



That's So Gay

Ending Bullying and Harassment Against
LGBT Students in Colorado Schools

A Resource Guide for Educators,
Parents, & Community Members



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide seeks to be a resource for educators, parents, and community members who are committed to addressing the pervasive problem of bullying and harassment in Colorado schools.

It provides information on the nature of bullying, and suggests practical tips and best practices for effectively addressing peer-to-peer harassment in schools throughout the state.

This resource guide was created by One Colorado Education Fund with the assistance of the state's leading education organizations, including the Colorado Association of School Executives, the Colorado Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers—Colorado.



**"When we tolerate a culture that allows children to bully and harass each other because of race, color, national origin, gender stereotyping, or disability, we are failing to live up to principles of fairness and equity that are deeply rooted in our Constitution."
-Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education**

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ABOUT ONE COLORADO EDUCATION FUND

One Colorado Education Fund is a statewide organization dedicated to securing equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Coloradans. We provide educational programming on LGBT issues, conduct research to understand public opinion, mobilize a community of LGBT people and straight allies, and develop campaigns to build public support for fairness and equality. We represent more than 14,000 supporters across the state, with members in every Colorado county.

In 2010, One Colorado Education Fund surveyed LGBT Coloradans across the state to learn more about their experiences, needs, and priorities. Thirty-four percent of respondents reported that creating safer school environments for LGBT students was a top priority. In fact, nearly 50 percent (47 percent) reported personally experiencing bullying or harassment in middle school or high school due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

To address this issue, One Colorado Education Fund has developed a comprehensive plan that includes advocating for comprehensive anti-bullying policies at every level, organizing LGBT young people and building a statewide network of Gay-Straight Alliances, and developing local and regional safe schools coalitions, which will work directly with districts and schools in their areas to address bullying and harassment against LGBT students.

This resource guide for educators, parents, and community members is one component of a comprehensive plan to end anti-LGBT harassment and bullying.

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BULLYING DEFINED

Bullying is no longer an inevitable adolescent rite of passage—it is a widespread, serious problem that has significant negative impacts on the academic achievement, educational aspirations, and psychological well-being of all students.

If we want children to succeed in school and in life, we must address the pervasive bullying that happens in schools throughout the state.

Although definitions of bullying vary, most experts agree that bullying involves:

- **Imbalance of Power:** People who engage in bullying behavior usually use power to control or harm; the targets of bullying behavior often may have a hard time defending themselves.
- **Intent to Cause Harm:** Actions done by accident are not bullying; the person engaging in bullying behavior has a goal to cause harm.
- **Repetition:** Bullying often happens to the same person over and over again by the same person or group (although a single incident of bullying must be responded to immediately and appropriately).

Bullying takes many forms:

- **Verbal:** name-calling, teasing, intimidation (may be sexual in nature)
- **Social / Relational:** spreading rumors, intentionally leaving people out, breaking up friendships
- **Physical:** hitting, punching, shoving, destroying property
- **Cyberbullying:** using the Internet, mobile phones, or other digital technologies to harm others




LGBT STUDENTS

More than any other students, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young people and those perceived to be LGBT are at risk for bullying, name-calling, harassment, isolation, and physical assault. Research indicates that schools are often hostile environments for LGBT students (or those perceived to be LGBT).

A 2009 National Climate Survey, which sampled more than 7,000 students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, begins to quantify the torment LGBT young people experience.

- Eighty-seven percent of Colorado's LGBT students were verbally harassed in school because of their sexual orientation. Seventy-three percent were harassed because of their gender identity or expression.
- Nine out of 10 LGBT students regularly heard homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke," or negative comments about someone's gender expression, such as not acting "feminine" or "masculine" enough.
- Nearly two in five LGBT students in Colorado were physically harassed, and almost a third were physically assaulted—meaning they were punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon because of their sexual orientation.
- LGBT students in Colorado report high levels of other forms of harassment at school: 89 percent felt deliberately excluded by peers; 86 percent had mean rumors or lies told about them; 69 percent were sexually harassed; and 62 percent had property deliberately damaged or stolen.
- Although most LGBT students have been victimized in school, many of these incidents were not reported to adult authorities.





While many students experience some form of bullying, Colorado's LGBT students are victimized more often and with more intensity than their straight peers. When comparing rates of physical harassment, 52 percent of students report being bullied because of their sexual orientation and 38 percent because of their gender identity, compared to 19 percent because of their religion and 14 percent because of their race or ethnicity.

The bullying that LGBT young people face can no longer be considered an inevitable adolescent rite of passage—as students who are the repeated targets of harassment experience alarming consequences.

- Compared to 7 percent of their non-LGBT peers, 30 percent of LGBT students missed at least one school day per month because they were too scared to attend.
- 14 percent of LGBT students didn't plan to pursue postsecondary education, compared to 9 percent who didn't experience high levels of victimization.
- 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.
- Students who are bullied frequently are more likely to smoke, abuse drugs, and attempt suicide.

All of these negative outcomes affecting the LGBT student population are connected directly to victimization—not to their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBT students who are not victimized don't differ from their straight peers regarding problematic behaviors.

UNDERSTANDING BULLYING & HARASSMENT LAWS

SB 08-200: Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act

In May 2008, Colorado expanded its anti-discrimination law to include protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, making it illegal to discriminate against LGBT Coloradans in housing and public accommodations such as hotels, restaurants, stores, hospitals, clinics, and other places of business. This law also protects LGBT students and adults from harassment and discrimination in schools across Colorado.

HB 11-1254: Anti-Bullying Legislation

During the 2011 legislative session, the Colorado General Assembly passed a bill aimed at reducing bullying and harassment in schools. On May 13, 2011, Governor John Hickenlooper signed that bill into law, making Colorado the 13th state in the nation to pass an anti-bullying bill that enumerates the personal characteristics often targeted for bullying, including race, religion, sex, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The new law also clearly defines bullying, requires each school district to adopt comprehensive anti-bullying policies, and creates a grant program to which schools can apply in order to fund anti-bullying programs.

How is bullying defined in HB 1254?

According to HB 1254, “bullying” means any written or verbal expression, or physical or electronic act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to coerce, intimidate, or cause any physical, mental, or emotional harm to any student. Bullying is prohibited against any student for any reason, including but not limited to any such behavior that is directed toward a student on the basis of his or her academic performance; or against whom federal and state laws prohibit discrimination upon any of the bases described in section 22-32-109 (1) (II) (i). This definition is not intended to infringe upon any right guaranteed to any person by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution or to prevent the expression of any religious, political, or philosophical views.

The schools in the district are subject to all federal and state laws, and constitutional provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability, race, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, ancestry, or need for special education services.

What will anti-bullying policies look like at the district level?

As specified in HB 1254, each school district board of education is now required to adopt and implement a safe school plan using the new definition of bullying as a guide for prohibiting behaviors and protecting vulnerable student populations. Safe school plans must include appropriate disciplinary consequences for students who engage in bullying behavior and for any person who takes retaliatory action against a student who reports a bullying incident.

Why Enumerate?

When a law enumerates categories (as HB 1245 does), it identifies types of individuals or things that need to be protected.

Anti-bullying and harassment bills like HB 1254 and SB 200 are designed to address the needs of students who experience bullying and harassment in their schools. Research indicates that this goal is best achieved through a policy that requires all students be protected from bullying and harassment, and that specifies categories of students who must be included by name (i.e., LGBT students).

While the goal of any safe schools legislation is to protect all students, we know enumeration that not only protects based on race, sex, or religion—all of which are very important—but also on sexual orientation and gender identity is critical because these students are more likely to experience bullying behavior.

Research clearly demonstrates the overwhelming benefits of enumeration:

1. Enumeration protects ALL students.
2. Students who attend schools with policies that enumerate categories report less bullying and harassment than students in schools that do not.
3. Enumeration is essential if laws are to be implemented. Girls would not have sports, and our schools would not be integrated if policymakers had not specifically addressed these inequities by enumerating categories like sex and race in our laws.
4. Enumeration that includes sexual orientation and gender identity removes all doubt that LGBT students are protected from bullying and harassment.
5. Comprehensive policies with enumeration help ensure safety and reduce absenteeism. Students from schools with an enumerated policy are 50% more likely to feel very safe at school (54% vs. 36%). Students without such a policy are three times more likely to skip a class because they feel uncomfortable or unsafe (16% vs. 5%).

UNDERSTANDING BULLYING & HARASSMENT LAWS

When is bullying a civil rights violation?

Schools that receive federal funding are required by federal law to address discrimination on a number of different personal characteristics. The statutes the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces include:

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex;
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504); and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II). Section 504 and Title II prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.


School districts may be in violation of these civil rights statutes and the U.S. Department of Education's regulations when peer harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability is sufficiently serious that it creates a hostile environment, interferes with a student's education, and when such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees.

While current laws enforced by OCR do not protect against harassment based on religion or sexual orientation, they do include protection against harassment of members of religious groups based on shared ethnic characteristics as well as gender-based and sexual harassment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Colorado's anti-discrimination laws include protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion.

A school is responsible for addressing harassment incidents about which it knows or reasonably should have known.



"Bullying is a school safety issue that significantly impacts Colorado students. By working together, school communities, parents, and students can help address this serious problem, and create a culture where all kids feel safe and accepted."
-Bruce Caughey, Executive Director, Colorado Association of School Executives



To address harassment in schools, the Colorado Association of School Boards has recommended that local school boards adopt a “Student Concerns, Complaints, and Grievances” regulation outlining a procedure by which unresolved incidents may be addressed. Students and parents are encouraged to inquire with their local board of education to review the specifics of their school’s reporting policy. At a minimum, a school should have in place the following:

Complaint Process

In schools where all students are safe and respected, incidents of bullying and harassment are reported and handled appropriately. Although the specific reporting procedures for each school and school district may differ, according to state law all school principals or designated administrators are tasked with the responsibility to report and investigate incidents of bullying and take appropriate disciplinary actions, if necessary. In filing a complaint, it is important to consider a few things to make sure a complaint is addressed:

- Find the appropriate reporting procedure. If the proper reporting procedure is not obvious, ask a supportive teacher or Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) advisor, or refer to the student handbook policies and follow the appropriate reporting procedures described.
- All educators and staff are responsible for reporting instances of bullying and harassment. While they may not have the authority to take action on a complaint, they can be great advocates to help students through the complaint process.
- If the school administration is not adequately responding to a complaint, notify the school superintendent and then a school board member.

Written Details

Descriptive details of a complaint assist administrators in addressing them. It’s important to write down every detail, every time an incident occurs. For the incident being reported, the person filing the report should include what happened, who did what to whom, what was said before, during and / or after the incident, and who witnessed the incident. Every conversation related to the incident should be documented as well. Ideally, the school will have a reporting or information-tracking form to use for documentation, but any written form will suffice.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PREVENTING ANTI-LGBT BULLYING

Research on preventing bullying against LGBT students is a growing area of academia. Although researchers have documented success using programs to reduce bullying, we still have much to learn about which aspects of these programs are most effective in addressing the needs of LGBT students.

The following strategies represent “best practices” in LGBT-bullying prevention, based on a review of existing bullying prevention programs and feedback from educators in the field.

- 1 Policy.** Adopt a comprehensive anti-bullying policy that enumerates categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, sex, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and gender expression / identity.
- 2 School Climate.** Focus on the social environment of the school. To reduce bullying, it is important to change the climate of the school and its social norms with regard to bullying. It must become “uncool” to bully, “cool” to help out students who are bullied, and normative for staff and students to notice when a child is bullied or left out. This requires the efforts of everyone in the school environment—teachers, administrators, counselors, nonteaching staff (such as bus drivers, nurses, school resource officers, custodians, cafeteria workers, and school librarians), parents, and students.
- 3 Assessment.** Assess bullying at your school. Adults are not always good at estimating the nature and extent of bullying at their school. Frequently, we are surprised by the amount of bullying that students experience, the types of bullying that are most common, or the “hot spots” where bullying happens. Anonymous questionnaires can help to better understand and assess what’s happening in the school. Additional benefits include:
 - Findings can help motivate adults to take action against bullying.
 - Data can help administrators and other educators tailor a bullying prevention strategy to the particular needs of the school.
 - Demographic questions can illuminate which students are most at risk.
 - Data can serve as a baseline from which administrators and other educators can measure their progress in reducing bullying.
- 4 Support and Buy-in.** Garner staff and parent support for bullying prevention. Bullying prevention should not be the sole responsibility of an administrator, counselor, teacher—or any single individual at a school. To be most effective, bullying prevention efforts require buy-in from the majority of the staff and from parents.

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- 5 Training.** Train your staff in bullying prevention, and teach them to identify bullying and harassment—including LGBT bullying—effectively and in a timely manner. All administrators, faculty, and staff at your school should be trained in bullying prevention and intervention. In-service training can help staff to better understand the nature of bullying and its effects, how to respond if they observe bullying, and how to work with others at the school to help prevent bullying from occurring. Training should not be available only for teaching staff. Rather, administrators should make an effort to educate all adults in the school environment who interact with students (including counselors, media specialists, school resource officers, nurses, lunchroom and recess aides, bus drivers, custodians, etc).
 - 6 Rules.** School rules and policies about bullying should be posted and discussed with students and parents. Appropriate positive and negative consequences also should be developed for following or not following the school’s rules.
 - 7 Intervention.** Intervene consistently and appropriately in bullying situations. All staff should be able to intervene effectively on the spot to stop bullying (i.e., in the one to two minutes that one frequently has to deal with bullying). Designated staff should also hold sensitive follow-up meetings with children who are targets of bullying behavior and (separately) with children who engage in bullying behavior. Staff should involve parents of affected students whenever possible.
 - 8 Welcoming Spaces.** Make classrooms and school buildings welcoming by displaying LGBT-inclusive materials. Hang “Safe Space” posters or stickers, display posters for LGBT History Month (October), LGBT Pride Month (June), or other LGBT material. These will let students know that their classroom or school is an inclusive and safe space for them.
 - 9 Inclusive Materials.** Incorporate LGBT materials into the curriculum to help students understand and respect differences within the school community and society as a whole. These materials will also ensure that LGBT students are represented in the content and history they are being taught.
 - 10 Student Empowerment.** Support and empower student efforts to address anti-LGBT bullying and harassment, such as the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance, the creation of a “Safe Space” building, and participation in events such as the National Day of Silence, Ally Week, and No Name-Calling Week.
 - 11 Maintenance and Sustainability.** Continue these efforts over time. There should be no “end date” for bullying prevention activities. Bullying prevention should be woven into the entire school environment.

HOW TO RESPOND TO BULLYING: PRACTICAL TIPS

It's completely normal to feel uncertain about how to handle bullying behavior. It can be difficult to recognize bullying, especially in its more subtle forms (social bullying). It can be intimidating to acknowledge that harassment is happening.

As adult intervention is one of the best defenses against bullying, it's critical that educators and parents understand how to intervene to stop it. Both educators and parents need to be equipped to recognize the warning signs, to intervene when bullying happens, and to send the message that engaging in bullying behavior is not okay.



Here are some tips to help you respond more effectively on the spot and make the best use of teachable moments:

- Intervene immediately. State that what happened was unacceptable, against the school's anti-bullying policy, and will not be tolerated. Separate the students involved.
- Do not immediately ask about or discuss the reason for the bullying or try to sort out the facts.
- Get the facts. Speak to students involved (participants and observers) in the incident separately and ask what happened.
- Make it a teachable experience. Help all involved—including bystanders—understand what has happened and why it is important for preventing future incidents.

Remember to:

- Report the incident to the right person (ideally, the school will identify an official contact such as the school administrator or a member of the school safety committee).
- Consider an appropriate intervention based on the severity and history of the incident, and the students involved.
- Follow up with the students involved to ensure the bullying behavior does not continue and that proper interventions (counseling, etc.) have been offered.

Know that there is no set formula for the best way to intervene when you suspect or observe a bullying incident. You must consider a variety of issues, including the safety of all children, the age and gender of the children involved, the circumstances surrounding the bullying, the form and type of bullying, and the role of bystanders. The most important thing to remember is to act; standing by and doing nothing is not an option.



“Teaching children to be responsible for their words and their actions is a paramount piece of being a classroom teacher. Along with our given subject matter, we are also responsible for modeling and reinforcing anti-bullying practices and norms.”
-Meghan Pellegrino, Aurora Public Schools Teacher

MISDIRECTIONS IN BULLYING PREVENTION & INTERVENTION

In recent years, increasing numbers of educators, health professionals, parents, and other adults who interact with children and young people have come to understand the seriousness of bullying behavior. As a result, many proven and promising prevention and intervention strategies have been developed.

Unfortunately, some misdirected intervention and prevention strategies also have been developed, including Zero Tolerance Policies, Conflict Resolution / Peer Mediation, Group Treatment, and Short-Term Solutions.

Zero Tolerance Policies


Many schools and school districts have adopted “zero tolerance” or “three strikes and you’re out” policies toward bullying, in which children who engage in bullying behavior are suspended or expelled from school. These policies (also called “student exclusion” policies) raise many concerns:

- These policies affect a large number of students. Recent surveys of elementary and middle school students indicate that approximately one in five students admits to bullying his or her peers periodically (Melton et al., 1998). Even if policies are limited to physical bullying, the number of affected children is still significant.
- Threats of severe punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, may actually discourage children and adults from reporting bullying behavior that they observe.
- Bullying behavior can be an early marker of other problem behaviors. Children who frequently bully their peers are at risk of engaging in other problem behaviors such as truancy, fighting, theft, and vandalism. Children who engage in bullying behavior are in need of positive, prosocial role models, including adults and students in their school.

Although suspension and expulsion of students may be necessary to maintain public safety in a very small number of cases, these practices are not recommended as a broad-based bullying prevention or intervention policy.

Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation

Conflict resolution and peer mediation are common strategies for dealing with conflicts among students, and many schools also use these strategies to address bullying problems. But conflict resolution and peer mediation are not effective in stopping bullying behavior, and they can do more harm than good.

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- Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. It is no more a “conflict” than are child abuse or domestic violence.
 - Mediating a bullying incident may send inappropriate messages to the students who are involved (such as, “You are both partly right and partly wrong,” or “We need to work out this conflict between you”). The appropriate message to the child who is the target of bullying behavior should be, “No one deserves to be bullied, and we are going to do everything we can to stop it.” The message for children who engage in bullying behavior should be, “Your behavior is inappropriate and must be stopped.”
 - Mediation may further victimize a child who has been the target of bullying behavior. It may be very upsetting for a child to face his or her tormenter in mediation.
 - There is no evidence to indicate that conflict resolution or peer mediation is effective in stopping bullying behavior.

Group Treatment

Another strategy that some schools use to address bullying behavior involves group therapeutic treatment for children who engage in bullying behavior. These treatment sessions seek to teach anger management, skill-building, and empathy-building, and they seek ways to build self-esteem.

Although these interventions are well intentioned, they are often counterproductive. Students’ behavior may further deteriorate as group members tend to serve as role models and reinforcers for each other’s antisocial and bullying behavior.

Simple, Short-Term Solutions

Often, school administrators and their staff adopt a short-term, piecemeal approach to bullying prevention. Bullying may be the topic of staff in-service trainings, a PTA meeting, a school-wide assembly, or lessons taught by individual teachers.

Although each of these efforts may represent important initial steps in the adoption of a comprehensive, long-term bullying prevention strategy, they likely will do little to significantly reduce bullying problems if implemented in a piecemeal way. To reduce the prevalence of bullying, we need a change in the climate of the school and its expectations for student behavior.

IT'S NOT BULLYING BUT ... IT'S A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Throughout the day, educators and parents witness behaviors that may not be considered bullying but that do offer adults the opportunity to begin conversations that can help to prevent future bullying incidents. These opportunities are referred to as “teachable moments,” and help to create welcoming schools for all children and families. Imagine scenarios like these:

Students are talking in the hallways while waiting for class to begin, and you hear a student say, “That’s so gay!” to her friend.

What you can do:

- **Stop It:** With a simple, quick response such as, “It’s not OK to say ‘That’s so gay’” or “You may not have meant to be unkind, but when you use the word ‘gay’ to mean something is bad or stupid, it is hurtful.”
- **Educate:** Be clear with students that when they use the word “gay” in a negative way, they are being disrespectful. Also be clear that using the phrase “That’s so gay” is hurtful to other students who may have parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, neighbors, friends, or other family members who are gay.
- **Don’t Ignore It:** Ignoring name-calling and hurtful teasing allows it to continue and possibly get worse. If other students do not see action, they get the message that there is nothing wrong with it.
- **Don’t Excuse the Behavior:** Saying “Josh doesn’t really know what it means,” or “Sarah was only joking” excuses hurtful behavior.
- **Don’t Try to Judge How Upset the Target Is:** We have no way of knowing how a student is really feeling. Often, targets are embarrassed and pretend that they were not offended or hurt. Saying “Michael didn’t seem upset by Laura’s remark” trivializes the child’s feelings. It tells the harasser that it is OK to make hurtful comments. It teaches not only the child targeted but also anyone in hearing range that they will not be protected from harassment.



“As a young bisexual female, hearing ‘That’s so gay’ hurts me. When teachers do nothing in response—which happened recently in my school—students are harmed by the slur itself and by the teacher’s ‘nonaction.’ My GSA decided to invite this teacher to our Safe-Zone training, and it had a great effect. The next time he heard the slur, he pulled the student aside and explained that his words hurt more than he realized.”
-Student from Colorado Springs



Your student asks you, “What does gay mean?”

Keep in mind: There is not one right answer. Many people have grown up without hearing the words “gay” or “lesbian.” Therefore, you may not be sure how to respond when a young person asks you what they mean. It is better to try to answer than to respond with silence or evade the question. Your comfort in answering these questions will set a welcoming tone in your class and school community.

Keep it simple: An answer can be as simple as, “‘Gay’ means when a man loves a man or a woman loves a woman.” Try to answer the question honestly without overloading a student with information. Throughout elementary school, a student’s ability to understand what “gay” means and what your explanation means may increase with development.

If students ask what the acronym “LGBT” means, you can provide the right amount of age-appropriate detail in your response. At a minimum, in addition to explaining what “G” stands for (explained above), you can explain that “L” stands for “lesbian,” which means a woman who loves another woman. People could consider themselves bisexual (for “B”) if they could imagine themselves having a boyfriend sometimes and sometimes a girlfriend. “T” means “transgender” or “trans,” and to be transgender means that a person just doesn’t fit the stereotypes for how we think a boy or girl should act, look, or feel.

Focus on love and relationships: A discussion with elementary-age students about the meanings of “gay” or “lesbian” is a discussion about love and relationships. You can just clarify that people love each other in different ways. Some women love and want to be partners with a man, and some women love and want to be partners with a woman. It can be helpful to give concrete examples, such as “Tanya and Angela love each other, and they want to be family to each other.”

Understand what the student is asking: If a second-grader says to you, “Alexia said that Ricardo is gay. What does ‘gay’ mean?” Or a student could say, “I heard that Omar’s dad is gay. What does that mean?” You could begin with, “Do you know why Alexia said that?” Listening first gives you a good idea of what your student wants to know and needs to know. Will your answer be about name-calling, defining what it means to be gay, different kinds of families, or some combination of answers?

IT'S NOT BULLYING BUT ... IT'S A TEACHABLE MOMENT

A student in your school comes out, and children are asking questions about what this means.

Have an open, honest discussion about what it means for a person to come out, including touching on some of the following key points.


People often decide to come out, or be open and honest about their non-conforming sexual orientation and gender expression, because:

- It feels phony to pretend to be someone you're not, and nobody can get really close to you when you're pretending.
- It isn't fair that other people can have boyfriends or girlfriends, and can walk and talk and sit the way they like—while people who are hiding their true identity can't date who they want or may have to watch every move they make.
- Watching every move you make can be exhausting; it can zap emotional energy that could otherwise go into being a better student.
- The opposite of coming out is actively hiding, an act of fear or shame. And at some point, as your fear and shame diminish and your confidence and self-respect grow with maturity, it just makes sense to stop hiding.
- Nobody should have to pretend to be someone else in order to get an education, hold a job, gain access to respectful health care, or be loved by their family.



Consider sponsoring some of the following activities in support of students who come out (possibly in partnership with your school's Gay-Straight Alliance).

- Host a "coming out" assembly, where you bring together several diverse LGBT alumni of your school to speak to the student body.

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- Create a “coming out” bulletin board featuring LGBT staff, alumni, and other heroes and role models.
 - Write a “coming out” article for your school paper, co-authored by those in your school’s Gay-Straight Alliance who are willing to do so, explaining why secrecy can be so self-destructive to the soul.
 - Interview African-American elders who once had to “pass” as white to get a job or marry the people they loved. Ask about what secrecy was like for them.
 - Interview people who have intentionally lost their accents and changed their names to sound more Euro-American and hide their ethnicities. Ask about what secrecy was like for them.
 - Interview gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender elders about times in their lives when they “passed” as heterosexual to get or keep a job or for other reasons. Ask about what secrecy was like.

A teacher in your school plans to observe and discuss Transgender Day of Remembrance, and a parent expresses opposition.

Be Prepared: Anticipate a variety of reactions to observing Transgender Day of Remembrance and schedule a pre-Transgender Day of Remembrance meeting to discuss positive ways to handle opposition and harassment from nonparticipants. Appoint a spokesperson from your group who can talk about the event. Have resources available about both the event and what it means to be transgender to help build awareness and understanding.

Reiterate the purpose of Transgender Day of Remembrance: The Transgender Day of Remembrance serves several purposes. It raises public awareness of hate crimes against transgender people, and it publically mourns and honors the lives of transgender people. Day of Remembrance gives transgender people and their allies a chance to memorialize those who’ve died by anti-transgender violence, while at the same time educating students, teachers, and administrators about transgender issues so that they may prevent anti-transgender hatred and violence from continuing.

IT'S NOT BULLYING BUT ... IT'S A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Explain the guiding principles of the Day of Remembrance:

- “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.” (Santayana)
- All who die due to anti-transgender violence are to be remembered.
- It is up to us to remember these people, since their killers, law enforcement, and the media often seek to erase their existence.
- Transgender lives are affirmed as valuable.
- We can make a difference by being visible, speaking out, educating, and organizing around anti-transgender violence, which can effect change.



We are often caught by surprise when conversations such as the ones described above arise, because these topics are not often discussed. Practicing age-appropriate responses to students' questions and reviewing the necessary terminology help all of us take advantage of these teachable moments. With preparation, these moments can actually help us improve a school's environment and prevent LGBT bullying (and all bullying) from happening in the first place.

For additional assistance in addressing teachable moments relating to LGBT issues:

- Human Rights Campaign resource guide for coming out: <http://ow.ly/5HBJ>
- Beyond the Binary: A Tool Kit for Gender Identity Activism in Schools: <http://ow.ly/5HBmf>

A TEACHER'S STORY

I met Stephen about seven years ago when he was a student in my ninth-grade language arts class. When I asked students to include on their address / phone number cards any information they thought I should know, Stephen wrote, "I am gay." I thought that was very brave for a ninth-grader, considering that high schools unfortunately remain strongholds of homophobia. I believed that I was open-minded enough to treat Stephen's sexual orientation as no big deal. The thing I didn't realize was how pathetically unaware I was of how my words and actions could unintentionally hurt people who aren't heterosexual.

The prime example of this was when I taught *Catcher in the Rye* as the class novel. I had often used this book, which I consider a classic, to teach literary analysis. Aside from the fact that Holden Caulfield, the main character, says "damn" almost constantly, I didn't consider the book offensive.

During a class discussion, Stephen had the courage to point out that Holden also uses the epithet "fag" on a very regular basis. Up until that moment, I had never paid any attention to that, knowing that the word was meant to be an insult, but, unbelievably enough, never making the connection between the insult and the obviously demeaning effect it had on the concept of being gay. In that moment, I learned more from Stephen, my student, than he could possibly ever hope to learn from me, his teacher.

After class, I asked Stephen for suggestions for titles of books and stories that he felt treated the issue of being gay fairly and directly, and based on that discussion, I now teach the short story, "Am I Blue" as part of my ninth-grade curriculum. Stephen opened the door of awareness for me that day, and after that, other students who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender continued to teach me understanding, compassion, and acceptance. I was always grateful to these students, but never more grateful than on the day when my own son, Josh, came to see me and told me that he was gay. Because of what my students taught me, I was able to see my son's sexual orientation as just another aspect of what I consider to be his wonderful personality.

Stephen's courage continues to be a cornerstone of his being. I can't imagine doing what he is doing—I can only admire it. I will always be thankful to him for changing my life.

WORDS TO KNOW

Cisgender refers to those whose gender expression or identity conforms to socially assigned gender roles or expectations; people whose gender identities are congruent with their assigned birth sex; not transgender.

Gay is the adjective used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic and / or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, lesbian (noun or adjective) is often a preferred term for women.

Gender expression refers to an individual's characteristics and behaviors such as appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions that are perceived as masculine or feminine.

Gender identity refers to a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being either male, female, something else, or in between. Everyone has a gender identity.

Gender nonconforming refers to a person who is or is perceived to have gender characteristics and / or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations. Gender nonconforming people may or may not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.


Genderqueer refers to people who do not identify as, or who do not express themselves as, completely male or female. Genderqueer people may or may not identify as transgender.

Homophobia is fear of lesbians and gay men. Prejudice is usually a more accurate description of hatred or antipathy toward LGBT people.

Homosexual is an outdated clinical term considered derogatory and offensive by many gay and lesbian people. *The Associated Press*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* restrict usage of it. Gay and / or lesbian accurately describe those who are attracted to people of the same sex.

Heterosexual is an adjective used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic and / or emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex. Also straight.

Lesbian refers to a woman whose enduring physical, romantic and / or emotional attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay (adjective) or as gay women.



LGBTQ is an umbrella term that stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning / queer.” The category “questioning” is included to incorporate those who are not yet certain of their sexual orientation and / or gender identity. The category “queer” is used by some people as a statement of empowerment.

Queer began as a pejorative term but is being reclaimed by some people and used as a statement of empowerment. Some people identify as “queer” to distance themselves from the rigid categorization of “straight” and “gay.” Some transgender, lesbian, gay, questioning, nonlabeling, and bisexual people, however, reject the use of this term due to its connotations of deviance, and its tendency to gloss over and sometimes deny the differences between these groups.

Sexual orientation refers to a person’s emotional and sexual attraction to other people based on the gender of the other person. People may identify their sexual orientation as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer. It’s important to understand that sexual orientation and gender identity are two different things. Not all transgender young people identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Not all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer young people display gender nonconforming characteristics.

Transgender is an umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is nonconforming and / or whose gender identity is different from their birth-assigned gender.

Transphobia is the irrational fear of those who are perceived to break or blur stereotypical gender roles, often expressed as stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, and violence. Frequently directed at those perceived as expressing their gender in a transgressive way, those who defy stereotypical gender norms.

Transsexual is a term most commonly used to refer to someone who transitions from one gender to another. It includes students who were identified as male at birth but whose gender identity is female, students who were identified as female at birth but whose gender identity is male, and students whose gender identity is neither male nor female. Transition often consists of a change in style of dress, selection of a new name, and a request that people use the correct pronoun when describing them. Transition may, but does not always, include necessary medical care like hormone therapy, counseling, and / or surgery, and / or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Content for this resource guide was adapted from the following publications and websites:

The Colorado Legacy Foundation, "A Statewide Blueprint for Bullying Prevention," 2011 (available at <http://ow.ly/6fHM1>)

National Climate Survey, 2009 and 2005 (available at <http://ow.ly/6fHWC>)

United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, "Dear Colleague" letter, October 26, 2010 (available at <http://ow.ly/6flgD>)

Colorado School Safety Resource Center, Bullying and Harassment Prevention and Education School Resource Guide (available at <http://ow.ly/6fliT>)

www.stopbullying.gov

www.glsen.org

www.welcomingschools.org

www.safeschoolscoalition.org

www.hrc.org

www.glaad.org

www.transgenderlawcenter.org

www.internationalspectrum.umich.edu/life/definitions

www.transgenderlawcenter.org/pdf/beyond_the_binary.pdf

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