

Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth—A Teacher's Guide

Students who experience discrimination, whether it is based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or culture, deserve to be protected in schools.

This booklet is part of a series that focuses on a variety of diversity topics as they affect students. The booklets are designed to help teachers obtain basic factual information, think about the issues and learn strategies to help these students feel safe, cared for and included.

The ATA's SACS Project believes that student safety is a priority and that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students (LGBT), or those who are labeled as such, are the most at-risk group in schools.

The SACS Project has developed this booklet to help teachers begin to think about ways to address homophobia and heterosexism in classrooms and schools.

The silence of friends

Ida is a school administrator who once taught junior high school. Several years ago while attending a party, she was proud to discover that some of her former students were now postgraduate students.

Ida was thrilled to discover that one of these former students was finishing an honors master's degree and had just received a prestigious scholarship to do his Ph.D. abroad. What she heard next, however, gave her pause for reflection.

"I'm gay," he said.

She was surprised and confused: this student did not conform to her notion of homosexuals. Then he added that not only was *he* gay, but so were two of his former classmates—and a third, lesbian. Four, out of a class of twenty-eight!

Ida considered herself to be observant and caring. How had she missed the signals? She asked the student when he had first known this about himself. About his classmates? Did their parents know? Had it made school life more difficult?

Later Ida wondered if her probing had been appropriate. If anyone had asked her when and how she had discovered her heterosexuality, she wasn't sure she could have answered. What was proper etiquette?

Ida thought back on her years of teaching, nervous that she might have hurt some of her gay students. She also tried to imagine the kind of role model she had been for the straight students.

She decided to educate herself, first by reading and picking up some basic terms and concepts. As she continued to explore, she worried that she might put her foot in her mouth. But she soon decided that making mistakes was part of the learning process. To learn another language, for example, one must overcome the fear of looking foolish and saying the wrong thing.

In time, other of Ida's friends came out to her, thereby shattering any lingering stereotypes she held. Virtually every social class, ethnicity, education level and home environment were represented. She concluded that the story of how her friends "got that way" was less important than the fact that gayness formed part of their identity, just as heterosexuality formed part of hers.

When an acquaintance told her that what hurt more than being called a fag by students was the absence of teacher response, Ida knew that doing nothing was no longer acceptable. She wanted to offer a safe and caring learning environment to all her students.

This booklet was conceived to assist Ida in the process of learning about these issues. This story is based on the experience of a Catholic school administrator.

In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Gay and lesbian students at risk

According to Schneider (1997), gay youth are two to three times more likely than their heterosexual classmates to

- attempt suicide,
- be kicked out of home or run away,
- drop out of school, and
- abuse drugs and alcohol.

While some gay and lesbian youth react to their situation by becoming overachievers, it is also true that at least **30 percent** of adolescents who commit suicide are homosexual (Schneider 1997). There are very few studies documenting risk factors specific to bisexual, transgendered and two-spirited youth.

Youth issues are often excluded in human rights discussions. Puberty is difficult at the best of times. Imagine the increased hardship for an adolescent who must also sort through feelings of homosexuality in an unsupportive and often hostile school environment. Imagine further that this young person often cannot count on support from home—unlike, for example, a young person from an ethnic minority suffering from discrimination.

Useful Terms

Bisexual: someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of both the same and opposite sexes.

Closest: hiding one's sexual orientation from others, in the workplace, at school, at home and with friends.

Outing: the public disclosure of another person's sexual orientation without that person's permission or knowledge. Outing is very disrespectful and is potentially dangerous to the outed person.

Coming out: [1] the process through which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual people recognize their sexual preferences and differences and integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives, [2] the act of disclosure to others, as in "I just came out to my parents." Coming out is a complex, selective and ongoing process.

Gay: someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. Gay can include both males and females, or refer to males only.

LGBT/GLBT: both acronyms are shorthand for bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgendered, transsexual and two-spirited. *Sexual minority* is a synonymous term.

Heterosexual: someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex. Also referred to as straight.

Heterosexism: the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior.

Homophobia: fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, bullying or acts of violence. Internalized homophobia is the fear or hatred of one's own homosexuality.

Homosexual: someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. Because the term is associated historically with a medical model of homosexuality and can have a negative connotation, most people prefer other terms, such as *lesbian*, *gay* and *bisexual*.

Lesbian: a woman who is attracted sexually and emotionally to other women.

Queer: historically, a negative term for homosexuality, but more recently reclaimed by the LGBT movement to refer to itself (see Reclaimed Language).

Rainbow flag: a symbol of the gay and lesbian movement. The now-familiar red-orange-yellow-green-blue-violet-banded triangle was designed in 1978 and is recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers.

Reclaimed language: taking terms or symbols that have been used in a derogatory fashion and using them in a positive way to name one's self or one's experience. In the same way that it is offensive for white people to use reclaimed racist words, it is offensive for heterosexuals to use reclaimed homophobic language. The triangle is a reclaimed symbol; pink triangles were used by the Nazis to identify gay prisoners, whereas the inverted black triangle was used to identify lesbians and other political prisoners.

Transgendered: a person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy do not fit into conventional expectations of male or female.

Transsexual: a transgendered person who has had treatments to alter the sex of his or her body.

Two-spirited: some aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirited rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual.

A dozen misconceptions

1. We know what causes homosexuality.

No one knows what causes sexual orientation. We do know that homosexuality has existed in cultures around the world throughout history. There is no evidence linking child abuse or other negative experiences with homosexual orientation, nor is there evidence that women become lesbian because they are unattractive and have no success with men. If either were the case, there would be many more lesbians and gays. Most gay and lesbian people have grown up with heterosexual parents.

2. People choose to be homosexual.

Lesbian and gay people do not choose to be homosexual any more than heterosexuals choose their own sexuality. Remember also that being homosexual does not mean being sexually active any more than being heterosexual does.

3. All gay men have AIDS.

While the gay community in North America has been hard hit by AIDS, in the rest of the world most people with AIDS are heterosexual. In Canada, about 20 percent of new cases of HIV infection are heterosexual women. According to the UN, one in four people in some sub-Saharan countries is HIV positive: this, through heterosexual contact.

4. Lesbians are man-haters.

Being lesbian has to do with feelings toward other women and very little to do with feelings toward men. Many lesbian women maintain close friendships with men.

5. Gays are effeminate; lesbians appear masculine.

Many gays and lesbians defy stereotypes of how “real” men and women should behave. However, some gays play football and work out, and some lesbians wear lipstick and carry purses.

6. All religious groups oppose homosexuality.

There are a variety of religious opinions on homosexuality. Some groups consider homosexuality to be a sin, others consider it to be a gift from God,

and still others do not even consider it. Until the 13th century, same-sex relations were accepted in many European societies (Boswell 1980, 1994).

7. I don't know any gay men or lesbians.

Chances are you do. They just might not be out to you. Gays and lesbians have jobs, own businesses, pay taxes; they have parents, siblings, children and other relatives—in short, they live their lives much as heterosexuals do.

8. I don't want to promote the homosexual lifestyle.

There is no such thing as a homosexual lifestyle, just as there is no single heterosexual lifestyle. Lesbians and gays can be rich or poor, fashionable or tasteless. They live in cities or the countryside. They are doctors, nurses, teachers, priests, truck drivers, accountants, football players and farmers.

9. All homosexuals are promiscuous.

Although the media often seems interested in promoting stereotypes, homosexuality actually reflects the same range of sexual activity as heterosexuality. Gays and lesbians can be single, celibate, married or in long-term relationships. They can have children or not.

10. Homosexuals do not value family.

Gay and lesbian people recognize the importance of family and encourage people to find mutual support in whatever type of family is suitable for them. Lesbians and gays fortunate enough not to have been rejected by their biological families usually have very strong ties with them. Same-sex parents are as loving, stable and supportive as their heterosexual counterparts.

11. Gays and lesbians recruit or molest young people.

Research shows that most child molesters are heterosexual men who abuse children within the nuclear family. Adults do not affect the sexual orientation of youth. For example, most gay and lesbian people have straight parents, and most of their own children are straight.

12. It's just a phase.

Is heterosexuality a phase? Many LGBT adults report having felt a sense of difference from other children at an early age. Most heterosexual teens become acutely aware of their sexuality during their secondary school years. So do many gay and lesbian teens.

What can I do in the classroom?

An inclusive school and classroom environment means that minority students are safe and supported. They need to know that there are adults in the school who will listen to them. Because LGBT students are sometimes fearful, they need to have some way to know that you are a safe person to approach. Teachers who want to demonstrate their support may find the following suggestions helpful. As with any actions, teachers need to consider their district and school policies.

1. Signal your support. Place a small rainbow flag on your desk, or post a pink triangle or rainbow sticker in your office or on your filing cabinet. This will signal that you know and care about LGBT youth.

2. Teach everyone. Whether you are teaching about abstinence or safe sex, make it clear that your message applies to homosexual, bisexual, transgendered and heterosexual students.

3. Challenge homophobic comments and jokes. First, don't laugh. Consider publicly challenging a comment, thereby signaling a caring attitude and identifying yourself as a safe person to talk to. Or you may wish to challenge a comment in private, thereby providing opportunity for an in-depth discussion. A good class activity is to ask students to list racist, sexist and homophobic terms and discuss the messages they convey.

4. Affirm the contributions of LGBT people to society. A person's sexuality should not be considered the most important thing in the context of life accomplishments. However, what is important is that all students have positive role models. Knowing that there are many LGBT people who have made remarkable accomplishments over time helps affirm LGBT youth. The following list provides a context for thinking about everyone's potential. This information may be useful in private conversations with students, when it is relevant to a particular lesson or when teachable moments arise.
[**Bold** identifies Canadians.]

Political Leaders: Members of parliament **Svend Robinson** and **Réal Ménard**, Winnipeg mayor **Glen Murray**, Edmonton councillor **Michael Phair**, Emperor Ai of the Han Dynasty of China, Alexander the Great of Macedonia, the Roman Emperor Hadrian, Richard the Lionhearted of England, Philip the Bold of France, Edward II of England, Queen Christina of Sweden, Pope Julius III, James I of England, Frederick the Great of Prussia, U.S. politicians Bella Abzug and Barney Frank

People in Theatre and Film: Pedro Almodóvar, **Denis Arcand**, **Raymond Burr**, James Dean, Ellen DeGeneres, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Sir John Gielgud, Rock Hudson, Danny Kaye, Eva Le Gallienne, Sir Ian McKellen, Sal Mineo, Rosie O'Donnell, Sir Laurence Olivier, Tyrone Power, **Patricia Rozema**, **Scott Thompson**, Rudolph Valentino

Dancers, Musicians and Composers: Aaron Copland, Alberta Hunter, **Ashley MacIsaac**, Benjamin Britten, Billie Holiday, Chris Williamson, Cole Porter, Dame Ethel Smyth, Elton John, Freddie Mercury, **Jennifer Berezan**, **k.d. lang**, Leonard Bernstein, Melissa Etheridge, **members of the Wyrd Sisters**, Michael Stipe, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Rudolf Nureyev, the Indigo Girls, Vaslav Nijinsky

Painters and Sculptors: Leonardo da Vinci, Salvador Dalí, David Hockney, **Attila Richard Lukacs**, Robert Mapplethorpe, Michelangelo

Writers: Edward Albee, Paula Gunn Allen, Reinaldo Arenas, W. H. Auden, James Baldwin, **Djuna Barnes**, **Marie-Claire Blais**, **Dionne Brand**, Nicole Brossard, William S. Burroughs, Lord Byron, **John Cheever**, **Chrystos**, **Colette**, Noel Coward, **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz**, **Emily Dickinson**, **H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)**, **Jacqueline Dumas**, Erasmus, **Timothy Findley**, **Janet Flanner**, **Brad Fraser**, **André Gide**, **Nicola Griffith**, **Tomson Highway**, A. E. Housman, Langston Hughes, Christopher Isherwood, Jack Kerouac, D. H. Lawrence, T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia,) **Federico García Lorca**, **Audre Lorde**, **Christopher Marlowe**, **W. Somerset Maugham**, **Herman Melville**, **Yukio Mishima** **Molière**, **Marcel Proust**, **Manuel Puig**, **Adrienne Rich**, **Arthur Rimbaud**, **Harold Robbins**, **Sinclair Ross**, **Muriel Rukeyser**, **Jane Rule**, **Gregory Scofield**, **Gail Scott**, **Makeda Silvera**, Stephen Spender, Gertrude Stein, Michel Tremblay, Paul Verlaine, Gore Vidal, **Alice Walker**, **Patrick White**, **Walt Whitman**, **Oscar Wilde**, **Tennessee Williams**, **Virginia Woolf**

Athletes: Olympic Canadian volleyball team member and national coach **Betty Baxter**; swimmer and Olympic gold medalist **Mark Tewkesbury**; Olympic silver medalist boxer **Mark Leduc**; diver Greg Louganis, tennis players Billie Jean King, Amélie Mauresmo and Martina Navratilova; golfer Bill Tilden; football players Dave Kopay and Jerry Smith; baseball player Glenn Burke; figure skaters **Toller Cranston**, Rudy Galindo and **Brian Orser**; Babe Didrikson Zaharias

Science and Business: Brian Epstein, David Geffen, Andrew Tobias, Alan Turing, Gianni Versace, Jann Werner

Educators, Scholars and Philosophers: Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Richard F. Burton, Mary Daly, Michel Foucault, Paul Goodman, Edith Hamilton, Sir John Maynard Keynes, Plato, Socrates, Ludwig Wittgenstein

What can the school do?

Prepare and educate all staff, preferably before a situation arises. Educate all students to create positive attitudes and a healthy school environment. Consider focusing on the theme of diversity and/or inclusive schools for district and school-based PD days (see workshop suggestions at the end of this booklet).

1. Provide leadership.

Take the lead in discussing heterosexism, sexism and racism in the office and staff room. Demonstrate support for staff who initiate and adopt inclusive behavior. Changes in attitude rarely occur overnight, and those who are exploring strategies and behaviors new to the school need to feel the administration's support if others are to follow. The status quo may appear acceptable but may be supporting a hurtful climate for a silent minority. Talk to schools in Alberta that have established a gay-straight alliance.

2. Establish basic expectations in your school code.

Expressions such as *fag* and *dyke* should be clearly classed with *chink* and *wop* and other deprecating terms. Racist, sexist or homosexual jokes and comments should be challenged in the classroom, the hallway and the staff room. Discuss how to challenge these remarks without being confrontational. For example, when someone uses these terms, follow up with private conversations, teaching lessons about the harm of putdowns or exploring word meanings and origins. Remember that staff members may be homosexual or have homosexual relatives.

3. Be inclusive.

Consider finding role models for all minority groups in your school. Female scientists and church leaders, aboriginal authors and leaders, LGBT professors and businesspeople, poverty activists, disabled professionals or politicians—use these as examples in your discussions and make clear your admiration for their work—not for their differences. Encourage the use of inclusive language. For example, refer to partner, rather than husband or wife.

4. Create user-friendly libraries.

Ensure that the library has the best possible collection of books on human sexuality—both to support the health curriculum and to provide information. Examine the materials on human sexuality that are currently available in the library and ask to have those with homophobic content removed. Include novels, short-story collections and magazines for youth that are affirming of same-sex orientation.

5. Be informed and ready.

If the school suffers any form of backlash from the community, staff should be prepared to defend the rights of students to a safe and caring environment. Knowing a few basic facts and having decided in advance to care for *all* students are good defences.

6. Provide resources and training for school counsellors.

Reference materials and contacts for relevant organizations are imperative for the school counsellor, whose office often is a haven for students.

7. Consider establishing an exception to protocol.

With issues of discipline, learning difficulties and child abuse, the first adult in the school who is aware of a problem generally calls on the support of other adults, be they administrators, counsellors, parents or police. In the case of LGBT students, such protocol can be dangerous for the student. First, telling even one person can leave the student vulnerable to abuse within the school. Second, some parents do not readily accept the news that their child is LGBT and may go so far as to force their child out of the home.

While it is important to respect a student's confidentiality, if you suspect that the student may be suicidal, you must take appropriate action. Ensure that the student receives immediate attention. Refer him or her to a school counsellor or psychologist. The counsellor or psychologist will determine what further steps are necessary to protect the student.

What to do when there is bullying

The Victim

- a. Arrange to meet the victim alone.
- b. Get names of the people involved and the sequence of events.
- c. Thank the student for his or her courage in reporting the incident.
- d. Ask the student what it will take for him or her to feel safe again.
- e. Remind the student that what is unacceptable is the act of demeaning another, not the victim's identity, regardless of the subject of the bullying.

Resist the temptation to ask the student about his or her sexual identity. To do so could be construed as blaming the victim, and if the student actually is homosexual (not necessarily the case), this could be the most dangerous moment to come out. Respect the victim.

The Bully

- a. Speak to each offender individually.
- b. Find out what occurred.
- c. Have the student question his or her right to demean anyone for any reason.
- d. Have the student propose an alternative response for future situations.
- e. Assign consequences as in any other situation.
- f. Monitor the situation.

Gay bashing, whether verbal or physical, is often an external projection of an internal struggle to define one's own sexuality. Whether or not this is the case, it is important to model respect for LGBT students.

The Witnesses

- a. Stay calm and talk to those involved separately.
- b. Get the facts.
 - Names of those involved
 - Sequence of events/behaviors/frequency of bullying
 - Circumstances and location
- c. Emphasize that it takes courage to report bullying.
 - Those who witness bullying and harassment have the most power to stop it.
- d. Take responsibility.
 - Reaffirm the expectation that everyone has a responsibility to help make the school safe and caring.

What to do when a student comes out to you

1. Be discreet.

Privacy and confidentiality are important. Whom and when the student decides to tell are up to her or him. If a student does decide to come out, you must be prepared to support that decision. Recognize that informing others can expose the student to harm. Maintaining confidentiality is important; however, there can be exceptional circumstances. If you suspect that a student may be suicidal, use your best judgment to seek help.

2. Follow the steps of support.

- a. Listen to the student's immediate concern.
- b. Validate his or her feelings.
- c. Thank the student for trusting you.
- d. Reassure the student of complete confidentiality.
- e. Ask the student what she or he needs from you.
- f. Suggest safe sources of support if the student appears interested.
- g. If the student wants to tell someone else, offer support.

3. Stabilize the situation.

We want all students to develop a stable identity and self-esteem and be contributing citizens. If possible, introduce the student to a person who has similar intellectual and work interests or shares a common religious background. At a minimum, provide historical examples of famous people to serve as models. Note that, for some students, even parents may not be supportive.

What to do when a student is outed

- a. Listen to the student's feelings whether, anger, embarrassment, fear and so on.
- b. Reassure the student that he or she has a right to a safe and caring education.
- c. Offer a range of support contacts.
- d. Establish whether the student's family is supportive.
- e. Help determine an action plan to deal with peers.
- f. Monitor the situation continuously.

Share the vision

When Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu was asked by a journalist what injustice he would most want to reverse, Tutu cited two. The first, he said, is the moral imperative of forgiving Third World debt. The second is the equal treatment of gays and lesbians: *"For me it's a matter of human rights and a deeply theological issue . . . I believe they are as much God's children as anyone."*

Continue Educating Yourself!

Find people around you who seem comfortable with homosexuality and talk to them. Challenge your own assumptions. Be open to making mistakes and learning from them. Remember what hurts more than being called names by students are the teachers who do nothing to help.

Legislation

The ATA Professional Code of Conduct

<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/professional/code.html>

According to the *Alberta Teachers' Association Code of Professional Conduct*, teachers are responsible for protecting students from discrimination based on sexual orientation. The first provision of the Code states:

(1) *“The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious belief, color, sex, **sexual orientation**, physical characteristics, age, ancestry or place of origin.”*

The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers

<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/about/declaration.html>

(9) *“Teachers have the right to be protected against discrimination on the basis of prejudice as to race, religious belief, color, sex, **sexual orientation**, physical characteristics, age, ancestry, or place of origin and have the responsibility to refrain from practising these forms of discrimination in their professional duties.”*

The Alberta School Act Section 28(7)

“A board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviors.”

In Canada and the United States, school districts have been taken to court by parents of LGBT youth because teachers and administrators did not act to prevent verbal and physical harassment or to discipline perpetrators. Schools in Alberta have the same responsibilities.

Resources for Teachers

Books

- Bass, E., and K. Kaufman. *Free your mind*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.
- Boswell, J. *Christianity, social tolerance and homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Same-sex unions in premodern Europe*. New York: Villard, 1994.
- Brelin, C., M. J. Tyrkus and M. Bronski (eds.). *Outstanding lives: Profiles of lesbians and gay men*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1997.
- Friend, R. Choices, not closets: Heterosexism and homophobia in schools. In L. Weis and M. Fine (eds.), *Beyond silenced voices: Class, race, gender in the United States*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1993: 209–235.
- Hogan, S., and L. Hudson. *Completely queer: The gay and lesbian encyclopedia*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.
- Lipkin, A. *Understanding homosexuality, changing schools: A text for teachers, counselors and administrators*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1999.
- Remafedi, G. (ed.). *Death by denial: Studies of suicide in gay and lesbian teenagers*. Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1994.
- Ryan, C., and D. Futterman. *Lesbian and gay youth: Care and counseling*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Schneider, M. S. (ed.). *Pride and prejudice: Working with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth*. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, 1997.

Diversity Booklet Series

- Safe and Caring Schools for Students of All Races*
- Safe and Caring Schools for Newcomer Students*
- Safe and Caring Schools for Arab-Muslim Students*
- Safe and Caring Schools for Aboriginal Students*
- Safe and Caring Schools for Students of All Faiths*

Films

The National Film Board of Canada (www.nfb.ca) offers:

Sticks and Stones (17 minutes)—Features children aged 5 to 12 talking about their experiences with name-calling and bullying, along with a short animated sequence about the history of derogatory slang.

One of Them (25 minutes)—A group of teenagers is planning a Human Rights Day. Controversy around the inclusion of the issue of homophobia emerges in this short drama.

In Other Words (25 minutes)—This film provides a tool to explore the origins of homophobic words, how young people feel about them and how to overcome the hurt and anger they cause.

Workshops

“Building Safe and Caring Classrooms, Schools and Communities for Lesbian and Gay Students.” Contact the ATA’s Safe and Caring Schools Project or the Alberta Teachers’ Association Professional Development program area.

For other workshops for teachers, contact the ATA Professional Development program area.

Websites

www.teachers.ab.ca/safe/index.html - ATA’s SACS Project

www.teachers.ab.ca/diversity/index.html - ATA’s Diversity and Human Rights Homepage

www.galebc.org (Canadian) - Gay and Lesbian Educators of B.C.

www.glsen.org - Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

www.safeschoolscoalition.org - Safe Schools Coalition

www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca - Alberta Learning Resources Centre - list of Safe and Caring Schools resources

Notes

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