School Safety Center

Bullying and LGBTQ: Bullying and the LGBTQ Community

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What Do We Know About Rates Of Bullying For LGBTQ Students?

A large percentage of bullying among students involves the use of homophobic teasing and slurs, called homophobic teasing or victimization (Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). Bullying and homophobic victimization occur more frequently among LGBT youth in American schools than among students who identify as heterosexual (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). A recent nationwide survey of LGBT youth reports that 84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). A population-based study of over 200,000 California students found that 7.5% reported being bullied in the last year because they were "gay or lesbian or someone thought they were" (O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004, p. 3). Of note, among sexual minority youth, transgender youth remain an especially understudied and underserved population who are often victimized because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2009).

Even without being a direct target of homophobic bullying, a student may feel isolated from friends and teachers because of the anti-gay attitudes and behaviors present in schools; 91.4% of a LGBT middle/high school sample reported that they *sometimes* or *frequently* heard homophobic remarks in school, such as "faggot," "dyke," or "queer." Of these students, 99.4% said they heard remarks from students and 63% heard remarks from faculty or school staff (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2008). The pervasiveness of anti-gay language in schools suggests that most school environments are hostile for LGBT students and create negative environments for their heterosexual peers as well (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008).

Are LGBTQ Students More At-Risk For Certain Outcomes Related To Bullying Than Their Heterosexual Peers?

Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) found that LGB youth were at higher risk for school victimization and health risk behaviors such as substance abuse, sexual risk-taking, and mental health issues than their non-LGB peers. In addition, LGB youth who were victimized reported more risky behaviors than non-victimized LGB youth.

School engagement. According to a 2003 survey of Massachusetts high school students, individuals who identified as LGB were nearly five times as likely as students who identified as heterosexual to report not attending school because of feeling unsafe (Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2003). A recent nationally representative survey reported that 29.1% of LGBT students missed a class at least once and 30.0% missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns, compared to only 8.0% and 6.7%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students (Kosciw et al., 2010).

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Also, in this sample, the reported grade point average of students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression was almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed. LGBT students also tend to have more negative school attitudes (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Russell et al., 2001).

Suicidal Ideation/Attempts. Suicide among sexual minority youth is a major public health concern. A number of studies have reported high rates of suicide attempts among sexual minority youth (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2002; Espelage et al., 2008; Paul et al., 2002; Safren & Heimberg, 1999); and these youth were significantly more likely to be at risk of suicidal completion than heterosexual youth (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Remafedi et al., 1998). Child Welfare League of America (2009) found that in 2005, 45% of gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth attempted suicide, compared with eight percent of heterosexual youth. However, on a positive note, when school climate is perceived as positive, it serves to buffer against the experience of negative psychological and social concerns among sexual minority youth (Espelage et al., 2008). That is, LGB and sexually questioning students who had experienced homophobic teasing, but perceived their school as positive, reported less depression, suicidality, and alcohol and drug use than LGB and questioning students who were bullied and in a negative school climate.

What Challenges Do LGBTQ Students Face Around Bullying That Are Unique From Other Populations?

Sexual minority youth frequently struggle with rejection from their parents, peers, and teachers, as well as homophobia in society, which put them at greater risk for depression, which can lead to self-destructive behavior such as suicide, especially if they are bullied frequently. In addition, students are coming out at younger ages and in higher numbers than in previous generations (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). However, they are coming out during middle school when attitudes about same sex attraction are less favorable among early adolescents than as students mature (Heinze & Horn, 2009; Horn, 2006; Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). For example, in a study of middle and high school students, 30% of 7th graders (10.8% of 12th graders) indicated that they **would not remain friends** with someone if they disclosed that they were gay (Poteat et al., 2009). Further, 44.5% of 7th graders (20.6% of 12th graders) would prefer to attend a school where there were **no** gay or lesbian students. These findings suggest that LGBT students are likely to use sources of support – friends- when they risk disclosing their sexual orientation.

Many LGBTQ students also report that school personnel are perpetrators of homophobic remarks in school – nearly two-thirds (63%) of LGBTQ students in the GLSEN's National School Climate Survey reported hearing homophobic remarks from school staff (Kosciw et al., 2008) and teachers intervene less when homophobic remarks are made in comparison to racist and sexist remarks (Kosciw et al., 2008). Moreover, lack of response from other students and teachers to homophobic remarks plays a role in maintaining a school environment that is unsupportive of sexual minority students (Espelage & Swearer, 2008) and compromises their basic rights to safety and an education (Bagley & D'Augelli, 2000; Nichols, 1999).

Indeed, LGBT students typically receive little-to-no protection or support from school policies or administration (Beach et al., 1993; Greydanus & Dewdney, 1985; Kosciw et al., 2010. In a nationwide survey of state and local laws, 42 states were given failing grades for not having sufficient sexuality education, safe school laws protecting students based on sexual orientation, presence of gay straight alliances in schools, and state and local laws protecting the rights of LGB students (Kosciw, 2004).

• Only sixteen states prohibit discrimination or harassment in schools on the basis of sexual orientation.

• Thirty-three states have enacted anti-bullying/harassment laws that **do not protect** LGBT students

It is obvious that many students who are LGBT or questioning their sexual orientation are spending their childhood and adolescence in schools that lack accurate information, positive role models, or support groups (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Mufoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002).

Are There Examples Of Strategies, Services, And/Or Programs That Are Effective For Preventing And Intervening In Bullying For LGBT Students?

Russell, Kosciw, Horn, and Saewyc (2010) in their "Social Policy Report: Safe Schools Policy for LGBTQ Students" highlight four practices that have shown to promote safety and well-being for LGBTQ youth in schools. These are elaborated here:

Practice #1: School nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies that specifically include actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity or expression (Russell & McGuire, 2008).

• LGBTQ students in states with comprehensive, enumerated safe school laws reported hearing fewer homophobic remarks in school, experienced lower levels of harassment and assault based on sexual orientation or gender expression than students in states with no law or in states with a non-enumerated anti-bullying law and fewer suicidal attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2008).

Practice #2: Teachers receive training and ongoing professional development on how to intervene when homophobic teasing occurs.

• Students feel safer when they report that their teachers intervene to stop harassment (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

• Two recent evaluations showed that teacher training around LGBT issues and creating safer school environments for LGBTQ students (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010; Horn & Gregory, 2005).

Practice #3: Presence of school-based support groups or clubs (e.g., gay-straight alliances (GSAs)).

• Students in schools with GSAs reported fewer homophobic remarks, less harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity, were less likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe, and were more likely to feel a positive school sense of belonging (Kosciw et al., 2008).

• Szalacha (2003) found in a Massauchatts statewide study found that the presence of a GSA was the most predictive factor in perceived school safety amongst LGB and heterosexual students.

• LGBTQ students who attend schools with Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other support groups report greater perceptions of safety and lower levels of victimization (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004; Goodenow et al., 2006; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009).

• A recent study showed that among heterosexual youth, those who had at least one LG friend were less likely to tolerate unfair treatment toward LG peers (Heinze & Horn, 2009).

• Dialogue groups also can provide opportunities for positive intergroup interactions among peers at school (Candelario & Huber, 2002; Portman & Portman, 2002).

Practice #4: Inclusion of LGBTQ role models or issues in school curricula, including bullying-prevention programming, and access to information and resources through the library, school-based health centers, and other avenues.

• When students know where to get information and resources for LGBTQ issues and if they have someone to talk to at their school then they feel safer (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

• School-based programs that focus on a range of issues such as raising cultural awareness or facilitating individual identity development, building connections between students and their cultural community, or promoting social action to counter prejudice and discrimination are likely to reduce bullying directed toward LGBTQ students (Espelage & Horne, 2008).

• In a study of 23 comprehensive anti-bullying programs aimed at middle and high school students, none of them covered issues of sexual orientation, homophobia, sexual harassment, and sexual violence sufficiently enough to warrant any efficacy (Birkett, Espelage, & Stein, 2008).

How Can Parents, Teachers, Community Leaders, Policy-Makers, and Educators Help to Reduce School Bullying in LGBTQ Community?

(1) Support legislation that provides funding to implement anti-bullying policies and that specifically include protections based on students' actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.

(2) SUPPORT RESEARCH ON BULLYING AMONG LGBTQ STUDENTS.

(3) SUPPORT BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMS THAT ADDRESS HOMOPHOBIA.