Tackling homophobic bullying in schools

Homophobic bullying is a particularly vicious form of bullying that schools can struggle to deal with. Suzanne O’Connell considers what can be done to address and prevent this hurtful behaviour.

‘Homophobic bullying’ is the term used to describe the bullying, harassment or name-calling of those perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. It’s a real problem for schools – and for post primary schools in particular.

The experiences of gay young people in UK schools
Stonewall is a lesbian, gay and bisexual charity that has campaigned against homophobic bullying in schools.

In 2012 it published a survey of more than 1,600 gay young people. The report found that:

- 55 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people experience homophobic bullying in schools
- 96 per cent of gay pupils hear homophobic remarks such as ‘poof’ or ‘lezza’
- 99 per cent of gay pupils hear phrases such as ‘that’s so gay’ or ‘you’re so gay’
- only half of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils report that their schools say homophobic bullying is wrong – only 37 per cent in faith schools
- three in five pupils who experience homophobic bullying say that teachers who witness it don’t intervene.

Lack of intervention by schools
What is particularly shocking in the report is the extent to which pupils reported that teachers and schools ignore the behaviour.

There is a definite sense that schools are confused and are staff hesitant about what they should do, and lack of intervention by both teachers and peers is a common concern.

Only 10 per cent reported that their school intervenes every time they hear homophobic language.

Negative effects
Not surprisingly, the experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils has a negative effect on their school career.

It leads to avoidance of team sports and a general feeling of isolation and rejection by the school community. This can have a direct effect on attainment and aspiration, and can lead to mental health difficulties, such as depression, self-harm and even suicide.
What schools can do

Ignoring homophobia is not an option. Training might clarify for teachers what they should and shouldn’t do, and schools need to present a strong, focused approach to tackling the problem at every level.

Pupils and their families need support, and can benefit from having someone to talk to. Some schools have established clubs specifically for gay pupils and their friends.

Ten ways of challenging homophobic bullying in schools

Stonewall makes 10 recommendations for schools in challenging homophobic bullying.

1. Go back to basics – with clear and promoted policies that explicitly state that homophobic bullying is wrong.
2. Deal with incidents swiftly and clearly – ensure a quick response from schools where bullying and homophobic language occurs.
3. Lead from the top – the example should be set by headteachers, governors and academy chain directors, and it should be a priority that homophobic language is not used by school staff.
4. Remember the bigger picture – tackling homophobic bullying must be part of schools’ drive to improve behaviour and to raise attainment and aspiration.
5. Equip your staff – teachers need to be trained in how to combat the bullying and in how to support lesbian, gay and bisexual young people.
6. Involve young people – there should be encouragement to take ownership of anti-bullying initiatives.
7. Encourage role models – teachers and staff should visibly challenge homophobic bullying, as well as supporting their own gay staff.
8. Broaden the curriculum – sexual orientation issues should be integrated into the curriculum, and teaching should include information and support to gay young people to help them stay healthy and safe.
9. Provide help and support – school nurses should make it clear that they can be approached about a young person’s sexual orientation.
10. Go beyond tackling bullying – create a school environment in which difference and diversity are promoted and celebrated.

Support programmes

Stonewall has also produced two programmes to support schools in challenging homophobic bullying: Primary School Champions; and Secondary School Champions.

What Ofsted is looking for

Schools should address issues of homophobic bullying for the pain and distress it causes their pupils and its corrosive effect on school ethos generally. However, there are formal legal and accountability reasons too. The Equality Act 2010 (The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2006; DE Circular 2010/01) and the Public Duty mean that teachers must be proactive in preventing homophobic bullying.

Checking that schools are tackling it is also now built into Ofsted inspections. The supplementary guidance that Ofsted issues includes Exploring The School’s Actions to Prevent and Tackle Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying.

A major focus for inspectors is talking to pupils themselves.
In primary schools
In primary schools, inspectors might ask pupils whether:

- they hear the word ‘gay’ being used, and if their teachers tell them it’s wrong to use it to mean that something is rubbish
- pupils get picked on by others for not behaving like a ‘typical girl’ or a ‘typical boy’
- they have had lessons about different types of families
- if someone born a girl or a boy would rather be different, pupils think that they would feel safe in school.

In post-primary schools
In post-primary schools, inspectors might ask pupils whether:

- they hear anti-gay derogatory language or name-calling
- if a gay pupil was ‘out’ in school, they would feel safe from bullying
- they have learned about homophobic/transphobic bullying and ways to stop it happening
- they learn about different types of families
- there is any homophobic bullying or derogatory language about staff
- someone who thinks of themselves as opposite gender feels safe and free from bullying at school.

Documentary evidence
Inspectors will also be looking for documentary evidence of the school’s approach to tackling homophobic bullying. This might include:

- records kept
- the inclusion of homophobic bullying in anti-bullying, equality and safeguarding policies
- evidence of provision incorporated into the curriculum.

Inspectors may also want to know what training there has been – not only in how to handle bullying but also in how to deal with homophobic language.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) pupils need specific information, and there should be some account taken of this in SRE and PSHE content.

Governors being aware of the issue
Governors may also be asked about the school’s statutory duty to prevent all forms of prejudice-based bullying, including homophobia and transphobia.

They will need to be aware of the issue – and how the school addresses it and follows up any incidents.

Tackling an uncomfortable subject
It can be an uncomfortable subject to tackle. However, schools that ignore homophobia are not only putting their pupils at risk, but they may also be brought to account by Ofsted.
Further reading

- The School Report: The Experiences of Gay Young People in Britain’s Schools in 2012, by April Guasp, Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge.
- Stonewall works in a number of different ways to achieve equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexual people.
- Exploring The School’s Actions to Prevent and Tackle Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying: Briefing for Section 5 Inspection (Ofsted, 2013).
- Grasping the Nettle: The experiences of Gender Variant Children and Transgender Youth Living in Northern Ireland. Institute for Conflict Research. 2013

Author details

Suzanne O’Connell has more than 25 years’ teaching experience, 11 years of which were as a junior school headteacher. She has a particular interest in special needs, child protection and extended services.

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