

# **B. ADVICE FOR HEADS AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM**

## B5: Responding

### B5.1 Responding to homophobic incidents

Adopting a “zero-tolerance” approach towards homophobic bullying is vital. Schools need to make it clear to pupils that homophobic comments are as serious as racist comments, and homophobic incidents are as serious as other forms of bullying.

Schools should respond consistently and effectively to incidents of homophobic bullying. This will indicate to pupils that incidents are taken seriously, thereby encouraging them to report incidents, and discouraging those behind the incidents.

Schools will already have procedures in place to respond to incidents of bullying and these procedures, where appropriate, should be applied to incidents of homophobic bullying.

Procedures need to aim:

- To protect the person experiencing homophobic bullying
- To hold to account the person causing the harm
- To repair, as far as possible, relationships between pupils

Part of these procedures will include helping pupils **understand** why homophobic bullying is unacceptable. This may mean explaining to pupils about lesbian and gay people, and their rights in society.

### B5.2 How to respond to verbal incidents

Refer to **DL17** and **DL17** with this section  
Staff need to feel able to discuss issues of homophobic bullying with pupils and **parents/carers** and deal with incidents quickly and effectively before a situation becomes more serious. Homophobic language is often used without thinking and is often ignored because it is difficult to know how to respond. Homophobic language in schools needs to be challenged because ignoring it allows homophobic bullying to continue to escalate.

Any action to challenge **homophobic language** needs to be taken within the framework of the school’s behaviour policy.

*“They say gay means lame, and it is nothing to do with hating gays. It doesn’t make me feel like that though”.*  
14 year old boy, London

#### **Those doing the bullying**

Staff should consistently make it clear that homophobic comments are unacceptable and ensure that pupils who experience it feel **supported**. Staff need to be sensitive when talking to pupils about incidents, taking into account the worries the pupil may have.

*“When we hear homophobic language, we make it clear it is not acceptable: I will not tolerate language like that in my classroom. If they say it’s just a bit of banter, I make them write me an essay on why homophobic language is not acceptable in our schools.”*  
Secondary school teacher, Manchester

If a pupil continues to use **homophobic language**, staff need to point out the effect that their language may be having on other people. This could include asking the pupil to write why homophobic language is unacceptable in school.

If the pupil still continues to engage in homophobic bullying, they could be spoken to by a senior member of staff. Schools may also consider giving a detention, ensuring first that parents have been informed about this policy and have been given 24 hours' prior notice if the detention occurs before or after the school day, or at lunchtime.

If the problem persists schools may want to consider directly contacting **parents or carers** to discuss the issue, and reminding them about the school's anti-bullying **policy**. In doing so it may also be necessary to explain to the parents or carers why **homophobic language** is unacceptable.

For more on the use of sanctions see *Safe to Learn* and *School Discipline and Pupil Behaviour Policies: Guidance for Schools*.

### **Those on the receiving end**

It is important to create a **secure time and space** where pupils can report incidents. It is essential that when a young person is reporting an incident or incidents, the staff member does not assume the pupil is either gay or heterosexual. Staff should listen carefully to the young person's experience, and work with them to identify appropriate responses. The school's anti-bullying policy and 'hierarchy of **sanctions**' should form the basis of the response.

If a pupil knows that staff will respond to **verbal bullying** with sensitivity, they may feel more comfortable about discussing other issues (including issues relating to **sexual orientation**).

When dealing with homophobic verbal abuse in **primary schools** staff need to take account of the fact the motivations for using such language are likely to be different and should therefore respond accordingly.

*"We hear "gay" as a term of abuse every single day. The children may not know exactly what it means, but they know they are using it as an insult. That's why we need to tackle it at this stage."*

Primary School Head Teacher, North East

## **B5.3 Responding to physical incidents**

Refer to **DL18** with this section

Like **verbal abuse**, pupils may be reluctant to **report** incidents because they fear that staff will assume they are gay. Physical abuse can indicate a young person is at risk, and the overarching strategies that are implemented to safeguard pupils might be appropriate in this context, for example working with other **agencies**, including (if necessary) the police. Homophobic violence can be a crime. Anti-bullying policies should be rigorously enforced in order to keep pupils **safe** from physical abuse.

Teachers and other staff members should refer to the **anti-bullying policy** and the '**hierarchy of sanctions**' when responding to homophobic bullying. In particularly severe circumstances the school should consider permanent exclusion.

The Department's guidance on exclusions 2006 states:

"A decision to exclude a pupil should be taken only:

- a) in response to serious breaches of the schools behaviour policy; and
- b) if allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others in the school."

Only the head or teacher in charge of a Pupil Referral Unit (or, in the absence of the head or teacher in charge, the most senior teacher who is acting in that role) can exclude a pupil.

The guidance further states:

“In cases where a head has permanently excluded a pupil for: ... persistent and defiant misbehaviour, including bullying (which would include racist or homophobic bullying), or repeated possession and/or use of an illegal drug on school premises, the Secretary of State would not normally expect the governing body or an Independent Appeal Panel to reinstate the pupil.”<sup>34</sup>

*Note this guidance is due to be updated Summer 2007 when the wording may change slightly.*

#### B5.4 Supporting lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils

Refer to **DL14**, **DL15** and **DL17** with this section. If pupils receive a supportive reaction from staff, they are more likely to feel able to tell someone about incidents of homophobic bullying. Staff should feel comfortable enough to deal with a situation where a pupil comes out to them. Staff should consider therefore:

- Listening and being **supportive**
- Discussing how **parents** and carers might respond
- Telling pupils their **confidentiality** will be respected, and pointing out the circumstances when this may not be possible
- Asking them how they would like to proceed

- Recommending other **resources**, such as local youth groups and websites.

*“My teacher told me that we have to all make choices and some choices are bad choices and some choices are good choices. She made it clear that I was about to make a bad choice.”*

15 year old girl, Cumbria

Staff who respond negatively to pupils who come out can compound the sense of isolation that a young person may be experiencing. Pupils may be reluctant to tell anyone else, and will not feel able to report incidents of homophobic bullying if this occurs.

<sup>34</sup> Source: [www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/exclusion/guidance/part1/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/exclusion/guidance/part1/)