How Educators Can Support Families With Gender Diverse And Sexual Minority Youth

Promoting Resiliency for Gender Diverse and Sexual Minority Students in Schools

DIVISION of SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

Society for the Psychological Study of LGBT Issues · Division 44

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

About this Series

This resource is part of a series of informational guides from Division 16 (School Psychology) and Division 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues) of the American Psychological Association. This series, "Promoting Resiliency for Gender Diverse and Sexual Minority Students in Schools", sets out best practices for educators, school counselors, administrators and personnel, based on the latest research on the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, gender diverse, questioning and intersex students. The series includes topics such as gender diversity among students, helping to support families with LGBT children and youth, risk factors and resiliency factors within schools around health and wellbeing of LGBT youth, and basic facts about gender diversity and sexual orientation among children and youth.

SERIES INCLUDES:

● **Pamphlet 01**
How Educators Can Support Families With Gender Diverse And Sexual Minority Children and Youth

● **Pamphlet 02**
Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Schools: Key Recommendations for School Health Personnel

● **Pamphlet 03**
Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Schools: Key Recommendations for School Administrators

● **Pamphlet 04**
School-Based Risk and Protective Factors for Gender Diverse and Sexual Minority Children and Youth: Improving School Climate

● **Pamphlet 05**
Key Terms and Concepts in Understanding Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation among Students

Sobering Statistics
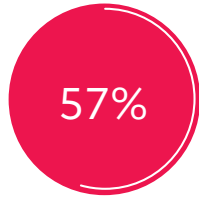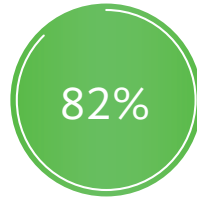
A national survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012) finds that gender diverse and sexual minority youth:
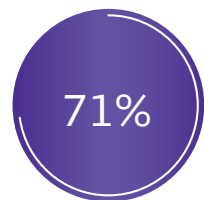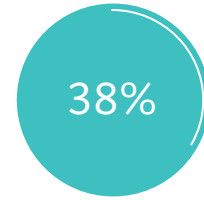
71%
Hear peers make negative remarks about sexual orientation (71%) and gender expression (61%)

57%
Hear teachers make negative remarks about sexual orientation (57%) and gender expression (57%)

82%
Are verbally harassed because of sexual orientation (82%) or gender expression (64%)

38%
Are physically harassed because of sexual orientation (38%) or gender expression (27%)

64% of students feel unsafe at school because of sexual orientation prejudice, and 44% feel unsafe at school because of gender expression. When gender diverse and sexual minority youth experienced harassment or assault, over 60% did not report the incident to school staff, often because they believed that little action would be taken or that the situation would be made worse by reporting (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

Purpose of the Resource

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and intersex (LGBTQI) students face unique challenges in schools due to harassment and discrimination. Higher rates of harassment and discrimination are related to higher absenteeism, lower academic achievement, and risk for mental health problems. LGBTQI youth need both peer and adult allies in schools to help prevent bullying and discrimination from occurring and to support LGBTQI youth who have experienced bias. The purpose of this resource is to help school personnel to examine their own assumptions and capacities to help families support their LGBTQI youth.

Becoming an Ally through Self-Reflection

Self-reflection on your attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and values is often the first step toward becoming an ally. It can be helpful to reflect on your own identities (e.g., gender, race, and sexual orientation) and personal experiences with culture and diversity. If you have not dealt with overt discrimination, it may be difficult to recognize your own privilege. Thus, diversity training exercises such as privilege checklists and privilege walks may help you learn about power and oppression. For instance, females may reflect on their own experiences with male privilege to consider how cisgender and heterosexual privilege impacts LGBTQI individuals (Cisgender replaces the terms "nontransgender" or "bio man/bio woman" to refer to individuals who have a match between the sex they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their gender identity). In fact, you may not be aware of your personal biases since prejudice is often learned and reinforced. Taking a hidden bias test through Project Implicit can help you identify your own biases and resources such as Culture in the Classroom, 5 Steps to Safer Schools, and Common Roadblocks from Teaching Tolerance may help you learn how to work through your biases and help create a safe and affirming school climate.

We live in a society that is not only heteronormative, but it is also cisgender-normative. That is, individuals are often assume that cisgender and heterosexual identities are the norms and everyone is perceived to be cisgender and heterosexual. As a result, you may not recognize when people are using microaggressions (i.e., a statement or behavior that is offensive or denigrating, regardless of intention). Statements such as, "that's so gay," or, "that's not what a real woman would do'" are insulting and suggest that LGBTQI individuals are inferior. Microaggressions are just as hurtful as racial slurs and sexist comments, and should be avoided. In addition to being more mindful of the language you use, don't be afraid to help others recognize how their words may intentionally/unintentionally hurt someone.

As an educator, please consider how your personal biases impact your classroom and how self-reflection can be a step toward creating a safe and inclusive environment. For example, take a moment to reflect on how you respond to, think about, and grade the work of your students, and ask yourself whether you treat any of your students unfairly. Also take a moment to consider how diversity is reflected in your curriculum as well as classroom discussions, and consider whether you can do more to create a more inclusive classroom. Teaching Tolerance has activities that educators can use to facilitate self-reflection and make their classrooms more inclusive. In addition to becoming an agent of change in your class, educators can help school administrators and school personnel use self-reflection to also become allies.

Helping Educators to Support LGBTQI Youth

Consider the following real-life examples reported by a school psychologist who was trying to make her school safe and affirming for LGBTQI youth:

> "I posted a rainbow flag on my counseling bulletin board and was told by my assistant principal that she thinks 'it's interesting that I have room for a gay flag on my bulletin board, but I don't have room for an American flag.' I simply did not know how to respond because I don't know how the two are related. One day, an American flag magically appeared on my bulletin board. Later, a classroom teacher asked me if I'm allowed to put a gay flag on my bulletin board, because she felt it was illegal for me to do so. I explained it was in no way illegal. She asked me to take it down because it makes her uncomfortable."

Schools are complex social environments that represent the diversity of our communities. School administrators and educators are not immune to the feelings stemming from their own personal biases, yet schools need to be safe and affirming for all children to receive a fair and appropriate public education. As described above, reflecting on your own biases and privileges can you help you to better understand the challenges faced by LGBTQI youth as they come to terms with their identity in a heteronormative and cisgendernormative society. Likewise, we may also need to work with administrators and colleagues whose personal biases, assumptions and prejudices interfere with their ability to treat all students equally and help establish safe and affirming school environments.

Administrators are responsible for establishing and enforcing codes of conduct in schools, upholding laws, approving curriculum, and helping to create a school climate that is safe for all youth. This is a very important role impacts every member of the school community. An administrator whose personal beliefs include affirming and embracing LGBTQI youth will likely foster a supportive and inclusive climate for those youth. However, an administrator who holds personal biases may not be supportive of LGBTQI youth, and could thwart efforts of staff to help these youth and may even be outright prejudiced and biased. This situation would likely ensure that LGBTQI youth would be vulnerable to bias and harassment with little or no protection from administration.

Administrators are strongly encouraged to engage in self-reflection and awareness training as described above, to help identify privilege and biases that impede their ability to ensure a safe and affirming school environment for LGBTQI youth. For example, administrators with devout religious beliefs may find their beliefs at odds with LGBTQI identities, yet their personal beliefs are just that – personal – and should not affect their ability to create an inclusive school environment. Moreover, there are federal, state, and local laws and district polices that an administrator must uphold and enforce, such as Title IX which forbids discrimination based on gender and Equal Access Act which supports the right of youth to create Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs. Administrators who are unwilling or resistant to uphold these laws and policies or who contribute to an unsupportive or harmful environment for LGBTQI youth should not be employed in these positions. Much more can also be done at the pre-service level in preparing future administrators to reflect on their own biases and be prepared to support all youth, as well as through continuing education and administrative training.

While administrative support is crucial, it is also vital that there is collegial support among faculty and staff that embraces a diverse school environment including LGBTQI youth. If educators hold personal biases against LGBTQI youth but find themselves in an affirming environment where LGBTQI bias and harassment are not tolerated, they will likely keep those biases to themselves and may even begin to question the rigidity and veracity of their own beliefs. In this regard, the normative environment for educators and staff is very important and predictive of their intention to be advocates for LGBTQI youth. Educators and school staff also need to examine their own biases and privilege, and consider how fairly they support the LGBTQI community, such as inclusion of LGBTQI history and topics in their teaching, and use of an unbiased instructional delivery that avoids the gender binary, heteronormativity, and cisgendernormativity. As educators and school staff emphasize the importance of supporting LGBTQI-inclusive curriculum, parents and students in the school will also see that this is a valued endeavor. This can foster positive and supportive attitudes within an entire community.

Helping Parents to support their LGBTQ child

In your interactions with families about their LGBTQI child, it is important to have adequate knowledge about your ethical responsibility in these conversations and about appropriate referral resources for families. Here are a few examples to guide you as you decide how to respond to specific inquiries from families.

Family Inquiry #1: Parents are concerned that their son is gay. The parents ask you to meet with their son during the school day to ask him if he is gay. The parents request that you share the son's response with them.

Professional Response #1: In general, under the right to privacy afforded by the U.S. Constitution, school personnel do not have the right to disclose student's sexual orie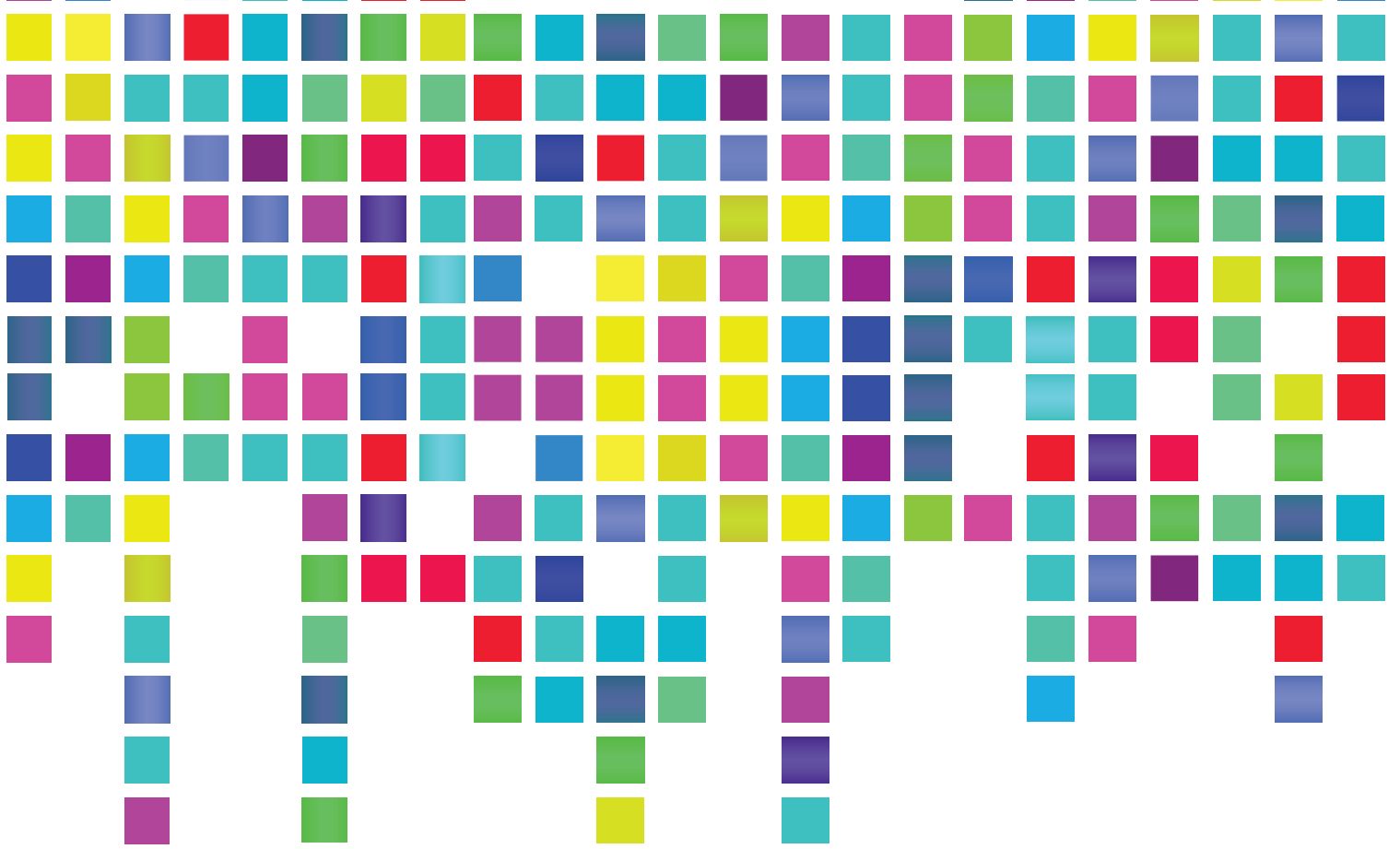ntation to the student's family members, to other teachers, or to other students without the student's permission unless the school personnel has a very good reason to do so. If you receive a similar inquiry from a student's family member, review your school system's policy for disclosing sexual orientation, review your professional ethical codes, and contact your state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union for guidance. www.aclu.org.

Family Inquiry #2: Parents are concerned that their daughter is being bullied because she identifies as a lesbian. The parents would like you to find out who the bullies are and to encourage the bullies to leave their daughter alone.

Professional Response #2: Ask the parent(s) to meet with you and the child. Encourage the child to discuss being picked on. Until the specific students engaging in the bullying behavior are identified and a targeted intervention can be implemented with them, consider a school-wide training for students to remind them of the implications and consequences for bullying. Refer to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) www.glsen.org or the Stop Bullying www.stopbullying.gov websites for bullying prevention and intervention resources.

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