

## Challenge Homophobic Language

Language is powerful - it is after all one of the main ways we communicate messages. What messages do you want to communicate?

The messages that we receive about gay, lesbian and bisexual people are overwhelmingly negative – including the message that it is an acceptable form of discrimination. This message is sent very loudly when homophobia is ignored in our homes, in our schools and in our workplaces.

Challenging homophobic hate begins by challenging people's negative attitudes and the language they use.

*From young people:*

Use of the word 'gay' to describe a person, event or object that young people don't like, or is in their minds dysfunctional, is homophobic and needs to be challenged. The use of other words such as 'queer' or 'faggot' – even if used in normal discourse or banter – are homophobic and need to be challenged.

Timing is crucial. If in a rush, make it clear that you do not find it acceptable to use this language: "The use of the word gay (or queer) in that way is unacceptable". Or, "I feel uncomfortable with jokes like that / that kind of labelling."

When you have more time ask questions like:

"What do you mean by that?"

"What are you intending to achieve by using the word gay?"

"What do you mean by gay?"

"Would use 'black', 'spastic', 'cripple', 'fenian / hun' in the same way?" "Why / Why not?"

"In our family we respect everybody's human rights so using language in a way which suggests that there is something wrong with gay people or being gay is unacceptable."

"What you said is homophobic. Why do you feel that it is acceptable to insult gay people?"

"How would you feel if people treated you differently to other people?"

When dealing with such remarks you may well have your own sexual orientation questioned:

"Are you a lesbian?"

"Are you gay?"

If you are and wish to affirm this, consider first if you have the support necessary to make such an affirmation positive. If you have, then do so.

If you are not lesbian, gay or bisexual (or you are and you do not wish to share that information) it is better to respond with, "Would it matter if I were?" as it keeps the dialogue open and allows for positive discussion of the issues. "No, I'm not." Closes the dialogue and is often heard (mistakenly) by someone with homophobic views as tacitly supporting their homophobia.

If young people use religious reasons to back their motive for using homophobic language, it is important to reiterate that whilst they have the right to their faith; it is their responsibility to ensure that they do not impose on other's rights to their beliefs, feelings and to safety and equality. Include in your discussion that homophobia is a hate crime. Therefore, homophobia and homophobic bullying is also against the law.

## **Use of other offensive terms**

Check that young people know what they mean and where offensive terms come from.

Enable them to recognise the equivalent in racism or sectarianism.

Make it clear that you as a parent, relative or friend find it offensive and will not accept them using this language.

### *Answering homophobia from friends or relatives:*

"The use of the word gay (or queer) in that way is homophobic."

"I feel uncomfortable with jokes like that / that kind of labelling."

"As far as I'm concerned we are all entitled to more respect than that."

### *Answering homophobia from Colleagues at work:*

"I feel uncomfortable with jokes like that / that kind of labelling."

"As far as I'm concerned we are all entitled to more respect than that."

"We have procedures to protect us all from that kind of behaviour."

"Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I'm shocked to hear views like that expressed here where we are all expected to support equal opportunities. I disagree with your view."

### *From Senior Management:*

"I expected you would be a leader in the promotion of equal opportunities. Please don't assume I feel comfortable with what you said or seem to believe. I feel very disappointed and unsafe when I hear you smear an oppressed group like that."

"If someone said something like that about me, I would have expected you to stand up for me. I feel it is part of your job as a manager/supervisor. Now I feel I can't trust you to challenge that kind of hate."

### *From staff you manage:*

"We have a policy against the use of those views – it is called equal opportunities and we are all accountable for upholding it. You are in danger of being disciplined if you don't stop using expressions of that kind."

"Have you ever attended a course or seminar on LGBT issues at work? Maybe we should look into it. You don't seem to know much about the effects of homophobia on people with whom you work, or anyone else for that matter."

