

School Safety and Crisis

Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth During Troubling Times

THE PROBLEM

Research indicates that LGBTQI2-S youth experience a significantly higher frequency of bullying and harassment in the school setting than their heterosexual peers. One study revealed that 85% of LGBTQ+ youth have been verbally harassed at school and 27% have been physically assaulted (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2015). Youth who are victims of bullying and discrimination are at risk for poorer school engagement, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Indeed, there have been numerous highly publicized acts of violence against LGBTQ+ youth, as well as suicide deaths among these groups. Exposure to such media coverage has the potential for strong negative effects on other young people. This is especially a concern for those who may feel a connection with the individuals involved or who are vulnerable themselves.

It is imperative that educators, parents, and other caregivers advocate for and connect with and support students who may be at risk. Understanding risk factors and effective supports is critical in preventing peer violence and decreasing the risk of suicide in LGBTQI2-S youth.

Although these issues are highly prevalent in LGBTQ+ students, they affect the general student body as well. Therefore, while the recommendations in this handout specifically address LGBTQ+ youth, they are best practice because they have the potential to benefit all students.

LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Framework for Safe and Successful Schools calls on schools to engage in prevention-based initiatives to reduce bullying-related behaviors. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) LGBTQI2-S Committee's official position statement emphasizes that school psychologists uphold responsibilities to work to eliminate sexuality- and gender-based prejudicial and discriminatory behavior while further promoting social-emotional and academic skills for students to thrive within their communities. School personnel have an ethical obligation to ensure that safe and healthy school environments free from verbal and physical harassment and violence are provided to all students, including LGBTQ+ youth. Strong support systems must be in place and easily accessible to at-risk youth before, not just after, an incident occurs.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that states include data related to school climate, bullying, and harassment on their annual state report card. In addition, ESSA requires that states specify how they will assist school district efforts regarding bullying, harassment, and discipline. Furthermore, when bullying overlaps with harassment, schools are legally obligated to address it (in alignment with Title IX, 14th Amendment, etc.) and to protect students, including those who are LGBTQ+.

Although there is no federal law addressing bullying beyond ESSA, all states have antibullying statutes that further require schools to take all reports of bullying and harassment seriously and to address them in an expeditious manner. In some states, bullying appears in the criminal code and may apply to juveniles (stopbullying.gov). Furthermore, many states have statutes that specifically protect individuals from discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (though federal law does not).

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

In addition to physical proximity, schools must be mindful of emotional proximity to violence. Students may feel a strong emotional connection to LGBTQ+ persons they know personally or through social media or even through a unifying connection with strangers due to their shared lived experiences. As such, it is imperative that schools engage in prevention-based approaches to support the social–emotional well-being of these students.

Recommendations from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) for school systems include:

- Establish written policies that specifically protect students and staff from discrimination and harassment based on real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Provide inservice training opportunities on issues affecting LGBTQ+ youth.
- Support a curriculum that includes accurate information about LGBTQ+ people across different subject areas.
- Allow and support the formation of Gay/Straight Alliances or other student activities with the goal of addressing homophobia and heterosexism in the school setting.

Recommendations for school psychologists and other school personnel include:

- Recognize the importance of relationships and the “Power of One.” Build connections between yourself and at-risk students while encouraging connection/reconnection with their peers.
- Be supportive by actively listening and validating student concerns.
- Be an affirming support by engaging in behaviors such as calling the student by their name and using their pronouns, respecting their degree of outness, and following their lead with regard to their identity development: Meet them where they are.
- Facilitate integration within communities such as LGBTQ+ persons and intersecting identities (persons of color, other religious groups, etc.) to assess needs, build community support, and foster culturally sensitive practice.
- Be understanding that student, staff, and parent fears are legitimate in the LGBTQ+ community. Be mindful and aware of the culture and climate of the school and surrounding community.
- Understand the importance of not promising support from others, while recognizing the value of “yet.” Offer your own support, while demonstrating that while the student may or may not have support from others, you will work with them to acquire such support. Remember that acceptance is a process that takes time.
- Ensure students have a realistic safety plan for times of crisis (e.g., Will they have access to a cell phone? Where can they go in an emergency? What steps can they take to keep themselves safe?).

- Teach personal safety, healthy boundaries, and psychoeducation pertaining to coping skills and self-care as preventive measures, and encourage the use of these same tools during times of need.
- Be visible in working with school administration, safety and security personnel, and PBIS teams to improve school safety practices and foster positive relationships within the school community.
- Following a crisis, facilitate reunification with caregivers (which in this case might be supportive primary caregivers, community members, or supportive school personnel) to prevent long-term psychological trauma.

WHAT PARENTS/PRIMARY CAREGIVERS AND OTHER CARING ADULTS CAN DO

Raising children is a journey that often begins with parents/caregivers envisioning their child's future even before their birth. Even for the most supportive parents, processing and accepting a child's LGBTQ+ identity takes time and can occasionally include a period of grief. Learning that a young person who is LGBTQ+ has been a victim of violence or trauma can be emotionally devastating for caring and trusted adults, and they may experience a range of emotions, including fear, sadness, anger, as well as a sense of loss. Despite these challenges, parents and other caring adults must continue to serve as advocates and sources of support for these young people.

What all children and teens need most is to be heard, validated, and valued. They need the reassurance of parental/caregiver support and love and to know that you will be there to protect them and assist them in getting the help they need. This is not to say that reassurance should be provided that can't be ensured: You can promise your own sentiments and behavior but never someone else's.

In addition to being a source of emotional support, caring adults need to promote healthy development and resiliency in LGBTQ+ youth.

Parents and other caregivers can enhance the external resiliency of youth by:

- Ensuring access to medical and mental health providers when needed.
- Seeking their own support and education through national and local LGBTQ+ organizations such as:
 - PFLAG (www.pflag.org),
 - Trans Youth Family Allies (<http://www.imatyfa.org>), and
 - Stand with Trans and Ally Moms (<http://standwithtrans.org>).
- Visibly seeking their own peer support through local parent support groups.

Caring adults can support youth's internal resiliency through:

- Allowing them to be heard, valued, and validated.
- Helping them to identify their own strengths and sources of support.
- Being aware of school climate and challenges experienced there, as well as demonstrating a willingness to advocate for the youth's physical and psychological safety.

Additionally, parents/primary caregivers and other adults can take steps to support the safety of LGBTQ+ in the community. For example, when you become aware of safety concerns, share this

information with schools and law enforcement. Also, connect with and support local LGBTQ+ liaison police units. If there isn't one of these units in your community, ask that local police be educated and trained in the public safety needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and their allied communities. Consider making a formal request that they establish an LGBTQ+ liaison police unit.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Local LGBTQ+ youth peer support and counseling groups
- Local Pride and LGBTQ+ affirming events

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [GLSEN Local School Climate Survey](#)
Tool to assist in analyzing and improving school climate.
- [NASP School Safety and Crisis Committee](#)
Resources related to talking to youth about violence and increasing school safety.
- [Love is Respect](#) [1-866-331-99474 (24/7) or Text “loveis” 22522]
Resources on dating/intimate relationship violence.
- [The Anti-violence Project](#) [Hotline 212-714-1124 Bilingual 24/7]
National coalition working to prevent violence and create system and change.
- [The Trevor Project](#) [Lifeline 24/7 1-866-488-7386; Text TREVOR to 1-202-304-1200]
Crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources for LGBTQ+ youth.

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