

Using language to support LGBT youth

(Adapted from *Freedom to Be: A Teachers' Guide to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Human Rights* by the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2007)

Statistics show that LGBT youth are at a greater risk of harm than heterosexual youth. Homophobia affects not only LGBT youth and those questioning their sexual orientation, but also heterosexual youth. Harassment and violence of any kind erodes the safety of schools, communities and families for everyone. These statistics demonstrate how important it is for communities to work together to educate people around them about LGBT populations.

- Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning their sexual orientation are 3.4 times more likely to report a suicide attempt.¹
- Students harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation are more than three times as likely as students who are not harassed to make a suicide attempt.²
- An estimated 28% of completed suicides are by lesbian, gay and bisexual people.³
- Over one third (37.8%) of LGBT students have experienced some form of physical harassment (i.e., being pushed, punched or spat upon).⁴
- One study found that one in four transgender people have been harassed or abused by a police officer.⁵
- One study found that one in two transgender people have experienced employment-related discrimination.⁶

¹ Garofalo, R. et al. (1999) 153 "Sexual orientation and risk of suicide attempt among a representative sample of youth." Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine 487-493; as reported in *Centre for Suicide Prevention SIEC Alert #53*, December 2003.

² California Safe Schools Coalition & 4-H Center for Youth Development, *Safe Place to Learn: Consequences of Harassment Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Non-Conformity and Steps for Making Schools Safer*, January 2004 at ?.

³ C. Banks, *The Cost of Homophobia: Literature Review of the Human Impact of Homophobia in Canada 2003* at 29. Online: Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition http://www.rainbowhealth.ca/documents/english/homophobia_human.pdf

⁴ Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, *The 2005 National School Climate Survey*, 2005 at 26. Online: Delaware Online <http://www.delawareonline.com/assets/pdf/BL509831121.PDF>

⁵ National Center for Lesbian Rights and the Transgender Law Center, *TransRealities: A Legal Needs Assessment of San Francisco's Transgender Communities, 2002* Online: Transgender Law Center www.Transgenderlawcenter.org/tranny/pdfs/Trans%20Realities%20Final%20Final.pdf [hereinafter *TransRealities*].

⁶ *TransRealities*.

- Three-quarters (75.4%) of students reported hearing derogatory remarks, such as “dyke” or “faggot”, often or frequently in school.⁷
- Students, harassed because of their sexual orientation, were three times more likely than those who had never been harassed, to miss at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe. Students, harassed because of their gender expression were twice as likely as those that had never been harassed, to have missed at least one day of school in the past month.⁸
- Over one-third (39.1%) of students did not report harassment to school staff because they believed nothing would be done about it.⁹
- Almost 40 percent of gay and lesbian youth had dramatically low self-esteem.¹⁰

A basic method of promoting inclusiveness in any environment is to pay attention to the language used in that space and correct it whenever it fails the test of respect. Language can be a powerful force of inclusion or exclusion and therefore plays an important role in promoting equality.

LGBT individuals are assumed heterosexual over and over again on a daily basis. People assume that their friends and co-workers are interested in the opposite sex only, and will often ask awkward questions such as asking a male, “Why don’t you have a girlfriend yet?”. These kind of questions might seem harmless but their repetitive nature makes them a constant reminder to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students that they are not fully accepted in the classroom. For students who might be questioning their sexual orientation, the constant assumption of heterosexuality, otherwise known as heterosexism, is a warning that they had better hide their identity or pay the price. This issue is even more complex for a trans person who may be aware at an early age of his trans status but unable to discuss it at school or at home. As trans people grow into young adults, language on forms forces them into the box of gender male or female.

⁷ *The 2005 National School Climate Survey* at 14.

⁸ *The 2005 National School Climate Survey* at 27.

⁹ *The 2005 National School Climate Survey* at 35.

¹⁰ Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia, *Challenging Homophobia in Schools*, 2nd ed., Gale B.C., 2004 at Rationale Page 25 [hereinafter “Challenging Homophobia”].

Creating a safe and inclusive learning environment is not just an professional and ethical mandate but a legal one as well. In Canada, provincial human rights legislation prohibits discrimination in a number of areas based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Here are some strategies to use to encourage LGBT youth and young adults to feel safe in their work or learning environment. Before implementing them you may want to spend some time examining your own stereotypes and language so that you can address these pitfalls before stumbling over your own words.

- Use open language when referring to romantic partners of any kind. Try to use the term ‘partner’ and avoid terms like ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’, ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ which still indicate a heterosexual assumption.
- In school, with each new year and new class, begin by laying the groundwork for class dynamics. Let students know that name-calling of any kind is not allowed in the classroom. The 2001 National School Climate Survey found that 84.3% of LGBT students heard homophobic remarks frequently or often. It also found that 81.8% of youth reported that teachers never intervened or intervened only some of the time when they were present during these comments.¹¹ These statistics demonstrate what a serious issue this is.
- If you have a discussion in a classroom setting on gay, lesbian and bisexual students, include a discussion of trans students. This will be a good opportunity to discuss limits based on gender stereotypes.
- Inclusive language is not only about eliminating heterosexist assumptions, but also about creating space for gay, lesbian and bisexual communities. Ensure you make reference to same-sex couples in ordinary discussion. The goal is to actively

¹¹ Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, “The 2001 National School Climate Survey: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students and Their Experiences in Schools” 2002. Available at http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/221-1.pdf(cited July 21/05)

let people know that as a teacher, counsellor, mentor or employer you are accepting of all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

- Do not make jokes about women or men in drag. Sometimes these issues come up in videos, or television shows. The degree of seriousness with which you deal with the issue will demonstrate to those around you that they are in a safe space.
- When talking to an LGBT student, follow their lead. Use whatever term they use to self-identify. If you feel uncomfortable, ask *privately* and respectfully what the person prefers. However, avoid referring to your colleagues or friends by their sexual orientation for fear of inadvertently ‘outing’ them. Remember that being LGBT is just one aspect of who that person is.
- Take a look around at the physical environment of your workplace, school, or agency. Are the posters representative of all people regardless of sex-and-gender diversity? Are any of the images homophobic or transphobic? Are the books you have inclusive? Are there any that depict homophobic or transphobic storylines? Make sure you have LGBT friendly magazines and notices in waiting rooms and public areas.
- Try not to use the term ‘homosexual’. ‘Homosexual’ was originally coined as an expression to describe a pathology. This term is not specific to the person you are referring to (i.e., gay, lesbian) and is too often used in a negative, rather than positive/celebratory fashion.
- Be aware that stereotypes about the LGBT communities will be different across diverse communities. In a classroom setting, ask your class to discuss and deconstruct these stereotypes, being aware of diversity. For instance, deconstruct the stereotype that people with mental or physical disabilities can not be LGBT. Alternatively, examine different stereotypes that are seen in various cultures.

- “Don’t assume everyone is heterosexual. Assume there are lesbian, gay and bisexual people in all classes, sports, the cafeteria, the staff room, meetings, daily life, etc.”¹²
- Don’t assume that someone who looks effeminate is gay, or who looks butch is a lesbian. Don’t assume being a macho male or a feminine female means a person is heterosexual.¹³
- Encourage your workplace, school or agency to make LGBT friendly policies.¹⁴
- Display a rainbow on your door to indicate that people are entering an LGBT friendly space.

Language can be used to actively exclude others from feeling accepted, it can be used in a way that ignores the existence of others, and it can be used to purposefully harm another person. Particular words or phrases in one context might be acceptable, while in another context hurtful and harmful. There are many words such as ‘fag’ and ‘queer’ that have been reclaimed by the LGBT communities as positive labels. However when these same words are used in a hateful manner they are hurtful to a person’s self esteem and growth. Usually terms such as these, which have been reclaimed by a community, can only be used safely by people that belong to those communities. It is best to use more mainstream terms such as lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans and two-spirited. Ensure that the person you are describing feels comfortable with the language you are using. Most importantly do not ‘out’ a student/colleague/employee unless you have received their permission to do so.

Most likely if you hear a term that sounds like a taunt, then it IS a taunt regardless of what the word is. Make those around you aware that it will be the tone of the comment that will receive punitive action. If it sounds degrading, and especially if the person on the receiving end feels harassed, it will be seen as degrading. Human rights caselaw says

¹² Education Wife Assault, *Creating Safer Schools for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth: A Resource for Educators Concerned with Equity* (Toronto, 1999) at 42 (hereinafter “Creating Safer Schools”).

¹³ Creating Safer Schools at 42.

¹⁴ Creating Safer Schools at 42.

that discrimination is not determined by the intent of the harasser, but by the effect it has on the victim.¹⁵ *Jubran*¹⁶ is a clear demonstration of this. Azmi Jubran was a student who was taunted and teased from grade 8 to grade 12. The harassing students in that case said that they did not *intend* to be calling Mr. Jubran a homosexual. They simply used the words ‘gay’ and ‘fag’ to describe anything that they did not like. The Court of Appeal found, “The effect of their conduct, however, was the same whether or not they perceived Mr. Jubran to be homosexual.” By using homophobic terms which were associated with negative characteristics, Mr. Jubran was denied full participation in school. This impacted his dignity and caused people to equate Mr. Jubran with the negative perceptions students had about homosexuality. Therefore it is important for students to understand that it is the effect of their words that will be punished, not the intent. It would be the same, in human rights law, if the person was an adult discriminating against a restaurant patron, or a principal harassing an employee.

Homophobic and transphobic language is aimed not only at LGBT people, but also at heterosexual people who do not ‘fit’ in with what is perceived as popular or mainstream. By eliminating taunting language from your workplace, classroom or organization you will not just be protecting LGBT individuals, but all people in that space. You will be protecting people’s rights to freely express their gender, whether that means girls playing baseball or boys joining a cooking class. In addition you will be creating an example of respect that is due to all people regardless of their sexual orientation, race, ability, sex or other perceived difference.

For more information about LGBT youth contact the Safety Under the Rainbow Program (403-220-2505) and ask about signing your organization up for a full-day Youthsafe workshop.

¹⁵ *Ontario Human Rights Commission et al. v. Simpsons-Sears Limited and Canadian Human Rights Commission et al.*, [1985] 2 S.C.R. 536.

¹⁶ *Jubran*.