Bullying and LGBT Students

Bullying is an ongoing problem in schools across the nation. Bullying is commonly discussed as including a physical, verbal, or psychological attack that purposefully harms or distresses the victim and that usually involves an imbalance of power and repeated acts (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010). Approximately one third of teenagers reported that they had been bullied in the past school year, with 7 percent indicating that they were bullied every day (e.g., Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). Such victimization tends to exacerbate whatever problems a student has (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002).

How Much of a Problem is Bullying in Schools for LGBT Students?

As the federal government stresses, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and those perceived as LGBT are at an increased risk of being bullied (stopbullying.gov -- http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/). Data on the problem are gathered annually by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (see http://www.glsen.org/learn/research/national-school-climate-survey).

In the 2007 GLSEN survey, 86.2 percent of LGBT students reported having been verbally harassed, 44.1 percent reported having been physically harassed, and 22.1 percent reported having been physically assaulted at their school in the past year because of their sexual orientation. Relatedly, 60.8 percent felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation; feeling unsafe caused 32.7 percent to skip at least a day of school in the previous month. The 2011 survey indicates "a decline in anti-LGBT language over the years, and for the first time the 2011 survey shows a significant decrease in victimization based on sexual orientation, although overall levels of anti-LGBT language and experiences of harassment and assault remain high" (e.g., see Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

What is the Impact on Bullied LGBT Youth?

Studies report that outcomes associated with bullying based on actual or perceived orientation are much more severe than outcomes associated with non-biased bullying (California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2004). Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey indicate that bullying based on actual or perceived sexual orientation is associated with much higher levels of health risk and lower levels of resilience (https://chks.wested.org/reports). Specifically, students bullied because of actual or perceived sexual orientation had lower grades, were three times more likely to miss school because they felt unsafe, had higher rates of depression, were more

than three times as likely to seriously consider and make a plan for attempting suicide, were more likely to report substance use, and were more likely to carry a weapon to school than other students. Additionally, students bullied based on actual or perceived sexual orientation reported feeling less connected to their communities and schools and feeling less support from teachers, family, and friends. And GLSEN reports stress that frequently bullied LGBT students are more likely to state that they are not planning to attend college.

From a psychological perspective, bullied LGBT youth may link their feelings of vulnerability to their LGBT identity and incorporate this as a core part of their self-concept. Fortunately, research suggests that a protective school climate and effective social support can mitigate the negative impact of bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenigh, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Birkett,Van Wagenen, & Meyer, 2014; Williams et al., 2005).

What are Schools Doing to Address Bullying of LGBT Students?

A variety of reviews discuss policies and practices used to address bullying in schools (see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011; also see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on Bullying – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/bully.htm). Reviews stress that findings on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs are mixed. At the same time, it is recognized that poor outcomes may be due to poor implementation.

General Approaches

What schools do specifically for LGBT students is embedded in their overall approaches to bullying. In general, the recommended emphasis is on promoting student and family engagement, monitoring and addressing problems, and providing essential supports, especially during the transition to a new school. Widely suggested are the following:

- *Promoting engagement through enrichment activities, including opportunities for all students to engage in community service.*

- *Pairing a student with a specific adult advocate/mentor for regular support.* The adult should be open to discussing all concerns and easily available. Promoting peer buddies/mentors also is viewed as potentially helpful.

- *Monitoring and addressing attendance problems.* Students should be given the opportunity to make up missed work with support from teachers and family.

- *Preparing teachers and staff to model caring behavior.*

- *Involving students in establishing rules against bullying.*

- *Teaching students what to do when they witness a bullying incident.*

- *Confronting bullies in private.* A general caution is that confronting a bully in front of their peers may actually worsen the situation by enhancing their status or perpetuating their power-seeking behavior.

Specific Strategies for LGBT Students

While schools are concerned with creating a safe environment for all youth, the federal government also stresses that "there are important and unique considerations for strategies to prevent and address bullying of LGBT youth" (see stopbullying.gov -- http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/). In general, the GLSEN surveys consistently indicate that a safer school climate is associated with availability of LGBT school-based resources and support, including Gay-Straight Alliances, inclusive curriculum, supportive school staff and comprehensive anti-bullying policies (e.g., see Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Discussions about helping LGBT youth feel physically and emotionally safe commonly emphasize the importance of ensuring that schools pay special attention to:

- *Countering actions aimed at LGBT youth.* Sexual orientation and gender identity protection are important matters to specifically address in school policies. In addition, when schools stress that it is unacceptable to mistreat anyone, the messages should emphasize this includes individuals who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT.

  Note: While federal civil rights laws do not cover harassment based on sexual orientation, many states protect against bullying because of sexual orientation in their state laws. And when bullying targets youth who do not conform to gender norms, this may be sexual harassment covered under Title IX. (Read more about federal civil rights laws -- http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/federal/index.html#civil).

- *Creating gay-straight alliances (GSAs).* Note: The Equal Access Act makes it clear that schools must allow these groups if they have other "non-curricular" clubs or groups.

- *Protecting a student's privacy.* Without a student's consent, confidential LGBT concerns that a student shares should not be disclosed to others.

I see that bully stole your lunch again.

Well, this time he's in for a surprise, unless he likes broccoli and tofu.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment for LGBT Students

In summary, in addition to general bullying policies and practices, the literature suggests specific strategies focused on LGBT concerns can reduce bullying of LGBT students, enhance their feelings of safety, counter their fears, reduce risk of suicide, enhance their feelings of empowerment, reduce isolation and encourage engagement in activities that make positive contributions at school, and enhance achievement and reduce dropouts (California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2004; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). The following are frequently cited:

➢ Anti-bullying policy at the school should include a specific focus on addressing and practices should counter harassment directed at sexual orientation.

➢ Ensure teachers are trained with respect to understanding and addressing concerns that arise related to LGBT students (e.g., how to help address the psychological and social impact on all students with respect to dealing with differences in sexual orientation; strategies for reducing homophobia in schools; how to integrate the matter of gender differences into curricula on human development and differences, health education, social studies, history, and literature in age appropriate ways).

➢ Strive to ensure that LGBT students feel proactively supported by their teachers and all school staff (e.g., post an LGBT sticker in the classroom, discourage derogatory or homophobic comments, as necessary develop safe spaces or zones).

➢ Ensure LGBT students know where they can go for information and support.

➢ Enable establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or similar student clubs and support groups, as well as facilitating referral and access to social, physical, and mental health services.

➢ Protecting student privacy.

Note: From the perspective of our Center at UCLA, addressing specific concerns (such as bullying) and specific subgroups (such as LGBT students) should be done within the broad context of improving how schools address the wide range of barriers to learning and teaching. Our Center stresses that failure to embed discrete interventions into a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports risks making the efforts just one more fragmented and marginalized approach to effectively addressing major and multiple problems experienced by many students. A unified and comprehensive system can enable schools to provide the broad range of student and learning supports that are essential to ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond.
See *What Is a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports?* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/whatis.pdf).

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