

Homophobic Bullying

A Factsheet for Teachers to use with the whole school community

What is homophobic bullying?

Homophobic bullying is behaviour or language that makes a child or young person feel unwelcome or marginalised because of a perceived or actual sexual orientation.

You do not have to be a lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) person to experience homophobic bullying.

The main factors that influence whether or not a person is a target of homophobic bullying are:

- * People perceive you to have a particular sexual orientation, because you fit lesbian, gay or bisexual stereotypes. These stereotypes are based on a societal bias involving traditional gender roles or traits, that are inaccurate, for example softly spoken boys, and girls with short hair
- * You defend the civil rights of sexual minorities
- * You have LGBT friends, parents or family
- * You are perceived as being different to your peers or those in your local community
- * Or none of the above. The child displaying the bullying behaviour knows such attacks will damage you.

How is Homophobic Bullying displayed?

Like all forms of bullying, homophobic bullying can occur in different ways such as emotional, verbal, physical or sexual.

Some of the more common types of behaviour may include:

- * Verbal bullying (being teased or called mean names, or having derogatory/inflammatory terms used to describe you, or hate language used against you)
- * Being compared to LGBT celebrities / caricatures / characters that portray particular stereotypes (for example, being compared to Lilly Savage)
- * 'Being outed' (the threat of being exposed to your friends and family by them being told that you are gay, lesbian or bisexual even if you are not)
- * Indirect bullying / social exclusion (being ignored or left out, for example gestures such as 'backs against the wall')
- * Physical bullying (being hit, pushed or kicked)
- * Sexual harassment (inappropriate sexual gestures, for example, in the locker room after P.E. or being groped with comments such as 'You know you like it!')
- * Cyber bullying (being teased, called names and/or threatened via email, text and on Social Networking Sites)

What are the possible effects of homophobic bullying?

All forms of bullying can affect a child or young person's emotional and social well being as well as their physical health. This could lead to withdrawing from social interactions in class or other school activities previously enjoyed, academic underachievement, truancy, school refusal or leaving education earlier than might have happened otherwise. How severe the effects on a particular child or young person are can depend entirely on the individual and their coping mechanisms and no two people will respond in the same way.

LGB people can face negative attitudes and prejudices in their local communities and

research has proven that as a result of this, young LGB people are particularly prone to poor mental health. This can lead some LGB young people to internalise these feelings (internalised homophobia). This might mean:

- * Denial of their sexual orientation to themselves or others or attempts to change their sexual orientation
- * Low self-esteem and/or negative body image
- * A dislike towards other open or *obvious* LGB young people

- * Shame, depression, defensiveness, anger or bitterness
- * Self-ridicule to gain social/peer acceptance
- * Risk-taking behaviours including substance misuse
- * Self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts

What must schools do?

Schools are required by the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 to have measures in place to tackle **all** forms of bullying amongst pupils, including homophobic bullying.

Some methods of proactively tackling homophobic bullying in the school community may include:

- * School policies for both staff and pupils (equal opportunities, bullying policies etc) including sexual orientation and gender identity issues
- * Daily reinforcement of the use of positive language and the challenging of inappropriate comments made by staff and pupils through policy and overall school ethos etc.
- * Awareness raising opportunities for staff and pupils, including positive imagery/posters and workshops/training delivered through specialist agencies
- * Accessible and diverse support strategies in place to tackle homophobic bullying, including signposting leaflets for helplines, counselling etc., for staff and pupils
- * Accurate record keeping and tracking

What can I do to help?

There are two things as a teacher you can do to prevent all forms of bullying - prevent and respond.

1: To try to prevent homophobic bullying incidents from occurring in the school you can support and implement the school's policy and procedures. If these could be improved to specifically tackle homophobic bullying you could champion this to the Senior Management Team.

2: To respond to an alleged homophobic bullying incident you should follow the procedures as described in the Anti-Bullying Policy however there are some things you should be aware of:

- * Many young people may not want to tell you they are LGB, or that they are perceived to be, through fear that your reaction may also be negative. So be sensitive to their circumstances.
- * Ensure confidentiality – particularly of the victim's sexual orientation. A pupil's disclosure of their sexual orientation is not a child protection issue, and should not be revealed to anyone, including their parents (especially as the young person may fear their reaction). Remember a child's best interests and welfare is paramount (Children's (NI) Order 1995).
- * Inform them of your legal obligations to report any form of abuse, and what information will be passed on and for what purpose. This may relate to how the young person is being bullied (if a crime or serious assault has been committed), or the young person may be self-harming or contemplating suicide. Remember their welfare is paramount, even if they are concerned about other people knowing what has happened.
- * Encourage the victim to report the homophobic incident. While homophobic bullying should be appropriately dealt with by most school policies, there may be a need to report the incident to the PSNI. Harassment of any kind on the basis of sexual orientation is a hate crime in Northern Ireland and should be dealt with accordingly. The young person can report this themselves (in person, over the phone or anonymously online). Explain to them the procedure for this, and the importance of doing it.
- * Above all, be compassionate and supportive to the victim. Where and when possible, provide them with information and other materials to allow them to explore their identity. Many LGB have little or no access to appropriate literature in the school environment. A positive view of your own identity is necessary for positive mental health and well-being.

Further Support

- * Visit the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum Website - www.niabf.org.uk
- * Refer to Save the Children's Anti-Homophobic Bullying School Resource - 'Leave It Out' (2008)