

Polyamorous youth report facing stigma, heightened levels of depression

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While increasingly visible among adults, polyamory also exists among adolescents, and as a new study indicates, so does the stigma that can come with it.

A Washington State University study of 323 youth ages 12 to 17 at an LGBTQ+ [summer camp](#) found that 54, or about 16.7%, identified as polyamorous or ambiamorous, meaning they were open to either monogamous or polyamorous relationships. These "poly" and "ambi" youth reported higher levels of depressive symptoms than their LGBTQ+ peers.

The study, one of the first to investigate polyamorous relationships in youth, [was published](#) in the journal *Psychology & Sexuality*.

"It was notable that many of the polyamorous teens said they wouldn't feel safe being out in their home communities," said study author Traci Gillig, a WSU researcher. "They felt like they would be misunderstood or that people have stereotypes or judgments around what it means for them to be poly, like that they are promiscuous or don't perceive cheating as a problem."

Polyamory is a relationship structure that involves having more than one [romantic partner](#) at the same time with the consent and knowledge of all the partners, so as with monogamous relationships, the secrecy of cheating is considered a breach of trust. Again similar to monogamy, polyamory is primarily about relationships and does not necessarily have to involve sex at all.

This study was limited to a camp for LGBTQ+ youth called Brave Trails, which likely indicates the adolescents came from more accepting families, Gillig noted. However, 30 adolescents still reported they either would not feel safe, or felt unsure if they would be safe, if they were open about being poly in their home communities.

Gillig said it was encouraging that many also felt they would be supported, and 16 of the 54 poly or ambi campers said they were open about it at home.

Adult polyamory has been gaining attention in the [news media](#) and on TV with shows that feature poly people on Netflix and Showtime. It has also been the subject of research, which has found that more than 20% of adults have engaged in consensually non-monogamous relationships like polyamory. Another study also found that some poly adults began to understand their identity as poly when they were adolescents.

For this study, participants filled out questionnaires before and at the end of the camp, which included assessments of anxiety and depressive symptoms. They also answered questions about their preferred [relationship](#) structure and how comfortable they felt being open with others about it.

The survey allowed campers to write in explanations, and some who felt less safe said that being poly was "a touchy subject" and that even those who accept their LGBTQ+ identity would not be okay with it.

The poly and ambi kids as well as all the adolescents in the study showed improved [mental health](#) after experiencing the accepting environment of the LGBTQ+ camp, and Gillig emphasized that support is key for young people who have a marginalized identity.

"Youths' experience with being polyamorous or ambiamorous is similar to being LGBTQ+ in that if they perceive that they won't be supported, then they're not as likely to disclose their identity at home. We know from research with queer youth that this can cause elevated levels of depressive symptoms," she said. "My hope is that parents would have an open mind, if their child comes to them and expresses that they identify as polyamorous or if they have questions about it."

More information: Traci K. Gillig, Polyamorous and ambiamorous

adolescents: a first empirical look at mental health in an LGBTQ+ sample, *Psychology & Sexuality* (2024). DOI: [10.1080/19419899.2024.2340985](https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2024.2340985)

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