

For LGBT teens, acceptance is critical

By Elizabeth Landau, CNN

December 6, 2010 10:09 a.m. EST



Zac Brokenrope, 20, was told he would be expelled from high school for talking about being gay.

(CNN) -- Zac Brokenrope got called into the school office almost every day as a freshman in high school. His offense, he was told, was "acting gay."

"I would literally lay awake at night in bed, just (dreading) to go the next morning, wondering what I was going to get in trouble for that day, wondering if someone was going to say something on my behalf," said Brokenrope, now a junior at Boston University.

He says his parents felt embarrassed by him, and wouldn't permit him to start a gay-straight alliance group at the school. Brokenrope felt so alone, he contemplated suicide.

Brokenrope's experiences growing up in Nebraska resonate with two studies published Monday that present unprecedented insight into the challenges that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth face.

Family acceptance of LGBT youth predicts positive outcomes in mental health, self esteem, and overall health status, finds a study in the Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing. And nonheterosexual young people are more likely to receive punishments in a school or criminal justice setting, says a study in Pediatrics.

Based on interviews with self-identified LGBT young adults, researchers found that family acceptance seems to protect against suicidal thoughts and behaviors, as well as depression and

substance abuse. The study comes from the [Family Acceptance Project](#) at San Francisco State University, which aims to increase support among families with LGBT children.

"Imagine trying to put up a persona during the day, so you're not bullied by your peers," said Russell Hyken, teen psychologist and educational consultant in Saint Louis, Missouri. "To be able to come home and be who you are has got to make all the difference in the world to these kids."

But kids like Brokenrope ([watch him speak at BU](#)) and Katie Christie, a student at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, didn't have that luxury. Christie, 22, who also struggled with an eating disorder, hid her sexuality from her parents until earlier this year.

"They told me that I'm not going to heaven anymore," said Christie, vice president of her school's gay-straight alliance. "We're trying to get to a point where we can respect each other."

Still, Christie feels a lot better now that her family knows, after having hidden from everyone for so long. Merely changing her "interested in" status on Facebook to "women" was "just so liberating," she said.

In the Pediatrics study, looking at students in grades 7 through 12, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were up to three times more likely to have experienced school expulsions, police stops, juvenile arrests and adult convictions than heterosexual teens. And that's not because the first group had more transgressions, said lead study author Kathryn Himmelstein. This seems to be especially true for girls. In fact, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth engaged in less violent behavior than their peers. The study did not, however, directly compare offenses with punishments. In other words, there's no way to know whether a heterosexual teen got a lighter punishment for any specific transgression than a lesbian, gay or bisexual teen.

It also did not look at the question of why. One speculation is that authorities are less likely to take into account mitigating factors when determining punishments for LGBT youth -- for instance, they could have been acting in self-defense, or other circumstances may have made the transgression less clear, Himmelstein said.

Institutions should look at whether this is disparity happening, if it's intentional, and what steps could be done to address it, so that all youth are treated fairly, she said.

Brokenrope's punishment for being gay was largely fear. The principal at his public school in Nebraska told Brokenrope he could be expelled for talking about his sexuality, and he was warned about his behavior -- that is, just being himself -- each time he was called in to the office. Christie also had bad experiences in high school: An ex-girlfriend told her band director that Christie was a lesbian, and the band director "told me how my sexual behavior wasn't going to be allowed in his band anymore," Christie said.

"It's not just about these kids having issues at schools that lead to them getting in trouble and being punished, it's also about the environment these schools are creating, and the ability of all students to

feel included and welcome," said Sarah Belton, an attorney and fellow of the nonprofit [Equal Justice Works](#).

Belton knows of one case where a parent came on to the school's campus and made derogatory comments to an LGBT youth while administrators stood by.

Finding a group where you feel like you can be who you are is critical for LGBT teenagers, Hyken said.

Brokenrope's informal network of LGBT friends in Nebraska helped him get through high school. Before there were internet forums and Facebook groups dedicated to this kind of support, he would call or text friends of friends of friends who were in similar positions. He still doesn't know the real name of a kid in Omaha who spoke with him on the phone twice a week.

Today, there are numerous resources throughout the country such as the [Trevor Project](#) that provide support, in addition to the [Gay-Straight Alliance Network](#) and numerous groups at colleges and universities.

Teachers should get more education in the kinds of issues that LGBT youth might be facing, Christie said. They are often struggling with their identity and their fear of rejection from family, friends, and community groups. They may be questioning their sexual orientation, and not have anyone to talk to about it.

Brokenrope stresses to anyone who is having problems in adolescence to do whatever it takes to survive.

Today, Brokenrope is happy to be alive. His parents still aren't comfortable talking about his orientation, but have learned that it is part of his lifestyle, and things have gotten better with his relationship to them. He also credits college life in Boston for saving him. He especially enjoys being introduced to people as "this is Zac" instead of "this is Zac, he's gay," as he was in high school. Brokenrope is also glad that LGBT mental health issues have achieved national attention and support.

"When I was growing up, I knew gay kids who had killed themselves. And it was really weird because now, everyone cares. There are all of these videos about it," he said. "But when I was in high school, it was another dead kid in rural Nebraska."

If you're a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning young person in trouble, call the [Trevor Project](#) crisis line at 866-4-U-TREVOR.