



Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth: Preventing Violence and Harassment at School

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Exposure to violence in schools, at home, and/or in the broader community is not an unusual occurrence for many youth. For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth, it can be a typical experience. LGB youth comprise about 10% of the school-age population, or 5 million students nationwide. Violence toward LGB students can take many forms, from name-calling and bullying to physical harassment and even murder. Although death is not a common outcome, the February 2008 murder of Lawrence "Larry" King, a 15-year-old gay high school student in Oxnard, California, by another student is an example of the tragic consequences that can occur when violence toward LGB youth goes unchecked. Teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and other educational professionals can take steps to prevent and intervene in violent situations in schools, especially those targeting LGB youth.

Although transgender youth are often grouped with LGB populations and are also targets of violence in schools and the general community, they are not specifically addressed in this handout. Transgender concerns gender identity and expression, not sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual). Although these populations share some common concerns, there are significant differences in their needs and challenges. For information about transgender youth, see Ludeke (2010) in Recommended Resources.

ROOTS OF VIOLENCE TOWARD LGB YOUTH

Violence toward LGB youth is rooted in society's heterosexism and homophobia and progresses through identifiable stages.

Heterosexism and Homophobia

Sexual orientation remains one of the most controversial issues in the United States today, due to the heterosexism and homophobia prevalent throughout society.

Heterosexism is a system of advantage based on sexual orientation, meaning that people who identify as heterosexual have social advantages and privileges denied to LGB individuals. For example, marriage and its benefits are reserved for two people of the opposite sex in most of the 50 states.

Because LGB relationships and lifestyles do not conform to the established heterosexual norms of society, LGB persons are vulnerable to homophobia. *Homophobia* is the discrimination perpetrated by heterosexual persons against LGB persons, based on fear and/or hatred, and it can take many forms. Violence is one possible outcome of homophobia.

Patterns of Violence Toward LGB Youth

The various forms of violence experienced by LGB persons, particularly LGB youth in schools, follow the same patterns of violence encountered by other marginalized groups of people in the United States. Although such violence often appears to be random, isolated, or singular, it tends to occur through a series of stages. It can be committed by individuals and groups, both knowingly and unknowingly. The process outlined here is adapted from a body of research on the steps leading to interpersonal violence.

Exclusion. In the first stage, *exclusion*, certain groups of people are identified as being different from the majority group, and they are prevented (or excluded) from full participation in the rights and privileges enjoyed by the majority. At this stage, LGB youth are separated from heterosexual peers through such

means as name-calling (e.g., faggot, dyke, queer), mocking, the denial of certain rights (e.g., bringing a same-sex date to the prom), and the exclusion of sexual orientation as a protected status in various school policy statements (e.g., nondiscrimination clauses, equal opportunity statements).

Expulsion. Stage two involves some form of actual or perceived *expulsion* from the general community. For LGB youth, the consequences of this stage may include an absence of LGB persons or information in school curricula and textbooks or the loss of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) due to the retraction of all extracurricular clubs based on community fears or hatred about the sponsoring of gay clubs in schools.

Extermination. The third and final stage of violence is *extermination*, where marginalized persons or something about them is extinguished. Again, although the case of Larry King illustrates the extreme outcome of this stage, the actual killing of LGB persons because of their sexual orientations is relatively rare. Instead, the outcomes of violence experienced by LGB youth at this stage may include internalized homophobia (i.e., believing the stereotypes about LGB persons pervasive in society, self-hatred due to her or his LGB identity); poor academic performance; dropping out of school; depression; and suicidal ideation, attempts, or the actual completion of suicide.

EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE TOWARD LGB YOUTH

Given the context of the developmental stages of violence, it is important to understand how violence affects LGB youth specifically. Because of their sexual orientations, LGB youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to be rejected by other students, to be bullied and harassed in school, to be threatened with weapons on school grounds, to be rejected by their families, and to be physically assaulted and harmed, sometimes severely enough that medical attention is required. Teachers and other adults in schools contribute occasionally to the violence toward LGB youth by making discriminatory comments or by not intervening when others incite violence toward LGB youth. Furthermore, many LGB youth from diverse minority communities in the United States, and those who are raised in some type of religious faith tradition that holds negative views toward LGB identities, often find themselves at odds with these communities.

As a result, LGB youth, compared to their heterosexual peers, report higher rates of:

- Feelings of isolation and loneliness (both at home and at school)

- Difficulties concentrating on schoolwork
- Ejection from their homes (often resulting in homelessness)
- Use of alcohol or drugs to deal with their feelings
- Risk-taking behaviors such as unsafe sex
- Mental health problems including suicidal thoughts and behaviors

If not addressed, these issues can lead to increasingly negative outcomes as LGB youth continue through school and move into adulthood. Thus, it is necessary to prevent violence toward LGB youth and to intervene swiftly when violence occurs.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

As with any issue that can affect school environments and learning, prevention is the preferred approach to dealing with violence towards LGB youth.

Promote a Positive School Climate

The most important preventive measure school districts can put into place is to create and promote positive, safe school climates for all students, including LGB youth.

Nondiscrimination policies. One way to create a positive school climate is to include sexual orientation as a protected status in nondiscrimination policies and statements. Further, those policies and statements need to be explicit, visible, and consistently enforced. Addressing all forms of discrimination (e.g., heterosexism, racism, sexism, ableism) not only sends the message that discrimination and violence toward LGB persons and all others are unacceptable and will not be tolerated in schools, but also provides justification for disciplinary action when some form of discrimination or violence does occur.

Supportive relationships and education. Other methods of creating and promoting positive school climates, particularly for LGB youth, consist of establishing and fostering strong, positive relationships with families and the communities in which schools are located, providing ongoing professional development and support for faculty and staff in the area of LGB issues, incorporating LGB issues into school curricula, making relevant information available in the school library, sponsoring Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), and providing student and family support through services offered in schools for everyone in need.

Bully-prevention and positive behavior supports programs. Published, research-based programs targeting bullying and other violent behaviors can be used to create and promote positive school climates. These

programs are intended to educate students, faculty, and staff about using appropriate social skills and conduct, identifying individual strengths and abilities, making connections with others, and identifying and responding to bullying, which benefits everyone in schools, particularly LGB youth.

Intervening in Violence Toward LGB Youth

Despite the best efforts to prevent violence toward LGB youth and others, situations will arise that require intervention.

Addressing homophobic remarks and behaviors.

Immediately addressing homophobic and heterosexist remarks and behaviors is necessary not only to protect those targeted by them, but also to prevent these behaviors from escalating and to model the behaviors expected of others in similar situations. When addressing discriminatory remarks and behaviors, it is important to (a) identify explicitly the remarks or behaviors as being heterosexist or homophobic, (b) indicate such remarks or behaviors as being unacceptable, and (c) aid the person making the comments or engaging in the behaviors to make more appropriate choices in the future. Depending on the type and severity of the remarks or behaviors observed, further disciplinary action may be needed. As mentioned previously, being able to rely upon nondiscrimination policies and statements that include sexual orientation as a protected status reinforces one's ability to justify appropriate disciplinary actions.

Support for LGB victims of violence. LGB youth who experience violence need access to coordinated, collaborative, and supportive services in the schools, such as individual and group counseling. It is important to help them deal with the consequences of the violence and to aid them in identifying and building their resiliency and coping skills. School psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, and associated mental health professionals should be prepared to provide these services in the school setting. Access to these services may vary depending on where one lives, so it is important to investigate what is available in the local schools and in the community at large.

SUMMARY

LGB youth are vulnerable to violence in schools and at home due to the homophobia and heterosexism prevalent in the larger society. To foster healthy

development, academic success, and positive relationships, schools need to be safe spaces for LGB youth to grow and thrive. Therefore, it is important for educational professionals to work to prevent discrimination and violent acts toward LGB youth as much as possible and to intervene as necessary. Such efforts will benefit not only LGB youth but all children and adolescents.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

- Barton, E. A. (2006). *Bully prevention: Tips and strategies for school leaders and classroom teachers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Lasser, J., Tharinger, D. J., & Cloth, A. (2006). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (pp. 419-430). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Ludeke, M. (2010). Transgender and questioning youth: Support strategies for educators. In A. Canter, L. Z. Paige, & S. Shaw (Eds.), *Helping children at home and school III: Handouts for families and educators* (S7H18). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Online

- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN): <http://www.glsen.org>
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Workgroup on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Issues: <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/glb.aspx>
- National Education Association (NEA), *Safety, bias and GBLT issues*: <http://www.nea.org/home/18932.htm>
- National Technical Assistance Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): <http://www.pbis.org>
- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG): <http://www.pflag.org>
- Youth OUTreach (LAMBDA Legal Defense and Education Fund): <http://www.lambda.org/youth.htm>

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