

## Bullying of LGBT Youth and Those Perceived to Have Different Sexual Orientations

### What is Bullying?

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children. It involves a real or perceived power imbalance and the behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.

Both kids who are bullied and kids who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth, or those perceived as LGBT, may be teased and bullied by their peers. Educators, health professionals, parents, and other concerned adults can make a difference in the lives of LGBT youth. Often, bullying towards LGBT youth targets their non-conformity to gender norms. This may be sexual harassment covered under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.

### Student and Teacher Attitudes

According to a 2005 Harris Interactive survey:

- A majority of youth know of LGBT classmates
- More than one-third of teachers know of an LGBT student
- Most teachers surveyed are committed to keeping LGBT students safe and creating school climates that are safe and supportive learning environments (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005)

### Effects of Anti-LGBT Bullying

Bullied LGBT youth, or youth perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, are more likely to skip school, smoke, use alcohol and drugs, or engage in other risky behaviors (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Lesbian, gay or bisexual youth are more than twice as likely as their peers to be depressed and think about or attempt suicide (Russell & Joyner, 2001). The risks are the same whether youth are LGBT, are heterosexual but are wrongly perceived to be LGBT, or choose to hide their sexual orientations.

## What Schools and Communities Can Do

### ***Develop Clear Policies on Bullying***

Schools can consider adding sexual orientation and gender identity to their bullying policies (Office of Civil Rights, OCR, 2010). Doing so tells students to treat everyone equally, regardless of their sexual orientation (Get Busy, Get Equal, 2006).

According to the Harris Interactive survey, students from schools with clear policies on LGBT-related bullying:

- Are less likely to report a serious harassment problem
- Report higher rates of feeling safe at school
- Are one-third less likely to skip a class

Schools with anti-bullying policies can consider making it clear that bullying based on sexual orientation is against school policy. (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005)

### ***Train Staff and Volunteers in Bullying Prevention and Intervention***

Schools, clubs, camps, after school programs, summer programs, and other youth organizations can train staff and volunteers on bullying prevention and intervention.

### ***Create Safe Environments for All Children***

Schools and communities can create safe, non-biased, and supportive environments

for all children and youth, such as a gay-straight alliance (GSA). GSAs help create safer schools, and reduce the hazards and stresses for LGBT youth (Just the Facts Coalition, 1999). According to the Equal Access Act, schools must allow these groups if they have other “non-curricular” clubs or groups.

### ***Discuss Bullying Openly***

Adults can consider discussing concerns about LGBT-related bullying with youth. Parents and other adults may convey an attitude of indifference by avoiding the subject. Or worse, their silence may convey an unspoken acceptance of the bullying (Ponton, 2001).

These discussions should protect the youth’s privacy. Be careful not to disclose or discuss issues around being LGBT with the youth’s parents or anyone else.

### ***Provide Additional Support***

When youth reveal same-sex attractions and relationships, this is an opportunity for health, medical, and school professionals to better inform and support sexual minority youth by linking them with community resources and helping to overcome the tensions of parents, families, and peers.

Bullied LGBT youth may need additional support, such as access to qualified healthcare professionals with experience working with LGBT youth (AAP, 2004; NAPNAP position paper, 2006).

### **Raise Community Awareness**

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages pediatricians to discuss youth sexuality with community leaders. Specifically, pediatricians are encouraged to:

- Provide facts about sexual orientation in school and community libraries
- Develop support groups for LGBT youth, their friends, and their parents (AAP, 2004)

## References and Resources

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**Get Busy, Get Equal.** (2006). *Get a safe schools policy*, produced by American Civil Liberties Union, GLSEN and AIDS project at [www.aclu.org/getequal/](http://www.aclu.org/getequal/).

**Harris Interactive & GLSEN.** (2005). *From teasing to torment: School climate in America, a survey of students and teachers*. New York: GLSEN. Additional research publications: *Institutional heterosexism in our schools: A guide to understanding and undoing it*, and the biennial, *National School Climate Survey*, are available at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

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**Kim, R.** (2009). A report on the status of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in education: Stepping out of the closet, into the light. National Education Association of the United States, Human and Civil Rights, Washington, D.C., p. 30.

**National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP)** position paper, Health risks and needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning adolescents (2006). *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 20, 29A-30A.

**Office of Civil Rights (OCR).** *Dear Colleague Letter: Harassment and Bullying.* (2010). Issued by Russlynn Ali Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html>.

**Ponton, L.** (2001). *What does gay mean: How to talk with kids about sexual orientation and prejudice*. San Francisco, CA: Horizons Foundation. Additional resources are available through the National Mental Health Association at [www.nmha.org/whatdoesgaymean](http://www.nmha.org/whatdoesgaymean).

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**Russell, S.T. & Joyner, K.** (2002). Adolescent sexual orientation and suicide risk: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal Public Health*, 91, 1276-1281.