

## North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA)

### **NORTH AMERICAN MAN/BOY LOVE ASSOCIATION (NAMBLA)**

Among LGBT groups, few can claim the degree of name recognition accorded to the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). Founded in 1978, NAMBLA has been among the most controversial groups in LGBT history. The group was initially inspired by the work of the Boston/Boise Committee, which formed in 1977 to defend a group of men indicted for running a boy prostitution ring based in Massachusetts. After the charges against all but one of the men were dismissed, the committee disbanded and NAMBLA was created. NAMBLA chapters have existed in [New York \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york\)](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york) City, Boston, [Los Angeles \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/los-angeles\)](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/los-angeles), [San Francisco \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/san-francisco\)](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/san-francisco), and Toronto; total membership has never been confirmed, but is estimated to have never been larger than one thousand.

It is difficult to determine the politics of NAMBLA, though by most accounts it supports consensual inter-generational relationships between men and teenage boys and opposes age-of-consent laws. NAMBLA has often resisted defining its politics, in part because many members fear police repression, in part because many members are anarchists who resist authoritarian structures, in part because many members are more interested in exposing the politics of their opponents, and in part because members do not always agree on the group's goals. Some who have belonged to or supported NAMBLA are motivated primarily by free speech, rights of assembly, and civil libertarian concerns. Others are motivated principally by visions of youth rights and youth liberation. A number of members see NAMBLA as a vehicle for challenging antisexual values that insist children are nonsexual. Some argue for the right and ability of post-pubescent teenagers to consent to sex with adults. Others extend this further to cover pre-pubescent children. And some, often using historical examples, defend the desirability, for both men and boys, of man-boy love.

NAMBLA's history includes a long string of hostile attacks and legal defenses involving both the organization and its supporters. Critics charge that the power differences between adults and minors exceeds those of most other relationships, that sex between adults and minors is intrinsically exploitative, that minors do not have the physical and psychological capacity to consent to sex with adults, and that sex between adults and minors constitutes sexual abuse.

NAMBLA meetings have been kept under police surveillance; the [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/us-government/federal-bureau-investigation\)](#) has launched investigations; politicians, journalists, and religious leaders have attacked the organization; right-wing and left-wing activists have targeted the group; states have refused to allow NAMBLA to incorporate as a nonprofit agency; publicly identified members have been fired from their jobs; and public institutions have refused to allow the group to meet on their premises. LGBT groups, including community centers, pride march organizing committees, and the International Lesbian and Gay Association have struggled about whether to include or exclude NAMBLA. Most have favored exclusion.

As even some critics acknowledge, NAMBLA members have not been secretive about their beliefs and practices. On the contrary, the group maintains a formidable list of publications, available in many bookstores and libraries. The [Harvard University \(/social-sciences-and-law/education/colleges-us/harvard-university\)](#) Library, as well as several other prominent repositories, carry runs of the group's publications, including *NAMBLA News*, *NAMBLA Bulletin*, *NAMBLA Journal*, and *Gayme*. A series called NAMBLA Topics addresses mostly legal issues, although number 4 is called *Boys Speak Out on Man/Boy Love* (1986); number 5 offers an anthology, *Poems of Love and Liberation* (1996); and number 8 (1998) carries a [short story \(/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/short-story\)](#), "Voodoo," by Ken Esser. The group also published *A Witchhunt Foiled: The FBI vs. NAMBLA* (1985). Nor has NAMBLA shied away from appropriate public venues, including LGBT pride parades, radio and television programs, and protest marches.

Despite its controversy, the organization has had a remarkable group of supporters, members, and defenders. [Allen Ginsberg \(/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/allen-ginsberg\)](#) spoke at a NAMBLA conference in the 1980s. The [American \(/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/social-reform/american-civil-liberties-union\)](#) Civil Liberties [\(/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/social-reform/civil-liberties\)](#) Union has defended NAMBLA; the [New York \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york\)](#) *Times* has criticized the firing of group members; and Camille Paglia has criticized NAMBLA's critics. Member Edward Hougen and his wife Margaret Hougen ministered to the Metropolitan Community Church in Boston and also published the popular international biweekly *Guide*. Bob Rhodes, a [federal government \(/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-28\)](#) attorney, provided NAMBLA with essential legal advice. David Thorstad, formerly active in the Socialist Workers Party and the Gay Activists Alliance, offered NAMBLA experienced leadership. John Mitzel wrote *The Boston Sex Scandal* (1980), which novelist and critic Edmund White called "irreverent, hilarious, and hard-hitting." Tom Reeves was active in the [civil rights \(/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/social-reform/civil-rights\)](#) and antiwar movements, neighborhood organizing, and housing advocacy. Perhaps the youngest member of the group, Bill Andriette—who joined when he was fifteen years old—became a

key NAMBLA writer, thinker, worker, and spokesperson.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the final chapter on NAMBLA has yet to be written, but none can question the fact that debates about love and conflict between the generations will not soon disappear. Historians and psychologists have recently attempted to understand the social construction of childhood sexuality, pedophilia, and abuse. [Michel Foucault](/people/philosophy-and-religion/philosophy-biographies/michel-foucault) (/people/philosophy-and-religion/philosophy-biographies/michel-foucault), in his introduction to *The History of Sexuality* (1978), identified the "masturbating child" and the "homosexual" as sources of anxiety in the modern age. Expanding on Foucault and others, James R. Kincaid, in *Child-Loving: the Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992), maintained: "By insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo experience, corruption, eroticism."

## **Bibliography**

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see alsochua, siong-huat; intergenerational sex and relationships.

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