

Tackling Homophobic Bullying: A matter of social inclusion

What is homophobic bullying?

Homophobic bullying is a particular type of bullying which is related to a person's sexual orientation, or assumed sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.¹

In a recent ILGA-Europe and IGLYO survey² with over 750 respondents from 37 European countries, 53% of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people said they had experienced bullying in school. Bullying, which often goes unnoticed, includes a wide spectrum of negative experiences from name calling and verbal abuse, to ostracism and physical attacks. Abuse can be verbal, physical or psychological. Bullies can be both fellow pupils and students or teachers.

What are the effects of bullying?

Bullying can have a serious impact on young LGBT people. At a time when young people develop their identity and learn to express themselves socially, bullying can damage self-esteem and confidence. Research has shown that bullying has a negative impact on LGBT youth's mental health; that it increases the risk of depression, self-harm and suicide; and that it lowers education attainment, and can lead to early school leaving. It can socially exclude young people, and leave them in fear of being hurt or ridiculed. Anxiety related to fear of discrimination or bullying can also lead young people to hiding their true self and to considering the "coming out" process as a luxury with potentially dangerous consequences.³

"When I was at school, I was bullied for being gay but it was only because my classmates presumed I was gay ...it was before I even told people I was gay. I was verbally and physically bullied and I had no friends for the first three years of high school. It made me very insecure as a person and I found it hard to make friends after that as it had made me really paranoid and vulnerable." (Man from the UK, age 21)

Who is affected by homophobic bullying?

Homophobic bullying is not only experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. It can also affect any child, young person or teacher who does not conform to ways of behaving that are traditionally associated

¹ "Gender identity" refers to a person's sense of conformity between their biological and psychological gender. This is the individual's gender concept of self, which does not necessarily depend on the sex they were assigned at birth. "Sexual orientation" in turn is used to depict a person's sexual and emotional attraction to people of the same and/ or different sex.

² Judit Takacs, Social exclusion of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT) in Europe (April 2006), ILGA-Europe and IGLYO www.ilga-europe.org/europe/publications/non_periodical/

³ Takacs, p.51.

with being ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. Anyone seen as “different” or as having characteristics considered to belong to LGBT people can suffer from homophobic bullying.

Respondents to the IGLYO & ILGA-Europe survey often interpreted bullying as being the consequence of gender nonconforming behaviour, character and look – or what was perceived to be such by others. Boys and girls are accused of being gay for being clever, or sensitive, or sporty, or quiet, or loud, in short of not acting according to traditional gender stereotypes. Bullying can also affect young people who may have parents, friends or family members who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

*“a bunch of kids once stole my wallet and cut it to pieces, and the stuff inside [...] because they thought I was gay. Funny thing is, I had no idea back then. I was 13 and a tomboy. They judged me on appearance, because I dressed like a boy.”
(woman from Portugal, age 20)*

Why is it important to combat homophobic bullying?

Tackling homophobic bullying and harassment is necessary because:

- youth who are bullied experience humiliation, fear, frustration, social isolation and loss of self esteem which can result in absenteeism from school, poor or deteriorating schoolwork, personality changes, illness, depression and unfortunately sometimes suicide;
- bullying contributes to a culture of homophobia in a school and creates an unhealthy environment for all students; it implies that anyone who is perceived to be “different” is a legitimate target for ridicule, taunts, aggression or even physical assault;
- bullying limits opportunities for personal growth and hence it negatively impacts a young person’s ability to manage the transition from school to work and to become an autonomous adult and an active citizen.

It is essential to draw specific attention to homophobic bullying which has roots that are unique compared to other forms of bullying. Traditional anti-bullying campaigns often do not address homophobic bullying due to a lack of knowledge of the reasons and the impact of such bullying.

What can be done?

Many good practices to combat homophobic bullying exist. They include, among others: 1) clear anti-bullying policies in schools and by equality bodies; 2) equal opportunity policies; 3) inclusion of LGBT related issues in the school curriculum; and 4) training and tools to support teachers and school managers to address bullying.

The European Union can play an important role by gathering data on homophobic bullying, by exchanging good practices, by raising awareness about the phenomenon, and by encouraging Member States to take positive action to combat homophobic bullying.

A few relevant links...

Schoolmates Project – Bullying and Homophobia in School
www.arcigay.it/schoolmates/

“Stop Homophobic Bullying Campaign”
Belong To and Equality Authority
<http://www.belongto.org/>

“Tackling homophobia in education”
Stonewall and Greater London Authority
www.stonewall.org.uk/education_for_all/

Homofobia en el sistema educativo
www.felgt.org/temas/educacion