

Title: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth Matter!

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Abstract

Presents general trends in the social and emotional well-being of youth who identify as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (GLBTQ), followed by a guide of sexual orientation definitions. Additionally, readers learn a series of steps that schools must address in order to build inclusive, safe, and effective schools for all students, including those who identify as GLBTQ.

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth Matter!

by Kathleen A. King



Equity Matters: In Learning, for Life.
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Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth are more visible in today's schools, in part because youth today are growing up at a time where they have greater access to information about other youth who identify in similar ways. There are also increasing social dialogue and progress around civil rights for sexual minority groups.

This does not mean, however, that youth who identify as GLBTQ are not dealing with problems associated with homophobia and other acts of aggression in their schools, communities, and families. In fact, in a review of eight quantitative studies which included a total of 83,042 middle and high school students across the U. S., more GLBTQ youth

than those who identified as heterosexual (i.e., "straight") reported that they had been threatened or assaulted at school, were fearful at school to the point of skipping entire days, and were engaging in self-endangering behaviors such as drug use and suicide attempts (Safe Schools Coalition, 1999). More recent stud-



ies also show similar results, including higher rates of school dropout and suicide for GLBTQ youth compared to their heterosexual-identifying peers (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollock, 2008).

Multiple Minorities: GLBTQ Students of Color

Youth of color who identify as GLBTQ face overlapping stigmas in connection with their memberships in multiple minority groups. Approximately 46 percent of GLBTQ youth of color report experiencing physical violence related to their sexual orientation; and nearly 45 percent of youth in one survey were verbally harassed in school regarding their sexual orientation and race/ethnicity (Espelage, et al, 2008). However, most notions of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender identity development are based on the experiences of white, middle- and upper-middle class lesbian women and gay men. Often, youth of color don't identify as 'gay' or 'queer,' which may mean they will not seek or receive supports designed by and for the white GLBTQ community. To effectively meet the needs of GLBTQ youth of color, schools must integrate awareness and confrontation of racism with an understanding of how culture shapes sexual attitudes, values, and beliefs, as well as teaching and learning in general education settings.

Steps to Creating Inclusive Schools for GLBTQ Youth and Their Allies

Concern with equity in inclusive schools means paying explicit attention to the conditions and attitudes that create unsafe places for GLBTQ youth, including GLBTQ youth of color, and youth who identify as straight. Here are a series of steps that schools must address in order to build inclusive, safe, and effective schools for GLBTQ youth.

A Guide to Sexual Orientation Definitions

Sexual Orientation refers to one's sexual and romantic attraction. The term "sexual preference" is misleading because it implies that this attraction is a choice rather than an intrinsic personal characteristic. **Categories of sexual orientation don't account for the differences within groups who identify with these categories (e.g., someone who identifies as a gay man may be attracted to women at times throughout his life, and have intimate relationships with them; someone who identifies as bisexual may not have even had any sexual experiences with someone of the same sex).*

A lesbian is a woman whose primary sexual and romantic attractions are to other women.

A gay man a man whose primary sexual and romantic attraction is to other men.

Gay is also used as an inclusive term encompassing gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, and sometimes even transgender people. In the last 20 years, this has become less and less common and "gay" is usually used currently to refer only to gay men. The term is still often used in the broader sense in spoken shorthand, as in, "We have a Gay/Straight Alliance at our school."

Bisexual men and women have sexual and romantic attractions to both men and women. Depending upon the person, his or her attraction may be stronger to women or to men, or they may be approximately equal.

A heterosexual man or woman's primary sexual and romantic attraction is to people of the other sex.

People who identify more strongly with the other gender than the one to which they were assigned by birth (e.g., women who feel like men, or men who feel like women) are called *transgendered*. Some transgendered people may "cross-dress" or "do drag" regularly or for fun (and many of these people are comfortable in their assigned gender). Other transgendered people may take hormones and/or have surgery in order to change their bodies to reflect how they feel inside. These people are also called "transsexual." Transgendered people may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.

Questioning youth are those going through a process of questioning or are unsure of their sexual orientation.

Read More

1. **Acknowledge and confront your own biases or lack of knowledge about GLBTQ issues.** While some educators may not be comfortable with sexual orientation and gender identity issues, [acknowledging and confronting these biases](#)¹ (*click here for a publication by the Human rights Campaign written for individuals who identify as straight related to addressing and overcoming these feelings*) is an important first step in creating inclusive schools where all students belong, are safe, and feel empowered. Whether or not you “agree” with certain sexual orientations, all students have a right to be treated with respect and dignity. Educators serve as role models of respectful treatment of all students.
2. **Become educated.** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth have reported the emergence of their sexual orientation, just like heterosexual youth, in early adolescence (American Psychological Association, 2004). *Homosexuality and bisexuality are not illnesses*. This is the position of the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and of course, of the *Equity Alliance at ASU*.
3. **Know your terms:** see our guide to definitions of sexual orientation on the preceding page.
4. **Make explicit the schools’ rejection of any and all homophobic, racist, and sexist attitudes, statements, or actions.** Inclusive schools must make explicit their commitment to being inclusive of GLBTQ youth. In addition to the ways that inclusive schools reject racist and sexist remarks, they also post and publicly refer to policy that reject discriminatory words and behavior directed at or about GLBTQ youth. Develop clear guidelines for disciplinary action that include interrupting any homophobic comments immediately, directly, and publicly, addressing the offensive behavior, rather than the sexual orientation of the individual being offended. For example, say, “You just put some-
- one down regarding sexual orientation. That is hurtful to everyone who hears it and is totally unacceptable. Teachers, students, and families do not tolerate that behavior at this school.” Follow up by supporting the student who was the object of offensive comments or aggressive behaviors, as well as by working with those who display such aggressions to address their own biases, and engage in dialogue with educators who can support the building of inclusive attitudes and respect toward GLBTQ youth. Support teachers in developing and practicing responses to homophobic or transphobic statements or actions.
5. **Send the message of support.** Visibly post safe place/safe zone stickers in the main office, hallways, classrooms, cafeterias and libraries, such as the one found at www3.wooster.edu/AandQ/safezone_sticker.jpg that says, “This zone is declared SAFE! Regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age and ability, you will be treated and respected as a human being. Ignorance, bigotry and harassment will not be tolerated.” Be aware of the possibilities of self-endangering behaviors that some GLBTQ youth may engage in, and have frank proactive and reactive conversations about these behaviors in order to address the challenges youth are facing. Also, be sensitive to and respect the right to privacy of all GLBTQ individuals.
6. **Use inclusive language.** Social interactions, lessons, and curricula should not assume students’ heterosexuality, or homosexuality. Refer to “significant others”, “dates”, or “partners” rather than girlfriends and boyfriends, or in reference to students’ future mates, use “spouse” or “partner”.
7. **Avoid stereotyping and confront those who stereotype.** Simply because someone identifies as GLBTQ, just as with those who identify as straight, doesn’t mean that she or he has the predisposition to certain interests, tastes, and preferences. Make sure to confront any of the stereotypes you may hold about individuals who are GLBTQ, as well as call attention to and counter the stereotypes of others.
8. **Create opportunities for empowerment and leadership, without assuming that individuals who identify as GLBTQ wish to be spokespersons.** Create opportunities for youth leaders who identify as GLBTQ, as well as their parents and families, to advise and inform administrators of issues and concerns. Also important is not to make assumptions that just because someone is open about their identity as GLBTQ, that they are interested in speaking for others who also identify as GLBTQ.
9. **Foster and make public inclusive hiring practices. To this day, many states do not have laws that protect GLBTQ teachers from termination of employment, even on the basis of sexual orientation.** Make clear the school’s commitment to inclusive hiring practices in an informational handbook given to prospective employees, and during interviews, as stated verbally by those responsible for hiring. Additionally, for both potential hires and current employees, administrators should make explicit, both verbally and in writing, that GLBTQ staff are valuable members of the school team and should feel safe in being open about their sexual orientation.
10. **Provide inclusive education on reproduction and human development (i.e., sex education).** All sexual education should provide information on intimacy, relationships, and sex for *all students*. Be up front about different ways of having sexual relationships, and when talking about sexual abstinence as one of many sexual options, do not frame it as waiting to have sex until marriage; rather, present it as making the choice to wait for sex until one has found a partner with whom one wishes to spend the rest of one’s life.





There are many resources out there for building inclusive schools that explicitly and directly address the creation of safe, effective, and empowering learning and social environments for GLBTQ youth. We offer this short brief as a starting point, rather than an exhaustive list of approaches that you may take in your local settings. Please check out the resources we provide within this brief, as well as below, in order to access additional information. As always, should you need any assistance with equity issues in education, pertaining to yourself or others contact us at the [Equity Alliance at ASU](#). Remember, Inclusive schools are an equity imperative!

Note

Go to www.hrc.org/documents/A_straight_Guide.pdf for a publication by the Human Rights Campaign written for individuals who identify as straight related to addressing and overcoming feelings of bias toward individuals who identify as GLBTQ.

Disclaimer

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mind on fire (username). (2008). Colors: [mindonfire's photo on flickr license](#)

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Resources

Organizations

■ [Advocates for Youth](#)
Established in 1980 as the Center for Population Options, Advocates for Youth focus on efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health.

■ [Teaching Tolerance](#)
Founded in 1991 by the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), Teaching Tolerance is dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children. Teaching Tolerance provides free educational materials, including [anti-homophobia lesson plans](#), to teachers and other school practitioners in the U.S. and abroad.

Online resources

■ [National Association of School Psychologist Position Statement on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning \(GLBTQ\) Youth \(formerly Sexual Minority Youth\)](#)

■ This article - "[Daily effects of straight privilege](#)" is based on Peggy McIntosh's article on White privilege and was written by a number of straight-identified students who got together to look at some examples of straight privilege. These dynamics are but a few examples of the privilege which straight people have. GLBTQ individuals have a range of different experiences, but cannot count on most of these conditions in their lives.