In Support of LGBT Athletes

Health Equity

Date Posted:

Feb 13, 2014

This blog was originally posted on philly.com on Tuesday, February 4th. You can find the original blog post here .

Later this week, the world's greatest Winter athletes will converge on Sochi, Russia for the 2014 Winter Olympics. For the next few weeks, Sochi hopes to represent everything that is right about the world of sports. But just last week, Sochi mayor Anatoly Pakhomov went on British television and proudly declared his city had "no gay people."

This does not represent the Olympic ideal, or the reality of sports or the world in the 21st century. In recent years, Jason Collins (NBA), Robbie Rogers (MLS), Megan Rapinoe and Lori Lindsey (US Women's soccer), and Orlando Cruz (Boxing) are just some of the well-known professional athletes who have announced they are gay or lesbian. While many people have been surprised by their "coming out" announcements and stories, it shouldn't be so unexpected.

Approximately 5-10 percent of the general adult population identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). So not only are there many gay pro athletes out there, statistically there is probably at least one young person who will grow up to identify as LGBT in every gym class or high school sports team nationwide.

As a pediatric sports surgeon and adolescent medicine doctor, we hope that sports will be a safe and nurturing place for all youth, including those who will grow up to be LGBT. While most LGBT kids and teens grow up to become happy, healthy adults, these youth unfortunately have a higher risk of substance abuse, depression, contemplating suicide, other health problems, and being victims of bullying and violence.

These problems are not because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but rather due to stress and isolation many LGBT youth face from their families, schools, communities, society, and possibly their sports teams. Even many LGBT professional athletes have had to hide their identity for fear of harassment, losing their job or endorsements.

One of the greatest benefits of youth athletics is learning principles of teamwork that can be translated to the real world. Caring about and supporting others no matter who they are—regardless of race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation—is paramount among these principles. Another great thing about sports is that exercise is a great way to relieve stress and, in combination with therapy, can fight depression just as well as medication in teens.

Coaches, parents and teammates can support LGBT youth and teens by using language that is inclusive, non-offensive, and treating everyone the same. You may not know who on the team is gay or transgender since

many kids and teens are still developing a sense of their own sexual and gender identity as they grow.

Society is making progress by increasing support for marriage equality and we have more role models in professional athletes coming out, but there still have been no professional athletes that have come out while playing in major sports leagues like the NFL and MLB, and recently one professional athlete was possibly fired for supporting LGBT rights. Those involved in sports can play an important role in ensuring that LGBT youth grow up to be happy and healthy adults by making locker rooms and playing fields a place where professional and recreational athletes alike feel comfortable to participate in sports and be supported for who they are whatever their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Please visit www.kidshealth.org to learn more about how you can support LGBT youth in general and the You Can Play Project for how to make things better for LGBT youth athletes.

For youth-serving professionals check out a newly released video book by the AAP called *Reaching Teens*. Dr. Dowshen is the author of the chapter and producer/editor of the films on supporting sexual and gender minority youth.

To join the first national network dedicated to educating, engaging, and empowering every generation of of LGBTQ athletes and allies, visit GO! Athletes.

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