

Things You Can Do to Make Your School a "Safe Space"

1. **Do not assume heterosexuality.** Remind yourself—and others—that LGBT people are found on every staff, in every classroom, and on every team.
2. **Include the significance of LGBT people in lessons.** "Out" the figures you study whose sexual orientation and gender identity/expression is not discussed. Just as race, class, sex, and ability affect the way people shape our world, sexual orientation and gender identity/expression impact people's experiences deeply.
3. **Work with the librarian towards inclusive collections of literature.** The library is frequently the first place to which students turn for accurate information on sexuality and gender.
4. **Work with athletic staff/ athletes to reduce bias on the field.** Transphobia and homophobia are often at their worst in the locker room or in the gym.
5. **Work towards inclusive dances, proms, and social programming.** These activities often set the tone for the community. Make them memorable for everyone.
6. **Work with student or staff groups concerned with diversity and oppression.** The same conditions that allow homophobia and transphobia to develop most likely promote other forms of prejudice. Collaborate to unite against all oppression.
7. **Provide appropriate health education.** Sex education should address the needs of LGBT youth, and should affirm the fact that they go through many of the same changes, and face many of the same challenges during adolescence as their straight peers.
8. **Celebrate LGBT History Month.** Recognize the struggles, contributions, and victories of the LGBT community with special lesson plans, events, and displays.
9. **Join or start a GSA.** Creating a time and place to talk about LGBT issues recognizes their value and opens up dialogues which lead to healing.
10. **Create inclusive anti-discrimination policies.** LGBT members of the school community need to know that their schools value equality and that they are protected against discrimination. In addition, sexual orientation and gender identity/expression should be included in multicultural and diversity statements as a way to communicate equal treatment for all.

Check out "Institutionalized Heterosexism in Our Schools: A Guide to Understanding and Undoing It," a GLSEN resource that provides a lot of other great ways to work for change in your school community. Go to the Staff Development section in the Resource Center at www.glsen.org.



When Someone Comes Out to You...

Be a role model of acceptance. The LGBT person has likely spent some time thinking about whether or not to tell you, and is aware of the risks that come with telling.

Ask questions that demonstrate compassion. Don't ask questions that would have been considered rude before the disclosure. The person has the same sensibilities as before. However, you might need to do some "catching up". Some good questions to ask are:

- How long have you known you were LGBT?
- Is there someone special?
- Has it been hard for you carrying this secret?
- Is there some way I can help?
- Have I ever offended you unknowingly?

Appreciate the person's courage and trust. Thank them for sharing with you, and follow up later to see how they're doing.

Have a sense of humor. While it's important to take the disclosure seriously, a little gentle humor might ease any tension the LGBT person is feeling.

Offer support. Ask if you might be available as the person comes out to others.

Be prepared to give a referral. If there are questions you can't answer, or if the person is feeling isolated, be prepared to refer them to a hotline, community center, GSA, or sympathetic counselor.

Listen, listen, listen. Coming out is a long process, and chances are you'll be approached again to discuss this process and its challenges.

Assure confidentiality. The person may not be ready to come out to others, or would like to do so in their own way.



Responding to Anti-LGBT Bias

Homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism manifest themselves in many different ways, from physical violence and verbal harassment to assumptions of heterosexuality and exclamations of “that’s so gay!” Different situations call for different responses, but all situations call for a **calm, non-inflammatory response**. Bullying back is never a good idea. Your role as an ally is to diffuse situations of anti-LGBT bias, educate others about why it’s harmful and unacceptable, and provide support to the person who has been targeted. Below are some ideas for dealing with anti-LGBT bias.

Name It, Claim It, and Stop It!

This technique is great in most situations where someone is being teased, name-called, or verbally bullied. It gives you an opportunity to spotlight the behavior, take a personal stand on it, and attempt to keep it from happening again.

- **Name it:** When you witness bias, call the offending party on it by saying, “That term is not cool,” or “Using words like that is hurtful and offensive.”
- **Claim it:** Make it *your* issue. Say, “I have people I care about who are LGBT, and I don’t like to hear those words.”
- **Stop it:** Make a request for the behavior to stop by saying, “Please don’t use those words,” or “Cut it out, please.”

Get Help

In situations where talking to the bully hasn’t stopped the harassment, or where you have a feeling the trouble will continue to escalate despite your intervention, get adult help immediately. Trust your instincts. **Being an ally does not mean you should compromise your safety at any time.** Similarly, if you know repeated incidents of harassment are occurring despite intervention, report it to an adult member of the school community. Reporting harassment is not “tattling”. It’s taking a mature and proactive stance for the right of every student to feel safe.

Give Emotional First Aid

Don’t get so caught up in addressing the bias that you forget the person who was being picked on. If you’ve diffused a situation, always be sure to ask the person if they’re all right, if there’s anything you can do to help, and if they’d like to talk further or take a short walk to cool off. Remind them that the behavior was not their fault by saying something like, “That person was being a jerk. They obviously have a problem, and it’s not you. You’re all right just the way you are.”



Easy Does It

Some situations call for a lighter hand. If nobody is being bullied or harassed, and the comments being made seem to be the result of ignorance and not a desire to hurt, try to keep these tips in mind:

- **Use humor.** Some teasing is misguided, not vicious. Sometimes a little humor can help diffuse a situation that's becoming tense. For example, if someone says something like, "That shirt she's wearing is so gay," you might respond by saying, "I didn't realize shirts had sexual orientations." This gives you a chance to point out the senselessness of homophobic language while keeping the mood light.
- **Don't personalize.** Homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism are the products of beliefs. So don't take it personally when someone makes a misguided conversational remark or asks a question that makes you want to bristle. Instead, take a step back, and remember that there is a belief behind that comment or question. It's up to you to challenge that belief— without losing your cool.
- **Ask.** Many people use anti-LGBT slurs without giving thought to how hurtful they are. Sometimes a well-placed query can stop them in their tracks and make them consider the language they use. Ask, "What do you think an LGBT person would think of that comment?" to open up a dialogue.

Remember Everyone's Rights

There is a difference between free speech that is the expression of a value or belief, and using words as weapons. Every student should be allowed to be who they are, and express opinions that speak to that end, so long as that speech is not depriving other students of their rights to obtain an equal education. So if a student respectfully states a belief ("I believe homosexuality is a sin"), you can certainly challenge that belief by opening up a debate, but you cannot tell them to stop it. Of course, beliefs can be used as fodder for harassment, (e.g., saying, "God hates you because you're queer.") in which case you *can* request that the behavior stop. It's sometimes a subtle distinction, but an important one, as we must guard everybody's First Amendment rights, whether or not we agree with how they use them.



HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE ALLY

An Effective Ally...

- Respects confidentiality.
- Allows individuals to lead the direction of the conversation, lets them make their own choices, and listens, listens, listens.
- Talks to LGBT family, friends, and coworkers.
- Avoids assumptions and stereotyping.
- Tries using gender-neutral terms when talking about significant others, spouses, and partners.
- Expects to make some mistakes, but doesn't use them as an excuse for not acting.
- Acknowledges how homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism have operated in their life.
- Educates themselves about issues facing LGBT people.
- Has a sense of humor.
- Knows when and how to refer somebody to outside help, and to get professional adult intervention when necessary.

An Effective Ally Doesn't...

- Have all the answers.
- Try to "fix" problems
- Proceed with an interaction if boundaries or personal safety have been violated.

How Anti-LGBT Bias Hurts Us All

At the same time the victims (or targets) of prejudice are oppressed, the perpetrators (or agents) and other members of the dominant group are hurt in some way also. Although the effects of oppression differ for specific target and agent groups, in the end everyone loses.

1. Homophobia and transphobia lock all people into rigid gender roles that inhibit creativity and self-expression.
2. Homophobia and transphobia compromise the integrity of heterosexual people by pressuring them to treat others badly, actions that go against our basic humanity.
3. Homophobia and transphobia limit our ability to form close, intimate relationships with members of one's own sex.
4. Homophobia and transphobia generally limit communications with a significant portion of the population and, more specifically, limits family relationships.
5. Homophobia and transphobia prevent some lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people from developing an honest self-identity, and add to the pressure to marry and/or have children, which places undue stress on themselves and their families.
6. Homophobia and transphobia are a cause of premature sexual activity, which increases the chances of pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Young people, of all sexual identities, are often pressured to become heterosexually active to prove that they are "normal."
7. Homophobia and transphobia result in the elimination of any discussion of the lives and sexuality of LGBT people in the curriculum, keeping important information from all students.
8. Homophobia and transphobia can be used to stigmatize, silence, and, on occasion, target people who are perceived or defined by others as LGBT, but who are, in actuality, heterosexual.
9. Homophobia and transphobia prevent heterosexuals from accepting the benefits and gifts offered by LGBT people: theoretical insights, social and spiritual visions, contributions in the arts and culture, to religion, to family life, indeed, to all parts of society.
10. Homophobia and transphobia (along with racism, sexism, classism, etc.) inhibit a unified and effective governmental and societal response to AIDS.
11. Homophobia and transphobia take energy away from more positive activities.
12. Homophobia and transphobia inhibit appreciation of other types of diversity, making it unsafe for everyone because each person has unique traits not considered mainstream or dominant. Therefore, we are all hurt when any one of us is disrespected.

Adapted from Warren J. Blumenfeld, ed. Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price

Parents, Families & Friends
Of Lesbians and Gays

Downloadable from:
www.pflagwestchester.org

From The GLSEN Safe Space Kit – www.glsen.org

