DL28: The experiences of boys

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

A boy may experience homophobic bullying if he:

• Doesn't have a girlfriend, and doesn't want one.

• Doesn't behave like the other boys.

• Has more friends who are girls.

• Is perceived to be particularly sensitive.

• Enjoys subjects and activities that are traditionally thought to be for girls.

• Doesn't enjoy or excel at sports.

• Is particularly vocal about gay rights and women's rights.

• Is openly gay.

The experience	How to provide support
Verbal abuse: Boys may experience high levels of verbal abuse, even if they are not gay. In order to avoid the risk of being called gay, boys may behave in stereotypically masculine ways, and assert their masculinity. Calling someone gay, and deriding them because of it, emphasises the bully's masculinity.	Schools need to intervene swiftly when verbal homophobic bullying occurs, even if pupils are being casual in their abuse. Pupils need to understand that calling someone gay as an indication that they are inferior and not manly enough, is unacceptable.
Coming out: Boys who come out at school sometimes feel in a very vulnerable position because they are "admitting" to something that is generally thought of as bad. Although there are an increasing number and range of role models for gay men, the hostile environment of a school can have a significant impact on self-esteem and self-worth.	Schools need to ensure that boys who are openly gay are given appropriate support and understand that there is nothing wrong with them being gay, and it does not mean they deserve to be bullied. Staff need to ensure that they do not treat the pupil any differently.

The experience	How to provide support
Gender roles: Schools can perpetuate a rigid view of the ways in which boys should behave and act. Boys who are told to "be a man" and to stop behaving like a "bunch of women", are therefore discouraged from being themselves, and leads to bullying of those who do not conform to fixed ideas about gender.	Schools need to challenge ideas about how boys and girls should behave and take care not to reinforce stereotypes. Accepting a range of behaviours in boys is central to preventing homophobic bullying.
Sport: Boys report that organised sport at schools provides a relatively unprotected space where homophobic bullying occurs. Bullying also occurs when boys aren't particularly good at a sport, and are reluctant to participate. Bullying discourages boys from participating in sport.	Schools want pupils to engage in sport and targeted strategies should be in place to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying in changing rooms and during activities. Schools should also consider providing a range of activities so boys can find safe ways of engaging.
Physical abuse: Boys are more likely to report incidents of physical abuse. Boys who are gay, or thought to be gay, can experience levels of physical and sexual abuse. For example, boys may be made to undress, may be touched inappropriately by other boys, and may be beaten up. Boys may be reluctant to report incidents, and incidents may be dismissed as "rough and tumble".	Physical abuse raises crucial safeguarding issues for a pupil. Boys who experience physical homophobic bullying may think they are somehow at fault and may be embarrassed about what has happened. If they are being called gay, they may think that it is equally "gay" and "weak" to report incidents. Schools need to indicate to boys that this sort of behaviour is unacceptable and be able to provide support.
Cyberbullying: As on-line communities become more popular the scope to spread rumours and speculation about a boy increases. Boys who would not normally bully feel able to do so in this context.	Boys 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 *Safe to Learn* for guidance in this area.
Risk taking behaviour: Boys who do not feel able to be themselves at school, may seek support and experiences elsewhere. This may include gay clubs and pubs where they may be exposed to drink, smoking and possibly drugs. They may also seek sexual experiences with older men. Research indicates that young men sometimes have unprotected sex because they think they are not at risk from HIV infection.	Boys should be encouraged to seek support from their peer group, such as attending a youth group or finding safe youth led internet spaces. Schools should aim to talk to pupils about safe sex in a same sex context and to offer support and advice. When discussing choices about risk-taking behaviours, staff should be mindful of the unique situations experienced by gay pupils.

The experience	How to provide support
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 boy is experiencing bullying as well, this can make both home and school a hostile environment.	If a boy does not feel supported at school, he 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.
Outside school: Boys report that homophobic bullying occurs to and from school, and in their community. Boys may be particularly vulnerable yet feel unable to tell parents, or the school, about any incidents.	Anti-bullying policies should refer 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.