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Coming Out in Middle School

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Austin didn't know what to wear to his first gay dance last spring. It was bad enough that the gangly 13-year-old from Sand Springs, Okla., had to go without his boyfriend at the time, a 14-year-old star athlete at another middle school, but there were also laundry issues. "I don't have any clean clothes!" he complained to me by text message, his favored method of communication.

When I met up with him an hour later, he had weathered his wardrobe crisis (he was in jeans and a beige T-shirt with musical instruments on it) but was still a nervous wreck. "I'm kind of scared," he confessed. "Who am I going to talk to? I wish my boyfriend could come." But his boyfriend couldn't find anyone to give him a ride nor, Austin explained, could his boyfriend ask his father for one. "His dad would give him up for adoption if he knew he was gay," Austin told me. "I'm serious. He has the strictest, scariest dad ever. He has to date girls and act all tough so that people won't suspect."

Austin doesn't have to play "the pretend game," as he calls it, anymore. At his middle school, he has come out to his close friends, who have been supportive. A few of his female friends responded that they were bisexual. "Half the girls I know are bisexual," he said. He hadn't planned on coming out to his mom yet, but she found out a week before the dance. "I told my cousin, my cousin told this other girl, she told her mother, her mother told my mom and then my mom told me," Austin explained. "The only person who really has a problem with it is my older sister, who keeps saying: 'It's just a phase! It's just a phase!'"

Austin's mom was on vacation in another state during my visit to Oklahoma, so a family friend drove him to the weekly youth dance at the Openarms Youth Project in Tulsa, which is housed in a white cement-block building next to a redbrick Baptist church on the east side of town. We arrived unfashionably on time, and Austin tried to park himself on a couch in a corner but was whisked away by Ben, a 16-year-old Openarms regular, who gave him an impromptu tour and introduced him to his mom, who works the concession area most weeks.

Openarms is practically overrun with supportive moms. While Austin and Ben were on the patio, a 14-year-old named Nick arrived with his mom. Nick came out to her when he was 12 but had yet to go on a date or even kiss a boy, which prompted his younger sister to opine that maybe he wasn't actually gay. "She said, 'Maybe you're bisexual,'" Nick told me. "But I don't have to have sex with a girl to know I'm not interested."

Ninety minutes after we arrived, Openarms was packed with about 130 teenagers who had come from all corners of the state. Some danced to the Lady Gaga song "Poker Face," others battled one another in pool or foosball and a handful of young couples held hands on the outdoor patio. In one corner, a short, perky eighth-grade girl kissed her ninth-grade girlfriend of one year. I asked them where they met. "In church," they told me. Not far from them, a 14-year-old named Misti — who came out to classmates at her middle school when

she was 12 and weathered anti-gay harassment and bullying, including having food thrown at her in the cafeteria — sat on a wooden bench and cuddled with a new girlfriend.

Austin had practically forgotten about his boyfriend. Instead, he was confessing to me — mostly by text message, though we were standing next to each other — his crush on Laddie, a 16-year-old who had just moved to Tulsa from a small town in Texas. Like Austin, Laddie was attending the dance for the first time, but he came off as much more comfortable in his skin and had a handful of admirers on the patio. Laddie told them that he came out in eighth grade and that the announcement sent shock waves through his Texas school.

“I definitely lost some friends,” he said, “but no one really made fun of me or called me names, probably because I was one of the most popular kids when I came out. I don’t think I would have come out if I wasn’t popular.”

“When I first realized I was gay,” Austin interjected, “I just assumed I would hide it and be miserable for the rest of my life. But then I said, ‘O.K., wait, I don’t want to hide this and be miserable my whole life.’ ”

I asked him how old he was when he made that decision.

“Eleven,” he said.

As the dance wound down and the boys waited for their rides home, I joined Tim Gillean, one of Openarms’s founders, in the D.J. booth, where he was preparing to play the [Rihanna](#) song “Disturbia.” An affable 52-year-old with wire-rimmed glasses and salt-and-pepper hair, he founded Openarms in 2002 with his longtime partner, Ken Draper. In addition to the weekly dances, the couple lead discussion groups every Thursday — about self-esteem, healthy relationships and H.I.V./AIDS.

When I asked Gillean if he ever expected kids as young as Nick and Austin to show up at Openarms, he chuckled and shook his head. Like many adult gay men who came out in college or later, Gillean couldn’t imagine openly gay middle-school students. “But here they are,” he said, looking out over the crowd. “More and more of them every week.”

I heard similar accounts from those who work with gay youth all across the country. Though most adolescents who come out do so in high school, sex researchers and counselors say that middle-school students are increasingly coming out to friends or family or to an adult in school. Just how they’re faring in a world that wasn’t expecting them — and that isn’t so sure a 12-year-old can know if he’s gay — is a complicated question that defies simple geographical explanations. Though gay kids in the South and in rural areas tend to have a harder time than those on the coasts, I met gay youth who were doing well in socially conservative areas like Tulsa and others in progressive cities who were afraid to come out.

What is clear is that for many gay youth, middle school is more survival than learning — one parent of a gay teenager I spent time with likened her child’s middle school to a “war zone.” In a 2007 survey of 626 gay, bisexual and transgender middle-schoolers from across the country by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Glsen), 81 percent reported being regularly harassed on campus because of their sexual orientation. Another 39 percent reported physical assaults. Of the students who told teachers or administrators about the bullying, only 29 percent said it resulted in effective intervention.

A middle-school counselor in Maine summed up the view of many educators I spoke to when she conceded that her school was “totally unprepared” for openly gay students. “We always knew middle school was a time when kids struggle with their identity,” she told me, “but it was easy to let anti-gay language slide because it’s so imbedded in middle-school culture and because we didn’t have students who were out to us or their classmates. Now we do, so we’re playing catch up to try to keep them safe.”

As a response to anti-gay bullying and harassment, at least 120 middle schools across the country have formed gay-straight alliance (G.S.A.) groups, where gay and lesbian students — and their straight peers — meet to brainstorm strategies for making their campus safer. Other schools are letting students be part of the national Day of Silence each April (participants take a vow of silence for a day to symbolize the silencing effect of anti-gay harassment), which last year was held in memory of Lawrence King, a 15-year-old gay junior-high student in Oxnard, Calif., who was shot and killed at school by a 14-year-old classmate.

Both G.S.A.’s and the Day of Silence have been controversial in places, as some parents and faculty members object to what they see as the promotion of homosexuality in public schools and the “premature sexualization of the students,” as a lawyer for a school in central Florida that was fighting the creation of a G.S.A. put it. But there is a growing consensus among parents and middle-school educators that something needs to be done to curb anti-gay bullying, which a 2008 study at an all-male school by researchers at the [University of Nebraska](#) and Harvard Medical School found to be the most psychologically harmful type of bullying.

“I certainly don’t believe school districts should force a sexual agenda on the community,” says Finn Laursen, the executive director of the Christian Educators Association International, “but we can’t just put our heads in the sand and ignore the kind of harassment that’s going on.”

The challenging school experience of so many gay and lesbian students — and the suicides last spring of a sixth grader in Massachusetts and a fifth grader in Georgia, both of whom were relentlessly bullied at school for appearing gay — reinforces the longtime narrative of gay youth in crisis. Studies in the ’80s and ’90s found gay teenagers to be at a significantly higher risk for depression, substance abuse and suicide than their heterosexual peers.

When I went to work in 1998 for XY, a national magazine for young gay men, we received dozens of letters each week from teenagers in the depths of despair. Some had been thrown out by their families; others lived at home but were reminded often that they were intrinsically flawed. My arrival at XY (at 23, I was only three years out of the closet myself) coincided with the founding of the Trevor Project, which runs a national 24-hour crisis and suicide hot line for gay and questioning youth, and with the first large wave of G.S.A.’s in high schools. (They are now in more than 4,000 high schools, according to Glsen.)

But by the time I stopped writing for the magazine nearly three years later, the content of the letters we received was beginning to change. A new kind of gay adolescent was appearing on the page — proud, resilient, sometimes even happy. We profiled many of them in the magazine, including a seventh grader in suburban Philadelphia who was out to his classmates and a high-school varsity-football player from Massachusetts who came out to his teammates and was shocked to find unconditional support.

That’s not to say that gay teenagers didn’t still suffer harassment at school or rejection at home, but many seemed less burdened with shame and self-loathing than their older gay peers. What had changed? Not only

were there increasingly accurate and positive portrayals of gays and lesbians in popular culture, but most teenagers were by then regular Internet users. Going online broke through the isolation that had been a hallmark of being young and gay, and it allowed gay teenagers to find information to refute what their families or churches sometimes still told them — namely, that they would never find happiness and love.

Today, nearly a decade after my time at XY, young people with same-sex attractions are increasingly coming out and living lives that would be “nearly incomprehensible to earlier generations of gay youth,” Ritch Savin-Williams writes in his book “The New Gay Teenager.” A professor of developmental psychology at [Cornell University](#), Savin-Williams told me recently that being young and gay is no longer an automatic prescription for a traumatic childhood.

In particular, openly gay youth who are perceived as conforming to adolescent gender norms are often fully integrated into their peer and school social circles. Girls who come out as bisexual but are still considered “feminine” are often immune from harassment, as are some gay boys, like Laddie, who come out but are still considered “masculine.” “Bisexual girls have it the easiest,” Austin told me in Oklahoma. “Most of the straight guys at school think that’s hot, so that can make the girl even more popular.”

Still, the younger they are when they come out, the more that youth with same-sex attractions face an obstacle that would be unimaginable to their straight peers. When a 12-year-old boy matter-of-factly tells his parents — or a school counselor — that he likes girls, their reaction tends not to be one of disbelief, dismissal or rejection. “No one says to them: ‘Are you sure? You’re too young to know if you like girls. It’s probably just a phase,’” says Eileen Ross, the director of the Outlet Program, a support service for gay youth in Mountain View, Calif. “But that’s what we say too often to gay youth. We deny them their feelings and truth in a way we would never do with a heterosexual young person.”

I was guilty of my share of that, too, the first time I met Kera — then a 12-year-old seventh grader — and her 13-year-old best friend, Justin, last spring in a city in New England. Kera had small, delicate features. Justin had freckles and braces. They seemed like kids. Yet there they were at a bookstore coffee shop after school, talking nonchalantly — when they weren’t giggling uncontrollably about one of their many inside jokes, that is — about their sexual identities. Kera said she was bisexual. Justin said he was gay. The effect was initially surreal to me, and before long I heard myself blurt out, “But you’re so young!”

My reaction surprised me. After all, I’d known on some level that I was gay when I was their age. If I were growing up today, it’s possible that I would feel emboldened enough to confide in my parents, or at least a close friend, that I was gay. I’d also spent the morning of my visit reading a handful of studies about when gay and lesbian youth first report an awareness of same-sex attraction. Though most didn’t self-identify as gay or lesbian until they were 14, 15 or 16, the mean age at which they first became aware of that attraction was 10. Boys tended to be aware about a year earlier than girls. (Of course, not all kids with same-sex attractions go on to self-identify as gay.)

Those findings are consistent with what many adult gay men have been reporting for years: they may not have come out until adulthood, but they knew they were attracted to the same sex as early as elementary or middle school. Kera and Justin knew that, too, but they’re among the first generation of young gay adolescents to take on an identity that many parents and educators associate with adult lifestyle choices.

Kera says she was 10 when she realized she was interested in both sexes. “It was confusing for a while, because for some reason I thought that you had to be straight or gay, and that you couldn’t be both,” she told me at the coffee shop. “So I thought about it a lot, like I do about everything, and I went online and looked up bisexuality to read more about it. I realized that was me.”

She told her mom soon after (more on that later) and then came out to her close friends at school, including Justin, who she had suspected was gay. Last year, the entire school found out when she briefly dated a female classmate. “We didn’t think we had anything to be ashamed of, so we didn’t want to go around hiding,” she told me. “It was a whole big drama at school. Some guys made fun of us, others hit on us. Most middle-school guys are total, complete morons.”

Though he wishes he could be as “brave” as Kera, Justin is out to only a few friends at school. “I lie when people ask me if I’m gay,” he told me. “Sometimes they leave me alone after that, but other times they still call me names.”

Kera doesn’t back down when someone harasses her or one of her gay friends. “I don’t want to be a bully back, but if I get mad, I will say mean things back,” she told me, adding that she has gotten into two fights at school.

Middle school was even worse last year for another boy named Austin, who lives in a small town in Michigan. A tall, heavysset 15-year-old now in his first year of high school, Austin said his eighth-grade classmates regularly called him the “gay freak.” They groped themselves in front of him. Not a day went by when someone didn’t call him a “fag,” sometimes with teachers present. And at a football game last fall, several classmates forced him off the bleachers because it wasn’t “the queer section.”

“I would have preferred that he not come out in school, but he wanted to be honest — he wanted to be true to himself,” Austin’s mother, Nadia, told me. “So I took a job as the lunch lady at school because I felt like I needed to be his bodyguard. It seems like I spent the entire year in the principal’s office trying to get them to protect my son. But they would say things like, ‘Well, what did he do to provoke them?’ We live in a very conservative area with very vocal parents, and I believe the school didn’t want to be seen as going out of their way at all to protect a gay student.”

The school’s principal would not comment specifically about Austin, but he insisted that the school “does not tolerate harassment and bullying of any kind.” He did concede that teachers don’t react to anti-gay language as consistently as he would like, which is something I also heard from a counselor at Kera’s school. “We have veteran teachers who have been teaching for 25 years, and some just see the language as so imbedded in the language of middle-schoolers that it’s essentially unchangeable,” she said. “Others are afraid to address the language because they feel like it would mean talking about sexuality, which they aren’t comfortable doing in a middle school setting.”

Jennifer Mathieu Blessington, who teaches at Johnston Middle School in Houston, said she has been forced to address the issue in her class. “Many boys at that age are so unsure of themselves and are incredibly worried about being perceived as gay, so they call everything and everyone else gay,” she told me. She relayed to me a recent incident when a boy in her class held up a book with a pink cover and said he wouldn’t want to read it because it “looks gay.” “Everyone in the class started laughing like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard,”

Blessington continued, “but I said: ‘We don’t use the word “gay” in a negative way in this classroom. Gay people are human beings, and that’s the way we talk about them in here. Is that understood?’ ”

By far the most common usage of the word “gay” in middle schools is in the expression “that’s so gay,” a popular adolescent phrase that means that something is dumb or lame. The phrase has become so ubiquitous in the culture of the average middle school that even friends of gay students sometimes use it. Still, the expression is offensive to many, and last year Glsen and the Ad Council embarked on a media campaign to combat it. (Glsen would have preferred to go after more incendiary language, “but broadcasters would be very reluctant to let us say the word ‘faggot’ on television,” Eliza Byard, Glsen’s executive director, told me.)

Though the commercials (featuring the celebrities [Hilary Duff](#) and Wanda Sykes) are aimed at teenagers, many of those who work with gay youth say that teachers also need to get the message. “Teachers would never let students say, ‘That’s so black,’ ” says Eileen Ross from the Outlet Program in Mountain View, “but I’ve had teachers look at me like I’m crazy when I suggest that they should say something to a student who says ‘that’s so gay.’ They’ll say, ‘If I have to stop what I’m doing every time a student says that, I won’t have any time to teach!’ ”

A few years ago, when I first heard from educators that young adolescents were coming out of the closet, I visited a middle school in Northern California where three eighth graders (a gay boy named Justin and two heterosexual girls, Alison and Amelia) took me on a tour of the school. They wanted to show me how many students were gay, bisexual or “confused,” but they wanted to do it discreetly — or as discreetly as middle-schoolers can.

All three were members of the school’s G.S.A. “Even though this is a liberal area,” Alison explained, “it’s still hard to be gay at this school. Most people won’t even come to G.S.A. meetings because they don’t want people other than their close friends to know they’re gay or lesbians, even though straight people also come to meetings. I get called a lesbian all the time even though I’m not.” She continued, “People are totally paranoid.” She suggested that they “come up with some code words on the down low so we can tell you what’s up without anyone knowing what we’re saying!” (They settled on “paw” for gay and “woof” for bisexual.)

As we walked past the gym, a group of boys came rushing out. Justin pointed to a short, muscular eighth grader in a baseball cap. “Paw!” he said.

Alison looked surprised. “Isn’t he a woof?”

“No, he just thinks he’s a woof,” Justin said.

Amelia looked confused. “What does woof mean again?”

A minute later, they fixed their gaze on a boy sitting against a wall listening to his iPod. “Paw,” Alison told me. “I mean woof!”

“Yeah, he’ll make out with anyone,” Justin confirmed. “Totally bisexual.”

“No, he’s not!” Amelia said, apparently distraught by the news.

“Oh, stop getting all mad just ‘cause you like him,” Alison told her. “Everyone knows he’s a woof.”

After pointing out a handful of girls who are “definitely woofs,” Alison turned to me and recalled a recent “lesbian moment” of hers. “I totally had the hots for this girl in ‘Jesus Christ Superstar,’ ” she said with a giggle. “I was, like, ‘Whoa, I’m really attracted to you right now!’ ”

“Jesus was hot in that, too,” Justin offered.

Midway through our tour we were joined by Sayre, a handsome and soft-spoken 12-year-old. Sayre was one of the few students at the school who was out to everyone, which had earned him the respect of the G.S.A.’s dozen or so members. “I really admire him,” Justin told me as we walked. “I’ve only come out to my close friends, but Sayre doesn’t care what people think.”

I asked Sayre if he was interested in any boys at the school. “I like this one guy over there,” he said, pointing toward classmates playing soccer on a grass field, “but I think he’s straight, so that’s probably not going to happen.” A few minutes later, Sayre added that he was in no rush to start dating. “It’s not like I have a lot of options anyway,” he said, echoing what I would go on to hear from many gay middle-schoolers. “I like guys who are nice and caring and don’t act like jerks to everyone. But this is middle school, where guys think it’s funny to pick their nose and fart really loud and laugh.”

As we came to the end of our tour, we approached a handful of boys sitting in a circle on the pavement eating lunch. “Woof, woof, woof, woof, woof!” Justin said, barely able to contain himself. “They’re all woofs.” One boy heard him and turned to us. “What’s a woof?” he asked us.

“Never mind,” Justin said.

“I don’t think he’s really a woof,” Alison told me, referring to a boy in the circle. “I think he’s straight but just confused.”

“He’s not confused,” Justin assured her. “He’s confused,” he said, referring to another boy in the circle. “He doesn’t know what he is. He changes his mind a lot.”

I was certainly confused trying to keep track of it all, but Alison told me not to worry. “We can’t even keep up with who’s gay or bi and who’s into who, and we go to school here!” she said.

All of this fluidity, confusion and experimentation can be understandably disorienting for parents and educators. Is an eighth grader who says he’s gay just experimenting? Could he change his mind in a week, as 13-year-olds routinely do with other identities — skater, prep, goth, jock — they try on for a while and then shed for another? And if sexuality is so fluid, should he really box himself in with a gay identity? Many parents told me they especially struggled with that last question.

Nadia, the mother of Austin in Michigan, told me that she and her husband “blew up” at him when he came out to them. “I really lost it, and my husband took it even harder than I did,” she said. “We just couldn’t wrap our heads around the idea that Austin would know what he was at 13, and that he would want to tell other people.”

A year earlier they asked Austin if he was gay after they discovered his call to a gay chat line. He promised them that he was straight, and he promised himself that he would cover his tracks better. It’s not uncommon for gay youth to have their same-sex attraction discovered thanks to a rogue number on a phone bill or, more

often these days, a poorly concealed Internet search history. “We see a lot of kids get outed by porn on the computer,” Tim Gillean told me in Tulsa. “I knew one kid who told his mom: ‘I don’t know how that got there. Maybe it was dad!’ ”

Austin eventually ended up telling his parents he was bisexual, which he knew was a lie (he wasn’t attracted to girls) but which he hoped would lessen the blow. But the plan backfired. “My mom said something like: ‘What does that mean, you’re bisexual? Do you just wake up in the morning and willy-nilly decide what you’re going to be that day? Straight yesterday, bi today, gay tomorrow?’ ” Austin recalled. “For the next two months my parents tried to convince me that I couldn’t know what I was. But I knew I was different in second grade — I just didn’t really put a name to it until I was 11. My parents said, ‘How do you know what your sexuality is if you haven’t had any sexual experiences?’ I was like, ‘Should I go and have one and then report back?’ ”

While Austin’s mother correctly assumed that Austin wasn’t yet sexually active, other parents heard the words “gay” or “bisexual” and immediately thought “sex.” In reality, many of their kids hadn’t had any yet. Some (including Kera’s friend Justin) hadn’t even kissed anyone. Those who had been sexual in some form often reported that it was with a heterosexual friend who they presumed was just experimenting.

Though many of the parents I spoke to needed a period of adjustment before accepting their children’s announcement that they were gay or bisexual, others offered immediate and unequivocal support. “The biggest difference I’ve seen in the last 10 years isn’t with gay kids — it’s with their families,” says Dan Woog, an openly gay varsity boys’ soccer coach at Staples High School in Westport, Conn., who helped found a gay-straight alliance at his school in 1993. “Many parents just don’t assume anymore that their kids will have a sad, difficult life just because they’re gay.”

That was certainly the case for Kera’s mother, who told me she hardly batted an eye when Kera came out to her. I visited them last spring in their small two-story house on a quiet street in a middle-class neighborhood. We sat at the kitchen table. Kera’s mother, who had just finished her shift as a nurse, hadn’t had time to change out of her blue scrubs.

Kera handed me a poem she wrote for her mom a year earlier. “It’s not one of my best,” she insisted, covering her ears in embarrassment after she agreed that I could read a portion of it into my tape recorder.

I like girls. I know it’s true

I like girls, I really do

Not just boys, but girls as well

I’m bisexual as you can tell

“My first reaction to the poem, which she slipped under my bedroom door before going to hide in her room, was that she seemed really worked up about this,” her mother recalled. “But I knew I was interested in boys when I was her age, so it didn’t strike me as unusual that Kera might know she’s interested in boys and girls, put two and two together and call herself bisexual. Kids just know what those words mean a lot earlier than when I was growing up.”

On the national Day of Silence last April, I visited Daniel Webster Middle School in Los Angeles, one of 21

middle schools in California with a G.S.A. California is one of only 12 states that have passed laws to protect students from bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. (In May, Representative Linda Sanchez of California introduced the Safe Schools Improvement Act, a federal anti-bullying bill that would require schools to implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies that include protections for gay students.)

I arrived at Daniel Webster, a school of some 850 students, most of them Hispanic or African-American, at lunchtime. About 50 kids milled around two large wooden tables at the center of the school's leafy courtyard. Many of them wore pink T-shirts, and some filled out cards that would later be strung together and displayed: "You Are What You Are — Embrace It," "Never Put Someone Down, and Never Let Someone Put You Down." Others communicated using hand gestures or by writing notes to one another. But most had given up trying to be mute. "Good luck getting middle-schoolers not to talk," the school's counselor and G.S.A. co-adviser at the time, Ruben Valerio, told me with a smile.

One of the loudest students at the tables was Johnny (a nickname), a tall, handsome seventh grader. A leader of the G.S.A., he had only managed to stay quiet for about 30 seconds that morning. "It's just really exciting to be at a school where it's O.K. to be gay," he told me as he bear-hugged his friend, an outgoing seventh grader known to her friends as Lala, who'd come out earlier that year as bisexual. At his previous school, Johnny didn't feel safe and had little support when he came out to his mother. "She would go back and forth between saying things like: 'I love you. I just don't understand why you would choose this lifestyle at this age,' to 'It's disgusting what you're doing. Are you a faggot now?'" No one would ever use that word here."

Johnny estimated that there were about 35 girls and 10 boys at Daniel Webster who were out as bisexual, lesbian or gay. (The vast majority of those girls identified as bisexual.) He introduced me to a handful of them, including two members of the G.S.A.: Tina (also a nickname), a seventh grader who considered herself bisexual and was dating a boy at another school; and a popular eighth-grade girl who used to date Tina.

They were joined at the tables by dozens of their straight friends and a handful of teachers. One teacher, Richard Mandl, approached me and asked what I thought of the school. I told him that I'd never seen so many happy gay kids in one place. "It's a little disorienting," I told him. "I feel like I'm in a parallel gay universe."

He laughed. "Yeah, it's pretty unusual what's happened here," he said. "It definitely wasn't always this way."

When Mandl began teaching at the school in 2002, he said that there weren't any openly gay students — and that it was common to hear anti-gay language. "Kids would run by you and be screaming at another kid: 'You fag! You're so gay!'" he said. "It wasn't until a few years ago when the faculty sort of came together and said: 'You know what? We need to stop this.'"

That became a lot easier two years ago when one of the school's most popular boys came out to his classmates. Because he was so well liked, and because so many of his friends rallied around him, "it became cooler at Daniel Webster to be accepting and open-minded," Mandl said.

The principal, Kendra Wallace, told me that she didn't hesitate when the school's science teacher approached her (on behalf of the boy and several of his friends) about starting a G.S.A. "I had some staff who were livid at first, because they thought it would be about sex, or us endorsing a lifestyle," she said. "But the G.S.A. isn't

about that, and they've come around. This is a club that promotes safety, and it gives kids a voice. And the most amazing thing has happened since the G.S.A. started. Bullying of all kinds is way down. The G.S.A. created this pervasive anti-bullying culture on campus that affects everyone."

Not all principals have reacted as enthusiastically to students or teachers hoping to start a G.S.A. (Teachers often wait for students to make the request, because they don't want to be perceived as "having a political agenda," as one school counselor told me.) At a middle school in Massachusetts, the G.S.A. adviser told me that the school's principal initially balked when students asked to observe the Day of Silence and start a G.S.A. "She argued that it wasn't age-appropriate, and she worried about having to deal with negative editorials in the local paper," the adviser said. But because the school had other extracurricular clubs, "the principal was made aware that blocking a G.S.A. from forming is against the law."

Indeed, courts — citing the Equal Access Act, which requires public schools to provide equal access to extracurricular clubs — have consistently ruled against schools that try to block G.S.A.'s from starting. (The 1984 law was the brainchild of Christian groups fighting to allow students to form religious clubs in schools.)

When Yulee High School in northeast Florida was forced by a federal judge last spring to let a G.S.A. meet on campus, the school asked students to change the name of their proposed club to something other than Gay Straight Alliance. The students refused, and a court backed them up in August. Administrators at Austin's middle school in Michigan used the same tactic when he tried to start a G.S.A. there, he said. "They told me I needed to change the name to something 'less controversial,'" Austin recalled. "I didn't feel like fighting them, so I just called it the Peace Alliance."

And because there were so few openly gay students at Austin's middle school last year, all but 2 of the 15 or so students who attended each meeting were straight. At G.S.A. meetings at Daniel Webster, gay and straight members spend two periods a week reading and discussing news stories about gay issues, organizing events like the Day of Silence and talking about navigating the outside world — which isn't always as supportive as their campus. Lala, for example, said the backing of the G.S.A. was critical when she came out to her family.

"They're a lot better now, but the first thing one of my relatives did when I told them I was bisexual was hit me on the head with a Bible," she told me. "So while I was dealing with that insanity at home, I at least had a safe place at school to talk about what was happening."

Later that day, as I sat in a conference room with a handful of the G.S.A. members from Daniel Webster, they spent a lot of time talking about dating. Asking 13- or 14-year-olds if they think they're old enough to date is a little like asking them if they're old enough to stay up past 11, so I didn't even bother. I was more interested in learning how their parents reacted to the news that they not only had gay kids — but also that those kids had same-sex boyfriends or girlfriends.

Tina surprised me when she said her father actually prefers that she date girls. "His biggest fear has always been that I'll get pregnant before I'm 18," she told us, "so my dad's really supportive of the girl thing."

Johnny said his mom has made it very clear that he's not allowed to bring a boyfriend over to the house. "She's like, 'O.K., I accept you, but you better not bring any of those people around,'" he told me.

That's one of about 50 "rejecting behaviors" identified by Caitlin Ryan of San Francisco State University, who

has spent the last eight years studying the link between family acceptance or rejection of gay children and their mental health in early adulthood. (Ryan found that teenagers in “rejecting families” were significantly more likely to have attempted suicide, used drugs and engaged in unprotected sex than those who were raised in accepting families.)

Of course, many parents of middle-schoolers don’t want their child dating yet, no matter their sexual orientation. But several parents I spoke to conceded that it wasn’t always easy to fashion the same rules for their gay and straight kids. Their instinct was to tell their gay children to wait longer before they could date. Austin from Michigan said he could see the struggle playing out in his parents. “When I came out, they said I couldn’t date anyone until I was 18,” he said. “Then I think they realized that was ridiculous, so they changed it to 16.”

In a rural area outside of Tulsa a few years ago, I visited a mother and her 14-year-old gay son, Ely, who were struggling to fashion the rules of when, and in what context, he could date. I listened as Ely tried to persuade his mother to let his latest crush spend time in his room (“With the door shut,” he clarified):

Ely: So, can we hang out in my room?

Mother: I don’t trust you two alone in there. Period.

Ely: What about if there are no body parts touching?

Mother: You don’t have that kind of self-control.

Ely: Yes, I do!

Mother: No you don’t. How old is he again?

Ely: 15.

Mother: And he has a shaved head and piercings everywhere. Is this who you really want to date?

Ely: All kinds of people have shaved heads.

Mother: I don’t think you’re ready to have a relationship right now.

Ely: Ugh.

Mother: I know, I know, you can’t wait to move away from me. You have the most unfair mother in the world!

As I listened to them bicker, I couldn’t help remembering what Ritch Savin-Williams, the professor of developmental psychology at Cornell, told me the first time we spoke: “This is the first generation of gay kids who have the great joy of being able to argue with their parents about dating, just like their straight peers do.”

Though dating and sexual activity were a reality for some of the middle-schoolers I spent time with, others were more concerned with simply making gay friends their age. Those who attended a school with other openly gay students or who lived near a gay youth group (Openarms in Tulsa, for example) were the lucky ones. But many, like Austin in Michigan, had never met another openly gay boy.

“He has his close girl friends, but he doesn’t have any gay friends,” his mother told me. To meet other gay people, he has gone with his father to nearby meetings of Pflag (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), where gay kids often accompany their parents. And in June, she agreed to let him attend the gay-pride parade two hours away in Chicago.

“I told Austin he could go if either me or his dad went with him,” she recalled. “So he chose his dad, probably because he knew it would be the thing his dad would want to do least in the world. But off they went, and I give my husband credit, because he will do anything for his son. He doesn’t totally understand why Austin is gay, or how he can know for sure at his age, but he’s trying to be there for him. And he’s rarely seen Austin happier than at the parade. Austin warned his dad, ‘You can’t get mad at me when I scream at cute guys in Speedos!’ And boy, did Austin scream. He was in gay teenage heaven.”

Benoit Denizet-Lewis, a contributing writer for the magazine, is the author of “America Anonymous: Eight Addicts in Search of a Life.” His new book, “American Voyeur,” a collection of his writing, will be published in January.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 27, 2009

An article on Page 36 this weekend about gay teenagers who come out when they are in middle school misstates part of the name of an organization that promotes tolerance in schools. It is the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, or Glsen — not “Educators” Network.

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