

A. ADVICE FOR GOVERNORS

A3: Recognition

A3.1 Homophobic bullying in schools: what does it look like?

Refer to **DL1**, **DL27** and **DL28** with this section. Homophobic bullying is a specific form of bullying and occurs when bullying is motivated by prejudice against lesbian, gay or bisexual people (LGB), or against those perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. It can also be targeted towards pupils who are seen to be “different” in some other way, for example, because they may be considered shy by other pupils. In this way, a person’s identity is used to abuse them and homophobic bullying can therefore be experienced by all pupils, regardless of their sexuality.

The bullying suffered can include **verbal** and **physical** abuse by an individual or group towards an individual or group of people. It can consist of:

- **Verbal abuse** such as suggestive remarks, ‘teasing’, jokes or name calling
- Non-verbal abuse such as mimicry, offensive gestures, or body language
- Ignoring or excluding someone because they are gay or lesbian, or thought to be gay or lesbian
- Display or distribution of offensive material or graffiti
- Threatened or actual **physical abuse** or attack
- Unwanted physical contact, including sexual contact
- **Cyberbullying** [see A3.2], including via email, chat-rooms and mobile phones.

Homophobic bullying can occur in **primary** and **secondary** schools and through a range of channels.

There are some differences in the ways that **girls** and **boys** bully in this way. Girls tend to use methods of social exclusion, particularly rumour spreading, “funny looks” and ignoring the person being bullied. This can lead to the young woman being attacked feeling excluded and eventually being isolated and unable to re-integrate herself. If this occurs, she may be more likely to take part in risk taking behaviour, such as attending adult venues or meeting people online.

Boys are more likely to be the victims of **physical bullying**. In order to avoid being called ‘gay’, boys may try to conform to perceived masculine stereotypes. This strengthens the idea that there is such a thing as ‘gay behaviour’.

Whilst many schools are becoming more confident to deal with bullying motivated by other kinds of prejudice, such as racist bullying, few have specific measures in place, or the confidence to deal with, homophobic bullying. Research conducted on behalf of the DCSF found that only 6%¹³ of schools surveyed had anti-bullying **policies** that addressed homophobic bullying. Whilst some more recent research suggests this figure may now be around 33%¹⁴ in secondary schools, it remains clear that too few schools make specific mention of bullying of this kind. Additionally recent results from Stonewall’s *The School Report* 2007¹⁵ show that 76% of LGB pupils attend schools where there is no explicit mention that homophobic bullying is wrong.

This may in part be due to the fact that homophobic bullying can be difficult to recognise. Many pupils

find it extremely **difficult to admit** that they are experiencing homophobic bullying. This can be because they may not want to disclose their sexuality to a member of staff, or because they are not lesbian or gay and/or are embarrassed that they are being bullied in this way.

Some LGB pupils feel that being bullied is inevitable and therefore have no right to report it. Others may not report the bullying as they are concerned about how staff may deal with the problem given the sensitivities involved. As such it cannot be assumed that where no homophobic bullying has been **reported** it is therefore not an issue for that school since, by its nature, homophobic bullying tends to be covert.

“Homophobic language is rife in schools, and nobody seems to do anything about it.”

16 year old boy, Birmingham

A3.2 Verbal homophobic bullying

Refer to **DL12** with this section

Homophobic language is a common form of homophobic bullying. It can be casual and is therefore often dismissed as “harmless banter”. Schools need to take a consistent approach to tackling any kind of inappropriate language. For more information on overall anti-bullying strategies see DCSF guidance *Safe to Learn*.

Homophobic language and abuse can start in **primary school** where pupils may call each other “gay” or “lesbian” without really understanding what it means. If such usage is not challenged at this stage it can appear acceptable, making it more difficult to address in secondary school. Children may also experience verbal bullying because they have a gay parent.

“They play with a pack of cards, and one card is the gay card. Whoever ends up with the card is the ‘gay boy’ for the day. These boys are 9 years old”.

Primary School Teacher, Sussex

In **secondary school**, homophobic language can be more extensive. Homophobic language can be used:

- To describe an inanimate object or item that is thought to be inferior or laughable – “that pencil case is so gay”
- To bully someone who has gay parents or other family members who are gay
- To suggest that a person is inferior or laughable or in some way not behaving as they should do – “why do you want to play basketball? Are you a gay?”
- To suggest that an action or response is felt to be inappropriate – “I’m not doing the play if I have to hug him, that’s gay”
- To intimidate someone or make them feel uncomfortable – “Miss, are you a lesbian?”
- To undermine and bully someone by suggesting that they are gay, including spreading rumours and malicious gossip
- To verbally bully someone who is gay, or who is thought to be gay.

“Everything is gay. No-one even thinks it is a form of bullying.”

14 year old girl, Leicester

¹³ DCSF “Don’t Suffer in Silence”, 2002 (Douglas et al 1999, sample size 307)

¹⁴ Smith, P.K., Smith, C., Osborn, R. & Samara, M. (in press). A content analysis of school anti-bullying policies: Progress and limitations. *Educational Psychology in Practice* (2007, sample size 115 primary schools, 27 secondary schools).

¹⁵ Sample, 1,140 (2007)

Pupils may also experience **indirect homophobic abuse**, not directed towards a particular person or group, but used when remarks are made to pass negative judgement, such as 'your bag is so gay' or 'that ring tone is gay'. It is important for all staff to **challenge** pupils, explaining the consequences of using 'gay' in a derogatory way. It might be **time consuming** at first, but a consistent "zero-tolerance" approach to such language is central to achieving progress and an environment in which being gay is not thought of as being inferior.

Direct homophobic abuse is directed towards an individual or group of pupils, as either a one off incident or repeatedly. A boy who is called 'poof' or hears 'backs to the wall' when he walks by, or a girl who is called 'dyke' and avoided as she walks through the school corridor, will suffer both short and long term consequences in terms of the harm caused.

In both contexts, it is essential to challenge homophobic **language**. It is the role of **governors** to ensure heads, teachers and other staff feel supported in doing so.

Cyberbullying

Homophobic bullying increasingly takes place through phone calls, text messaging, picture/video messaging, e-mail, online message boards, online chat rooms and on personal web spaces. Through modern technology vicious comments can be made and rumours spread about a person's sexual orientation.

"They set up a website that had all this stuff on it about me being gay... what I'd done, who I'd been with. I was really scared my parents would see it."

14 year old girl, London

Schools need to ensure that they are alert to the risks of cyberbullying and include provision for it within their anti-bullying policies. See *Safe to Learn*.

A3.3 Physical homophobic bullying

Physical abuse can include hitting, punching or kicking. Young people also report that they experience vandalism and theft of property, being threatened with a weapon, and even death threats.

Homophobic physical abuse can also include sexual abuse. Some gay women report that they have experienced sexual abuse and humiliation from both heterosexual women and from men. Some young people who are lesbian or gay feel under pressure to have sex with someone of the same sex or opposite sex, to "prove" that they really are gay. Some young people are also pressured into having sex with someone of the opposite sex in order to "prove" they are not gay. These pressures are heightened by physical abuse and pressure from peers. Physical abuse might indicate that staff need to take steps to **safeguard** the pupil.

Physical homophobic bullying can affect anyone, regardless of whether or not they are gay, and has to be challenged and **stopped** within a school.

"On Tuesday we went on a geography field trip. One boy thought it would be funny to throw stones and mud at me because I was a filthy gay. I shouted at him to stop, we started fighting. We both got detention but only for the fighting."

13 year old boy, London

Primary school pupils can experience physical homophobic bullying, as well as verbal abuse. This may involve hitting, kicking or punching but can also involve inappropriate touching between pupils. These forms of bullying may be motivated by the fact that a child seems "different" in some way. Teachers and staff may not realise that homophobic bullying is playing a part in the other pupils' responses.

"I was first beaten up for being "different" when I was 8. The teachers thought it was rough and tumble."

16 year old boy, London

In **secondary schools**, homophobic bullying commonly manifests itself in the form of physical abuse. ChildLine¹⁶ has identified that boys are more than twice as likely to report being physically bullied than girls. Physical homophobic bullying can take many forms, both sexual and non-sexual. A boy may be forced to undress in front of other pupils to be laughed at, or may be beaten up. As a result of the embarrassment this kind of bullying causes, many pupils do not report it.

"I was coming out of the toilets when a group of girls started giving me grief for being a lesbian. I told them to leave me alone, and then one punched me in the face. I reported it to the teachers but they didn't sort out the problem completely so I went to the police."

16 year old girl, Leeds

A3.4 Who experiences homophobic bullying?

Anyone can experience homophobic bullying:

- Young people who are **lesbian, gay or bisexual** (LGB)
- Young people who are thought to be lesbian, gay or bisexual
- Young people who are thought to be different in some way, for example, might work hard, or may not be as good at sport, or may have a particular hobby or interest
- Young people who have **parents**/carers [15.10] or friends or family who are lesbian, gay or bisexual
- **Teachers and other school staff**, who may or may not be lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Homophobic bullying can also occur when a bully uses **homophobic language** [see A3.2] to describe something, for example: "Those trainers are so gay".

In this context, the general hurtful action is delivered in a way that is homophobic.

The wide use of 'gay' to illustrate 'something bad' creates a hostile environment at school where difference and diversity is not respected.

"Homophobic bullying makes me miserable. Nothing else to say really."

14 year old boy, West Midlands

A3.5 Who does the bullying and why?

There is no one type of person who bullies in this way.

Pupils may justify homophobic bullying because:

- They think that lesbian and gay people should be bullied, because they believe gay people are "wrong"
- They do not think there is anything wrong in bullying someone because of their sexual orientation. This may in part be motivated by an incorrect interpretation of what is taught by the faith to which they belong
- They do not realise that it is bullying
- They may have low self-esteem, poor communication skills, and were possibly bullied themselves
- They think they might be lesbian or gay, and this makes them uncomfortable and hostile to others who are
- They think it is acceptable to bully others who do not conform to their "norm"
- They think **gay parenting** is wrong and pupils should be treated differently because of it.

¹⁶ www.ChildLine.org.uk/extra/homophobicbullyingsurvey.asp

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In addition pupils tend not to intervene in cases of homophobic bullying in case the bully thinks that they might be gay, or they think that it is ok to be gay. This makes the sense of **isolation** more profound for the person being bullied.

For more information on the motivations for bullying and strategies to deal with this, please see *Safe to Learn*.