

# **Homosexuality 101: What Every Therapist, Parent, And Homosexual Should Know**

By Julie Harren, Ph.D., LMFT

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Homosexuality is an issue that has often been mishandled by therapists due to misinformation on the topic. Although not supported by the research, many therapists believe that homosexuality is solely biological in nature, and therefore unchangeable. Yet despite ongoing efforts, researchers have not discovered a biological basis for same-sex attractions. In fact, many researchers hypothesize that a homosexual orientation stems from a combination of biological and environmental factors. For example, when asked if homosexuality was rooted solely in biology, gay gene researcher, Dean Hamer, replied, "Absolutely not. From twin studies, we already know that half or more of the variability in sexual orientation is not inherited. Our studies try to pinpoint the genetic factors...not negate the psychosocial factors" (Anastasia, 1995, p. 43). In addition, brain researcher Simon LeVay has acknowledged that multiple factors may contribute to a homosexual orientation (LeVay, 1996).



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What, then, are the causes of homosexual attractions? These feelings typically stem from a combination of temperamental factors and environmental factors that occur in a child's life. According to Whitehead and Whitehead (1999), "Human behavior is determined by both nature and nurture. Without genes, you can't act in the environment at all. But without the environment your genes have nothing on which to act" (p. 10). One way of understanding this combination might be expressed in the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Genes} + \text{Brain Wiring} + \text{Prenatal Hormonal Environment} &= \text{Temperament} \\ \text{Parents} + \text{Peers} + \text{Experiences} &= \text{Environment} \\ \text{Temperament} + \text{Environment} &= \text{Homosexual Orientation} \end{aligned}$$

While environmental factors may include experiences of sexual abuse or other traumatic events, a common contributor to same-sex attractions is a disruption in the development of gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person's view of his or her own gender; that is, his or her sense of masculinity or femininity. Gender identity is formed through the relationships that a child has with the same-sex parent and same-sex peers.

The process of gender identification begins approximately between age two and a half and four. For boys, it is during this phase that they begin to move from their primary attachment with the mother to seeking out a deeper attachment with the father. For males, the relationship between a boy and his father is the initial source of developing a secure gender identity. It is through the father-son relationship that a boy discovers what he needs to know about being male, including who he is as a boy, how boys walk, how they talk, how they act, and so forth. As the father spends time with the son, shows interest in the son, and gives the son affirmation and affection, the father imparts to the son a sense of masculinity. The boy begins to develop a sense of his own gender by understanding himself in relation to his father.

When the child reaches the age of five, he begins to face another task, that is, to begin to attach to same-sex peers. At this age, he starts school and begins to look to the other boys to answer the same questions that his dad has been answering. He looks to the other boys to discover how they walk, how they talk, how they play, and how he measures up in relation to them. He seeks to be included, accepted, and acknowledged. Through the relationships he forms with other boys, he continues to gain a sense of masculinity, discovering more about others boys and therefore more about himself as a boy.

During the early years of elementary school, children are not usually very interested in playing with members of the opposite sex. They desire to spend time with members of the same sex. This is a very necessary stage of development, because a person cannot be interested in the opposite sex or in others, until he or she first understands himself or herself.

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Eventually, after many years of bonding with members of the same sex, the boy enters puberty. At this time he begins to turn his attention to the opposite sex. He becomes curious about the gender which is different from his own, the female gender. With the simultaneous emergence of puberty, this curiosity becomes a sexual interest and a desire for romantic connection with the opposite sex.

Conversely, for the child who will develop a homosexual orientation, this process does not happen. So, what happens in the development of gender identity that would lead a child to have same-sex attractions? Typically, for this child, there is something that prevents him from attaching to the father. Either he doesn't have a father or a father figure, or he doesn't have a father who he perceives as safe and/or welcoming. Of course, there are many children who grow up without fathers and yet do not develop a homosexual orientation. In addition, there are many children who have loving fathers, yet still become homosexually oriented. This is due to the fact that there are various factors that contribute to a homosexual orientation. Human development is very complex and includes events, as well as perceptions about the events.

Perceptions are very important. Perceptions are more powerful than what actually happens, because perceptions become that person's reality. Perceptions are influenced by temperament. For example, a child with a more sensitive temperament might perceive rejection even when rejection is not intended. Temperament is the biological contributor; however, temperament alone is not enough to create a homosexual orientation. The temperament type must be met with the right environmental factors in order to produce same-sex attractions. Typically the child who will later develop same-sex attractions is naturally sensitive, observant, intelligent, and is sometimes more artistic than athletic. This child often tends to personalize and internalize experiences and observations.

So, if a child perceives that his father does not want a relationship with him, that child might try a few times to connect with his father, but will eventually retract in self-protection. This is called defensive detachment. Upon sensing rejection, the boy chooses to reject the father in return. He detaches from the father and even what the father represents, which is masculinity (Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2001). Typically at this point, he will stay connected to the mother and will instead soak in femininity. Usually he is also surrounded by other female figures, such as, a sister, an aunt, or a grandmother. So at a time when he is craving masculine input and seeking to understand himself in terms of his male identity, he instead receives feminine input and begins to develop a sense of the feminine.

By the time this child enters school, he often has a difficult time relating with other boys. Either he is just more comfortable with the girls, who are more familiar to him, or he is intimidated by the boys. Often this child sees himself as different from the other boys. So he may hold back from bonding with them. If he has developed any feminine mannerisms, he might also be rejected by the other boys and quite possibly even ridiculed. He is craving acceptance from the other boys and continues to need this acceptance, though the need goes unmet. The boy watches the other boys from afar, he longs to be noticed by them, and included by them, yet he remains with the girls, further gaining a sense of the feminine while deeply craving the masculine.

This child typically spends his elementary school years learning about femininity while craving to understand masculinity. Specifically, he desires to understand himself in terms of his own masculine identity. Yet, he does not assimilate with the same-sex parent or same-sex peers, so he does not acquire a masculine identity. He associates with the feminine, which is his primary source of input. He does not develop a secure gender identity. So by the time this child reaches puberty, the craving for male input has grown and intensified. At this time in his life he is not curious about or interested in the opposite sex. He already knows all about the opposite sex-- they are quite familiar to him. What he is craving to know about is his own gender. He still deeply longs to know about boys. He longs to experience connections with males. This emotional need, the need for same-sex love, which has gone unmet, now begins to take on a sexual form. His unsatisfied cravings for male love become romantic cravings with the emergence of puberty. (Satinover, 1996).

To this child, it feels very natural that he longs for male love. In fact, he typically thinks that he was born that way, having craved male love for as long as he can remember. Indeed, he has craved this love most of his life. However, initially it was not a sexual craving. Instead, it was an emotional craving, a legitimate need for non-sexual love, an emotional need that has become sexualized.

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The female development of homosexuality is a bit more complex. As with the male development, there are a number of factors that can contribute. For some women who end up with same-sex attractions, the development is similar to the male development previously described. For others, negative perceptions regarding femininity may lead to an internal detachment from their own femininity. For example, if a girl watches her father abuse her mother, the girl might conclude that to be feminine is to be weak. At an early age she might make an unconscious decision to detach from her female identity. She might detach from her own gender in an effort to protect herself from the perceived harmful effects of being female.

Sexual abuse is another factor that can contribute to a homosexual orientation. In these cases men are seen as unsafe, and lesbianism becomes a way of protecting against further hurt from a male. For some there might be a disconnection from the mother, and lesbianism becomes a search for motherly love. For others, same-sex attractions may not initially be present, but may later develop as a result of entering into a non-sexual friendship which becomes emotionally dependant. An emotionally dependent relationship is one in which two people seek to have their needs met by one another. It is a relationship in which healthy boundaries are not in place. The absence of appropriate emotional boundaries can then lead to a violation of physical boundaries.

For any of these reasons listed above, and in combination with other factors, same-sex attractions may develop. To the one who has these feelings, they are very real and very strong. There are many people who find themselves attracted to members of the same sex and yet do not want those attractions. For those who are dissatisfied with their sexual orientation, it should be noted that change is indeed possible. Research studies have revealed that change of sexual orientation does take place (see Spitzer, 2003; Byrd & Nicolosi, 2002). It is not a quick or easy process, but as with any other therapeutic issue, varying degrees of change are achievable through therapy and other means.

The inaccurate concept that homosexuality is solely biological is extremely misleading. Many therapists tell their clients that homosexuality is biological and therefore unchangeable. These therapists encourage their clients to embrace a gay identity, even when such clients are seeking change for their orientation. In doing so, therapists negate clients' rights to self-determination. Clients have the right to choose their own goals for therapy and should be allowed to pursue the path they desire. Clients should not be discouraged from pursuing change when change is what they seek. In order for clients to have the options made available to them, it is vital that therapists as well as clients become better educated on this issue.

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