

Queer Youth Advice for Educators

How to Respect and Protect Your
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

by Abe Louise Young
and youth contributors

“This compilation of urgent youth voices is a critical reminder that sometimes the most important thing an adult ally can do is listen.”

– Eliza Byard, Executive Director, GLSEN

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I feel the school tries to not address the elephant in the room,
but this year has been revolutionary.
The kids have taken the gay-rights movement into their own hands.

– EDDIE, 18

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and youth contributors



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Welcome

Dear Educators,

Welcome, and thank you for picking up this text.

This guide presents the feelings and thoughts of thirty lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth and their allies, on the subject of school.

The main message is simple. Queer youth are here. They're in your class. They're standing on the fault line of a powerful continental shift between old rules and new values in our society. Just as the children of every civil rights movement have done, they're taking a lot of the heat. Some are exuberant leaders; others are choked with fear. But they all want to grow and learn, and want your respect.

In a school of 1,000 students, up to 100 will be gay, lesbian, or bisexual; 10 will be transgender; and 1 will be intersex (biologically neither male nor female). If their lives are average, 87 of them will be verbally harassed, 40 of them will be physically harassed, and 19 will be physically assaulted in the next year, because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Sixty-two will feel mostly unsafe going to school. Thirty will harm themselves in what may be suicide attempts. Their academics suffer; social and emotional needs go hand in hand with educational needs, and nervous students don't learn easily.

The youth make clear that it's not *being* LGBT that causes these problems. There are about as many people born queer in the world as there are people born left-handed. The problems are the outcome of intolerant actions and speech by peers, parents, teachers, clergy, and strangers. Bullying is a symptom of the culture.

An informed educator can use this moment to deeply engage students in inquiry.

By educating yourself and being an ally to queer youth, you can help keep those 111 students alive and thriving. The other 899 will benefit in wonderful ways from an inclusive, nonviolent school climate.

It's an honor to present the voices of the smart, compassionate students in this guide. To gather their thoughts, I interviewed thirty youth over four delightful months. The interviews took place in person, via telephone, on Skype video conferencing, and online. The students named here speak for the whole; some students who contributed to the conversations did not feel comfortable being included in print, and others echoed the voices here.

The youth here come from Latino, Caucasian, African American, Middle Eastern, and Asian families. They identify as lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, transgender, androgynous, curious

or questioning, genderqueer, two-spirit, and straight ally. They live in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Illinois, Washington State, California, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Some students elected to choose pseudonyms; others wanted to be fully named. We settled on using first names and a few *noms de plume*.

An abundance of strategies exist to handle issues of school bullying, and you probably already have some expertise with them. The most exemplary resources for adults who work with youth address the symptom (bullying) alongside the cause (bias). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network and the Trevor Project offer free kits for educators and a panoply of resources for addressing both bullying and bias. I encourage you to order them just as soon as you finish reading this guide.

Listening to young people never gets old. Please join us at the table.

It's our hope that a guide like this will soon become unnecessary. Read on to learn more about the students in your classroom, and to see what you can do to bring that day around.

Abe Louise Young
Austin, Texas
March 2011

Praise for *Queer Youth Advice for Educators*

A rich, important, and powerful work, in which students teach us about their experiences and their wishes for safe, respectful and civil schools. I hope every K–12 educator reads and reflects on this wonderful book.

Jonathan Cohen, President, National School Climate Center

In this essential book, LGBTQ youth tell us about peer and adult actions that hurt them—and, even more important, about peer and adult actions that have helped them live good lives.

Stan Davis, author of *Schools Where Everyone Belongs*

This eye-opening guide reveals a national crisis in school climate. The powerful voices of students describe more than bullying—they show a whole-school issue that must be addressed sensitively by every educator. *Queer Youth Advice for Educators* is a great resource for school counselors and all adults in a school building.

Kwok-Sze Wong, American School Counselor Association

A must read for every parent, educator, and youth worker who wants to create safe harbor for all young people—a place where kids can honor the uniqueness of themselves and others as well as celebrate our common humanity. The wisdom and deep caring of the youth in this book will humble and hopefully embolden us to stand up for our kids and speak out against any injustice.

Barbara Coloroso, author, *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Bystander*

This is an intelligent and useful resource for teachers. The book provides insight into the thoughts and feelings of students whose voices are too rarely heard.

Rosetta Marantz Cohen, professor of Education and Child Study, Smith College

A Note on Vocabulary

We use the terms LGBT and queer interchangeably here.

There's currently no all-inclusive term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Queer and LGBT come the closest. Once a derogatory slur, queer is now a celebratory umbrella term to describe anyone who lives and loves outside of the heterosexual, two-gender model. LGBT is the acronym you see lit up on community center signs. Sometimes extra letters are added to make sure everyone is included—Q for questioning, I for intersex, and A for ally.

We use the terms LGBT and queer interchangeably here. We hope that the stories and advice of these young people will inspire you to become an ally—someone who is committed to equality, and who creates a safe and welcoming environment for LGBT people.

If you're new to this subject, you might feel overwhelmed by the vocabulary or the variety of issues. Don't worry—you don't have to master it all overnight. Simply let your students know that you are supportive, open, and eager to learn, and ask them to teach you what else you need to know.

Educate, Protect, & Respect

Awareness of a difference in their gender and romantic orientation starts, for many, in elementary school—and so does traumatic bullying.

We learned that discrimination starts before kids even know about the birds and the bees. Some people are aware of having romantic attraction to the same sex as young as kindergarten; others are not. Some youth begin to express transgender feelings as soon as they can speak.

Elementary and middle school is a perfect time to model diversity. Kids need to learn that there aren't "boy colors" and "girl colors" or "boy games" and "girl games," that their teachers respect gay and lesbian people, and that only individuals can say whether they are gay or not.

See the Safe Schools Coalition flyer, "[Learning About Sexual Diversity at School: What Is Age Appropriate?](#)"

See "[Teaching About Gender Identity and Fluidity in Elementary School](#)"

- ▶ I've been ridiculed for being gay since age six, and it's not about being gay because at age six I didn't know, I didn't understand. I didn't understand sex. I didn't understand all the logistics. This is what I believe I was made fun of for: for being a gender non-conformist. For being too feminine. – SAM
- ▶ People are afraid to talk about sexuality to elementary school kids because they think that they are going to get into trouble, or that the kids are, like, so pure and innocent they don't know anything. But what they don't realize is that elementary school kids are all talking about it already and lots of kids are already gay or different in second grade, and are really friggin' terrified because no one has ever talked to them about gayness except for the insults. – MC
- ▶ When all my friends were talking about boyfriends, in around third grade, I was really hurt and sad, because I just wanted to stay girlfriends. I didn't know what that meant but I knew I was jealous, and probably I was in love or had a big crush on my best friend. – MARCELA
- ▶ The school needs programs that teach openness starting in first or second grade about other sexualities and its being okay, so that students do not develop that "it's different and bad" mindset. It would also help those who are growing up bi to be told that yes, bisexuality does exist, and yes, it is okay. – ALEX B.

Teach students that you cannot tell who is gay or lesbian by how someone dresses, talks, or acts. Introduce the idea that all people have a different balance of masculine and feminine qualities, and that mix is part of what makes them unique.

- ▶ If I had bullying, it was before I ever came out, for the fact that I was dressed as a tomboy, for being incredibly masculine, yes. – JOE

- ▶ I was starting to try to transgender when I was about seven. But with school, basically, it all started when I was in fourth grade. I wanted to be called “she” and by my female name. Our principal was all like, “You can’t be called that until next year!” I’m like, “You’re making me wait another year!” So we basically . . . I left. We left that school. – ALEXANDRIA
- ▶ I’m LGBT as well. I’ve known since middle school, and people have taken it to the extreme by calling names and trying to exclude me from groups or whatever. But I don’t judge anybody else for who they are. I don’t tell them, “Okay, well, you’re straight. I don’t have anything to do with you.” – ANNIE

When elementary students do come out, they run the risk that their entire social or peer group will exclude them. Older students may have found support networks for gender or sexual difference online, through a GSA, or outside of school—but few elementary students have those options. Talking about their feelings may leave them friendless.

- ▶ I was very ignorant back then, so I thought I could trust my next-door neighbor, who I became very good friends with, with my secret. Then one day I got to school and I find out that everyone knows . . . then the whole school started bullying me and were like, “Oh, my god! Totally gross!” One day this girl runs after me and pulls my hair so hard that I’m like bending on the ground. And then I totally lost it! And basically I never went to school for two weeks. I didn’t study or get homework sent home or anything. Luckily my counselor was nice enough to make it an excused absence. – ALEXANDRIA
- ▶ So when I was eight, when I was in third grade, I was in the school library and I was looking at pictures of girls. In the magazine, National Geographic, like, girls, women from Africa without shirts on. And these two boys saw, and they said nasty things and tried to pinch my body, and literally punched me in the chest like ten times, really hard. You know, where my bra is, before I matured up. I was all bruised in the area. But I was, like, so scared, I didn’t tell on them. The magazines were in the school library, so it couldn’t have been, like, a thing to be punished for, but it was bad, and I knew. You know? The whole year of third grade I was afraid. – MARITZA

You can also teach the younger grades that families come in a wonderful variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and genders—a family is a group of people who love and support each other, and that can look a variety of ways.

- ▶ My parents are gay and I grew up in a genderqueer community. I grew up not really caring more about whether someone was a boy or a girl because I never wanted people to care about that with me. – CHARLTON

Did you know?

The Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University recently documented emerging trends in LGBT youth self-identity. Its study charted the average age of first same-sex attraction at ten years old, with some youth reporting LGBT identities as young as five years old.¹

The current focus on school bullying prevention may mask the underestimated health consequences of sexual harassment. Research shows that although less frequent, sexual harassment has a greater negative impact on teenagers’ health than the more common form of victimization, bullying.² Since what LGBT students experience is both bullying and sexual harassment, its impact on health no doubt reflects that.

Not all anti-LGBT behavior comes from students. Sometimes educators are the source of problems.

The need to respect and protect queer students is extra-difficult for some administrators and teachers to understand—especially when religious values conflict. But when teachers are uncomfortable with these issues, they may misuse their positions of power over students. Some actively contribute to verbal bullying and even to sexual harassment of LGBT students.

Teachers set the climate and ambiance for their classrooms. Their attitudes can either prevent or increase problems. Education about LGBT issues is the first step toward comfort for teachers unfamiliar with the topic.

Smart schools should provide training on anti-bullying and LGBT student issues for every single adult they employ—from the janitor to the coach to the principal. All staff members need to know the rules for protecting student safety, and to apply them consistently.

The GLSEN Safe Space Kit is a free resource to help educators create a safe space for LGBT youth in schools. The latest kit features a 42-page Guide to Being an Ally to LGBT Students. This provides concrete strategies for supporting LGBT students, educating about anti-LGBT bias, and advocating for change inside the schools. The kit also shows how to assess the school's climate, policies, and practices. It includes templates for printing your own Safe Space stickers, and a color Safe Space poster (8.5" x 11" format).

- ▶ Two lesbian girls at my school were showing some affection (not making out or anything, just being close). My teacher made a snide remark about it and told them to stop. – ADAM
- ▶ I almost got kicked out when my teacher, who was really racist also, wrote So Gay in marker on my history paper. He tried to play it off. I said, "What is this?" and he was like, "There are a lot of women named Gay. Is your middle name Gay?" trying to get the whole class to laugh. – LARISSA
- ▶ I had a person who was the AV director at my school, the guy who brought the projector and the technical computer stuff around. He must have thought because I was bi and had a girlfriend that I was kinky or something, and he would make kissy kissy noises at me when I walked by and pull at my clothes and stuff. He popped my bra strap once and touched my legs when I was going up the stairs. He'd say *Lesbiana muy sexy!* – RAQUEL
- ▶ I once heard my Spanish teacher in 9th grade announce to the class that he doesn't mind seeing two girls kiss in the hallway, but seeing two guys makes him queasy/ nauseous! – EDDIE
- ▶ Bullying and harassment is not really stopped as it should be. Indeed, the sports coaches certainly would see that kind of bullying as a positive, not a negative thing. And whilst the other teachers and administrators might [see bullying as negative] it seems they don't know what to do about it. – ALEX B.
- ▶ My computer teacher, she would wear this perfume that was really heavy of flowers, and it made me feel sick, because, you know, she has to stand behind you when you are working on the computer to see your work. I told her I was getting a headache from it and she went and got the bottle of it then came over and sprayed it straight on me from behind and said "Are you sure you're a girl? Cuz girls *like* perfume." I couldn't believe she had just done that! I never went back to that class. And I went and threw up in the bathroom, I was that upset. – DESTINY

- ▶ At age 13 I was forced out of the closet. Employees at my school and the church next to my school told my Mom. They told her there was a rumor going around that I was bi. It wasn't me who was coming out. It was other people coming out for me. – SAM
- ▶ There is no process here for going to the office or . . . reporting negative hate speech, or if you're threatened. Telling the school counselor something basically means that you've told the whole school. It's like putting it on a television channel. I would never go to a counselor here with something I needed kept confidential. – AMANDA

Did you know?

In the 2004 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 61 percent of LGBT students said they heard school personnel making homophobic remarks.

One school district has been proactive in combating anti-gay behavior for almost three decades. The Los Angeles Unified School District's Project 10 is a district-wide program that, among other things, has provided sensitivity training on sexual-orientation issues and how to recognize and prevent discrimination, bullying and harassment of students to more than 35,000 teachers and administrators. Teacher Virginia Uribe launched the program in 1984 at Fairfax High School after a gay male student, who had been verbally abused and assaulted, was transferred to another high school. Three years later, the program expanded to the entire district.

Straight youth also suffer from an anti-LGBT climate.

Anti-LGBT sentiment divides students because it creates an environment where students don't feel free to be themselves. Straight students who are misperceived as queer experience bullying on that basis, and straight allies risk being harassed for defending their friends.

- ▶ My mom always thought I was gay for some reason. Just cuz I look beautiful. But I was like always the boy interested in fashion. But I'm straight, I'm an ally. – GILBERT
- ▶ I'm straight but not narrow, and I want more punishment for bullying and name-calling. – MARITZA

Safe Schools across the country celebrate [Ally Week](#) in October. Students organize and celebrate allies to the LGBT community, and ask peers and staff to take the Ally Pledge.

Another way to be an ally is to make room on the class bookshelf and in the curriculum for learning about the contributions of LGBT individuals. The American Library Association offers its [Rainbow Project Bibliography](#), a list of the best books with LGBT characters and subjects, by grade level.

- ▶ I know a lot of gay people. But I have a lot of friends that are straight as well. They always made fun of my gay friends, which is kind of . . . not cool. I always kind of go away from that. – WILFRIDO
- ▶ My parents are gay, and I've never experienced any problems or bullying or any anti-gay sentiment. I am homeschooled. – CHARLTON
- ▶ It kind of bothers me when people, if they notice something different about my gay and lesbian friends, they're like, "Oh! Are they gay?" It's really annoying to come ask me. It's none of my business. I wouldn't be sharing out information that I can't share. You know, people are making fun of them and it's really uncomfortable for me. – GILBERT
- ▶ There is no way to express bisexual other than saying it. So it's like I'm invisible. . . which is great for not getting bullied but hard for having an identity. – ALEX B.

Students interviewed for the RiotYouth Climate Survey in Ann Arbor, Michigan (a student-led research project in the Ann Arbor public schools) reported that they feared violence if they stood up for the rights of their queer classmates. They said: "If you intervene, you could get beat up or jumped later on," "I'm afraid of having daily school enemies again," and "I would be afraid of being hurt myself."

When young people do take a stand as allies for the rights of their classmates they offer a brave example of character strength, and sometimes see results.

- ▶ People would tease a particularly effeminate guy in our grade who is actually straight. I called a class meeting and called everyone out on it, and it pretty much stopped. – JAMES
- ▶ I have to stand up for my people when people start calling them out. And when the teacher says nothing, I'm like, "Miss? What? Are you ignoring this mess? Someone is being stepped on here for who they are and that is not right." "Cause MLK and Rosa Parks are who got to fight for civil rights for African-Americans. Now for us, it's getting to fight for LGBT rights at the same time. Even if you're white it doesn't matter. And it doesn't matter if you're straight. You can do a drag show! – DESHAUN

- ▶ Saying being gay is bad is just dumb. Kids can see that today because we didn't grow up segregated from anything. – MARITZA

Did you know?

Surveys of teens indicate that anti-LGBT bullying affects greater numbers of straight students than sexual minority youth. For every lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who is bullied, four straight students who are perceived to be gay or lesbian are bullied.³

The stigma and hostilities youth experience from anti-LGBT bullying make them prone to health risk behaviors, such as skipping school, smoking, alcohol and drug use, and sexual risk. These same risks exist for heterosexual youth perceived to be lesbian or gay, as for non-heterosexual youth who keep their sexual orientation hidden.⁴

When teens in a National Institute of Mental Health survey were asked how they felt about the teasing or bullying of LGBT students, 78 percent disapproved and only 3 percent said this behavior was funny.⁵

Race matters: Queer students of color and immigrant youth feel less safe and experience greater stress than their white peers.

The experiences of queer students of color are often different from those of their white peers in significant ways. Racism or invisibility when in a predominantly white LGBT community and homophobia from their community of color can mean double jeopardy.

In the Ann Arbor, Michigan RiotYouth Climate Survey, students of color were “significantly less likely to feel safe in schools and restrooms than their white counterparts. This difference in feelings of safety was found to exist both on the basis of sexual orientation and on gender identity.”

The National Black Justice Coalition

is the leading black LGBT civil rights organization.

California Newsreel offers current documentary films that challenge racial, ethnic, and sexual stereotypes and help build a more inclusive environment. Some include teachers’ guides and discussion questions.

Queer students of color become adept at confronting bias from multiple directions—which takes a toll on their mental and physical health. This difficulty also inspires many youth to be active in seeking support and social change.

- ▶ Society looks down on us so much, at time I feel Dehumanized. – JAYY
- ▶ Being part of a triple minority doesn’t help much. – OMAR
- ▶ With my mother, she is very, you would say, Catholic—she speaks Spanish only. So for her, it’s really bad, a bad thing, that your daughter is not going to get married and have a husband and have kids and everything. You should hide it. For Hispanic people it is different, it’s much more strange, so, less . . . accepted. So I never had a person I could see, look

up to, who was queer and lesbian and Hispanic, or like me. Or had immigrant parents and was queer. If I was with my Hispanic friends, I’m quiet, hidden. To myself. And if I was with white friends, I was just already different, a different background, so being lesbian is even weirder. And I’m not a girly lesbian or a butch, I just am in the middle, kind of, how I look, so people can’t tell. Having one place to be everything has not really happened yet. When I move out I can find it. I hope. Try to. – MARITZA

Ernesto, a young writer with the YouthResource blog, writes about the diverse aspects of his identity in an essay called “‘It’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out, at the old ball game’: A day in the life of a young queer person of color.” He writes:

- ▶ Explaining my sexuality, gender and orientation in English is something that I’ve become accustomed to doing. Translating that conversation to Spanish doesn’t go as smoothly. You see, in Spanish there isn’t a word for *queer*, or *homosexual*, the words used are derogatory and repulsive. For me to define myself I have to try and use English words with a Spanish accent. One word I do know in Spanish is *maricon*, a word I often heard growing up and the English equivalent to *faggot*. Coming out for me wasn’t about being comfortable with myself or worrying about what people might think. It was more about finding the right words to tell them I was gay. Eventually I just used the derogatory words.... Ultimately I am myself, I am E and that’s all I have to be. I am a Queer Identified Person. I am Mexican. I am Youth. I’m just E. – ERNESTO

The work for women’s rights, African-American rights, children’s rights, and other social justice movements is all part of a wheel of expanding human liberty. The movement for LGBT rights is one spoke on this wheel, and it owes much to the movements that precede it. Teaching about how struggles for equality are all connected is a powerful way to bring different identities—and time periods—into communication.

- ▶ I want my teachers to teach about people of color and other cultures, and about gay and lesbian people and about women and the prejudices people have faced and, like, how they overcame them, something I haven’t seen before. – MARCUS
- ▶ They might think, well why should I do that? Because most people are not that way. They probably don’t want to seem too liberal and like they are doing, I don’t know, something off the track instead of the real, the regular history. – MARCELA
- ▶ But they should do it to help stop the problems, and the violence. What are we learning about every time except for what white people do? Teachers should mix it up, for real, like, queer it up, gay it up, black it up, whatever it up. – MARCUS

Did you know?

In GLSEN’s “Shared Differences” report (2009), more than half of LGBT youth of color reported verbal harassment in school based on their race or ethnicity. For all groups, LGBT students of color who were minorities in their school were two to three times more likely to feel unsafe and experience harassment because of their race or ethnicity than those who were in the racial or ethnic majority.

In the same report, fewer than half of students of color who had been harassed or assaulted in school said that they reported the incident to school staff. For those minority students who did report incidents to school staff, fewer than half believed that staff’s resulting response was effective.⁶

The challenges of life outside of school may be more dangerous than your students let on.

It is estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ. Why so many? One major reason is that many LGBT youth are forced to leave home when they come out to their parents. They may continue to attend school, but their risks skyrocket regarding substance abuse, sexual victimization, self-harm, and being a target of violence.

The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973. But some youth are stressed by being sent to “reparative” therapies operated by the ex-gay ministry movement. This movement claims that LGBT people—even young children exhibiting what it calls “prehomosexuality”—can be “cured.”

Whatever stress your LGBTQ students may experience outside of school, you can help by being a stable, supportive presence. When students feel safe, they’ll share their stories.

If your student is struggling with intolerance at home or in their place of worship, check out [“What the Bible Says—and Doesn’t Say—About Homosexuality”](#) and the companion text [“What the Science Says—and Doesn’t Say—About Homosexuality”](#) for up-to-date research. Both are available as downloadable PDFs from [Soulforce](#).

- ▶ My mom told me to “stop my b*llsh*t” or she would kick me out—referring to me being with another girl. – GUADALUPE
- ▶ I am worried about safety in school more than out in public places. The bathrooms are what scares me the worst. Some of the guys, they just—they barely tolerate it. And they like, they call me names and whatnot. Then I’ll be in the bathroom with them. I see those boys every day so there’s more risk for tension to build. It might cause issues. If guys find out, like if they don’t know and they find out, they’re explosive. In girls... it brings out disgust. It’s almost like going to the circus and watching a show, you know? – JOE
- ▶ [When I came out] my mom, of course, feared I would die of AIDS. You have to remember my mom lived out the 80s as a mature adult. She herself saw people die of that, so her first reaction was, “Oh my god! Sam!” And my dad, when I came out, he didn’t associate that with good things. Neither one of my parents associated that with good things and that was kind of terrible. That kind of made me go insane. We won’t even talk about the ex-gay therapy. Oh, yes. There was that. – SAM
- ▶ My dad judges me on everything. When *God* is thrown at me, I completely shut down. I kind of feel tricked in a way when that happens. – VICENTE
- ▶ A lesbian friend of mine had milk poured all over her simply because she was gay. – JAYY
- ▶ I always have these nightmares about being some kind of animal, you know, like an animal you take to slaughter. I tend to have nightmares about the type of animal that you take to slaughter, like a cow or a pig. And I dream about running and having people tie me down and grab my legs and stuff. In any case, I always feel like people are treating me a lot like an animal because they look at me for the body and the meat. – JOE

- ▶ I think that it should be definitely brought to the attention of students how many kids around the world have committed suicide or attempted suicide because of how they were treated. I'm not saying everyone's mind should be changed and it's just gonna be okay, the world's gonna be peachy—it's not. You can't change everyone's mind, but you can definitely start to put it out there that there are consequences to actions. – AMANDA
- ▶ My mom is a strict faithful Jehovah's Witness and has warned me if I "sin" I will be kicked out because her home is not a place for sinners, in her mind anyone who is LGBTQ is a sinner. I still live at home with my parents only because I feel like there is no escaping. I want to move out or even run away. I think about running away all the time but I couldn't leave my sister behind. – ADRIAN

Did you know?

LGBT young adults who reported high levels of family rejection during adolescence were over three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts and to report suicide attempts, compared to those with high levels of family acceptance. High religious involvement in families was strongly associated with low acceptance of LGBT children.⁷

In New York City in 2010, almost 4,000 homeless and runaway children slept on the streets. Many fled abusive family environments. Between 33 and 40 percent of them identified as LGBT.⁸

Queer youth want teachers and school staff to be their allies and protectors.

When youth feel safe and protected by an adult at school, it can make the difference between dropping out or graduating. Students learn more, make better grades, and have enhanced emotional wellbeing when the adults in their schools stand up for their rights to learn free of verbal and physical harassment.

One way to demonstrate support to your queer students is to create lessons that directly address prejudice, while teaching empathy and peacemaking. Here is a sampling of good lesson plans that do just that.

Elementary School

"Allies: A Discussion Activity"

After leading students in a discussion about ways children and adults are discriminated against, the next question is: "So what do I do if I notice this happening?"

Middle School

"Identity/Expression Activity: Learning What It Feels Like to Hide Who You Are," by Caroline Gould

Adapted from various sources and used by the Massachusetts Department of Education's Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students.

High School

"Day of Kindness"

Lesson plans and worksheets from San Francisco Unified School District (also available in Spanish and Chinese)

- ▶ I had one teacher who specifically stood up for one guy being teased. He said to stop taunting him about being gay, and that it wasn't anything wrong. It's been four years, and I still remember that. It made a world of difference to me to hear someone say that. – CHARLES
- ▶ My counselor is a huge sweetheart. She has all the conversations with my teachers and the principal, so I don't have worry about it. I just adore her. – ALEXANDRIA
- ▶ I don't know any adults who would support me for being gay, who I could talk to. I do have some older friends who do, but they are like, 22, so they are not really... adults. – GUADALUPE
- ▶ Last week, my TA [teacher's assistant] in my class stood up for me when my history teacher called me a gay and wrote So Gay on my paper. All the other kids were laughing at me and I was so upset I left school without permission. But my TA left the class too, she just like stood up and got her purse and left, and she was so upset she was crying. She wrote a letter to the principal saying that the teacher's actions were unacceptable. I would have dropped out if not for her. I love her, she is my hero. – LARISSA
- ▶ Teachers have the right to say, "We will not tolerate this. You need to stop." – SAM
- ▶ If I felt unsafe, I'd tell the principal, counselor, and my mom. And I'd try to get them to tell the police officers at the school. – VICENTE
- ▶ My mentor, Cody, he taught me a lot about happiness. He was an English teacher. I met him when I was 16, and I still talk to him today. He was always there. I would tell him, like, all kinds of things. . . . He was always giving me his two cents and his two cents were very powerful. I'd tell him, "I'm struggling at home." And then he would give me tools to work around that. I was struggling at school and he would just tell me. "You've gotta do it." Cody, he was like my surrogate father. He was like the gay father I never had. He taught me things that a man really needed to teach me. – SAM

- ▶ Teachers need to step up! By making sure that this type of hate language—or all hate language!— isn't accepted in the classroom. Even if they don't hear it, if a student comes up to them or somebody puts a note on their desk or something... just make sure that it's just not accepted.

But I think teachers hear everything. From my experience, if you're dating a person, they'll instantly hear about it. They know gossip. They know everything! When something happens, it travels fast.

So don't back down and say, "Well, I don't know what you're talking about," just because you wanna save your own behind. Think about either a life that's been taken or someone who's been hurt. And you not stepping up just because you don't wanna get yourself in trouble? You heard it, so own up to it! – ANNIE

Did you know?

Students who frequently experienced harassment because of their sexual orientation had grade point averages that were more than 10 percent lower than those who did not. LGBT students who are frequently harassed are twice as likely to say they will not go to college as LGBT students who are less frequently harassed.⁹

Importantly, the presence of supportive staff contributed to a range of positive indicators among LGBT students including fewer reports of missing school, fewer reports of feeling unsafe, greater academic achievement, higher educational aspirations and a greater sense of school belonging.¹⁰

Students who learn about LGBT issues and bias as part of their formal instruction are more than 20 percent less likely to be bullied on account of their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹¹

Intervene when you hear the word “gay” used as a put-down—even in jest. Slurs like “faggot” and “bulldyke” are also intolerable in a safe school.

When dealing with prejudicial comments in the classroom, it can help to preserve the self-respect of those making comments as well as those receiving them. First, call an immediate time-out to stop the behavior or speech. Second, educate the students about why the comments are out of line. Third, offer them an opportunity to apologize, ask questions, or otherwise make amends.¹² This three-tier approach creates the best potential for positive change. In the case of students who continue to make hurtful comments, offer them clear consequences of escalating severity.

No Name-Calling Week (NNCW) is an annual week of educational activities aimed at ending name-calling of all kinds and providing schools with the tools and inspiration to launch an ongoing dialogue about ways to eliminate bullying in their communities.

What Do “Faggot” and “Dyke” Mean?

This middle/high school lesson plan is rich with reading, discussion, journaling, and other activities well suited to the language arts classroom.

- ▶ Students use hate speech because they know that they’re not gonna get penalized. It’s not that they don’t know it’s wrong. – AMANDA
- ▶ The way I see it, when I was called gay when I was younger, that was basically like a meaner way of saying, “F— you for being yourself!” – SAM
- ▶ I think it should be treated just like the N-word, or wetback, or other trash talk, like insults about people’s race. Same with calling students “he-she” or “it.” You wouldn’t do that without hearing about it from the teacher. – MARCELA

This is an ideal opportunity to examine language in the classroom, and how the meaning of a word changes in different contexts. It is also a chance to build complex thinking skills as students make connections between different kinds of oppression.

- ▶ I think it would help if we had a way to name it when somebody says “gay” in a mean way as opposed to just describing someone. Like, “the bad ‘gay.’” Or “the gross ‘gay.’” As opposed to “the cool ‘gay,’” which is when you are being yourself and you are gay. Because otherwise you’re going to ban a word that also means good things. People are gonna be confused. And why would I want to be something that people aren’t even allowed to say?” – MARCELA
- ▶ I think that they should make it a policy—intervening at least. Even though some people might not agree with being gay, it’s like their words are still hurting somebody and it’s putting somebody in the classroom, you don’t know who it could be, in an unsafe feeling. And at school that’s just not, anywhere, not okay. People are people and they deserve to feel safe and to be equal to other people. – AMANDA
- ▶ My freshman year in high school was one I won’t forget. A peer in class started saying, “That’s nasty, gays are nasty.” The teacher said to him, “That is not okay. Don’t do it again.” And he never bothered me after that day! – CHARLES
- ▶ I gave my senior speech about gay rights and came out to the entire student body. People started teasing and insulting me until I made jokes about it which set them off guard, and then everyone either shut up or got over themselves. – ALEX H.

- ▶ I would still love to see teachers state they will not tolerate “faggot” just as they wouldn’t tolerate the N-word etc. I constantly hear people use the word faggot and I will tell them, “That’s not cool, educate yourself!” And they swear they didn’t mean it as such, but words like that don’t have multiple meanings. – EDDIE
- ▶ I had a boyfriend who would always say, “Oh, that’s so gay,” and it would frustrate me. And I’d be, like, “Why do you keep saying that?” And he’s, like, “I’m sorry. I’m just so used to it.” So I said, “Okay, well I’m gonna let you deal with you, but I’ma need you not to say that around me.”
People also say things are “so gay” so that kids don’t suspect they are gay. It’s kind of like a self-defense thing. – ANNIE
- ▶ I am a strong believer in freedom of speech, so we shouldn’t restrict others’ speech. Ideally people should understand that it’s not okay and not use it because of that. Like the N-word, some times it is used but for the most part society has said “Do not use that word” and so most people don’t. – ALEX B.
- ▶ I feel that racist speech would be reacted to much more forcefully than anti-gay speech at my school. It would be a really big deal. Whereas this—how people talk about queers—gets more like a mild warning or it is ignored completely. – AMANDA

Did you know?

In the 2005 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, three-quarters of the high school students surveyed said they heard derogatory and homophobic remarks “frequently” or “often” at school, and 90 percent heard the term “gay” used generally to imply someone is stupid or worthless.

In the 2004 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 83 percent of LGBT students reported that school personnel “never” or “only sometimes” intervened when homophobic remarks were made in their presence.

Make a clear statement of support for LGBT students, every year. Hanging a rainbow flag on your door is a sign that can't be missed.

The rainbow flag is a universal symbol of welcome. It's the "pride flag" for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people—and signifies a celebration of diversity. As students come out to you, celebrate and affirm them, congratulate them for knowing themselves. Coming out is a cause for cheer, because it means crossing a threshold into self-love and self-awareness.

If rainbow flags are outside of your comfort zone, try posting a "Safe Space" sticker, available free from GLSEN in its Safe Space kit.

While preparing for the school year, keep in mind the simple things you can do to ensure that your classroom or school is a safe and inclusive space for all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

See GLSEN's "[Back-to-School Guide for Creating LGBT Inclusive Environments](#)"

- ▶ [If I were threatened] I would go to my language arts teacher (who identifies as lesbian) and my science teacher (who identifies as "straight" but is very supporting of the community and has a rainbow flag hanging up in his classroom with the word "Pace" (peace in Italian) on it. – ADRIAN
- ▶ Two weeks ago there was an incident in my class where one of my teachers was explaining about this meeting and volunteering to be part of it. She had started out the sentence with like, "Oh, it helps gay students . . ." and then this kid, he finished the sentence, ". . . to not be gay." And she went off on him. She was like, "I can't even be around you. My father was gay." And it was, oh my god, like you never imagined! Sometimes you don't realize that there are people who have been through the bullying, and people who are gay, while there's people not thinking about what they're gonna say. When she said that, I was just shocked. She said she had gone through a lot of bullying when she was growing up because her father was gay. I felt proud that she had the courage to tell us. – AMANDA
- ▶ If I were bullied at school] I wouldn't tell anyone else about it because I don't think my teachers/ parents would be any more accepting of my sexuality than the harasser. – ADAM
- ▶ I'm out to a few friends but no friends that go to the same school. I am scared. My language arts teacher is lesbian and I have considered coming out to her so I could have at least someone to come out to in my school. The school president is a female in a relationship with another female and my classmates don't seem to mind at all. My school seems like a safe space but I am still worried. – ADRIAN

Stand behind youth when they feel action is needed (even if you think there will be resistance from your administration).

Did you know?

LGBT students who cannot identify supportive adults at school are more than twice as likely to say they are not planning to go to college.

LGBT students who can identify supportive adults at school do more than 10 percent better academically than those who cannot.¹³

A rainbow flag is a multi-colored flag consisting of stripes in the colors of the rainbow.

The use of rainbow flags has a long tradition; they are displayed in many cultures around the world as a sign of diversity and inclusiveness, of hope and of yearning. The most widely known is perhaps the pride flag representing gay pride. The rainbow peace flag is especially popular in Italy, and also symbolizes the international cooperative movement.¹⁴

If your school does not already have one, help create an inclusive non-discrimination and anti-bullying policy—known as a “Safe Schools Policy.” Make sure bullying can be reported by a team or anonymously, and that all reports get serious attention.

In a number of the cases of suicide by victimized LGBT teens in 2010, their school principals stated that they were unaware of any problems. When principals are not aware of the actual climate for students on their campus, it means that students probably do not feel safe reporting threats.

‘Safe Schools’ policies

Check to see if your school has a clear, updated policy of non-discrimination and bullying prevention—one which names sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories. If not, work with a team of colleagues to [create one](#).

A sample policy

“The district is committed to a safe and civil educational environment for all students, employees, parents/legal guardians, volunteers, and patrons that is free from harassment, intimidation, or bullying. ‘Harassment, intimidation, or bullying’ means any intentionally written message or image—including those that are electronically transmitted—verbal, or physical act, including but not limited to one shown to be motivated by race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, including gender expression or identity, mental or physical disability or other distinguishing characteristics.” (Excerpted from [Washington State’s Model Anti-Bullying Policy 2010](#).)

- ▶ I would be really, really happy if we had a team that was there just to watch out for people being picked on and bullied. So no one person had to go to the office . . . because that person would definitely get bullied more if they did that. – AMANDA
- ▶ A team would be a good way to handle it, and maybe also a box where you could write down if someone was bullying you, anonymously. – ANNIE
- ▶ They should do a survey of your whole school to find out what people think about people being gay. How much you hear the word gay tossed in your face, if you feel endangered. And if you’ve had other stuff too, like if you’re a girl, if you had a boyfriend who hurt you or somebody try to get up on you without permission. The school should ask people if they have been bullied, or if they *are* a bully. Bullies are proud of it. – MC

Students report that whole-school assemblies are not the best method to address bullying. Big lectures that highlight LGBT issues or safety can cause more problems than they solve—and increase aggression and targeting. A better approach is using small-group workshops or classroom presentations to establish a climate for discussion.

- ▶ We’ve had assemblies or school conversations to say, Let’s talk about this certain thing, and . . . sometimes it just gets worse . . . I feel like a school-wide conversation’s just going to give people the opportunity to be like, “Okay, well now I know *this* person’s like that,” or “It may bother those around me, so I’m gonna use it.” Just as a reaction towards opening the doors. – GILBERT AND AMANDA

- ▶ I think learning in a big school group about gay bullying would help some people out, but at the same time it would kind of give an advantage to some of the people that do want to hurt other people, knowing that they will accomplish what they want to do. – LINDA

Did you know?

The 2009 GLESN National Climate Survey found that students attending schools with an anti-bullying policy that included protections based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression heard fewer homophobic remarks, experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation, were more likely to report that staff intervened when hearing homophobic remarks and were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault to school staff than students at schools with a general policy, or no policy.

Despite the positive benefits of these interventions, the 2009 GLESEN survey also notes that less than a fifth (18 percent) of the students attended a school that had a comprehensive anti-bullying policy.

Offer your classroom as a meeting place for a queer rights club, equality team, or gay-straight alliance (GSA). Throw a party!

Be sure to advertise that straight allies are always invited—both so that allies come, and so that LGBT students who aren't out can join in without jeopardizing their privacy.

- ▶ I would decide whether a school was safe to go to or not based on if it had a GSA, a support group. – SELENA

Ally Week offers students a way to organize events that serve to identify, support and celebrate Allies against anti-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) language, bullying and harassment in America's schools. Students plan events appropriate to their school community. Although Ally Week is largely a student-led action, there are many ways educators can participate.

- ▶ A group would definitely help, but at the same time I feel like it's just gonna bring more attention. Like, "Okay, they're gay and they just want all the attention." I've heard people say that. – ANNIE
- ▶ I would have, like, a program to support. Like having a get-together, like in a club or something? Having them, and having us, allies, where we just talk about how we can help change people's opinions and how it's not bad. And also how it's the same thing being straight, gay. Being straight's not something different. – WILFRIDO
- ▶ We need just somewhere that people can share out what they feel about the situation. Like, any person could come in and get opinions on what everybody thinks about the situation of people being gay, lesbian, bisexual. Share out their opinions. And ways that we can better help those people to not be bullied. – GILBERT

- ▶ We need to be having more information out there, 'cause like I feel like at this school it's based on fear. Some people are honestly just afraid of what they don't know. So, I think that having more information out there, just letting it be known that it's not something to be afraid of, would definitely help. – LINDA
- ▶ I would really like to have a GSA, and some kind of teaching about gay and lesbian life in health class, how to stay safe, what's normal and what's not. And a queer section of books may be in the library or counselor's office. But a GSA would be the big thing. – MARCELA

Did you know?

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are student clubs that work to improve school climate for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Found in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. military bases, GSAs have become one of the fastest-growing student clubs in the country. More than 4,000 GSAs exist nationwide; more than 50 percent of California high schools have one. Some GSAs change their name to place less emphasis on the word "gay," resulting in alternatives such as "Project Rainbow," "Pride Alliance," "Common Ground," "Coexist," "Spectrum," or even "Straight-Gay Alliance." Under the 1984 Federal Equal Access Act, students are legally allowed to form GSAs in schools.

The 2009 GLSEN National Climate Survey found that in schools with Gay-Straight Alliances, LGBT students hear homophobic remarks less often, experience less harassment and assault, feel safer at school, skip school less often, and have a greater sense of belonging.

A gender-neutral bathroom and a private locker room stall can mean the difference between shame and safety. Make sure your school has at least two for student use.

Just think about the hurricane of hormones that having boys and girls undress together in the same locker room could unleash, and you start to understand one dilemma of being an LGBT teen. A common thread in conversation was the need for locker-room changing stalls with doors or curtains—both so that they would not have to see the bodies of people they might feel attracted to, and so they would not be suspected of trying to look.

- ▶ It is hard to call people out [for making anti-gay comments] when all the guys are naked in the locker room. – DAWSON
- ▶ I don't take gym so I don't have to deal with the whole locker-room thing. I think they could install a bunch of separate things for people to change by themselves. Just have private stalls where no one can just barge in at any time. – ALEXANDRIA

Anything from inexpensive privacy curtains to constructed stalls can cordon off areas in locker rooms. This benefits all students who request privacy for modesty or other reasons.

- ▶ Many male students think that if you like boys, you must like them. So that makes being open difficult. – ALEX B.

- ▶ I wear my gym clothes to school under my clothes so I don't have to change in the locker room. It's crazy for me to be in there with all the girls, getting naked and stuff. It's not like I'm going to do something to somebody, but people think I'm going to. Plus... what if I like a girl, am I going to want to look at her changing? – MARCELA

- ▶ Some "straight" guys and girls would tell LGBTQ students not to look at them or they would get their ass beat. – GUADALUPE

For students who are transitioning genders, the option of a gender-neutral bathroom is a lifesaver.

- ▶ I don't want to speak for all men, but some men might feel they're being teased because inside [me] there's a female. And they're disgusted at why I'm not looking or acting like a female. – VICENTE

- ▶ When I was really young, like in elementary school, I'd be in the girls' bathroom and I'd be waiting for all the other girls to get out because I was kind of afraid to be in there. I would think that they'd left because it was quiet, but they hadn't left yet and so when I got out of the stall they'd ask if I was a boy or a girl.

It would be good to have the teachers know what trans means. And I think we need the gender-neutral bathrooms along with the binary bathrooms. – JOE

- ▶ I don't take gym, and I only use the bathroom in the nurse's office. I got the idea from reading the book *Parrotfish*. I can't use the girl's bathroom because the nurse says I'm still technically a boy, even though I'm like, 90 percent female. – SELENA

Did you know?

The need for accessible gender-neutral bathrooms was rated as the top priority of youth attendees at Outright Vermont's 2009 Gay Student Alliance Conference. Afterward, students began a campaign to establish at least one gender-neutral bathroom facility in each middle school and high school in the state—the first initiative of its kind in the United States.

The campaign has been largely successful. Outright Vermont's 2010 "Safe Schools Report Card" found that 57 percent of the state's middle and high school have gender-neutral restrooms. (Vermont is one of only twelve states and the District of Columbia whose laws bar discrimination based on gender identity.)

Queer students sometimes transfer to different schools multiple times in order to seek safety. Transgender students may use the break to change their pronouns, names, and gender expressions. Adopt the language they request and stay aware of their safety.

For younger students, transitioning genders at school may be a fairly quick process—supportive parents help them to start a new school year with new outfits, a new hairstyle, and a new name. For older students who have entered puberty, or do not have parental support, it's more complex. They may juggle several different “selves” through the course of a single day.

▶ I had difficulty re-establishing pronouns at my third school, so now it's 50-50 whether people call me he or she. – JOE

Every student should be respectfully addressed with the name and pronoun they prefer. If you are uncertain what pronoun to use when addressing someone, politely inquire: “Do you prefer to be referred to as ‘he’ or ‘she’?” If you do not have an opportunity for a personal interaction, address the student with the pronoun most closely associated with their gender presentation.

For more advice on working with gender transitioning students, see the [Miami-Dade County Public Schools Gender Resource Guide](#).

▶ I went to three different schools in high school. When I transferred to my second school I got sh*t, but that's because I went to a pretentious, rich-kid school. At the third school, I had mentors there—teachers that were gay who helped me out a lot. – SAM

▶ My school situation right now is all right, but I worry about different people that might explode. – SELENA

▶ I'm planning on going to the arts and sciences academy for ninth grade. On the sign-up form there was a place for you to write something they should know about you. I put that I was transgender. When I go into highschool I'll have my braces off, contacts, shorter haircut. I hope to start a new chapter. I don't want to be known as that guy that used to be a girl. – VICENTE

▶ I would get a boyfriend, and then I'd feel really gross about it and over the summer I would change schools to break up with him, so I wouldn't have to do it up front, to his face. Because I didn't want to get a boyfriend but I wasn't really sure how to not get one without saying, Hey, I'm gay. Sometimes saying that makes boys pressure you, they want to see if they can, like, get with you anyway. – LARISSA

▶ I had an okay time when I went into ninth grade. It's just I kinda want to switch schools now. I want to transfer because of all the rumors that got spread and a lot of people that I haven't even known yet know now. – SELENA

▶ Transferring schools has had a good impact. I've really improved, my grades have improved, and I'm at school as trans, not a male or boy. – JOE

▶ My biggest worry right now is my dad. Everyone else knows I'm transgender except for him. I'm afraid he's going to have a bad reaction. The fear is that my dad's not going to accept me. I feel like I have to lie and I don't like that. I'm gonna work my way up to my dad. Maybe try hinting at him. – VICENTE

- ▶ I have been to so many schools . . . I hadn't stayed in one school for more than two years, from fifth [grade] on. I don't know why, I just keep moving . . . I guess I was looking for someplace I would feel right. Not feel bad, freaked out. And someplace where the teachers would appreciate me. – MARCELA

Did you know?

Disclosing any information about a student's gender status or transitioning process should only be done in conjunction with the student who is transitioning. Keep in mind the high risk of suicide and depression when students undergo this process. Unintentional or malicious disclosure could have life-threatening consequences.

People's perceptions of someone in the process of a gender transition will be shaped largely by the information they receive. Presenting the information in a way that represents the absolute support of the school for a transitioning student is one of the surest ways to contribute to good outcomes. (From the *Miami-Dade County Public Schools Gender Resource Guide*¹⁵)

Youth are at the forefront of a social transformation. Follow their lead!

In addition to all their other diverse interests and talents, LGBT youth are transforming their schools and communities for civil rights.

Tens of thousands of youth around the country have founded Gay-Straight Alliances at their schools and challenged teachers to respect and include them.

At thirteen, Caleb Laeski founded his own advocacy group, Gays and Lesbians United Against Discrimination. After being threatened and bullied at school for his sexual orienta-

GLSEN offers a school survey designed to help educators and community members assess the climate of their school or community. They provide a sample participant letter, tips for conducting the survey, and survey forms.

tion, Caleb transferred schools, organized legal representation, and sent a letter to 5,000 school officials in Arizona stating that he would sue their districts if they did not put anti-bullying policies into place. He is also raising funds to start a shelter for queer homeless youth in Tempe, Arizona. Candace McMillan became a cause célèbre in Mississippi when she and her girlfriend were banned from her school's prom in 2010—and the prom was promptly canceled. A national campaign rallied around Candace, drawing attention to the discriminatory school actions. She is suing her school with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The principal of Flour Bluff High School in Corpus Christi, TX banned all student clubs rather than allow student Nikki Peet to create a Gay-Straight Alliance in 2011. Nikki's petition to the school district has gathered over 50,000 signatures, and she is pursuing her legal rights under the Equal Access Act and the First Amendment.

- ▶ To solve the bullying of students inside schools we as a country and a society have to make changes. LGBT rights are human rights and there needs to be social reform as to how the LGBT community is seen. – ADRIAN
- ▶ I was leaving church when I ran into a church friend at the bus stop. We were talking about something and somehow the conversation led him to judgmentally say, “. . . just like homosexuals think it's okay to be gay but it's not. The bible says that homosexuals won't inherit the kingdom of God. It's a sin.” I immediately said, “We are all sinners . . .” I began to feel better respected after confronting him. – STELLA
- ▶ The best thing about being LGBT is it's like belonging to a special club. I feel like by having the ability to love both boys and girls that I am more far along than other students who can only love one. The brain tends to think in a duality type of world, and we are a challenge to that. – ALEX B.
- ▶ At my school, I initiated the first-ever anti-gay bullying PSA, which was broadcast through our live television show to the 4,000 people at my school. It began as allies/queer seniors (well-known/popular/powerful) stating facts on anti-gay bullying and then led into the lives of three queer seniors in power, myself included. Our video is currently on the It Gets Better campaign's YouTube page. Also during a staff development day, we had a panel of gay students speak to the teachers and administration about our story, how we feel at school and what we would like to see. It was an eye-opener for a lot of teachers. Since the panel I have seen a lot more equality stickers in teachers' rooms. – EDDIE

Celebrate the unique strengths of your lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students.

When asked what awesome qualities they bring to their schools, the youth interviewed here bubbled over with enthusiasm. They can say what they appreciate about themselves—and what they want to offer their classroom communities.

- ▶ I am the only openly out person and I am one of the most genuinely joyous people on campus.
– ALEX H.
- ▶ I'd describe myself as individual, confident, and happy. My reputation as "weirdo" in earlier years has grown into one of widespread respect for my openness about my sexuality and appreciation of my distinct personality and looks. – GUADALUPE
- ▶ To me the best thing about being bi is being different—I was born to break the mold, expand beyond a range of 0–10, and be colorful. I love being able to see that the world is filled with so many different kinds of beauty. Even though the world is a scary place, life is difficult, the beauty of existence is so much greater than any darkness. – ADRIAN
- ▶ I bring education, leadership, and awareness to my peers. – OMAR
- ▶ I have a different opinion than most on a lot of things and that makes me open up people's minds to how things are . . . or how they could be different. If you assume everyone is "normal" and thinks along one line, you stop being smart. Really, you're stuck in one place. That puts a limit on you. So I am a good person to ask questions to. I'll say . . . something new.
– MARCELA
- ▶ I'm a Pacific Islander, Indian from India, Black, and White. I'm a Virgo, a very proud Bisexual, and I have a girlfriend who I love very much. I can't get married to a woman, and it will be difficult for me to adopt a child, but I am a highly intelligent, sweet, funny, creative, and loyal person. – JAYY
- ▶ Before, I used to wish I was straight and my life would be so perfect. I've realized very quickly that being a fighter is in my nature and I will always stand up for the underdog. I love more than anything knowing that I'm true to myself in the biggest way possible. – EDDIE
- ▶ I know sometimes I will face difficulty, that it would make life easier if I just lived like a girl. Then I'm, like, "No. You need to learn to love yourself because if you don't love yourself, you're just going to keep going backwards." – VICENTE
- ▶ I had to go through a lot of stuff to be so mature as this stage, to realize it's not taboo. You can make it beautiful. I mean, I've made myself beautiful. That's kind of the great part about people having power over you for so long. You learn to have your own. I've learned to have my own power. – SAM

All of the young people who speak here expressed optimism for the future.

Endnotes

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- ³ National Mental Health Association. (2002a). What Does Gay Mean? Teen survey executive summary.
- ⁴ Bontempo, D.E. & D’Augelli, A.R. (2002). Effects of at-school victimization and sexual orientation on lesbian, gay, or straight students. *Journal of Adolescent Health* (30), 364-374.
- ⁵ National Mental Health Association. (2002a). What Does Gay Mean? Teen survey executive summary.
- ⁶ Shared Differences: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students of Color in Our Nation’s Schools (2009). New York: GLSEN.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Fidler, L. Alone and Sleeping on the Streets. *Gay City News*, December 15, 2010.
- ⁹ 2003 National Climate Survey. New York: GLSEN.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Strengthening the Learning Environment: A School Employee’s Guide to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Issues, 2nd edition (2006). Washington: National Education Association.
- ¹² Sapon-Shevin, M. Because We Can Change the World: A Practical Guide to Building Cooperative, Inclusive Classroom Communities (1998). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- ¹³ 2003 National Climate Survey. New York: GLSEN.
- ¹⁴ Wikipedia.
- ¹⁵ Miami-Dade County Public Schools Gender Resource Guide: Questions, Answers, and Solutions for Schools with Gender Transitioning Students

Youth Contributors

These youth . . . are the ones who will carry on our work of achieving full equality when we are too old and too worn-out to continue. They will carry the torch into the future and, like any good “parents,” we are concerned about their welfare as if each and every one of them was our own flesh and blood.

But it is not often enough that we stop fretting about LGBT youth and notice the amazing things that they are capable of doing. Despite the added set of challenges that they face on top of how difficult it already is to be a teenager . . . gay and transgender young adults are strong. Sometimes, when we stop and notice this, even those of us who work with them and worry about them every day are amazed at how much so.

— *Jan Stevenson and Susan Horowitz*,
Pride Source Media Group, September
2010

Note: All students are identified using the terms they prefer.

Adam, 16, is a gay student in Massachusetts.

Adrian, 15, is a queer girl in New Mexico.

Alexandria, 13, is a male-to-female transgender girl in New Mexico.

Alex B., 16, is a gay student in Texas.

Alex H., 18, is a bisexual student in Georgia.

Amanda, 16, is a lesbian woman in Texas.

Annie, 16, is a bisexual woman in Texas.

Charlton, 16, is a bisexual person living in Texas.

Dawson, 17, is a student in Dallas, Texas.

DeShaun, 16, is a gay youth in California.

Destiny, 17, is a lesbian woman in Pennsylvania.

Eddie, 18, is an activist in Reseda, California.

Ernesto, 19, is a gay youth blogger in New York City.

Gilbert, 17, is a straight ally in Texas.

Guadalupe, 18, is a lesbian woman in Venice, California.

Jayy, 16, is a bisexual girl in Los Angeles, California.

Joe, 17, is a transgender person in New Mexico.

Larissa, 13, is a questioning girl in Manor, Texas.

MC, 16, is a bisexual boy in Illinois.

Maritza, 19, is a straight ally girl in Georgia.

Marcela, 15, is a queer girl in Illinois.

Omar is a gay veteran and student activist in Austin, Texas.

Raquel, 17, is a queer dyke in Illinois.

Sam, 19, is a gay man living in Seattle.

Selena, 16, is a male-to-female transgender girl in New Mexico.

Stella, 14, is a queer girl in Texas.

Vicente, 13, is a female-to-male transgender boy in Austin, Texas.

Wilfrido, 15, is a straight ally in Texas.

Wren, 16, is a bisexual student in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Resources for Youth

National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC)

www.nyacyouth.org

A social justice and capacity-building organization working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth and youth-serving professionals.

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN)

www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com

A North-America-wide organization working on issues of healthy sexuality, cultural competency, youth empowerment, reproductive justice, and sex positivity by and for Native youth.

Third Wave Foundation

<http://thirdwavefoundation.blogspot.com/>

A feminist, activist foundation that works nationally to support young women and transgender youth ages 15 to 30. Through strategic grantmaking, leadership development, and philanthropic advocacy, it supports groups and individuals working towards gender, racial, economic, and social justice.

TransActive: Supporting Transgender Children and Youth

<http://www.transactiveonline.org/>

Seeks to improve the quality of life of transgender and gender-nonconforming children, youth, and their families through education, services, advocacy, and research.

The Trevor Project (1-866-4-U-Trevor)

www.thetrevorproject.org

The national crisis and suicide prevention helpline for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. Its free and confidential phone and Internet chat helplines offer hope and someone to talk to, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

YouthResource

<http://www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource>

A website created by and for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning young people. YouthResource takes a holistic approach to sexual health and exploring issues of concern to GLBTQ youth, providing information and offering support on sexual and reproductive health issues through education and advocacy. Through monthly features, message boards, and online peer education, it offers information on activism, culture, sexual health, and other issues important to GLBTQ youth.

Resources for Educators

GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network

www.glsen.org

The leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Note especially its Safe Space Kit, as follows.

Safe Space Kit

Designed to help educators create a safe space for LGBT youth in schools, the (new) [Safe Space Kit](#) features a 42-page *Guide to Being an Ally to LGBT Students*. This provides concrete strategies for supporting LGBT students, educating about anti-LGBT bias, and advocating for change inside the schools. The kit also shows how to assess the school's climate, policies, and practices. It includes templates for printing your own Safe Space stickers, and a color Safe Space poster (8.5" x 11" format).

The Trevor Project (1-866-4-U-Trevor)

www.thetrevorproject.org

The Trevor Survival Kit

Sexual orientation and gender identity alone are not risk factors for suicide. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth face many social factors that put them at higher risk for self-destructive behaviors, including suicide. The Trevor Project believes that the high rates of suicide are preventable. Its Trevor Survival Kit includes a number of resources for educators, including the short film *Trevor* and a workshop guide for generating discussion about the myriad issues surrounding suicide, personal identity, and sexual orientation. Through open discussions with all youth about feelings of isolation, feeling "different" from their peers, or being misunderstood, a classroom atmosphere can empower youth to discuss options for troubled youth and help students to watch over each other.

Gender Spectrum

www.genderspectrum.org

Provides education, training, and support to help create a gender-sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens. Gender Spectrum offers consultation, training, and events designed to help families, educators, professionals, and organizations understand and address the concepts of gender identity and expression.

The Safe Schools Coalition

www.safeschoolscoalition.org

The Safe Schools Coalition works to help schools become safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Its online compendium of lesson plans for all age levels is aligned to state standards.

Scholarship Opportunities

Point Foundation

<http://www.pointfoundation.org/>

Provides financial support, mentoring, leadership training, and hope to meritorious students who are marginalized due to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Queer Foundation

www.queerfoundation.org

Provides \$1,000 college scholarships to high school student winners of an annual essay contest to promote queer studies and improve the educational situation of queer youth. Collected, the essays form “queer-the-curriculum” materials for use in high schools.

League Foundation

www.leaguefoundation.org

Gives scholarships to lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender U.S. high school seniors who have demonstrated achievements in academics and community service.

National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA)

www.nlgja.org/students/aarons2010.htm

Tuition awards of up to \$5,000 to an LGBT student who plans a career in journalism and is committed to furthering NLGJA’s mission of fair and accurate coverage of the LGBT community.

Messenger-Anderson Journalism Scholarship and Internship Program

thetaskforce@thetaskforce.org

Offers \$10,000 scholarships to LGBT students studying journalism and communications at a four-year college. Winners participate in a summer internship in Washington, DC, or New York.

HRC Foundation Generation Equality Scholarships

<http://www.hrc.org/geneqscholarship>

Funds three non-renewable \$2,000 scholarships for LGBT and allied students who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to the fight for queer equality.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) National Scholarships Program

<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=370>

Funds college scholarships for LGBT and Allied graduating high school seniors who have demonstrated an interest in service to the LGBT community. Scholarships of \$5,000, \$2,000, and \$1,000 are available from local PFLAG chapters.

Information on statewide and school-specific scholarships for LGBT and Allied students can be found in the Human Rights Campaign’s Scholarship Database:

http://www.hrc.org/issues/youth_and_campus_activism/8644.htm

About the Author



Writer and educator Abe Louise Young was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1976. Her special focus is helping young people take action for social change through the written word. She has spent half her life teaching writing and organizing communities. She is the editor of *Hip Deep: Opinion, Essays, and Vision from American Teenagers* (Next Generation Press), and author of numerous articles and poems. Please visit her at www.abelouiseyoung.com.

What Kids Can Do, Inc.

What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD) is a U.S.-based nonprofit organization founded in 2001 for the purpose of making public the voices and views of adolescents. On its website, WKCD documents young people's lives, learning, and work, and their partnerships with adults both in and outside school. WKCD also collaborates with students and educators around the world on photography projects, books, curricula, and research to expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement.

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Next Generation Press


Printed copies of this book are available from Next Generation Press, the book publishing arm of WKCD.. With a particular focus on youth without economic privilege, Next Generation Press raises awareness of youth as a powerful force for social justice.

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FOR EVERY GIRL WHO IS TIRED OF ACTING WEAK WHEN SHE IS STRONG, THERE IS A BOY TIRED OF APPEARING STRONG WHEN HE FEELS VULNERABLE. FOR EVERY BOY WHO IS BURDENED WITH THE CONSTANT EXPECTATION OF KNOWING EVERYTHING, THERE IS A GIRL TIRED OF PEOPLE NOT TRUSTING HER INTELLIGENCE. FOR EVERY GIRL WHO IS TIRED OF BEING CALLED OVER-SENSITIVE, THERE IS A BOY WHO FEARS TO BE GENTLE, TO WEEP. FOR EVERY BOY FOR WHOM COMPETITION IS THE ONLY WAY TO PROVE HIS MASCULINITY, THERE IS A GIRL WHO IS CALLED UNFEMININE WHEN SHE COMPETES. FOR EVERY GIRL WHO THROWS OUT HER E-Z-BAKE OVEN, THERE IS A BOY WHO WISHES TO FIND ONE. FOR EVERY BOY STRUGGLING NOT TO LET ADVERTISING DICTATE HIS DESIRES, THERE IS A GIRL FACING THE AD INDUSTRY'S ATTACKS ON HER SELF-ESTEEM. FOR EVERY GIRL WHO TAKES A STEP TOWARD HER LIBERATION, THERE IS A BOY WHO FINDS THE WAY TO FREEDOM A LITTLE EASIER.

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