REACTING... to children's homophobic words and actions







Every day we hear a multitude of hurtful names in and around our schools. These insults take many forms, and all are hurtful. Racial, ethnic, sexist and homophobic slurs hurt everyone. Hurtful teasing, name-calling and bullying affect the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders.

Children who are victimized and students who exhibit bullying behaviour have lower academic achievement. Meanwhile bystanders lose self-esteem and empathy when they observe someone getting hurt and feel unable to stop it. Additionally they live under the fear that they might become the next victims of teasing and/ or bullying.

All children living in homoparental families live with this reality. For a child, the fear of homophobic insult takes on a very personal character when his or her parents are homosexual. However, they are not the only victims of homophobic insult.

A school that does not take a proactive stance to end violence will have a negative impact on all its students. If teachers and other adults in authority do not act to confront insult and intolerance, students quickly learn that the expression of hate against an identifiable group or a person who is different is acceptable in our society and its institutions.

Yet educators and support staff often don't know how to react to children's insults, particularly when they take the form of homophobic language. Some adults are uncomfortable even broaching issues related to homosexuality.

Young people use the word gay as an insult, or use terms like "fag", "homo", "dyke", etc because they've learned how effective these words can be in attacking the self-esteem of others. In general, these insults are directed at anyone who looks or acts differently from group norms or gender stereotypes (for example, a boy who isn't sporty or a girl with short hair). When the children of lesbians and gays hear these remarks they have a particular resonance, as well. Therefore, all children are potential victims for this type of name-calling, and it's in everyone's interest to work for its elimination. Homophobic slurs aren't always recognized as hurtful, and may even be considered to be a joke. Sometimes students will use an expression without even having any sense of its meaning. Educators can inform students that that the terms they are using or the way they are using them are insulting to gays and lesbians (or more simply put "men who love men" and "women who love women") and that language used in this way is always insulting.

Many schools have adopted practices to combat intimidation and violence. This guide and the student activities in this kit can serve as a complement to any practices already in place, since they place a particular emphasis on family diversity, including homoparental families, and because they deal with the question of homophobia in the context of discussions about intimidation.

Your simplest efforts will make a difference. Through systematic intervention, you reaffirm the fundamental principle that intolerance has no place in the school or in the classroom. Teachers and educators are thus in a position to create a learning environment where diversity is recognised and seen as beneficial. In that way, all students will feel respected in their school environment, whatever their appearance, their interests, or the composition of their families.

Action Strategies

EXAMPLES OF HOMOPHOBIC INSULTS

Queer, faggot, homo, dyke, lesbo are just some of the homophobic insults you may hear. The words gay and lesbian, along with the expression "that's gay" are also used as insults.

Gender-based name-calling, where boys are said to be acting like girls, or vice versa, is another type of homophobic bullying that is linked to sexist views about how boys and girls "are supposed" to act.

BE AWARE OF THE CONTEXT

- Deal with the situation in the context. It is important that all students, whatever their role (aggressor, victim, witness or accomplice) receive the same message that all students are safe and protected in the school and that homophobic remarks are unacceptable. Make sure that all the students in the area hear your comments.
- When you intervene, don't make the assumption that you are dealing with an isolated incident. It is possible that there have been other acts of intimidation directed at the same person. Occasionally, bystanders or witnesses will need to speak to you in private, to protect their own safety.

PUT A STOP TO IT

Keep it simple with quick responses. Respond verbally to the immediate situation. Here are some examples of potential responses depending on the context and your role with respect to the children.

PUT A STOP TO IT (cont'd)

To draw attention to the school's policy against verbal violence:

"Remember, we don't use hurtful language in this classroom / school."

"That word / expression is not acceptable."

To indicate the unacceptability of homophobic remarks and insults:

"It is not acceptable to say 'It's gay to..'..."

"You may not have wanted to hurt, but when you use the word 'gay' to mean something bad or stupid, it hurts people."

To initiate a more intensive discussion of homophobia:

"What did you mean to say by that?"

"Do you understand what 'gay' means?"

"Do you understand why what you just said is hurtful?"

PUT A STOP TO IT (cont'd)

- If you have the time and the opportunity to educate on the spot, do
 it. If you don't, make time later.
- Ensure that the spotlight is focused on the name-calling behaviour and not the victim. Do not imply that the victim is a member of that identifiable group.
- Personalise your response. Point out the impact of the behaviour on others.

"That is offensive to me and everyone else in this class."

EDUCATE

- If you have been hearing homophobic insults or the word gay to mean something stupid or bad, take the time in a class or group meeting to make sure your students understand what the word gay means and why it is hurtful to use it as an insult.
- Make it clear to students that when they use the word gay as an insult or when they use other homophobic insults, they are showing disrespect. Make it equally clear that using such insults is also hurtful to students who have parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles or other family members who are gay.
- Use the lessons and classroom activities in this kit to teach respect for differences and deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices about homosexuality. Draw analogies between homophobic insults and other forms of harassment based on race, religion, ethnicity, ability, gender, age, economic status, size, etc.

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BE PROACTIVE

- Create an environment of respect and caring toward all the students in your class and in the school.
- Establish clear policies in the school and in the classroom forbidding insults, teasing, or hurtful remarks.
- If you have been hearing homophobic comments in the classroom or elsewhere in the school, let students know that the school's rules prohibit name-calling and include that particular phrase or anti-gay put-down.

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DON'T IGNORE IT

- Ignoring homophobic insult and hurtful remarks means that the situation will persist and, possibly, grow even more serious. If other students see that there is no reaction, they will conclude that there is nothing wrong with using such language and that talking that way will be tolerated.
- Verbal and physical violence will not stop on their own. Adequate intervention on the part of adults in authority is essential to eliminate the phenomenon.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF MAKING THE SITUATION WORSE

- Almost any response is preferable to silence or inaction on the part of the adult. Even though you may not be sure exactly what to say, you should always intervene in incidents of violence between children.
- Action establishes limits for children. Putting a stop to verbal aggression is not always easy. With experience, you will feel more comfortable handling these situations.
- A mistake is far less harmful than doing nothing at all. You can always go back to the student and say or do something else if you feel you did not respond well.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF BECOMING THE VICTIM

When teachers and educators defend lesbians and gays or homoparental families, certain colleagues, students or parents may display suspicion of their motives, even to the extent of "accusing" them of being gay or lesbian. This is not an uncommon fear.

If you should hear of any such suspicions or accusations, the following are possible responses, depending on your particular situation.

"You don't have to be Black, First Nations or Asian to know that racial slurs hurt people. And you don't have to be gay or lesbian to know that homophobic slurs hurt people too."

"My job as an educator / teacher is to make sure the school provides a safe and respectful environment for all my students."

"My personal life is not at issue here (and is really none of your business)."

DON'T EXCUSE THE BEHAVIOUR AND DON'T UNDER-ESTIMATE ITS IMPACT

- Saying things like "Justin just doesn't know what he's saying" or "Sophie was just kidding" excuses the hurtful behaviour. Children who use homophobic remarks or insults to hurt other children should be made to understand the consequences of their actions.
- It is hard to know how a victim really feels. Victims are often shy, sometimes ashamed or fearful, and act as if they are not offended or hurt by these remarks. Saying that "Michael doesn't seem to be disturbed by Laura's remark" trivialises the victim's feelings. It sends the message to the child-aggressor, to witnesses and to accomplices that it is permissible to make hurtful remarks to another child with impunity. This teaches not only the victim but everyone else around that no one in the school is safe from violence.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE

• Insist that the child-aggressor change behaviour and ask him how he will take responsibility for his actions. .

"In this school, we don't harass people. How do you plan to make ammends?"

- Ensure that the child-aggressor suffers the consequences of his remarks.
- Encourage the victims to have confidence in you.

"If that continues, please let me know, and I will take further measures. We want everyone to feel safe in this school."

OTHER IMPORTANT POINTS

- Remember to deal consistently with homophobic remarks and don't give up.
- Record what happened, where, why when, who was involved, how many times it has happened, how long it has been going on and who were the bystanders. The incident may be one amongst many others in which a child is being consistently victimized by another child or group of children. Specific actions may be needed to stem the violence.
- If the problem persists or you feel you're in over your head, notify the school administrator who may need to follow up with changes to the code of conduct, a strategy for the entire school to combat homophobic insult, educational programs for parents and the community, or intervention plans developed on a case by case basis.
- Seek out the support of the administration and your colleagues.
- Encourage all the children to report any homophobic gestures (actions, comments, insults) against them or others to an adult in authority.

(Adapted from the documents "Welcoming Schools Program" of HRC and "Dealing with Name-calling" by the Pride Education Network)

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