

Homophobic Bullying in Schools

Introduction and Definition of Problem

The topic of homophobic bullying is a pervasive issue in the schools today. According to a recent study, eighty-eight percent of students in California schools hear homophobic remarks at least once in a while (GLSEN, 2009). Anti-gay slurs are extremely antagonistic and hurtful but they are not the harshest form of bullying that invades school climates. Bullying directed at individuals can take many forms including physical (hitting or punching), verbal (name-calling, teasing), social or emotional (exclusion, hurtful gestures) or cyber bullying (negative messages via email or text messaging) (Olweus, 2011). Acts of bullying can be distinguished in two ways. The more common type is considered to fall in the category of harassment, and is most frequently committed as verbal slurs whether directly at individuals or not. The other type represents more serious overt offenses involving continual mental anguish against someone who is gay or appears to be gay. Attention should be focused on how these acts can be prevented from happening in the first place so that a safe climate is always present. Education and prevention school-based programs are the best tools to address both types of bullying and are the focus of this paper. The problem is relevant to our schools because harassment of any kind interferes with learning, and can lead to serious obstacles for healthy social and emotional mental health. Resources are provided at the end of this paper to help in the effort that one day bullying will become a less pervasive concern that schools will have to address.

Current Research

Research studied from the last five years in the area of bullying offers unsettling statistics. A recent study published in the *Journal of School Health* has found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth who experience high levels of school victimization in middle and high school report impaired mental health in young adulthood (Medical Xpress, 2011). Verbal harassment and other forms of bullying are so common in schools that organizations have been created on the national level to offer intervention programs, among them are the *Gay Straight Alliance* and *GLSEN*. According to the *Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)*, "84.6 percent of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1 percent reported being physically harassed, and 18.8 percent reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation" (GLSEN, 2009). The network of *Gay Straight Alliances* offers support groups in more than 4000 high schools and 150 middle schools nationwide. The programs provide considerable impact. Studies conducted in Virginia showed schools who implemented an anti-bullying program noticed that standardized test scores increased (Olweus, 2011). School-based interventions are crucial, but parent and family supports may impact students even more. After almost a decade of research on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens, Dr. Deon Davis at *San Francisco State University* found a clear pattern: The more supportive the parents and families are, the better kids do over the long run (Miller, 2011).

Community Feedback

Leigh McLellan, from the *LGBTQ Speaker's Bureau* in San Francisco, runs a program that sends speakers into the San Francisco schools to conduct question and answer sessions with students (age 10 and up). The speakers talk to approximately 3000 students per year. The effort

is to humanize LGBT people. She says that kids often view LGBT people as abnormal from what they have been told in their communities, churches and sometimes their families. If the topic of bullying does not come up from the kids' questions, the speakers work it in. What the speakers really try to affect is to get kids to stop harassing other kids who they think are gay. Many times, students who get targeted are not gay, but somebody decided to start a rumor about them. McLellan sees the teacher's role as a critical factor in combating bullying in schools. She says teachers have to be alert to the issue all the time, and they have to know the difference when kids are being bullying and when they are playing a game. McLellan identifies school culture as another critical factor. Some schools are more accepting to differences than others, and may even have teachers who are out. If the school climate is not particularly supportive to LGBTQ students, the speakers can let the students know that they are not alone. Local resources are written on the board highlighting supportive groups and activities available to LGBTQ youth in their own communities. Kevin Gogin, from *San Francisco Unified Schools*, conducts diversity trainings at the city's high schools. Gogin helps teachers understand bullying by providing examples and case studies. Through role playing, teachers learn how to intervene and respond to student questions, and how to address parent's concerns issues as well.

Plan of Action

My solution to address the problem of bullying is to promote prevention through discussion and education. Programs like the *Speaker's Bureau* in San Francisco and diversity workshops, such as *Challenge Day* (see below), offer needed attention to a pervasive problem that rears its ugly head if left unchecked. Kids who tease other kids are often seen as cool by their peers, and so it becomes the responsibility of the adults and the schools to have policies in place (just as we have sexual harassment policies in the workplace) to address the incidents if

they occur. An important step in reducing incidents of bullying in schools is to have teachers trained in diversity, and who do not hesitate in confronting students who verbally abuse their peers.

Conclusion

While programs and policies are important, my study of this subject brings me back to the basic issue of humanness Leigh McLellan likes to focus on in her LGBTQ talks with the youth of San Francisco. When she leaves the classroom, she would be happy to have gotten one message across: Everyone deserves to be treated with kindness and respect.

Resources available for Teachers, Parents and Others

Teachers:

Lesson Plans and Workshops: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/antibullying/index.html>

Curriculum from San Francisco Unified:

<http://healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/InTheClassroom/curriculum.html>

Schools:

Gay-Straight Alliance Network: <http://www.gsanetwork.org/>

National organization to help straight and gay teens create safer school environments for LGBTQ youth

GLSEN: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html>

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students.

Challenge Day: <http://www.challengeday.org/challenge-day-program.php>

Challenge Day's mission is to provide youth and their communities with experiential workshops and programs that demonstrate the possibility of love and connection through the celebration of diversity, truth and full expression.

Speakers Bureau offered for San Francisco schools: <http://www.sfspeakersbureau.org/>

Parents:

Good overall parent resource: <http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/bullies.html>

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG):

<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=1035>

A national support and advocacy organization with local chapters across the U.S. and online resources on how to cope when a family member comes out.

Communities and Media:

MTV Show: *If You Really Knew Me*:

http://www.mtv.com/shows/if_you_really_knew_me/series.jhtml

It Gets Better Project: <http://www.youtube.com/user/itgetsbetterproject>

A YouTube channel dedicated to videos that reassure LGBT youth who are being bullied or feeling isolated that it will get better. The channel features videos from President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, celebrities like The Dixie Chicks and Ke\$ha and hundreds of individuals and groups.

The Make It Better Project: <http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/>

This Web site, founded in response to the September 2010 string of bullying-related gay teen suicides, is a comprehensive list of resources and concrete steps that adults and youth can take to help stop antigay bullying and make things better for LGBT youth.

Legal issues:

An interactive map where you can click by state:

http://www.olweus.org/public/bullying_laws.page

California has enacted numerous laws in three categories:

Bullying/harassment, Cyber bullying and Hazing.

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