

C. ADVICE FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

C5: Responding

C5.1 Responding to homophobic incidents

Refer to **DL7** with this section

School staff interact with pupils on a daily basis and are more likely to see, and be told about, incidents of homophobic bullying. It is important that staff responses are, in line with Ofsted guidelines, 'swift, proportionate, discreet, influential and effective'. This section explores ways in which staff can respond effectively to incidents of homophobic bullying, and instil confidence in pupils and parents/carers that issues will be dealt with.

C5.2 Working with policies and procedures

Refer to **DL3** with this section

The first stage in the process of preventing homophobic bullying is to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying measures already in operation and consider how these can be applied to homophobic bullying. It is **Heads** and **governors** who have a duty to ensure that the necessary policies and procedures are in place. These policies should include homophobic bullying and should be developed in consultation with staff, parents/carers and pupils. Therefore all staff should be aware of them.

Responding to incidents of homophobic bullying should be done within the context of a school's own policy, for example, with regards the 'hierarchy of sanctions' which the school has deemed appropriate for responding to inappropriate behaviour. This section of guidance should be read with these policies in mind.

For more information on sanctions and tackling bullying see *Safe to Learn* and *School Discipline and Pupil Behaviour Policies: Guidance for Schools*.

C5.3 How to respond to verbal abuse

Refer to **DL16** and **DL17** with this section

Stopping verbal abuse, particularly the use of homophobic language, is part of the broader, whole school approach to preventing homophobic bullying. If heads develop "**zero-tolerance**" strategies for incidents of homophobic language, this will help staff intervene and take action. Taking steps to ensure respect for people regardless of their sexual orientation will enable pupils to be more open about their experiences of bullying.

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 member of staff does not assume the pupil is either gay or heterosexual. Staff members 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

C5.4 How to respond to physical abuse

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."⁵⁰

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

C5.5 Holding people who bully to account

Refer to **DL9** and **DL25** with this section

If pupils have not previously been taught that homophobic bullying is wrong, it may take time to make pupils understand that their behaviour is inappropriate. Although schools can develop and implement immediate **responses** to homophobic bullying incidents, schools may also want to develop a longer term strategy to help change attitudes.

This work is achieved by making use of **curriculum** opportunities, working in partnership with pupils to develop **policies**, and ensuring that pupils understand what **sanctions** will be applied if they fail to follow the rules. Discussions and ideas about sexual orientation should not be shut down. Examining sexual orientation in a positive, constructive way, rather than just as a response to bullying, helps tackle discrimination and prejudice, and thus helps prevent homophobic bullying in the future.

⁵⁰ Source: www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/exclusion/guidance/part1/

Some pupils may be reluctant to stop bullying because they think their stance is justified. This position can sometimes be supported by **parents/carers**. Schools need to be very clear that homophobic bullying is not tolerated under any circumstances and that **sanctions** and consequences apply.

C5.6 Supporting those harmed by bullying

Refer to **DL8, DL26, DL14** and **DL15** with this section. One of the greatest barriers to addressing homophobic bullying is under-reporting. Pupils may feel reluctant to report incidents because they think that the staff member will assume that they are gay, or that they will respond negatively. In order to **safeguard** all pupils, children and young people need to feel confident that the school will be able to **support** them effectively.

Homophobic bullying is distinct from other forms of bullying since additional barriers exist to admitting it is occurring. If a pupil is experiencing racist bullying, they may feel able to discuss this with their **parents or carers**. Whilst it is desirable for a pupil who is experiencing homophobic bullying to confide in their parents/carers, evidence suggests that 75% of young people feel that they are unable to do so as they may be worried that parents or carers will either find out that they are gay, or assume that they are, even if this is not the case (Source: Stonewall's The School Report).

"I'm not gay, but always been rubbish at sports at stuff. My dad already thinks I'm lame. If he found out the other boys call me a poof, it would just prove him right I reckon."

14 year old boy, Cardiff

Schools need to develop robust **confidentiality** policies that pupils understand and be able to offer help to pupils who are unable to access support at

home. In terms of confidentiality, it is important to bear in mind that "coming out" or a disclosure about consensual sexual activity, is not in itself a reason to breach confidentiality. However, an admission of behaviour, which places the young person, or other young people at risk of significant harm, regardless of their sexuality, may constitute a need to breach confidence. School confidentiality policies should be in line with local child protection protocols which reflect the principles of Working Together (2006).

A pupil who has experienced homophobic bullying needs to have the opportunity to state what has happened, and have an opportunity to express how they feel (in writing if they prefer). If they want to, a parent, carer or other adult or friend can support them.

Pupils need to understand what is going to happen as a result of them telling a member of staff. Staff will want to consider if they should also use the opportunity to provide further pastoral care, especially if the pupil is **gay** and wants to talk about it.

Pupils may also be reluctant to use pupil support systems for example, peer mentoring systems. All those involved in anti-bullying work need to understand the sensitivities around homophobic bullying.

It is important to involve pupils in developing the policies in place relating to homophobic bullying to improve young people's confidence that the school will deal with the bullying, and to demonstrate to all pupils that bullying of this nature will not be tolerated.

C5.7 Working with parents whose child has experienced bullying

Refer to **DL10** with this section **DL10**

No **parent or carer** wants their child to be bullied. Any young person, whether they are gay or not, can experience homophobic bullying. It can affect

children and young people at primary school or secondary school. Young people however, often do not tell their parents/carers about homophobic bullying, because they do not want their parents/carers to think, or know, that they are gay. Parents, carers and families may not even know this is happening.

It is advisable that schools work with parents/carers to help prevent homophobic bullying. By working in partnership, parents/carers will be more aware of the issues around homophobic bullying, and are more likely to tell the school if they think their child is experiencing it. Communicating and consulting with parents/carers about this issue will also help challenge any **resistance** to the subject.

Parents/carers, like pupils, may think that homophobic bullying is acceptable. Schools will want to consider explaining to parents/carers what homophobic bullying is, and what strategies there are in place to prevent it and respond to it.

Some parents/carers may assume that if a school is preventing homophobic bullying, they are therefore discussing gay sex, or encouraging pupils to be gay. This is not the case, and this needs to be made clear to parents/carers. Schools should consider using vehicles such as the prospectus to emphasise that **anti-bullying policies** include homophobic bullying. Letters home about bullying should ideally make reference to homophobic bullying.

For more on working with parents and carers see **“How to respond to verbal incidents”**.

C5.8 Multi-agency working and safeguarding

Schools have a responsibility to safeguard children and young people from harm, including bullying. This means that on occasion, schools may want to engage with other **agencies** in order to protect children and young people from bullying. See *Safe to Learn* for more information. Staff will also want to be aware that some voluntary organisations can offer support to children or young people experiencing homophobic bullying. **Please see the Further Resources section for more information.**