

# Frequently asked questions

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### 1. Sexuality is a private matter. Why is it relevant to school?

There is no obligation for any person to disclose their sexual orientation. However **homophobic bullying** is something which schools have a **statutory** obligation to address. Addressing homophobic bullying does not mean discussing sex. It means taking decisive and assertive action to prevent bullying.

It is important to remember that homophobic bullying does not just affect lesbian, gay or bisexual people, or those perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. It can also be targeted towards those who are seen to be “different” in some other way, for example, because they do not wear the “right” sort of clothes.

### 2. Some parents/carers do not want us to respond to homophobic bullying. What do we do?

No **parent/carer** wants their child to be bullied. Nor do they want to hear that their child is a bully. Regardless of their views on gay people, or sexual orientation, parents and carers have to understand that schools have a responsibility to keep pupils safe. **Preventing** and **responding** to homophobic bullying is essential if schools are going to fulfil their **responsibilities**. It is important to **consult** parents/carer about any steps to prevent homophobic bullying. Parents/carers also need to **understand** that homophobic bullying can affect anyone, regardless of whether or not they are gay.

### 3. We have to respect cultural and religious difference. Does this mean pupils can be homophobic?

Some religions or cultures believe that homosexuality is wrong and lesbian and gay people are not entitled to the same rights as heterosexual people. However, **no religion** or culture believes that bullying, including homophobic bullying, is ever acceptable. There can therefore be no justification for homophobic bullying.

**All young people** can experience homophobic bullying, regardless of their sexual orientation, religion, or views, and they deserve to be protected. Tolerance and kindness should be integral to any school. A person can hold whatever views they want, but expressing views that denigrate others is unacceptable.

### 4. Primary school pupils are too young to understand. Surely we should not mention gay people?

**Primary school** pupils may be too young to understand their own sexual orientation but it is likely that some primary school pupils will know someone who is gay. This might be a member of their family, godparents, or family friends. Homophobic language is used in primary schools without the pupils necessarily realising what it is that they are saying. Primary schools should respond to homophobic bullying in an age-appropriate way, whilst demonstrating that it is not acceptable in school. The same strategies can be used to tackle all forms of inappropriate language.

## 5. What about transgender people?

Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different things. Gender identity describes a person's gender. Sexual orientation describes whether a person is heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. The description of someone as transgender refers to their gender identity.

Some young people come to realise that their biological gender is not the same as the gender with which they identify, that is, they are born a girl but feel like a boy, or a born a boy and feel like a girl. Some Trans young people can be heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual, but like all pupils can experience homophobic bullying and should be protected from it.

Trans pupils may not conform to accepted gender norms and roles and therefore may experience homophobic bullying as a result. It is therefore important to be alert to the unique sort of bullying they may experience and protect them accordingly.

## 6. Is it ok to tell gay pupils to be more discreet to avoid bullying?

No. The fundamental principle of *Every Child Matters* is that children and young people should be able to grow up and discover their identities. Telling a pupil to be more discreet undermines that identity, and suggests that the young person is responsible for the bullying they are experiencing. It is important to **respond to the bullying**, rather than removing the target. For secondary age pupils schools may wish to encourage the young person to attend a local **youth group** if they are gay, or find friends and activities where they are able to be themselves.

It is important to work with children and young people who are being bullied to offer them the **support** they need and to equip them with the skills to assess their own safety. For more information on strategies to tackle bullying, including Restorative Justice and conflict resolution see *Safe to Learn*.

See also:

**DL9** Working with pupils who bully

**DL14** How to support lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils

**DL26** Supporting those harmed by bullying

## 7. I'm a gay teacher and pupils talk to me about my sexual orientation. What can I say and not say?

**School culture** and ethos determines how open staff are about their **private lives**, and you should therefore seek advice and guidance from your head. The key is consistency between all staff regardless of sexual orientation. See section 5 and guidance written by the General Teaching Council *The Statement of Professional Values and Practice for Teachers* [5.3] for more information.

Pupils, especially **gay pupils**, can benefit from knowing positive lesbian and gay role models. Staff should however, remain professional and ensure that they provide advice and guidance in a way that is appropriate.

## 8. I think a pupil may be gay. What should I do?

It is important that you do not ask pupils about their sexual orientation, or assume that they are necessarily troubled by it. If a person does come out to you, it is important to be **supportive**. That way, they will be more likely to tell you if they are experiencing bullying.

Creating a **school ethos** where all pupils feel respected is central to giving pupils the confidence to talk to staff if they need to. Use group discussion and **classes** to reiterate the school's anti-homophobic bullying **policy** and in secondary schools ensure appropriate information about local groups and useful websites is made available in an appropriate place (and in line with school policy), and reiterate the school's commitment to inclusivity.

## 9. We do not have any gay pupils at this school. Why would this be relevant?

Homophobic bullying can affect **anyone** regardless of sexual orientation. Anyone who is thought to be gay, or just thought to be “different” can be called “gay” or experience homophobic abuse. It is highly likely that your school will have gay pupils, even if they have not yet “come out”. Even if you do not have any gay pupils, it is likely that pupils may have gay friends or **family** and therefore it is relevant to them. Finally, there are gay people in the world (and in the **workplace**) and therefore tackling homophobic bullying is essential to a pupil’s wider education.

## 10. How do schools with a religious character respond to homophobic bullying?

Along with all schools, schools with a religious character condemn and will not tolerate any form of bullying, including homophobic bullying, for at the heart of a successful school is the respect for the dignity of the individual and bullying can have no place in such communities.

See also:

**DL11** Schools with a religious character and homophobic bullying

## 11. Everything is “gay” these days. Do I have to challenge every word?

**Homophobic language** is common and its use is often casual, but it is very difficult to respond to more serious forms of homophobic bullying if certain words and usage are allowed. Homophobic language also contributes to a culture of intolerance, and may have an impact on how young people feel about themselves. It is therefore necessary to have a “**zero-tolerance**” approach to homophobic language, regardless of how it is used. Staff should make it clear that homophobic language is not tolerated by the school and that a ‘**hierarchy of sanctions**’ will be followed if it continues.

## 12. How should I treat the non-biological parent of a pupil?

Like any other **parent**. Non-biological parents have the same rights and responsibilities as a step parent. It is important that schools treat non-biological parents in the same way as biological parents, and they feel able to be involved in school life and activities. Some non-biological parents may apply to adopt a child. Some others may apply for a parental responsibility order; this enables them to sign official forms from school for example.

## 13. How do I respond to homophobic bullying in PSHE?

Providing an opportunity for pupils to **talk** about sexual orientation and their views of lesbian and gay people is a good thing. You may not always like what they say but if the issue is up for discussion, it is not going to be ignored. There is, however, a crucial difference between expressing views about lesbian and gay issues (which may not be positive) and expressing hatred (homophobic bullying). Before the **lesson** begins, reiterate the importance of respecting other people’s views and circumstances. Pupils should be able to present their viewpoints in a way that respects others. If a pupil expresses views which cause particular concern, consider whether it is necessary to speak to them after class and provide additional **support**.

## 14. What about section 28?

Section 28 was an often misinterpreted piece of legislation that prompted some schools to think they could not tackle homophobic bullying. Section 28 has now been **abolished**. This means that schools can and should respond to homophobic bullying without worrying about Section 28.

**15. What about homophobic bullying outside school?**

A school is not legally responsible for bullying that takes place outside school, but can take steps to tackle any bullying inside school, and be responsive to incidents that happen outside school.

Under the Education and Inspection Act 2006 a school's behaviour policy can include, as far as is reasonable, measures to regulate behaviour outside school premises when pupils are not in the charge or control of members of staff (which is particularly pertinent to cyberbullying). See section 3.4 of School Discipline and Pupil Behaviour Policies: Guidance for Schools for more detail.

**16. Our child is about to start primary school. Should we tell his teacher that we are a same-sex couple?**

You do not have to tell the school that you are a same-sex couple, but telling them will enable them to ensure that your child is included and supported. Telling the school will also enable them to keep an eye on your child, and intervene swiftly and effectively if there is any homophobic bullying. Schools' primary concern is the children in their care, not their views on their family arrangements.

**17. I have pupils in my school who believe their faith condones homophobic bullying. Do I treat them differently?**

All faiths fully support the declaration that all forms of bullying are wrong. No pupil has the right to bully another and it is likely that such an assumption is based on a misunderstanding of religious teachings.

As well as working with the bully to acknowledge the harm that they have done it is important to look for wider opportunities to discuss attitudes around difference and respect, for example within the curriculum or tutor group sessions. Demonstrating a whole-school ethos based on celebrating difference is also critical. Where the bullying is persistent it may also be appropriate to contact the child's parents or carers to alert them to the situation and to remind them about the school's policies on bullying.