

REACTING...

to children's homophobic words and actions

Resource guide for
+OLDER kids



Every day we hear a multitude of hurtful names in and around our schools. These insults take many forms, and all are hurtful. Racial, ethnic, sexist and homophobic slurs hurt everyone. Hurtful teasing, name-calling and bullying affect the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders.

Children who are victimized and students who exhibit bullying behaviour have lower academic achievement. Meanwhile bystanders lose self-esteem and empathy when they observe someone getting hurt and feel unable to stop it. Additionally they live under the fear that they might become the next victims of teasing and/ or bullying.

All children living in homoparental families live with this reality. For a child, the fear of homophobic insult takes on a very personal character when his or her parents are homosexual. However, they are not the only victims of homophobic insult.

A school that does not take a proactive stance to end violence will have a negative impact on all its students. If teachers and other

adults in authority do not act to confront insult and intolerance, students quickly learn that the expression of hate against an identifiable group or a person who is different is acceptable in our society and its institutions.

Yet educators and support staff often don't know how to react to children's insults, particularly when they take the form of homophobic language. Some adults are uncomfortable even broaching issues related to homosexuality.

Young people use the word gay as an insult, or use terms like "fag", "homo", "dyke", etc because they've learned how effective these words can be in attacking the self-esteem of others. In general, these insults are directed at anyone who looks or acts differently from group norms or gender stereotypes (for example, a boy who isn't sporty or a girl with short hair). When the children of lesbians and gays hear these remarks they have a particular resonance, as well. Therefore, all children are potential victims for this type of name-calling, and it's in everyone's interest to work for its elimination.

Homophobic slurs aren't always recognized as hurtful, and may even be considered to be a joke. Sometimes students will use an expression without even having any sense of its meaning. Educators can inform students that the terms they are using or the way they are using them are insulting to gays and lesbians (or more simply put "men who love men" and "women who love women") and that language used in this way is always insulting.

Many schools have adopted practices to combat intimidation and violence. This guide and the student activities in this kit can serve as a complement to any practices already in place, since they place a

particular emphasis on family diversity, including homoparental families, and because they deal with the question of homophobia in the context of discussions about intimidation.

Your simplest efforts will make a difference. Through systematic intervention, you reaffirm the fundamental principle that intolerance has no place in the school or in the classroom. Teachers and educators are thus in a position to create a learning environment where diversity is recognised and seen as beneficial. In that way, all students will feel respected in their school environment, whatever their appearance, their interests, or the composition of their families.

Action Strategies

EXAMPLES OF HOMOPHOBIC INSULTS

Queer, faggot, homo, dyke, lesbo are just some of the homophobic insults you may hear. The words gay and lesbian, along with the expression "that's gay" are also used as insults.

Gender-based name-calling, where boys are said to be acting like girls, or vice versa, is another type of homophobic bullying that is linked to sexist views about how boys and girls "are supposed" to act.

BE AWARE OF THE CONTEXT

- Deal with the situation in the context. It is important that all students, whatever their role (aggressor, victim, witness or accomplice) receive the same message that all students are safe and protected in the school and that homophobic remarks are unacceptable. Make sure that all the students in the area hear your comments.
- When you intervene, don't make the assumption that you are dealing with an isolated incident. It is possible that there have been other acts of intimidation directed at the same person. Occasionally, bystanders or witnesses will need to speak to you in private, to protect their own safety.

PUT A STOP TO IT

- Keep it simple with quick responses. Respond verbally to the immediate situation. Here are some examples of potential responses depending on the context and your role with respect to the children.

PUT A STOP TO IT (cont'd)

To draw attention to the school's policy against verbal violence:

"Remember, we don't use hurtful language in this classroom / school."

"That word / expression is not acceptable."

To indicate the unacceptability of homophobic remarks and insults:

"It is not acceptable to say 'It's gay to...'"

"You may not have wanted to hurt, but when you use the word 'gay' to mean something bad or stupid, it hurts people."

To initiate a more intensive discussion of homophobia:

"What did you mean to say by that?"

"Do you understand what 'gay' means?"

"Do you understand why what you just said is hurtful?"

