

Same-sex relationships increase self-esteem, decrease homophobia in teens

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Involvement in a same-sex relationship boosted self-esteem in teen males and lowered internalized homophobia in teen females who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, a new University of Michigan study shows.

Surprisingly for the same teens, having an opposite-sex [relationship](#) had no effect on self-esteem, depression or anxiety.

Dating in adolescence is critical to developing sexual and social identities, says Jose Bauermeister, assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. It's even more salient for [gay](#), [lesbian](#) and bisexual youth because there is such a stigma attached to their [sexual orientation](#).

Studies have shown that these teens may suffer more [psychological distress](#), victimization, physical threats and violence than heterosexual youth. Gay, lesbian and bisexual teens who conceal their sexuality, often have a lower self-image or internalized sense of homophobia—which can lead to depression and anxiety.

Bauermeister's research group set out to determine the influence of same-sex and opposite-sex relationships on symptoms of depression, anxiety, internalized homophobia and self-esteem over time in 350 gay, lesbian or bisexual teens from three Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender drop-in centers in New York City.

The protective effects of same-sex relationships are different for young men and women, says Bauermeister, who oversees the SPH Sexuality and Health Lab. A same-sex relationship is protective in that it reduces internalized homophobia for girls even after only one relationship. For men, a same-sex relationship is protective in that it raises self-esteem, but the relationship must be prolonged.

Bauermeister and his research team checked back with the study participants for two years after the baseline interview. They were surprised by how little effect participation in opposite sex relationships had on the group of kids in the study. This contrasts with existing literature.

"I actually expected to see more associations between psychological distress and having an opposite-sex partner," Bauermeister said. "But there was no association with self-esteem, depression or anxiety. The literature seems to suggest that creating a bond with a partner may be protective. However, we found having an opposite-sex partner is not protective, but it's not harmful either."

Opposite-sex relationships did increase internalized homophobia in boys, but this association disappeared as youth grew older.

The research team also considered other types of relationships in their analyses.

"There's also a protective effect of being out with your friends," Bauermeister said. "Again it seems to also go with both increases in self-esteem for boys and with decreased internal homophobia for girls. All types of relationships seem to matter here."

The takeaway?

"Providers and caregivers of (gay, lesbian and bisexual) youth need to create supportive environments where kids can talk about and support their sexual identity, which may include their dating experiences with same-sex and opposite-sex partners," Bauermeister said.

The paper, "Relationship trajectories and psychological well-being among sexual minority youth," will appear in the journal *Youth and Adolescence* in August.

Provided by University of Michigan

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