
Under Attack: Emotional Abuse and Violence Against GLBT Youth in America's Homes and Public Schools

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“Some young lesbians and gays are bullied relentlessly, day in, day out. They wake in the morning knowing that before the school day ends they will have been called hurtful names, ridiculed, even hit or kicked, because some people have decided that they deserve to be punished – for being

themselves.” (Leicester Lesbian and Gay Action Website, 1998).

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) students are often harassed and bullied by students and, sometimes, school staff. Even in a better case scenario, when they are merely ignored and unsupported by staff and administration, they feel rejected, alone, inferior, and invisible. “In every school, there is a group of forgotten children – a hidden minority of boys and girls whose needs have been ignored, whose existence has been whispered about, whose pain is just beginning to surface” (Anderson, 1997, p.65). GLBT students are now the most at-risk population in middle and high schools. Bright talented students cannot effectively function and learn in a hostile environment and often end up becoming truant, dropping out, and running away. In a survey of self-identified GLBT students, 64% reported feeling unsafe at their school because of their sexual orientation and 28% reported missing at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe. The survey results indicate that verbal, sexual and physical harassment are common experiences for GLBT students (GLSEN, 2003).

Attacks on GLBT youth take many forms, including verbal, physical, and indirect. In a 2003 survey of 877 self-identified GLBT students, 84%

reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation; 91% reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently or often; 44% of youth of color reported being verbally harassed because of both their sexual orientation and race or ethnicity; 82% reported that faculty or staff never intervened or intervened only some of the time when present and homophobic remarks were made (Kosciw, 2004). Verbal harassment often escalates to physical attacks. Physical harassment includes hitting, kicking, stealing, breaking or damaging other people's belongings. The extremes of physical harassment include rape, being doused in chemicals, being urinated upon, and being burnt with cigarettes while held down. The National School Climate Survey (GLSEN, 2003) indicates that 39% of GLBT students were physically harassed because of their sexual orientation; 57% reported having property stolen or deliberately damaged at school, as compared with 35% of students in a national sample of all high school students in a 1999 U.S. Department of Justice survey, indicating that GLBT students were significantly more likely to be victimized by such crimes and attacks (Kosciw, 2004). Indirect and emotional forms of bullying involve being left out of activities, being excluded from groups or conversations, being the subject of gossip or rumors, being made to feel uncomfortable, scared or pressured to do

aversive things.

Many GLBT students attempt to become invisible to others by using coping mechanisms, which are designed to minimize chances of victimization. They internalize negative stereotypes (internalized homophobia) and develop severe degrees of low self-esteem. The acting out of this severe negative self-image can take a variety of forms of antisocial behavior such as drug and alcohol use, vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, and dropping out of school. Some of the immediate psychological effects are loneliness, insecurity, feelings of humiliation, loss of self-esteem, fear of going to school, insomnia and mood swings. Long-term effects include depression, self-harm, agoraphobia, fear of strangers, anxiety attacks, psychosomatic disorders, and eating disorders. Because of lack of support or safety, GLBT students may form maladaptive coping strategies, which invite unsafe behavior. A national study on adolescent health (Sathrum, 2001) indicates that GLBT students report higher levels of stress, greater use of drugs and alcohol, more high-risk sexual behavior, and higher rates of HIV infection and suicide. It was found that 20% of GLBT students surveyed attempted suicide on more than one occasion in youth and that GLBT young people account for more than half of all youth suicides.

“Educators have a clear mandate to address the needs of sexual minorities” (Anderson, 1997, p. 68). The tasks necessary to address this need involve the development of written anti-harassment policies, identification of and response to incidents of harassment, development of formal complaint procedures, and creation of a school climate that values diversity. There are legal ramifications of not supporting GLBT students. Derek Henkle sued high school administrators for failing to stop anti-gay harassment and won \$451,000. He was a victim of violence and severe bullying at three different high schools. This settlement is the first to recognize the constitutional right of gay and lesbian students to be “out” at school and protected from harassment (PR Newswire, 2002, Aug. 28). Congress passed the Federal Equal Access Act in 1984, which prohibits public schools from discriminating against student clubs based on their points of view. The law is clear about allowing Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA's) in public schools.

Curriculum reform is proposed as one facet of providing a safe educational climate, by reassessing the curriculum for inclusion of GLBT history, prejudice, and social action. The 2003 GLSEN survey reports the following. Three-quarters of the youth (76%) reported that GLBT issues

were never addressed or discussed in their classes. Many youth reported that they did not have access to GLBT-related resources in their schools. Having GLBT resources available in school is an extremely important step toward having a more inclusive school climate; however, the existence of resources alone does not necessarily mean that all GLBT students in the school feel as if they truly have access to such resources. Some GLBT youth may not feel comfortable using the school Internet to access GLBT sites or borrowing GLBT-related books from the school library. Even the establishment of GSA's does not guarantee reaching all GLBT youth. Twenty percent of youth who had GSA's in their schools reported that they never or rarely attended the meetings. Youth who were more open about their sexual orientation at school were more likely to report attending GSA meetings. Only about half of the youth reported having gay-straight alliances in their schools, having Internet access to GLBT community sites or having GLBT resources in their libraries. Far fewer students reported having inclusionary textbooks used in their classes.

In order to provide safe campuses for GLBT students, it is necessary to form a safe and accepting school environment with no tolerance for anti-GLBT bullying, harassment, or violence. All students must be taught acceptance and tolerance of all diversities. Research indicates that having

on-campus support organizations helps empower GLBT students and improves their lives (Lee, 2002). The entire school community benefits when students form GLBT support groups. Students learn to support other students who experience bullying, intimidation, or other forms of social marginalizing. When students are trained in conflict resolution and leadership, they learn to mediate the conflicts between the various types of students they encounter in their own schools. GLBT students find great comfort in being able to communicate with others who share their experiences. When GLBT youth find a community of support, they are much less likely to commit suicide or participate in other high-risk behavior ("Preventing Suicide," 2001). When students are aware of their rights, they are empowered to demand equal treatment and they set the example for other students whose rights are not respected. School personnel develop greater understanding of gay and lesbian students, enabling them to contribute to a climate of safety for all students in the school. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is one of the most comprehensive websites of resources and information for creating open and safe schools (Taylor, 2000). Counselors, health teachers, administrators, and faculty must be trained to understand and support the GLBT student. "School personnel need to develop an understanding of gay

and lesbian students and need to reach out to them for the students' own good and for the good of the school" (Callahan, 2000, p. 313). GLBT students unable to identify supportive teachers or staff were more than twice as likely to discontinue their education after secondary school; 24% of GLBT students with no supportive faculty or staff said they did not intend to go to college. Only 10% of GLBT students who did report having one or more supportive faculty or staff said they would not go to college (GLSEN, 2003).

Major strain is put on a family when one of the members is being bullied. The physical and emotional effects can be hard for families to deal with when the family sees someone they love being hurt. The bullied student will often become isolated, have major mood swings, cry uncontrollably, and/or develop sleeping and/or eating disorders. With the stresses of life, school, and social settings, the bullied student's only vent for anger towards the bully may be at home. Home becomes the bullied student's arena for acting out (Woest, 2004). GLBT youth not only face the risk of verbal harassment, rejection and violence at school, but often they are also under attack at home. It is reported that 40% of gay teens have experienced violence by members of their family (Callahan, 2000). If they choose to open up with their family about their sexuality, GLBT youth sometimes

risk total rejection from their family with no future support (Vare & Norton, 1998). It is estimated that 30% to 40% of all homeless teenagers are gay or lesbian (Taylor, 2000). Since many families experience the added stress of their religion's disapproval of sexual minorities, it may take family members much soul-searching and counseling before being able to accept their sexual minority child. The school can be a valuable resource to the family struggling with the necessary adjustments.

When schools accept GLBT youth, doors are opened to provide a continuum of acceptance at home. Schools become resources for parents who are trying to understand and adjust to their GLBT children. By fostering an atmosphere of tolerance, respect, and understanding during school-age years, educators create a foundation for society to become more tolerant as a whole.

Resources for counselors working with GLBT youth are available through a variety of organizations. Parents & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG) serves as a resource for counselors working with GLBT youth, whether used as a collaborative or a referral source. PFLAG seeks to affirm to GLBT youth that they are unconditionally loved and accepted, no matter what their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression and

provides education and support for the family and friends of the GLBT population. Most importantly, PFLAG has been actively pursuing the creation of the Safe Schools in America campaign, which provides brochures for educators, such as “From Our House to the Schoolhouse,” “Safe Schools Resources,” and “Tips for Working with GLBT Youth.” The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) works to make anti-GLBT bullying, harassment and name calling unacceptable in America's schools, engage and empower educators as partners in creating schools where every student can fully participate in school life, and ensure that the national agenda to create effective schools includes GLBT issues. GLSEN provides helpful educational resources, curriculum tools and more in their publication, *Educator*. The following is a listing of other staff development and student education resources.

ACLU Lesbian and Gay Rights Project: Organizing Manual for Making Schools Safe

www.aclu.org/LesbianGayRights/LesbianGayRightsMain.cfm

American Psychological Association. Healthy Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Project.

www.apa.org/ed/lgbproj.html

“Anti-Homophobia Training for School Staff and Students”

www.glstn.org/pages/sections/library/schooltools/031.article

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network.

www.glsen.org

Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel. ccalhoun@nea.org

Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling by Caitlan Ryan and Donna Futterman. Columbia University Press, (800) 844-8648

“Strengthening the Learning Environment: An Education Employee’s Guide to Gay and Lesbian Issues.” National Education Association.
www.nea.org/books

School counselors are in a pivotal position to address the needs of GLBT students who are under attack. As models of acceptance, providers of staff development, and advocates, counselors have the potential for calling a “cease-fire” in the attack against GLBT students.

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