



# Position Statement

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## **GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUESTIONING YOUTH**

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports equal access to education and mental health services for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (GLBTQ) youth within public and private schools. Violence and intimidation violate the right of GLBTQ students to receive equal educational opportunities, regardless of whether the violence takes the form of direct harassment of individual students or is directed at the entire group through hostile statements or biases. Failure to address harassment and intimidation in the school setting perpetuates an environment that is unsafe and not supportive of academic or social achievement. NASP believes that school psychologists are ethically obligated to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity for the development and expression of their personal identity in an environment free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse. To achieve this goal, education and advocacy must be used to reduce discrimination and harassment against GLBTQ youth by students and staff.

Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender; those who question their sexual orientation or gender identity; or those who are gender nonconforming; are at great risk for a number of dangerous or harmful situations or activities (D'Augelli, 2006; Hollander, 2000). These risk factors often impair their ability to access and benefit from education. The most prominent risks include suicide, physical and verbal harassment, physical violence, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV), and substance abuse (D'Augelli, 2006; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Ryan & Futterman 1998). In addition, these youth are at increased risk for emotional and physical rejection by their families and may become homeless as a result of the disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Harassment and intimidation at school may result in academic underachievement, disruption of schooling, or dropping out to avoid an environment perceived as unsafe (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Henning-Stout, James, & McIntosh, 2000). When surveyed, GLBTQ students were five times more likely to report skipping at least one entire day of school in the previous month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Members of other minority groups share their identity with families and communities and, from them, learn effective coping strategies to counteract prejudice and discrimination (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Society's attitudes and behaviors toward GLBTQ youth put them at risk for verbal and physical aggression, and thereby lessen their sense of safety. As a result, many GLBTQ youth do not identify outwardly as such, rendering them invisible, and with less access to resources to support healthy development and learn appropriate problem solving. These youth may develop an internalized sense of inadequacy and poor self-esteem. GLBTQ youth who also have disabilities or are members of other minority groups may encounter additional barriers to receiving appropriate education and mental health care within the school system and society as a whole (Ryan & Futterman, 1998).

## CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS FOR GLBTQ YOUTH

Schools must maintain campuses that are safe and conducive to learning for all students in order to promote and provide equal access to all school services for GLBTQ youth. Individual and systems advocacy, education, and specific intervention efforts are those that NASP believes are needed to create safe schools for GLBTQ youth. These should include but not be limited to:

***Establishing and enforcing nondiscrimination policies that apply to all students.*** Many schools already have nondiscrimination policies, but these may not include reference to sexual orientation and gender identity. Explicitly including GLBTQ students in policy statements gives legitimacy to the school's commitment to educating all students. Staff and students need to be aware of the nondiscrimination policy, and enforcement and consequences must be consistently applied across incidents of harassment and intimidation. School policies should mandate fair treatment of all students and equal access to educational and mental health services within the schools. The gender identity and expression of transgender students should be honored and respected and should not be the basis for unfair or unequal treatment. Gender nonconforming students who do not identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender should also be protected from harassment, discrimination, and violence.

***Education of students and staff.*** Because many GLBTQ students choose not to reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity for fear of harassment (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001), other students and staff are often not aware of their status. Staff and students who are aware and supportive may fear that openly advocating for GLBTQ youth may increase the possibility that they will become targets for discrimination. Many of those who are aware of GLBTQ youth in their school maintain misconceptions regarding these youth and may lack information needed to address their needs (Henning-Stout, James, & McIntosh, 2000). NASP supports educating students and staff about GLBTQ youth and their needs through inservice training about the range of normal human diversity, including sexual orientation and gender identity. NASP also supports the provision of information and training about relevant research, the risks experienced by these youth, effective strategies for addressing harassment and discrimination directed toward any student, and improving the school climate. In addition, creating an educational context that includes the broad array of human diversity can help demystify sexual orientation and gender identity. This includes infusing issues pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity into the curriculum, such as presenting theories about the development of sexual orientation or gender identity in a science class; reading works of famous gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender authors in a literature class; discussing the GLBTQ rights movement in historical context with other civil rights movements in a social studies class; or including GLBTQ demographic statistics in math exercises. In addition, including GLBTQ issues in health education can increase decision-making skills for all youth, by preparing them to make positive choices and reducing unsafe behavior such as substance abuse, unintended pregnancy through sexual exploration, and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. By including GLBTQ information within the curriculum, educators can help decrease the isolation gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth often feel as a result of perceiving themselves as invisible or as misunderstood.

***Direct intervention with perpetrators of harassment and discrimination.*** As with any instance of school violence, harassment and discrimination against GLBTQ youth, or any gender nonconforming youth, should be addressed both through applying consequences and educating the perpetrator. Counseling and education should also be provided to the perpetrator to help prevent future episodes of harassment. Because school staff may, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminate against GLBTQ youth, NASP believes that support for such youth must occur at all levels of schooling. Education should stress that discrimination and harassment must be addressed regardless of the status of the perpetrator and students, teachers, support staff, and administrators must all be educated to make policies effective.

***Direct intervention and support for those students targeted for harassment and intimidation and those exploring their sexuality or gender identity.*** An estimated one fourth of early adolescents may question their sexual orientation or gender identity (Hollander, 2000). NASP believes school personnel should make no assumptions about youth who may be questioning, but provide opportunities for students to develop healthy identities with the support of counseling. GLBTQ youth who also have disabilities or another kind of minority status often face additional challenges to healthy development and may need additional intervention and support. Nonjudgmental counseling should be provided for students who have been targets of harassment, those who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, those who may be perceived as GLBTQ, and those who may become targets of harassment in the future by disclosing their status as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Students who have experienced harassment, intimidation, or other forms of discrimination need intervention and support to understand their experiences, as well as to identify resources and strategies that will allow them to experience safety in the school environment.

***Promoting societal and familial attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights within educational environments of GLBTQ youth.*** Schools should promote awareness, acceptance, and accommodation of GLBTQ students and their needs in a fair way. Within their own schools and in society as a whole, school psychologists can promote attitudes that affirm the dignity and rights of GLBTQ youth by becoming aware of and eliminating biases from their own practice. They can model nondiscriminatory practice by making it clear that they are willing to provide services to all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or other minority status. School psychologists can promote and model affirming attitudes and use language that is nondiscriminatory and inclusive. They can also collaborate with other staff who understand the importance of affirming diversity and supporting healthy development, including sexual orientation and gender identity. By educating students and staff, school psychologists can help change negative or indifferent attitudes toward GLBTQ youth. Moreover, school psychologists can function as powerful agents of change when they actively address slurs and openly confront discrimination, and they can address the actions or statements of other school staff or administrators who neglect the needs of GLBTQ youth or who actively discriminate against them.

School psychologists can provide information, expert opinions, and evidence-based strategies to ensure that effective policies and practices are adopted and enforced. School psychologists can be instrumental in increasing the acceptance and tolerance of differences in the school environment by supporting development of student groups that promote understanding and acceptance of human diversity, such as gay-straight alliances (GSAs) that have a positive impact on school climate (Harris

Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Students who reported having GSAs in their schools were “less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, and were more likely to feel that they belonged at their school than students in school with no such clubs” (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). School psychologists should also be informed about programs in the community that facilitate and support healthy development of GLBTQ youth and support their families, and become prepared to advise parents, school personnel, and youth about these resources. Finally, school psychologists can encourage local, state, and national organizations to disseminate information to parents and other groups that need to be aware of the issues related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth in the schools.

## **ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST**

Because school psychologists work directly with students as well as with staff and administrators, they are uniquely positioned to affect policies and practices within the schools. They can function as role models of ethical practice and inform staff and students that they are available to all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. School psychologists can address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in inservice training with teachers and programming for parents, and actively counter discriminatory practices. On an individual level, in counseling sessions, school psychologists can be mindful that sexual orientation and gender identity encompass a broad spectrum, and that many students question their sexual orientation and gender identity or are gender nonconforming. They should remember that without adequate information and support, GLBTQ status can negatively affect self-esteem and peer relationships. To serve groups of students, school psychologists are also in a position to educate students about a number of issues related to high risk behaviors that are especially frequent among gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth, creating a more inclusive and healthier environment for both the school population in general and GLBTQ youth in particular.

## **SUMMARY**

NASP recognizes that students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, as well as those who question their own sexual orientation or gender identity, or those who are gender nonconforming, may be at risk for a number of dangerous and destructive behaviors as well as harassment, discrimination, and poor self-esteem due to psychosocial stressors (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; D’Augelli, 2006; Ryan & Futterman 1998). A successful program to address these issues educates both those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against because of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender nonconformity. School psychologists can participate in education and advocacy on a number of levels, promoting nondiscrimination policies, conducting school wide inservice training; actively addressing discrimination and neglect of student needs; sharing information about human diversity and evidence-based practices to address student needs; and modeling ethical practice through accepting and affirming attitudes, language, and behaviors in daily interactions with all students and staff. In addition, school psychologists can provide intervention to individual students. Any program designed to address the needs of GLBTQ youth should also include efforts to educate and support parents and the community through collecting information about services and establishing involvement with other organizations committed to equal opportunity for education and mental health services for all youth. Schools can only be truly safe when every student, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, is assured of access to an education without fear of harassment, discrimination, or violence.

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