

A Guide for Addressing Homophobic Language in Sport

* Based on *Guidance for Rugby League Clubs: Challenging Anti Gay (homophobic) Abuse and Behaviour* and revised with permission from the Rugby Football League.

Purpose of This Guide

Homophobic language is prevalent in Canadian society, particularly in sporting environments, and often goes unaddressed. In *The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools* conducted by Egale Canada, 75% of students reported hearing expressions such as “that’s so gay” on a daily basis and 50% of student body heard labels such as “faggot”, “queer”, “lezbo” and “dyke”. In sport, this homophobic language is often over looked and excused as being “just part of the game” or a result of “kids being kids”.

In the same way that racist language is challenged, sport organizations and particularly staff and coaches, should feel confident responding to homophobic language whenever it happens. Addressing homophobic language and behaviour sends a strong message that disrespect and hurtful biases will not be tolerated from anyone. The purpose of this Guide is to provide individuals and organizations tools and resources needed to effectively address homophobic language.

What is Homophobic Language?

Homophobic language includes explicit verbal abuse such as calling someone a “Lesbo” “Queer” “Fag” or “Dyke” as well as more subtle and casual phrases that imply gay people and homosexuality are inferior and wrong, such as “you play like a girl”, “you are such a sissy/sissy boy” and “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay”. All homophobic language whether implicit or explicit, and the constant association that being gay is inferior and wrong, creates an unwelcoming environment for LGBT athletes, and their friends and families.

Homophobic language is not only experienced by LGBT persons but also:

- People who are perceived to be LGBT;
- Males who participate in certain sports;
- Males who are considered not “tough” enough;
- Females who “act like boys” and play in certain sports i.e. contact sports;
- People who have gay parents, children, or other family members and;
- Vulnerable and bullied individuals who are routinely subject to name calling.

Tips for Responding to Homophobic Language (or Behaviour)

Homophobic language is often ignored because individuals do not know how to properly respond or because they believe the language is not meant to be malicious or intentionally homophobic. It is important, however, to respond to all incidents of homophobic language to demonstrate that it is unacceptable and to ultimately create a welcoming and safe space for all.

Tips for responding to homophobic language:

- Be consistent in your response;
- Challenge the comment rather than the individual, i.e. instead of saying “You are homophobic” a better option would be “Your language is hurtful and makes me feel uncomfortable”;

- Use your judgement to decide whether or not the language or behaviour should be challenged immediately or at a later time;
- Respond calmly and ensure that the situation does not escalate especially if others join in the discussion;
- Where possible, use the incident to educate and explain why a comment is unacceptable rather than simply saying “Don’t say that”.

Potential responses to homophobic language and behaviour:

“The word gay should never be casually used as a negative comment or label. It is hurtful to people who are gay and to people who have parents/guardians, other family members, or friends that are gay.”

“Homophobia will not be tolerated on this team, or within this organization. We have a zero tolerance policy.”

“Homophobic language and behaviour goes against the code of conduct of respecting everyone on this team and within this organization. Respect is essential for creating a strong and successful team. “

“We do not tolerate racism on this team or within this organization so why would we tolerate homophobia?”

“It does not matter what you intended by saying that phrase - using homophobic language is not a joke.”

“Comments are never harmless or just a joke when they offend or upset people.”

“It is important that we set a good example for the children and youth, that kind of language is therefore unacceptable.”

Taking Further Action!

It is important to decide whether the incident surrounding the use of homophobic language or behaviour requires a more formal follow-up. It is important to discuss incidents within the leadership of the organization to decide whether more serious sanctions are required.

It is important to document the incidents of homophobic abuse, including unacceptable and offensive language, while ensuring that this information is treated in confidence. Records should include dates, times, places, people involved, actions taken and outcomes.

Information, education and training may be the most appropriate response depending on nature of incident or if it is a first time incident. For repeat or serious incidents, sanctions may be the most appropriate response.

Flowchart for Use by Sport Organizations

This flowchart is intended as a guide and it is important that you use your judgement, skills, and knowledge of the

people involved to determine the most appropriate response to the situation.

What to do when the homophobic comment comes from a child or young person

A child or young person makes a homophobic remark such as “that’s so gay” or “she must be a lesbo”.

Does the team/organization have an explicit zero policy against homophobic language?

YES

Tell the individual, in age appropriate language, that homophobic remarks are not acceptable on this team/at this organization and that homophobic language is against policy. Explain how this language is offensive and hurtful and how it impacts others. Explain how it does not matter if they “didn’t mean it like that” because this language cannot be justified as being “just a joke”.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Does the person understand?

NO

The child/young person continues to make comments and others join in. Explain in more detail the effects homophobia and homophobic language have on people, and that just like racist language, it will not be tolerated.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Does the person understand?
Has the homophobic language stopped?

NO



Volunteers/Staff can intervene more effectively and confidently to homophobia if it is part of the team/organization’s policy and procedures.

YES



There may be some lapses and you may have to repeat your message to get it across to everyone. If you are consistent in your message, however, members of the team will come to understand that homophobic language is unacceptable.

YES



The culture of the team/organization and sport in general is changing. In the same way members understand that racism is unacceptable they also begin to understand that homophobia is unacceptable.

NO ↓

Take the person to the side and talk to them in more detail about why the language they are using is offensive.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Has the homophobic language stopped?

YES



It takes time to educate people that homophobic bullying and language is unacceptable, especially if they have not been challenged in the past. Individuals who experience homophobia, however, will be more confident discussing or reporting incidents if the team/organization is seen to address incidents effectively.

NO ↓

Child/Young Person – Involve parents and those in positions of authority with the team/organization. Explain, in age appropriate language, that the team/organization will use sanctions if the homophobic language continues.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Does it stop?

YES



Young person- Involving others in positions of authority sends a strong message that homophobic language and behaviour will not be tolerated.

NO ↓

Young Person – Invite parents/ guardians to discuss the attitude of the young person and that the team/organization has a zero tolerance policy for homophobic language and behaviour. Consider having the member sign a “Behaviour Contract.”

RECORD THE INCIDENT AND THE ACTIONS
Does it stop?

YES



Young person – Parents/guardians support the team/organization in educating young persons.

NO ↓

Young person- Explain to parents/guardians why the anti-homophobia policy is important and part of the team/organization’s anti-bullying policy. Explain how everyone should feel safe and respected on the team/within the organization. Explain that if the homophobic language and behaviour continues the child/young person may be expelled.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Does it stop?

YES



Young person – Team/organization and parents/guardians need to work together to address homophobia and create a welcoming environment for all.

**NO –
Parents fail to support team /
organization**



Young person – A formal response from the team/organization is required with the possibility of either temporary or permanent suspension. A letter explaining the team/organizations' decision must be sent to young person and parents. A general letter should also be sent to all members/parents reiterating the team/organization's anti-homophobia policy and commitment to creating a welcoming environment and safe space for all.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS

Adult staff member / Team volunteer

Adults are expected to be role models for children and young people on teams and within sport organizations. They play a vital role in creating welcoming and safe spaces for all. If an adult staff member, volunteer, or parent is heard or seen using

homophobic language or behavior, or failing to address homophobic comments from children and young people then sanctions, within the framework of team/organization's anti-bullying policies should be applied.

Adult member of staff/adult volunteer - If the individual is employed by the team or a volunteer and the incident is judged to be less serious, then the team/organization should arrange an informal meeting with the individual to explain that their conduct is not acceptable and potentially recommend a sensitivity awareness/training course.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Has this resulted in a change in behaviour?

NO



Adult member of staff/adult volunteer- If the incident is judged to be of a more serious nature, or a repeated incident despite previous informal warnings, then the team/organization should refer to their disciplinary policy to determine appropriate actions. These may include a verbal warning, written warning, or dismissal.

RECORD INCIDENT AND ACTIONS
Does it stop?

NO



Parent - If a parent is overheard using homophobic language or behaviour with the team / organization then staff or volunteers should tell the parent that this language is unacceptable, and that it is against policy and the spirit of the game.

RECORD THE INCIDENT AND THE ACTIONS
Has the parent stopped?

YES



Adult – Involving persons of authority with the team/organization in addressing homophobia sends a strong message throughout that this language and behaviour will not be tolerated. Recommending or sending the individual to a training course demonstrates the importance of education in changing behaviours and the team/organization's commitment to creating a welcoming and safe environment.

YES



Adult – The culture of the team/organization and sport in general is changing. In the same way members understand that racism is unacceptable they also begin to understand that homophobia is unacceptable.

YES



NO



If the parent continues, explain that the team/organization has a zero tolerance attitude towards homophobia and that as adults it is everyone's responsibility to create a welcoming, inclusive and safe environment. Warn him/her that they may be banned from the team if the language or behaviour persists either for a fixed term or permanently.