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For gay youths, middle school can be toughest time

NEW YORK ? By the time she was in eighth grade, Rory Mann was so aware of the differences between her and other students that she couldn't bear to enter the cafeteria. Instead, she ate lunch alone on the cold, hard bathroom floor, propped against a wall.

Sometimes Mann, who had known she was gay for about a year but dared not tell anyone, would cut herself on the arms with a razor blade. Her long sleeves hid the evidence of her misery from classmates and family.

"Everyone's trying to figure out who they are in middle school," says Mann, now 18 and a high school senior in Newport, R.I., where she is active in a gay students group.

"They turn into vicious people. They are really insecure, and they exploit someone else's differences so people won't see who THEY are."

With recent stories of anti-gay bullying and tragic suicides of gay youth at the forefront of the national conversation, experts say they are increasingly seeing evidence that middle school is the toughest time for gay youth ? a time of intense self-discovery, but also one when bullying and intolerance is at its peak.

Evidence collected over the past few years indicates it's at this age ? 11 to 13 or 14 ? when many youngsters realize they are gay and consider coming out. Some take the plunge, and some don't. Yet it's a difficult time for such identity struggles, because it's an age when being different feels the most painful.

"We know that kids are much more likely to be cruel-hearted then," says Michele Borba, an educational psychologist and frequent commentator on parenting issues. "They'll pick on anyone who is different. Peer pressure is huge. Kids desperately want to fit in and be included."

Indeed, the rates of violence against gay youth in middle school are almost twice as bad as in high school, says Eliza Byard, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. She says 20 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender high school students questioned in a 2007 school climate survey reported physical assault, while 39 percent of LGBT middle schoolers reported the same.

And yet the answer is not to stay closeted, says Byard and others.

Her group's 2009 study found that coming out, while obviously making students a target for bullies, is also a hugely positive thing for gay students of any age ? correlating with higher self-esteem, lower depression and a greater sense of belonging at school.

The problem, many say, is that middle schools are often woefully unprepared to combat the kind of harassment or bullying aimed at gay students, whether these students are out or not.

"Some teachers have mistakenly thought that if they address these issues in middle school that they're addressing sex, which would be inappropriate," says Carolyn Laub, executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a San Francisco-based group that helps students form gay rights groups at their schools.

"People think, 'You can't talk about these issues in middle school.' But that is so far from the truth."

Schools often don't understand the early signs of that sort of harassment, Laub adds.

"A lot if it targets students who are non-gender conforming, for example boys who wear clothes considered stereotypically feminine," she says. "They don't realize it's often not about sexual behavior at that age."

Isaiah Baiseri, a high school senior from Glendora, Calif., says he started to realize he was gay when he was 11, in the sixth grade.

"I already had a girlfriend, a 'kid' girlfriend, but I felt uncomfortable at the thought of holding hands with her," he says. "I was trying to do the straight thing. It just wasn't working out."

It took a gay-themed teen novel, "Geography Club," to bring things home to Baiseri. Even then, it took four more years before he came out. His middle school years were particularly miserable.

"It was a really unhappy time. Middle school in general is unhappy," he says. Peer pressure was intense. In an environment where he always heard the dreaded expression, "That's SO gay," Baiseri felt he needed to keep his sexual orientation quiet to avoid being stereotyped.

The worst part came at the start of ninth grade, when a group of girls he thought were his friends turned out to be mocking him on MySpace.

He was crushed, and says that at the worst moments he considered suicide, though never to the point where he made specific plans. Then he threw himself into his studies. He finally came out the following year, and now heads a gay-straight alliance group at his school.

Experts agree that kids are coming out sooner nationwide.

While national figures are lacking, the Family Acceptance Project, a San Francisco State University-based research group, found in a study of California families conducted between 2000

and 2005 that the coming-out age is now on average 13.4 years, as opposed to 14-16 in the late 1980s to mid-1990s and the 20s in 1970.

Project director Caitlin Ryan says youngsters several decades ago may have sensed they were different but weren't quite able to label it.

Now, she says, they are much savvier, thanks to the vast amount of information available on the Web, as well as TV shows like "Glee," which features an openly gay character at high school and appeals to kids as young as 8 or 9.

"Forty years ago there was no openly gay Oscar host like Ellen DeGeneres, or the Web, or 'Glee,'" says Ryan. "Forty years ago a kid might have made his discovery in the stacks of a library ? and if you could even find a book, it would have a tragic ending."

But the more positive images of today, she notes, give a "false sense that acceptance is everywhere. Most people don't realize that while society has more positive images, that doesn't translate into a more supportive school or a more supportive home or someone for a young person to talk to."

Emily Coffin, now a high school junior in Santa Clarita, Calif., knows how important that support can be. She struggled to define her sexuality in middle school, where even her friends were mean, she says.

"They'd make offensive jokes," says Coffin, 15. Or, while she was still figuring out her identity, they'd say things like, "C'mon, you can tell me, you totally are gay."

For her, the real change came when she got involved with a gay-straight alliance at her school, of which she is now co-president.

"It gave me an outlet, a purpose," Coffin says now. "It changed my life."

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