

One percent of children aged 9-10 self-identify as gay, transgender

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In a study into the sexual orientation and gender identity development of thousands of youth across the nation, a San Diego State University team found that about 1 percent of 9 and 10-year old children surveyed self-identified as gay, bisexual or transgender.

As the majority of studies indicate that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) self-identification generally occurs during the mid-adolescent years, the study by SDSU researchers Jerel P. Calzo and Aaron J. Blashill is providing unprecedented insight into early identity development.

"This is such an important stage, biologically and socially. At 9 and 10, youth—whether through their peers, media or parents—are beginning to be exposed to more information about relationships and interacting in the world. Even about sex," said lead author Calzo, an associate professor in the SDSU School of Public Health. "They may not see any of this as sexual, but they are beginning to experience strong feelings."

The findings are detailed in "Child Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Cohort Study," co-authored by Calzo and Blashill, an associate professor in the SDSU Department of Psychology. The article appears in the current issue of *JAMA Pediatrics*.

Calzo and Blashill utilized the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study dataset, a multisite, longitudinal study exploring brain

development and health among [children](#) aged 9 and 10 over a 10-year period, leading to the 1 percent finding for self-identification.

"One percent is sizable, given that they are so young," Blashill said.

"For so long, social scientists have assumed that there is no point in asking kids at this age about their [sexual orientation](#), believing they do not have the cognitive ability to understand," he said. "This is the first study to actually ask children about their sexual [orientation](#) this young. It is important to have a baseline to understand how sexuality develops and how it may change over time."

Blashill and Calzo captured data collected in 2016-2017 to investigate identity-related stress and how children self-identified. They also sought to understand how parents perceived their children's sexual and [gender](#) identities.

"What is interesting about this study is that you have children and parents responding," Calzo said. "This is one of the more important implications of the study: there are few, if any studies on such a large scale in the context of health research and at such a young age while involving parents."

Nearly 7 percent of parents, when asked about the sexual identity of their children, reported their child might be gay and 1.2 percent reported that their child might be transgender, the team found.

Another insightful finding was that children overwhelmingly reported no problems at home or school related to their minority sexual orientation or [gender identity](#) while 7 percent of parents reported gender identity-based problems.

As sexual and gender minorities experience higher rates of physical and

mental health issues than do their heterosexual counterparts, the research may provide crucial insights into resiliency development within the LGBT community. It could also help lead to improved programs and policies to better serve the community, Calzo said.

"If we can understand identity development earlier and can track development using large datasets, we can begin improving research and prevention around risk and protective factors," Calzo said, adding that he and Blashill purposefully set out to study sexual identity issues among youth at earlier ages than previous research.

Another key finding is that researchers must identify better ways to explore identity issues among younger populations, as about 24 percent of those surveyed indicated they did not understand questions about sexual orientation, potentially as they were phrased. This will be crucial as researchers seek to explore other issues, such as same-gender attraction and gender expression, in young children.

"ABCD does plan to include more measures and other researchers are studying sexual orientation and gender expression," said Calzo, also a core investigator at the Institute for Behavioral and Community Health. "We know from other studies that these identities can change over time, so this research is powerful. It helps us to understand sexual and gender [identity](#) younger so that we can have a much better understanding of these identities over time."

More information: *JAMA Pediatrics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.2496](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.2496)

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