



## Bullying Among Children and Youth on Perceptions and Differences in Sexual Orientation

*Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength.*

Often, it is repeated over time. Children and youth who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), or are perceived to be so, can face unrelenting teasing and bullying by their peers. Because this aggression can be sexual in nature, the effects closely resemble those of sexual harassment and in some cases may constitute sexual harassment.

### The prevalence of anti-LGBT bullying

Surveys of middle and high school students show that a great deal of verbal and physical bullying in our schools is directed at students who are, or are perceived to be lesbian, gay or sexual minority youth.

- *The National School Climate Survey*, conducted in 2007 by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), concluded that nearly three-quarters of the high school students surveyed heard derogatory and homophobic remarks “frequently” or “often” at school within the past year. Almost 90% of LGBT youth had been victimized verbally, with almost half experiencing physical attacks and threats. Bullying around issues of sexual orientation and gender expressions resulted in two-thirds of LGBT students feeling “unsafe” in school. Moreover their rates of school avoidance (missing a class or a school day in the past month) was five times higher than a national sample of high school students (Kosciw, 2008).
- In a poll conducted by Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005), 60% of students (aged 13-18) had been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted

during the past school year because of real or “perceived race/ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, or religion” (p. 4). Over half of these incidences were thought to be based on sexual orientation alone.

- In a national survey of teens (ages 12-17) commissioned by the National Mental Health Association (NMHA), 78% of teens reported that youth who are gay or who are thought to be gay are teased or bullied in their schools and communities; 93% hear other youth use derogatory words about sexual orientation at least once in a while, and 51% hear these words every day (NMHA, 2002).
- The 2009 *Indicators of School Crime and Safety Report* conducted jointly by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, found that 10% of students (aged 12-18) reported hearing hate-related words, 36% saw hate-related graffiti, and 1% reported that the hate-related words related to sexual orientation (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009).

### Attitudes of students and teachers

- A majority of the students in the Harris Interactive survey (2005) admitted knowing gay, lesbian, or bisexual students, and slightly more than one-third of the teachers acknowledged knowing a student with same-sex orientation.
- Most teachers expressed a strong commitment to safeguard LGBT students and work to create school climates that are safe and supportive learning environments (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005).

- When teens in the NMHA survey (2002) were asked how they felt about the teasing or bullying of LGBT students, 78% disapproved and only 3% said this behavior was funny.
- Adolescents who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to be depressed and think about or attempt suicide (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007; Russell & Joyner, 2001).

### The effects of anti-lgbt bullying and harassment

- Surveys of teens indicate that anti-LGBT bullying may affect greater numbers of straight students than sexual minority youth. For every lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth who is bullied, four straight students who are perceived to be gay or lesbian are bullied (Ponton, 2001).
- The stigma and hostilities youth experience from anti-LGBT bullying makes them prone to health risk behaviors, such as skipping school, smoking, alcohol and drug use, and sexual risk. These same risks exist for heterosexual youth perceived to be lesbian or gay, as for LGBT youth who keep their sexual orientation hidden (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001).
- Lesbian and gay youth who openly admit to their same-sex orientations and gender non-conforming youth (e.g., their appearance or dress violates gender norms) are at a higher risk of bias-related violence, including physical assaults, than heterosexual youth. The hostilities they regularly confront often lead to dangerous behaviors and injurious outcomes, such as dropping out of school, abusing alcohol and illicit drugs, engaging in criminal activity, and running away from home (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). LGBT students and those questioning their sexual identities are seven times more likely to drop-out of school than heterosexual youth. The risk for dropping out of school is higher for non-disclosing LGBT students and those questioning their sexual orientation than lesbian, gay, or bisexual students who do disclose their orientation (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kim, 2009).

### What schools and communities can do

- The National Education Association held a summit in 2008 to hear from 25 leading scholars and educators on the status of LGBT students. NEA concluded in its report of findings, *Stepping Out of the Closet, Into the Light*, that anti-LGBT attitudes and fears are pervasive in nearly every school and community. School districts, community, and donor organizations were asked to partner in raising awareness and support for LGBT students (Kim, 2009).
- Schools with anti-bullying policies should clarify that teasing and exclusion based on sexual orientation is prohibited. Students from schools with comprehensive policies reported hearing fewer derogatory remarks, such as "gay" used in a negative or personal way (5-6% lower rates than generic and no policy schools), and LGBT students reported more frequent and effective interventions by school staff when bullied (Kosciw, 2008).
- Schools should consider adding sexual orientation and gender identity to school policies on discrimination and harassment. This sends the message to the school community that no one should be treated differently because of an admitted or presumed sexual orientation (Get Busy, Get Equal, 2006; Kim, 2009).
- Schools, clubs, camps, after school and summer programs, and every youth-serving organization should train staff and volunteers on the impact of anti-LGBT rhetoric and acts, and on effective bullying prevention methods and interventions ([see Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and On-the-Spot Interventions factsheets](#)) (Kim, 2009).

- Schools and communities must create, non-biased and supportive environments for all children and youth that will reduce the hazards and stresses for sexual minority youth (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008; Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001).
- Schools can provide age-appropriate instruction on sexual orientation in health and sexuality curricula. Communities can ensure inclusiveness in social, recreational, and sports programming to set an accepting tone of diverse identities (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008; Kim, 2009).
- Concerns about bullying or harassment of LGBT youth should be discussed with youth. By avoiding the subject, parents and other adults may convey an attitude of indifference, or worse, an unspoken acceptance of the harassment experienced by LGBT youth (Kim, 2009; Ponton, 2001).
- Additional supports may be needed when anti-LGBT bullying is detected to guarantee access to qualified health care and mental health providers who are knowledgeable and skilled in health promotion and risk reduction in working with LGBT and questioning youth (AAP, 2004; NAPNAP, 2006).
- Clinical guidelines by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourage pediatricians to help raise awareness among community leaders on issues of adolescent sexuality and specifically relative to sexual minority youth, to provide facts about sexual orientation in school and community libraries, and to develop support groups for minority sexual youth, their friends, and their parents. 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 (AAP, 2004).

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