

# Sexuality and gender based bullying in schools

## An equal opportunity fact sheet for staff

### What is sexuality and gender based bullying?

Everyone knows about bullying in schools. But what if the bullying behaviour is sexual in nature?

All schools have a duty of care to their students and bullying should not be tolerated.

**“Everyone has the right to be educated in a safe environment free from discrimination, harassment and bullying.”**  
**WA Equal Opportunity Commissioner Yvonne Henderson.**

But does this zero tolerance extend to bullying behaviour that is sexual in nature, and does it apply to sexuality and gender diverse students at your school?

Sexuality and gender based bullying can be similar to sexual harassment or sexual orientation discrimination.

It can be suggestive comments or jokes, insults or taunts, pictures, emails or texts sent by the bully and intrusive questions about a student’s private life.

It can even be use of language such as another student saying, “that’s so gay”.

### Is it against the law?

Yes, sexuality and gender based bullying can be against the law.

If the bullying behaviour is sexual in nature it can be sexual harassment.

Just as it can be sexual orientation discrimination if a student has been treated less favourably by staff or students because of their sexuality or their presumed sexuality.

If a student feels they have been harassed or discriminated against they can lodge a complaint to the EOC or the Australian Human Rights Commission,

which can be a drain on emotions, time and resources for everyone involved.

Staff need to be aware of their behaviour and attitudes and the behaviour and attitudes of their students to prevent this kind of bullying from existing in schools.

**“When so many people tell you how disgusting you are, you start to feel disgusting and at many times in my life, I know I have wanted to turn my back on the person looking at me in the mirror.” Aiden, 18.**

### What is my responsibility under the Act as a staff member?

As a staff member you need to be aware of the harassment and discrimination laws that apply to you, your students and your school.

**Equal opportunity education and training for staff members is an important part of this process.**

The EOC Education and

Training section offers state-wide training for staff and students about discrimination and harassment under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984*.

It is also important for staff to educate students about discrimination and bullying so that all students treat each other fairly.



**“My teachers’ silence gave the homophobes the okay,” Stephen**

## What can I do?

### Teach everyone

Whether you are teaching about abstinence or safe sex, make it clear your message applies to gender and sexuality diverse students.

### Challenge comments and jokes

Don't laugh at homophobic or transphobic jokes as by doing this you may be seen as encouraging unlawful behaviour.

Consider publicly challenging a comment to signal a caring attitude and zero tolerance to bullying. If publicly challenging students is against your school policy, perhaps

privately challenge a comment or introduce a class activity later discussing racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic terms and stereotypes and the effects they have on people in the community.

### Be a safe school

Sexually and gender diverse students often do not have support at home like other minority students and because of this they can be extremely vulnerable. They need to know there is an adult in the school who is safe to approach and they can trust. Aim to create a safe classroom environment respectful of difference.

## Myth Busting!

**MYTH:** Homosexuality can be changed

**FACT:** Psychologists agree that trying to change a person's sexuality is harmful. People cannot be 'cured' from being gay just as they cannot be 'recruited' to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual.

**MYTH:** Gay men & lesbians don't have long-term relationships.

**FACT:** Gay, lesbian and bisexual people can be in long term relationships, be a member of a loving family and a part of the wider community.

**MYTH:** Bisexuals just can't make up their mind.

**FACT:** The point is they have! Sexuality is a range between exclusively gay and exclusively heterosexual, and many people are naturally in between. Being bisexual doesn't mean you cannot be

in a committed relationship with one person either!

**MYTH:** Trans people are confused about their gender.

**FACT:** Trans people feel very sure about what gender they are. If they weren't, they wouldn't risk exposure to bullying to live as that gender.

**MYTH:** If a person is with another person of the same sex they must be gay.

**FACT:** Sexuality can be fluid and some people experiment with their sexuality, this does not mean they are necessarily gay.

**MYTH:** All gay men are 'flaming' or effeminate and all lesbians are butch.

**FACT:** Lesbians and gay men have the same range of gender expression as heterosexual people

### Glossary of Terms

**gender** - The sense of self associated with cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity.

**sexuality** - Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.

**sexually** - Sexual in nature.

**diversity** - State of being diverse or different.

**sexual orientation** - A person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted.

**trans** - An umbrella term including transsexual and transgender.

**transgender** - A term used to describe a broad

range of gender identities and/or behaviours. This usually includes all trans people, but some transsexual or other gender diverse people prefer not to use this term.

**transsexual** - A person who lives as the opposite sex to the one assigned at birth and who may choose to undergo hormone therapy or surgery.

**intersex** - A person born with reproductive organs, genitalia, hormones and/or sex chromosomes that are not exclusively male or female.

#### Disclaimer:

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