



**Q:** “What can I do to if I see a student being bullied because of his or her perceived sexual and/or gender orientation?”

**A:** While societal gains have been made in regard to supporting and accepting lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBTQ) youth in the U.S., the fact remains that they, as well as their allies, those who have non-conforming gender norms, and those who are perceived to be LGBTQ, remain at an increased risk of being bullied <sup>[2]</sup>.

LGBT youth are nearly twice as likely to be called names, verbally harassed or physically assaulted at school compared to their non-LGBT peers <sup>[1]</sup>. The statistics are startling.

LGBTQ students in U.S. identified bullying problems as the second most important problem in their lives <sup>[1]</sup>.

However, schools can foster acceptance towards students with a range of identities in many ways:

- For school administrators, establishing safe, respectful and supportive school environments allows acceptance to permeate into classroom culture.

The message leadership sends is powerful, and often contributes to shaping the ideas and attitudes of student bodies.

Schools have the powerful ability to establish policies and norms which enforce and communicate the expectation that everyone should be treated equally regardless of their sexual orientation.

- This then empowers teachers and other adults who witness a particular bullying incident to step-in, communicate support to the student being bullied, encourage him or her to talk about the experience and to open dialogue about what is appropriate behavior while at school.
- Other opportunities for schools include:
  - purposeful class discussion moderated by a supportive teacher or other adult where students are asked important questions which encourage critical thinking about social discourse;
  - creating gay-straight alliances (GSAs) or other clubs dedicated to fostering a sense of belonging for students;
  - supporting art projects or murals with a message of inclusiveness;
  - and inviting diverse, open-minded and child-friendly speakers or activists to address students at assemblies.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but illustrates opportunities for students to critically think and cultivate empathy and open-mindedness.

For families, communication and acceptance are key, especially for LGBTQ youth, who identify non-accepting families as the biggest problem in their lives<sup>[1]</sup>.

Youth are often sensitive to rejection, and if a child feels they have been rejected in other areas of life — by friends, the media or a judgmental look from someone at the grocery store — your acceptance is particularly important: Encourage them to talk about their feelings and experiences, and share your support and admiration for them and for who they are.

Letting LGBTQ youth know that they are supported at home will allow them to go out into the world with a sense of confidence that no matter what, they have someone at home to talk to who will respectfully listen without judgment. The phrase, “I love you, not in spite of who you are, but because of who you are,” may be particularly meaningful for your child, grandchild or family friend.

For communities, a culture of acceptance can be especially powerful. Communities hold the power to build relationships with neighbors, attend the PTA and to schedule play dates for their children.

- Being willing to openly share your support for LGBTQ peoples in your neighborhood helps foster and support safe communities.
- Community members can educate themselves on the issues and rally their leaders to a meaningful cause by phoning their representatives and communicating support for legislation protecting the rights of LGBTQ people. For instance, federal civil rights laws do not currently cover harassment based on sexual orientation.

Often, bullying towards LGBT youth targets their nonconformity to gender norms, which may be sexual harassment covered under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Knowing the law can motivate and empower community members to action.

- Citizens can also support funding for access to mental health resources in their districts as well as advocate for access to school counselors in their area schools, an essential resource for many LGBTQ youth.

## Some tips and resources

1. If you witness physical or verbal bullying, do what you can to intervene. Separate the parties, bring in other adults, and then report it to the appropriate authorities. It's important not only to the student being bullied but also to others: If they see strong adult reaction in defense of a student, they may feel emboldened to stand up themselves. They'll know they have adult support.
2. In class, negative and disparaging comments should be immediately addressed. All students should know that putdowns and personal attacks will not be tolerated. Let them know you'll stand up for students and oppose hurtful behavior. Students should see their teachers and other adults around them as supporters and protectors.
3. It's also important to see that bullies are not only properly dealt with according to school or organization rules, but are also counseled about their behavior. Bullying can often be a projection of one's own fears onto others or a denial of one's own personhood by trying to disparage others'. They must be responsible for their actions, but, especially with younger students, they also need help to deal with the frustrations that drive their behavior.
4. Cyber-bullying has become a very significant aspect of bullying. If you're a parent, be sure to keep track of your child's online activity. Report bullying to websites' operators. Teachers and other adults should be aware of students who spend excessive time online and who may suddenly start to do poorly in class or in activities without any obvious signs of harassment.

5. If a student comes to you and says he/she is being bullied, treat the situation seriously and do what you can to help. If you already have a good relationship with that student, give him or her some time to talk about what's been happening.

Don't interrogate or try to find out who the bully is right away; allow the student to give as much or as little information as he or she wants to.

This moment is about letting the student express feelings and ask for your support. When you feel the time is right you can ask, "Are you willing to tell me who's been bullying you?" Accept the student's answer and indicate you're always there to listen.

Check out these websites for more information:

- <https://nobullying.com/lgbt-bullying-statistics/>
- The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network ([GLSEN](#)) has a comprehensive site and sponsors a "No Name-Calling Week" each year as well as related activities.

[1] Human Rights Campaign. (2013). *Growing Up LGBT in America: HRC Youth Survey Report Key Findings*. Washington, D.C.

[2] Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). *The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.

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