

I know that it's very common to make jokes about gays and call others things like 'poofa', 'faggot' and 'dyke'. A lot of the time people say they are just mucking around when they do this but what you need to know is that it can be really hurtful. Some young people are gay but you may never know that they are or what they are going through at home. The last thing they need is to be called names and abused at school or down the street. The reason I am saying this is because of what I have experienced growing up and this is what I am going to tell you about now.

I started to think that I was different from most other kids at quite a young age. I remember that even my family members started calling me a poof around the time that I had started primary school. Obviously at that age, I didn't know about sex and relationships but I knew that being called a poof was not a good thing. The reason for the name calling was that I didn't follow the social norms for young boys. For example, I had always liked to play with Barbie dolls. Admittedly my most favorite thing was to take their heads off and cut them up. Fortunately at one place where we lived for a while there was a young girl next door who liked to do the same thing and we used to have a great time cutting heads off and drowning the torsos in her pool. I continued 'playing' with Barbie dolls up until about the age of 10. (Now, as an adult of 21 years, I have joined the Anti-Barbie Foundation on line)

Seriously, during Primary school, I did start to feel attractions towards other guys – it wasn't sexual – it was just a sort of 'unnamed attraction.' I had friends of both genders and as I got a bit older, I still felt quite comfortable and natural about having a girlfriend.

When I was 12 years old, I had my first sexual encounter with another guy. He was one year older than me but I was the one who made the advances. Neither of us really knew what was going on and it was a bit clumsy. Although I had had sexual contact with girls before this, I was getting more and more certain that I wanted to be with guys more. I was also starting to think that I was gay but I didn't say anything about this to anyone else.

My mum and dad had separated when I was young and then my dad remarried & I went to live with him & my step-mother. I didn't get along with my Dad very well and it was really bad with my step-mother because she was very religious and seriously against homosexuality. It had been pounded into my head for years that being gay was the devil's work and heathen.

Just before I turned 15, I decided that I had had enough of keeping my secret and I told my Dad and step-mother. My step-mother went hysterical and called the Government Child Welfare Service who came to the house the next day. I overheard them talking in the lounge room and my step-mother was saying to the workers that she was worried that I would molest my younger half-brother (who was about 4 years old at the time). The Child

Welfare workers then told me that I would have to go into a youth refuge. I was given no other counseling or support. The only words my father said was "pack your stuff and get out."

I started to live with a foster family about a week later. The family was made up of two lesbian mums and their two daughters. This was a bit strange at first because I didn't really know about lesbians and I had only ever thought about gays being men. I became very close to one of my foster sisters who took me under her wing and told me how to cope with all of the homophobic slander you get from the outside world. During this time, I was going through a real period of depression. I was taking drugs, not wanting to get up in the mornings and on some days I didn't want to live at all. I made several suicide attempts.

During this time I was also really uncertain about what it meant to be 'gay' and as a result, I adopted a lot of the stereotyped behaviors – being very flamboyant and feminine (I wore make-up and grew my nails). I was only going to school every now and then but it was pretty obvious because of my behaviour that I was gay. Accordingly, I coped a lot of homophobic abuse like being called names, have my property vandalized and on one occasion, I was spat on by a guy on the balcony above me. I had had enough at that point and I flew up the stairs and shredded his face with my long finger nails. After that, the insults became less common but I ended up dropping out of school anyway. I ended up going back to school and finishing Year 10 when I was 17.

My foster mums split up and I ended up moving with one of the mums and my two sisters to rural Victoria. I have long since regarded them as my real family. I have found that the homophobic abuse is not so blatant in the town where I am living. Shortly after we moved here, there were a few remarks yelled at us in the street by some local guys but we stood up to them straight away and they haven't happened much since then.

I have been a member of a group for same sex attracted people and their friends on and off for about 4 years. There is still a lot of ignorance and negative attitudes about homosexuality in rural areas. There is also a lot of taboo about speaking about it and this keeps things suppressed from conversations – people just don't want to know about. Its part of our group's job to help get the topic talked about in more positive ways in our community.