



Bullying in Schools: Harassment Puts Gay Youth At Risk

While trying to deal with all the challenges of being a teenager, gay/ lesbian/ bisexual/ transgender (GLBT) teens additionally have to deal with harassment, threats, and violence directed at them on a daily basis. They hear anti-gay slurs such as “homo”, “faggot” and “sissy” about 26 times a day or once every 14 minutes.¹ Even more troubling, a study found that thirty-one percent of gay youth had been threatened or injured at school in the last year alone!²

Their mental health and education, not to mention their physical well-being, are at-risk.

How is their mental health being affected?

- Gay and lesbian teens are at high risk because ‘their distress is a direct result of the hatred and prejudice that surround them,’ not because of their inherently gay or lesbian identity orientation.³
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.⁴

How is their education being affected?

- Gay teens in U.S. schools are often subjected to such intense bullying that they’re unable to receive an adequate education.⁵ They’re often embarrassed or ashamed of being targeted and may not report the abuse.
- GLBT students are more apt to skip school due to the fear, threats, and property vandalism directed at them.⁶ One survey revealed that 22 percent of gay respondents had skipped school in the past month because they felt unsafe there.⁷
- Twenty-eight percent of gay students will drop out of school. This is more than three times the national average for heterosexual students.⁸
- GLBT youth feel they have nowhere to turn. According to several surveys, four out of five gay and lesbian students say they don’t know one supportive adult at school.⁹

What can we do to help?

Schools should offer a safe and respectful learning environment for everyone. When bullying is allowed to take place, it affects everyone. For every GLBT youth who reported being targeted for anti-gay harassment, four heterosexual youth reported harassment or violence for being perceived as gay or lesbian.¹⁰ Also, we know that bullying was a contributing factor in the Columbine shootings and other school violence. Students, teachers, and school administrators who look the other way are contributing to the problem. In contrast, kids who said that they had a supportive faculty or openly gay staff member were more likely to feel as if they belong in their school.¹¹

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Help end bullying at your school with the following actions:

- Be alert to signs of distress.
- Work with student councils to have programs on respect, school safety, and anti-bullying.
- Ask school personnel to have a discussion at an assembly or an after school activity about gay prejudice.
- Help start a Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) chapter at your local high school. Youth whose schools had these kinds of groups were less likely to have reported feeling unsafe in their schools.¹²
- Arrange for a group like GLSEN to present bullying prevention activities and programs at your school.
- Do encourage anyone who's being bullied to tell a teacher, counselor, coach, nurse, or his or her parents or guardians. If the bullying continues, report it yourself.

For more information, contact your local mental health association or the National Mental Health Association at (800) 969-NMHA (6642), or www.nmha.org.

Other Resources

National Association of School Psychologists

www.nasponline.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

www.aacap.org

American Academy of Pediatrics

www.aap.org

American Psychological Association

www.apa.org

American School Counselor Association

www.schoolcounselor.org

Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists

www.aglp.org

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

www.glsen.org

Human Rights Campaign

www.hrc.org

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Human Rights Watch

www.hrw.org

National Education Association

www.nea.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition

www.nyacyouth.org

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

www.pflag.org

- 1 Bart, M. Creating a safer school for gay students. *Counseling Today*, September 1998
- 2 Chase, Anthony. "Violent Reaction; What do Teen Killers have in Common?" *In These Times*. 9 July 2001
- 3 Norton, Terry L., and Jonathan W. Vare. "Understanding Gay and Lesbian Youth: Sticks, Stones, and Silence." 17 July 1998: 3
Lexis Nexis. 20 June 2002
- 4 Report from the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide (Paul Gibson, US Department of Health and Human Services), 1989
- 5 Chase, Anthony. "Violent Reaction; What do Teen Killers have in Common?" *In These Times*. 9 July 2001: 3.
- 6 Garofalo, R. Wolf, R.C., Kessel, S., Palfrey, J (1998) *Pediatrics*, 101 (5), 895-902
- 7 Chase, Anthony. "Violent Reaction; What do Teen Killers have in Common?" *In These Times*. 9 July 2001
- 8 Bart, M. Creating a safer school for gay students. *Counseling Today*, September 1998
- 9 Sessions Stepp, Laura. "A Lesson in Cruelty: Anti-Gay Slurs Common at School; Some Say Insults Increase as Gays' Visibility Rises." *The Washington Post* 19 June 2001
- 10 Reis, B. (1996). *Safe Schools Anti-Violence Documentation Project, Third Annual Report*. Seattle: Safe Schools Coalition
- 11 The 2001 National School Climate Survey, GLSEN, p.35
- 12 Ibid.

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