens that do finally accept themselves and tell friends and family are frequently met with anger and sadness, and many are told that the homosexual feelings will only be temporary. Most religions still preach against homosexuality, and many teens struggle to rectify their sexuality with their spiritual beliefs. Finally, many teenagers do not know how to handle the awkward feelings that arise when friendships with members of the same sex turn into secret and unrequited crushes.

Many gay teens experience overwhelming feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially those that live in smaller towns and rural areas where the lack of gay resources leads to the feeling that they are the only people in the world with similar feelings. According to an online study conducted by the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Youth (NCGBLT) and *Oasis* magazine, only half of gay teens feel connected to the overall gay community. Of these, only 26% have ever gone to a gay youth group, and only 16% have ever visited a gay community center.

Gay teens also report living much of their lives with an undercurrent of fear. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "The most frequent victims of hate violence today are blacks, Hispanics, Southeast Asians, Jews and gays and lesbians. Homosexuals are probably the most frequent victims." The murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in 1998 put a national face on the issue of violence against gays, but it also may have frightened many teenagers even further into hiding.

School is the arena where many gay teens live with the most fear. Not surprisingly, most experience some form of harassment at school. According to statistics from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG), a support organization for families, over 90% of gay youth report that they sometimes or frequently hear homophobic remarks in school from other students - in fact, the average high school student (gay or straight) hears approximately 25 anti-gay slurs each day. These range in severity from someone using a word like "fag" as a put-down to less blatant slurs like people using the word "gay" as an all-purpose adjective for "stupid" - as in "That assignment is so gay." Many times, the targets of anti-gay harassment are not even gay, but rather are students that do not conform to a stereotypically "straight" ideal.

Perhaps more alarmingly, the P-FLAG study found that 36.6% of gay teens reported hearing anti-gay remarks from school faculty and staff. Sixty-nine percent said that they had experienced some form of harassment or violence directed at themselves, and of those that cited verbal harassment, almost half said they experienced it daily. With figures like these, it is no wonder that over 40% of gay teens said they don't feel safe in their schools.

Another major fear of gay teens is rejection by their family and friends. Gays are the only minority group who could end up being turned away by their families as a result of their minority status. In fact, many of them are. Over 50% of all teen runaways are gays who have been kicked out of their houses or who have left due to familial pressures.

With all of these emotional challenges, it is easy to see why many gay teens find it necessary to seek support in a nicotine fix. For any teenager dealing with the hardships of growing up, the health issues related to tobacco use can seem trivial by comparison. But there are other possible reasons that have more to do with the unique social situation of gays.

One of these is the lack of community meeting places and other social outlets for gay teens. As a result, many gay teens have had to seek others like themselves at adult bars and clubs, where alcohol and cigarettes are freely consumed. They end up picking up the habit that is being modeled by the people surrounding them as a way of looking like they belong in the adult crowd.

Another possible reason is the power of smoking as a social link. Like many straight teens, gay teens may use cigarettes as easy conversation starters. However, for gay teens, the conversation that a cigarette can start may be a milestone in their lives. "Got a light?" or "Can I bum a cigarette?" could be the first words that a gay teenager ever speaks to another gay person.

Gay teens, particularly males, may also be more susceptible to the imagery associated with tobacco use and specific cigarette brands. In addition to using tobacco as a badge of adulthood, gay teens could also be using it as a badge of heterosexuality. This could explain why gay teens are four times as likely than straight teens to use smokeless tobacco, an activity that is commonly associated with athletes and males from rural areas.

Industry documents reveal that tobacco giant Philip Morris understands the unique psychological and social forces that may motivate gay teenagers and adults to start smoking. Research conducted for their Marlboro brand in 1994 concluded that, "In a society where male homosexuality is often interpreted to mean non-masculinity, Marlboro is particularly

appreciated as a cue to manhood. Marlboro's success in this context depends wholly on the relevance of this cowboy image to the world (fantasy and real) of these gay consumers."

In 1992, Philip Morris became the first major tobacco company to advertise in a gay publication by placing a general interest ad for Benson & Hedges Special Kings in *Genre* magazine. A backlash over the targeting of gays erupted, and Philip Morris pulled its ads until 1993, when it began running in *The Advocate* and *Out*. Now tobacco companies routinely run ads and advertorials in national gay magazines, as well as smaller community publications and newspapers. Although these publications are geared to an adult lifestyle, anecdotal evidence suggests that those under 18 frequently read them simply because there are few titles specifically published for gay teens.

Philip Morris was also the first tobacco company to target gays via direct mail. The company included a smoker's survey in a packet of general promotions sent to gay consumers and offered free cigarette lighters to respondents. Tobacco companies also frequently sponsor gay events, and in an effort to build their public image among this segment, they also contribute generously to gay-interest charities - Philip Morris claims on its website that it is the largest corporate contributor to the fight against AIDS.

Are gay teens any match for these tobacco marketing efforts? Hopefully, the tide is shifting. As society's views on homosexuality become more accepting, there are positive signs that many gay youth are growing up happier and healthier than ever before and perhaps will no longer need to fall back on tobacco.

Rather than hiding, many gay teens are publicly declaring their homosexuality, and they are finding support rather than discouragement. According to Dianna Hardy-Garcia, the Executive Director of the recent gay Millennium March on Washington, "More and more people are coming out earlier." The NCGLBT/*Oasis* survey reports that 16.3 years old is the average age that people come out, after realizing they are gay at 12.2 years of age and accepting it internally at 15.6.

More and more, gay teens are discovering that they are not the only gay people in the world. A huge 76% reported in the NCGLBT/*Oasis* study that they knew another gay person their own age. Additionally, the advent of the Internet has linked them with a larger community of their peers. A large percentage of gay teens spend a significant amount of time online, and they say that it has helped them accept their sexual orientation. The Internet has been particularly important to gay teens in smaller towns that do not have the resources and social outlets available to those in larger cities.

Gay and straight teens have also been exposed to generally positive depictions of gays in the popular media in recent years. According to Peter Nardi, a sociology professor at Pitzer College in California, "Especially with younger people, pop culture has helped 'normalize' homosexuality." In the music world, openly gay or bisexual musicians like Michael Stipe of R.E.M. receive much media exposure. The "gay best friend" has become a stock character in a number of Hollywood movies, most notably *My Best Friend's Wedding* with Julia Roberts and Rupert Everett, and smaller movies with gay storylines have also found audiences.

Television has also made strides in its portrayal of gay characters. After a huge media

splash brought record ratings to the coming out episode of *Ellen* in 1997, the show's popularity quickly dwindled as it emphasized gay storylines. Since then, however, *Will & Grace* has become a hit on NBC and will be moving to its popular Thursday at 9pm timeslot this fall. Gay characters have also cropped up on the teen-friendly WB network. *Dawson's Creek* includes the character Jack, who came out as gay to his friends and family and is a member of the high school football team, while Willow on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* recently began a relationship with another female character. These characters are integrated into the overall storylines and presented as ordinary teenagers who happen to be gay.

Public figures are also raising gay consciousness by maintaining high-profile lives and careers while being open about their sexual orientation. Kathy Levinson, president and CEO of e-Trade, is an open lesbian along with being a respected Internet entrepreneur. Gay tennis legend Martina Navratilova began competing in doubles matches after retiring from singles competition. And Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts continues to earn high approval ratings and re-election while being openly gay.

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network reports that over 700 schools nationwide now have Gay-Straight Alliances, school-sanctioned clubs that promote acceptance of gay students and faculty members. Although there is sometimes controversy when these groups are established, many of them were formed peacefully in the wake of Matthew Shepard's murder.

These changes in the general social climate have given gay teens a new-found optimism about their lives. According to the NCGBLT/*Oasis* study, 70% of respondents feel positive about their sexuality, and 75% believe they will achieve the things they set out to do in life. In fact, most of them feel that society is making more of an issue of their sexuality than they are.

So what does all this mean for the Truth brand? It means there are still a lot of questions, most importantly whether gay teens are getting the Truth message or whether the factors that keep them smoking at such a high rate are too strong to be affected by an industry manipulation message. TIG will be working with the Consumer Insights Group to further research this area. We will keep you posted on the findings.

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