

DL27: The experiences of girls

Girls, and young women, can experience homophobic bullying in ways that are different from boys. Understanding those differences can enable schools to support them more effectively.

A girl may experience homophobic bullying if she:

- Doesn't have a boyfriend, or does not wish to have a boyfriend.
- Is particularly studious or shy and may not want to do the same things as the other girls.
- May have gay parents, or other family members.
- May be particularly vocal in her views about gay rights, and women's rights.
- May be good at sports, and enjoy activities that are traditionally "male".
- May be thought to "look gay" or particularly masculine.
- Is openly lesbian.

The experience	How to provide support
<p>Verbal abuse: This is the most common form of bullying for girls. Girls are "accused" of being gay, and excluded from groups. Rumours can be spread about her, and can quickly escalate. Girls report that they do not want to be associated with girls who are gay, or thought to be gay.</p>	<p>Schools should not ignore situations like this. Girls often do not report this sort of bullying in case staff assume that they are gay. Staff are often reluctant to intervene because they think it is a private matter between girls. Staff should use existing intervention strategies.</p>
<p>Coming out: Coming out can be particularly hard for a girl. There are very few gay women in the media, portrayed on the television or in books. This can lead to a particular sense of isolation which is compounded through bullying. Girls can find it hard to know how to be themselves. Some people also find it easier to accept that a boy is gay, but can more readily dismiss that a girl is gay. Gay women report that they are often told that their feelings will pass, and it is just a phase.</p>	<p>Young women who are gay need to be able to be themselves in school and feel that they are not doing anything wrong by being open about being gay. They need to know that the school will protect them from any form of bullying, and they will not be treated any differently by staff. Staff should take care not to be dismissive if a young woman discloses that she is gay. This will compound her sense of isolation and discourage her from discussing any incidents of bullying.</p>

The experience	How to provide support
<p>Gender roles: Bullying is often caused because girls don't dress or act in a way that is thought to be "like a girl". A pupil does not have to be gay to experience this sort of bullying. Some girls who are considered more "masculine" for example, may not wear make up, have short hair, wear trousers, don't have a boyfriend, report that they experience homophobic bullying.</p>	<p>Some girls report that they are encouraged to dress and present themselves in a more feminine way if they experience homophobic bullying. This is not appropriate. Pupils should be able to dress and look as they want, within the rules of the school. Pupils should be reassured that they do not deserve to be bullied because of how they look, and the school will intervene in incidents of bullying.</p>
<p>Sport: Girls who are particularly good at sport are sometimes "accused" of being gay. This can lead some girls to drop out of sport and try to fit in with the other girls. Gender roles are particularly defined in sport so girls also can feel discouraged from participating in non-traditional sports.</p>	<p>A joint approach of tackling sexist bullying and attitudes, as well as homophobic bullying is crucial here. Schools want pupils to participate in sports, and continue to participate. It is therefore important to target anti-bullying messages specifically in this area of the curriculum.</p>
<p>Physical abuse: Both girls and boys can physically abuse girls. Some pupils report being touched inappropriately by boys and girls as well as other forms of physical abuse. Some girls may feel responsible for this bullying and therefore be reluctant to report it.</p>	<p>Physical abuse raises crucial issues about safeguarding. Pupils must understand that any form of bullying is unacceptable, including physical bullying. Girls should also be made aware that they should not feel under pressure to do anything they do not want to do.</p>
<p>Cyberbullying: As on-line communities become more popular the scope to spread rumours and speculation about a girl increase. Girls who would not normally bully feel able to do so in this context.</p>	<p>Girls need to understand that spreading rumours and accusations via the internet is a form of bullying and the school will respond to it. A robust cyberbullying policy will enable staff to respond to these incidents. See cyberbullying guidelines in <i>Safe to Learn</i> for further guidance.</p>
<p>Risk taking behaviour: Girls who are gay, or think they might be, may seek support somewhere other than school, if they do not feel able to be themselves in that context. Girls report that they visit pubs and clubs in order to meet other women. Some girls also report that if they think they are gay, they feel it necessary to sleep with a man in order to "prove it". In this context, sex can be unplanned, and girls do not necessarily take the appropriate precautions. This presents serious safeguarding issues.</p>	<p>Young women who think they are gay need to find age-appropriate sources of support, for example, youth groups. Young women need to be taught about how to feel positive, without having to resort to risk taking behaviours and situations. Staff should be aware of the unique contexts in which young gay women can be exposed to drink, smoking and possibly drugs and feel able to offer help.</p>

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<p>Social exclusion: Young people who come out can sometimes encounter negative reactions from parents and family. This can lead them to feel like they have to disengage from their family and sometimes leave home. If a girl is experiencing bullying as well, this can make both home and school a hostile environment.</p>	<p>If a girl does not feel supported at school, she might be reluctant to talk about incidents at home. Agencies are available to help parents and carers to support their children if they are gay. Schools need to demonstrate to pupils that they can help in this situation and will be supportive of pupils.</p>
<p>Outside school: Girls report that homophobic bullying takes place outside school, including on the way home. Girls who are “boyish” report incidents of groping and harassment on the bus. Pupils often feel that policies do not apply in these settings and that they are not protected, and are unable to report incidents.</p>	<p>Anti-bullying policies should make reference to incidents that take place outside school and pupils should feel able to report incidents. Working in partnership with the local police and transport providers can help in this situation.</p>