

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports that all youth have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from educational and mental health services within schools regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Harassment, lack of equal support, and other discriminatory practices toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth violate their rights to receive equal educational opportunities, regardless of whether the discrimination takes the form of direct harassment of individuals or is directed at the entire group through hostile statements or biases. Failure to address discriminatory actions in the school setting compromises student development and achievement. NASP believes that school psychologists are ethically obligated to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity for the development and expression of their personal identity in a school climate that is safe, accepting, and respectful of all persons and free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse. To achieve this goal, education and advocacy must be used to reduce discrimination and harassment against LGBTQ youth by students and staff and promote positive social–emotional and educational development.

When compared to youth who are heterosexual, youth who identify as LGBTQ or those who are gender nonconforming are more likely targeted for harassment and discrimination. For example, when over 7,000 LGBTQ students nationwide were surveyed regarding their school experiences, 84% reported being verbally harassed, 40% reported being physically harassed, and 18% reported being physically assaulted at school within the past year based on actual or perceived sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Of the students who reported harassment experiences to school staff, one third said no subsequent school action was taken. Additionally, LGBTQ students were four times more likely than heterosexual students to report skipping at least one day of school in the previous month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. While LGBTQ youth appear to experience higher levels of mental health and academic difficulties, school-based social situations like victimization and lack of support are frequently related to these heightened risk levels (Bontempo & D’Augelli., 2002; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006).

Whereas members of other minority groups likely share their unique identity with family members and a visible community, LGBTQ youth may have few to no opportunities to learn coping strategies related to dealing with anti-LGBTQ sentiments and behaviors from a family support network (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Additionally, LGBTQ youth are at an increased risk for emotional and physical rejection by their families and may become homeless as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). Concealing one’s LGBTQ identity may increase a youth’s risk for anxiety, depression, hostility, demoralization, guilt, shame, social avoidance, isolation, and impaired relationships (Pachankis, 2007).

CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

Individual and systems-level advocacy, education, and specific intervention efforts are needed to create safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ youth. These should include, but not be limited to, the following strategies.

Establish and enforce comprehensive nondiscrimination and antibullying policies that include LGBTQ issues. Many schools already have nondiscrimination policies, but these may not include reference to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Explicitly including these characteristics in policy statements gives legitimacy to LGBTQ concerns and keeps schools accountable for enforcing nondiscrimination and antibullying standards. Explicit policies also support staff who may fear repercussions for openly intervening and advocating for LGBTQ youth.

Educate students and staff. NASP supports educating students and staff about LGBTQ youth and their needs through professional development about the range of normal human diversity that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Professional development training can lead to immediate and maintained improvements in students' and educators' motivation to interrupt harassing remarks and increased awareness of LGBTQ issues and resources (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). NASP also supports the provision of information and training about relevant research, the risks experienced by these youth, effective strategies for addressing harassment and discrimination directed toward any student, and improving the school climate (e.g., inservices, staff development, policy development, research briefs, and program implementation). In addition, creating an educational context that includes the broad array of human diversity can help demystify sexual orientation and gender identity, along with promoting a positive self-concept for LGBTQ youth. This can include infusing issues pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity into the curriculum, which may decrease feelings of isolation and promote a more positive self-concept. Curricula may include presenting theories about the development of sexual orientation or gender identity in a science class; reading works of famous gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender authors in a literature class; discussing the LGBTQ rights movement in historical context with other civil rights movements in a social studies class; or including LGBTQ demographic statistics in math exercises. In addition, including LGBTQ issues in health education can increase decision-making skills for all youth, by preparing them to make positive choices and reducing unsafe behavior.

Intervene directly with perpetrators. As with any instance of school violence, harassment and discrimination against LGBTQ youth, or any gender nonconforming youth, should be addressed both through applying consequences and educating the perpetrator. Education should be provided to the perpetrator to help prevent future aggression. Interventions should emphasize that discrimination and harassment must be addressed regardless of the status of the perpetrator. Youth, teachers, support staff, and administrators must be educated to make policies effective.

Provide intervention and support for those students targeted for harassment and intimidation and those exploring their sexuality or gender identity. Up to one fourth of adolescents may question their sexual orientation or gender identity (Hollander, 2000). School personnel should make no assumptions about youth who may be questioning, but provide opportunities for students to develop healthy identities. In addition to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, other diversity characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) may add additional challenges or serve as strengths toward positive mental health and academic development and should be considered.

Counseling and other supports should be made available for students who have been targets of harassment, for those who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, for those who are perceived as LGBTQ by peers or others, and for those who may become targets of harassment in the future by disclosing their status as LGBTQ (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliance). Interventions should focus on strategies that allow students to experience safety and respect in the school environment, including empowerment of students to address harassment of students who are LGBTQ.

Promote societal and familial attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights within educational environments of LGBTQ youth. Schools should promote awareness, acceptance, and accommodation of LGBTQ students and their needs in fair ways. Schools can promote attitudes that affirm the dignity and rights of LGBTQ youth by becoming aware of and eliminating biases from their own practice. They can model nondiscriminatory practice by providing services to all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or other minority status. School psychologists can promote and model affirming attitudes, use language that is nondiscriminatory and inclusive, and educate students and staff. Moreover, schools can function as powerful agents of change when they actively address slurs and openly confront discrimination, and they can address the actions or statements of other school staff or administrators who neglect the needs of LGBTQ youth or who actively discriminate against them. School psychologists can provide information, expert opinions, and evidence-based strategies to ensure that effective policies and practices are adopted and enforced, increasing the acceptance and tolerance of differences in the school environment by supporting development of student groups that promote understanding and acceptance of human diversity. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have a positive impact on school climate (Kosciw, Diaz, Greytak, & Bartkiewicz, 2010) and should be supported by school psychologists. Students who reported having GSAs in their schools were less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, and were more likely to feel that they belonged at their school than students in school with no such clubs (Kosciw, et al.). Schools should also be informed about programs in the community that facilitate and support healthy development of LGBTQ youth and support their families, and be prepared to advise parents, school personnel, and youth about these resources.

Recognize strengths and resilience. While much of the research has focused on negative factors impacting the development of LGBTQ youth, there are strengths as well. Savin-Williams (2009) posits a developmental trajectory that can impact a student positively or negatively with regard to psychosocial and educational domains. Further review of the research indicates that LGBTQ youth are capable of developing methods to keep themselves safe and find support from their environment. School psychologists should work to identify and build strengths and resilience in LGBTQ youth.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

School psychologists can function as role models of ethical practice and inform staff and students that they are available to all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. School psychologists can address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in inservice training with teachers and programming for parents, actively counter discriminatory practices, and utilize NASP and other resources to advocate for LGBTQ youth. On an individual level, in counseling sessions, school psychologists can be mindful that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression encompass a broad spectrum, and that many students question their sexual orientation and gender identity or are gender nonconforming. School psychologists are also in a position to educate students about a number of issues related to high risk behaviors that are especially frequent among gay, lesbian, bisexual,

transgender, and questioning youth, creating a more inclusive and healthier environment for both the school population in general and LGBTQ youth in particular.

SUMMARY

NASP recognizes that students who identify as LGBTQ, or those who are gender nonconforming, may be at risk for experiencing harassment and discrimination, as well as risk factors for social, emotional, and academic problems related to psychosocial stressors (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli, 2006; Ryan & Futterman 1998). A successful program to address these issues educates both those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against because of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender nonconformity. School psychologists can participate in education and advocacy on a number of levels by promoting nondiscrimination policies; conducting school-wide inservice training; actively addressing discrimination and neglect of student needs; sharing information about human diversity and evidence-based practices to address student needs; and modeling ethical practice through accepting and affirming attitudes, language, and behaviors in daily interactions with all students and staff. In addition, school psychologists can provide intervention to individual students. Any program designed to address the needs of LGBTQ youth should also include efforts to educate and support parents and the community through collecting information about services and establishing involvement with other organizations committed to equal opportunity for education and mental health services for all youth. Schools can only be truly safe when every student, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is assured of access to an education without fear of harassment, discrimination, or violence.

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