



kort's korner

Does Your Gay Age Match Your Chronological Age?

LESBIANS GENERALLY COME OUT later than gay men. Studies show that males tend to be aware they're gay by age 13, whereas females tend to know by age 19. I suggest that one reason behind this is sexism. Society allows girls

to touch each other, hug and kiss each other, even dance together. But boys learn, early on, not to touch each other or risk being labeled "queer."

Young gay people have little to no permission to explore their sexual orientation. So most go into the closet and postpone the exploration of their sexual orientation or expanding their romantic potential until later in life. By the time a man or woman finally comes out, they're typically beyond the age—usually in adolescence—where most heterosexuals "come to" an awareness of their sexual and romantic interest in the opposite gender. We gays and lesbians miss our true age-appropriate adolescence and often do not undergo our "gay adolescence" until our 20's, or later.

People often ask, "Why do gays and lesbians have to come out?" Straights don't have to proclaim their orientation, so why do gays? The answer is heterosexism, which

assumes that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. Examples include:

- Asking a gay man about his wife or girlfriend, or a lesbian about her boyfriend or husband.
- Doctors asking a lesbian, "Are you practicing birth control?" or "When do you plan to settle down and start a family?"
- Asking "When are you getting married?" (For gays and lesbians, that's legally impossible in 49 of the 50 states to date.
- Seeing a wedding band and asking a man, "What is your wife's name" or a woman, "What is your husband's name?"

To answer questions like these, lesbians and gays must either lie, duck the issue by changing the subject, or inform them that they're gay and don't need birth control; they can't legally marry their partner/spouse of the same gender; or that they

don't have a husband or wife, they have a same gender spouse. Just as someone who's Jewish can correct those who wish him a Merry Christmas or Happy Easter, so do lesbians and gays have to correct the straight person's assumption. So while the generic "Happy Holidays" or "Season's Greetings" has replaced "Merry Christmas", no gender-neutral sensitivity has yet taken hold. Having said that, however, I see more and more heterosexual couples are calling each other "partners" before they marry and/or if they never marry.

Stage five of coming out is when we begin correcting heterosexuals who assume we are straight too. This stage mirrors what adolescents do to establish themselves as individuals, separate from their families. To underscore their individuality, they'll dye their hair different colors, shave their heads, pierce themselves, and wear T-shirts with slogans that make their elders (particularly their parents) uncomfortable. For many teens, it's a blood sport with no time out: Adolescents vs. the Old Fogeys at Home. Stage five of coming out mirrors the process of teenagers "emerging" as authentic individuals. So under-

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standably, this is when gay men and lesbians delight in demonstrating shocking behavior that's over the top and in your face. They're relentlessly zealous in telling everyone they're gay. They wear a T-shirt that says I CAN'T EVEN THINK STRAIGHT. They French-kiss in the shopping mall or the supermarket to the discomfort of every Soccer Mom in sight. They may look and sound like adults, but at this stage of coming out, their "gay age" is between 13 and 18 years old.

They love to call attention to themselves—and succeed—when the media points their fingers at those who voice anti-gay rhetoric saying, "See? This is how all gays and lesbians behave!" However, their critics—and the gays themselves!—don't realize that this is only a phase of development, one that we missed at the age-appropriate time. It's not that gay men want to act immature and irresponsible, it's that they often have to be—at least for a while.

Moving through the stages of psychological developmental is healthy and natural, whether you do it at the age-appropriate time or later. For readers of this article, gay and straight alike, be reassured that if you—or someone you care about—is going through this normal stage, it is time-limited, just as it is for any adolescent. In fact, it's here that the best gay activists are born, demanding that they be counted and noticed. Just like a normal teen.

If you find that you are a "gay teen" but your chronological age is 30+, or even later—rest assured that this time, you get to pass through adolescence without all that acne!