

# Sexual Identity Formation - Cass (1979)

## Stage One: Identity Confusion

1. heterosexual identity is called into question
2. the teen wonders, "Could I be homosexual"?
3. gay and lesbian information or awareness becomes personally relevant
4. the heterosexual assumption begins to be undermined.
5. confusion is great and the adolescent may seek information on homosexuality
6. this information is difficult to find

## Tips for Counselor/Service Providers

1. help teen redefine differentness
2. discourage premature labeling and attempt to normalize feelings
3. provide an accepting environment in which sexual identity may be explored

## Stage Two: Identity Comparison

1. begins with accepting the potential that homosexual feelings are a part of the self
2. the realization that, "I might be homosexual" may cross the teens mind
3. a reframing of same-gender sexual attractions as a special case (it just happens to be this one person I am attracted to and he/she happens to be the same sex) may occur
4. The idea that "I am bisexual" (which permits the potential for heterosexuality) can manifest at this stage
5. "This a 'phase' I'm going through" may surface
6. the main task of this stage is to deal with the social alienation as the teen becomes aware of her or his difference from the larger society
7. youth often experience a sense that they are the only one "like this"
8. many youth experience great turmoil, "it's not normal to be gay"

## Tips for Counselors/Service Providers

1. help teen explore teens fears and anxieties
2. attempt to locate role models
3. locate peer support groups etc.

### Stage Three: Identity Tolerance

1. marked by statements like, "I am probably homosexual"
2. a move further for heterosexual identity and more toward homosexual identity
3. teens seek out other homosexual for psychosocial support
4. This stage might help some with isolation, but increases may increase the gulf between self and other non homosexual peers, family, etc.
5. teen may scrutinize every action to maintain secrete lifestyle
6. teens may attempt to dissipate dissonance of identities by adopting an asexual role or practicing covert homosexual behavior which may be very dangerous
7. positive homosexual experiences are crucial to developing degree of self acceptance vs. self hatred

### Tips for Counselors/Service Provider

1. assist teen in interpreting negative experiences
2. help teen with developing interpersonal skills
3. help with addressing fears of exposure
4. facilitating decision making on coming out
5. offering insight on the identity formation process as well as resource information

### Stage Four: Identity Acceptance

1. involves increasing contact with other gays and lesbians and developing a more clearly delineated homosexual identity
2. many teens try to leave home-town and go to urban areas to meet more homosexuals
3. those who have access to support groups and/or gay social events often heighten there dual lifestyle existence- being heterosexual publicly and bi- or homosexual privately as the fear of being "discovered" permeates their existence

## Stages Five and Six: Identity Pride and Identity Synthesis

1. these stages move the individual from a “them and us” mentality into a realization and acceptance of the similarities between the heterosexual and homosexual worlds
2. strong identification with the gay subculture and devaluation of heterosexuality and many of its institutions gives way to less rigid, polarizing views and more inclusive and cooperative behavior
3. these latter two stages, pride and synthesis, are particularly difficult for school-aged adolescents to achieve, given the basic reality of their life circumstances. In this regard, lesbian and gay adolescents have the same needs for economic, physical, and emotional dependence and nurturance from parents as do heterosexual adolescents
4. society’s focus on the sexual behavior component of a homosexual orientation, excluding feelings of attraction, love, companionship, and subcultural mores encourages the perpetuation of inaccurate sexual myths and stereotypes about homosexual relationships

## Tips for Counselors and Service Providers

1. help youth realize that orientation goes beyond sexual impulse or behavior
2. a confused adolescent may believe that a single sexual contact of any sort defines sexual identity
3. encourage young people to consider the meaning of daydreams, affectional patterns, unexpressed physical attractions, and emotional responses in sorting through issues of sexual orientation
4. please note: many adolescents who question their sexual orientation will not develop a gay or lesbian identity
5. to dismiss the fantasies and the same-sex intimate behavior with an explanation that it is a “phase”, or to prematurely foreclose on an adolescent’s acceptance of his or her own gay or lesbian identity, are equally invalid and harmful to the youth
6. assisting teens to explore their prior sexual attractions and fantasies, differentiation between sexual orientation and gender roles, and providing literature to assist in the exploration of these questions can normalize the process of identity formation and diminish fear
7. helpers need to recognize that for many teens, sexuality is an realm of flux, and the process of arriving at an established sexual orientation can take months or years