

UNDERSTANDING...

what lies behind the words

Resource guide for
+ OLDER kids

(This activity has been adapted from "Challenging Homophobia in Schools," produced by GALE-BC.)

ACTIVITY

An activity on children's homophobic insults for the 2nd and 3rd cycles of elementary school.

WHY?

This classroom activity shows children how all kinds of insults based on appearance, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. are similar. More specifically, the activity is intended to make children aware of the hurtful effect of homophobic insults (such as *faggot*, *homo*, *queer* and, when used pejoratively, the word *gay*), the reasons people use them, and the best ways to respond to them.

Supplementary activities will give students the opportunity to consider the places where intimidation occurs and how they can be transformed into more secure environments.

NOTES

WHO?

This activity is intended for children from 8 to 12 years of age. Depending on their age, it could be more or less complex and the pedagogical objectives may vary. It can be tied in with the competencies of the Québec Education Program of the Ministry of Education of Québec (see below). The activity can also be used in the context of the program "Ethics and religious culture: living together in today's Québec."

WHERE?

In an elementary classroom from grades 3 to 6 (2nd and 3rd cycle), in a school or neighbourhood library, or in a community organisation.

WHAT?

Depending on your group's needs and circumstances:

- 1 Information:** The object of this activity is to help students understand the hurtful effects of insulting language and the reasons people use such language.
- 2 Awareness:** Students should be able to identify common insults and understand why people use them. They will develop empathy for others and will be able to describe how a victim of insulting language feels. In a supplementary activity, students will establish links among different prejudices deriving from racism, sexism and homophobia.
- 3 Intervention:** A large number of students, including those with gay and lesbian family members, are the targets of homophobic insults. This activity will teach students how to react to homophobic comments and insults among children in the school environment. In a complementary activity, students will also discuss the places in school where they are most likely to encounter intimidation and ways to create a safer environment for all students.

WHEN?

Prevention

We recommend talking about homophobic insults proactively or in response to an actual situation in the school. Insulting language can be discussed at any point in the year. The subject can also come up as part of a theme day or week, for example against racism or homophobia, or in any other context where prejudices and stereotypes are the focus. This activity is also suitable at any time when questions of peer relations, diversity or simply human relations in the school are at issue. In that way, homophobic insults are treated in the same way as other prejudices based on ethnic origin, religion, or any other difference.

Activity

MATERIALS

For the main activity:

- Per team: a photocopy of the **TABLE “WORDS THAT HURT.”**
See table
- Per team: materials to create a poster against homophobia and homophobic insults (suitable paper, coloured markers, glue, scissors, paints, etc.).

For the complementary activities:

- Per team: a photocopy of the **TABLE “SAFE PLACES AND RISKY PLACES.”**
See table
- Per team: a photocopy of the **TABLE “WORDS THAT HURT – LONG VERSION.”**
See table

PROCEDURE

1 Explanation: The teacher explains the objectives of the activity. The teacher can use the **TABLE OF DEFINITIONS AND ORIGINS** to explain the significance of terms associated with homosexuality. The teacher can also use this table to explain the origin of certain homophobic insults.
See table

2 Three questions in sub-groups: The teacher divides the class into single-sex sub-groups of four or five children and asks them to work together for 20 minutes with the **TABLE “WORDS THAT HURT”** to answer the first two questions: “What pejorative words (insults) are used?” and “Why do people use those words?”
See table

For the third question, the teacher asks them to think as honestly as possible about how they would feel if they were called those names. To create empathy, the teacher suggests that the students close their eyes for a few minutes and imagine that other children are shouting homophobic insults at them in the corridors, at recess, in the school bus or when school gets out. When they open their eyes, they immediately write down how they felt.

3 Sharing and clarification: The teacher leads a discussion in which each team shares its answers. She writes the answers on the blackboard or a flipchart and explains, if necessary, the meaning of certain expressions (e.g., *faggot*, *queer*). The adult helps the children express clearly their feelings, helping them to find the right vocabulary where necessary (confused, ashamed, embarrassed, frustrated, annoyed, anxious, shocked, isolated, aggressive, sad, etc.).

The teacher makes the students aware that those terms are pejorative and hurtful. He/She discusses the reasons some young people call others *faggot*, *queer*, or *lesbian*. Teachers can refer to the **TABLE “REASONS PEOPLE USE HOMOPHOBIC INSULTS.”**
See table

NOTES

INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD*

Stage 1: Observation of the reality

The first thing to note is that certain pejorative words (inappropriate words or acceptable words used as insults) associated with homosexuality can be deeply hurtful to children of homoparental families or with homosexual family members (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.). Such insults can also hurt children whose appearance or interests do not correspond to traditional stereotypes of boys and girls and who are victimised whatever their sexual orientation or that of their parents. This exercise will help students to understand the destructive power of such language and the reasons some children use insults to hurt. The object of the exercise is to **raise awareness** of the harmful effects of homophobic insults and, by association, of all insults based on ethnic origin, physical appearance, religion, etc.

Stage 2: Analysis of the reality

Analysis involves identifying a phenomenon (in this case, homophobic insults) and deconstructing its essential elements in order to understand and explain it. When we analyse, it is necessary to be able to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behaviour. To do that, the adult must awaken the child’s **natural curiosity**.

The suggested activities explore a social issue (homophobic insults) in a manner adapted to the age of the children. The activities examine various aspects of hurtful language in general. The issue can be discussed during a single period or occur over a longer period, always in a climate of learning and respect. If inappropriate comments come up, it is important to point out how much harm homophobic language can do.

Stage 3: Transformation of the reality

To transform the reality, it is first necessary to **reflect on our ideas and our behaviours**. The children are encouraged to adopt appropriate language and behaviours with respect to difference and homosexuality. The use of tables produced by the children themselves serves to reinforce and solidify the notion of respect for others whether they are like us or not.

In the end, this activity will lead children to make the commitment to adopt appropriate attitudes and language when talking about or to others.

PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

4 Change and action: The teacher leads a brainstorming session on how we can put an end to such insults. She can use the following questions to start the discussion: "How can you help someone who is being insulted?", "What can students do to stop people insulting others?", "What can teachers do to stop such behaviour?", "What can others in the school (the principal, lunch and recess supervisors, bus drivers, etc.) do?" The suggestions are written on the blackboard or a flipchart.

The teacher invites the students to return to their groups, which then create a poster to make other young people aware of the destructive effects of homophobia.

COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

First activity:

Safe places and risky places

1. Explanation and identification

The teacher explains that she wants to know the areas in the school where students feel safe or comfortable and others where they feel unsafe or uncomfortable. It is important for the teacher to be aware that student perceptions and opinions may vary with respect to any given location.

The locations considered to be "risky" are those where insults or the possibility for other unacceptable behaviours such as harassment, intimidation, or physical violence are likely.

Some possible locations to look at with children are: corridors, stairways, toilets, classrooms, learning centres, cafeterias, specific areas of the playground, the nurse's office, the principal's office, the library, etc. The teacher should also include the route to school, the school bus or the bus stop. Locations mentioned can be written on the blackboard or a flipchart (**SEE THE TABLE "SAFE PLACES AND RISKY PLACES"**).

See table

2. Children's opinions

Students are asked to vote and express their opinion about each location: Is it safe or risky? The results can then be added to the table.

Not all students will feel comfortable marking their choices in front of the class. If the teacher senses this, she can distribute individual copies of the table and tabulate the results at the end. She can also divide the class into small groups chosen by the students themselves, with one member reporting the results at the conclusion of the exercise.

The teacher leads a discussion of why students feel safe or unsafe in school. He or she can ask why certain locations seem safer than others.

3. Change and action

A brainstorming session follows to determine what actions to take. The teacher can use the **TABLE "MAKING PLACES SAFER"** to consider what can be done in these locations where students feel they are likely to experience verbal or physical violence. The table is divided up based on the various activities that might be undertaken by the students, teachers, or the rest of the school staff. Students should understand that adults are also responsible for their safety and that they can always ask for help in the event they are victims of intimidation.

See table

Second activity:

Strengthening our understanding

The activity "Words that hurt" can be enriched through the inclusion of other types of insults based, for example, on sex, race, ethnic origin, physical characteristics, etc. The teacher can use the long version of the **TABLE "WORDS THAT HURT."** The procedure for the activity remains the same.

See table

Third activity:

Activities intended for the entire school

A homophobia awareness day could be organised in the school. Posters promoting the International Day Against Homophobia (May 17) could be displayed, or included as part of any other theme day or week to combat prejudice, intimidation or violence (including verbal violence) or promoting tolerance. Students can also organise information booths, write an article in the student newspaper, or form a committee to work for the prevention of violence in the school or the struggle against prejudices.

CONCLUSION

The adult points out the hurtful impact that insults can have. He/She stresses that insults are unacceptable. Actions taken by students and teachers to prevent insults are encouraged.

NOTES

Links with the Québec Education Program

By adapting these activities to the age of the children, it is possible to tie them in with the Québec Education Program (www.mels.gouv.qc.ca).



BROAD AREAS OF LEARNING AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

The activity “Words that hurt” and the complementary activities to prevent insults are consistent with the broad areas of learning for elementary instruction:

When a child is placed in a situation of solving problems with his peers, he is putting into action an important dimension of his education. The playground and other places where he relates with his peers are, effectively, locations that provide the opportunity to contribute to a climate of peace and justice. From such activities he improves his capacity to exercise critical judgement and to cooperate with others.

The broad areas of learning relating to this activity are:

- 1 Health and well-being:** learning to cultivate a healthy lifestyle;
- 2 Personal and career planning:** self-knowledge and awareness of his/her potential and how to fulfil it;
- 3 Citizenship and community life:** learning how to play an active role within a group in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity.

AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL (2ND AND 3RD CYCLE)

The suggested activities for combating insults and intimidation as well as class discussions can be incorporated into the subjects being taught: English, citizenship education, arts, ethics and religious culture. Also, a number of the nine cross-curricular competencies of the Education Program are touched on by these activities.

• Intellectual competencies

The child learns to solve problems (*competency 2*) and to exercise critical judgement (*competency 3*) to recognise the destructive impact of verbal violence and intimidation, the ways to combat it, and the prejudices that underlie the words used as insults. The child employs his / her critical thinking (*competency 4*) to plan strategies to fight against prejudice and its manifestations (posters, day against violence, information booths, etc.).

• Methodological competencies

Working with a team to create a poster requires the child to adopt effective work methods (*competency 5*) to achieve the assigned task.

• Personal and social competencies

Constructing his/her identity (*competency 7*) involves, in particular, learning to accept differences and to be open to diversity. These activities are ideally suited to that objective.

The activity also requires the child to cooperate (*competency 8*) in a team structure and to communicate ideas and questions. Affirmation of the self while respecting others, constructive openness to diversity and non-violence—all in all, what is being acquired here is how to live harmoniously with others and be open to the entire world.

• Communication-related competency

This learning activity requires the student to prepare and transmit a message to the entire group through an artistic creation. Discussion, listening to others, and the formulation of questions will lead the child to a greater mastery of socially appropriate communication (*competency 9*). The theme of hurtful language helps to anchor the concept in the daily reality of the child.

Definitions and origins

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(Taken from the activity for the 3rd cycle of elementary prepared by GRIS)

Terms to be defined at the beginning of the intervention:

HOMOSEXUAL OR GAY

A man who is attracted to other men and, when he falls in love, is in love with a man.

HOMOSEXUAL, GAY OR LESBIAN

A woman who is attracted to other women and who, when she falls in love, is in love with a woman.

BISEXUAL

A person (man or woman) who is attracted to both men and women.

HOMOPHOBIA

A fear of homosexuality and, in practice, insulting, mistreating, or discriminating against people just because they are homosexual or because they are thought to be homosexual.

HOMOPARENTAL

When a family has one or two parents who are homosexual, the family is described as a homoparental family.

HETEROSEXUAL

A woman who is attracted to men and who, when she falls in love, is in love with a man. Or a man who is attracted to women and who, when he falls in love, is in love with a woman.

The Origin of Some Common Insults*:

THE HISTORY OF "FAG" OR "FAGGOT"

The word "faggot" has been a part of the English language since the 1300s. During the European Inquisitions, "faggot" referred to the sticks used to set fires for burning heretics, or people who opposed the teachings of the Catholic Church. Eventually people began to use the word "faggot" to refer to anything that was considered to be a burden or difficult to bear.

The word "faggot" appeared in the North America during the early 20th century to abuse gay men and men perceived to be gay. Since many people are biased against homosexuals, being called "faggot" is the biggest fear of many heterosexual men, and thus the easiest way to hurt them. Considering the long and violent history of the word, it's important for people to understand its meaning before they use it carelessly.

THE HISTORY OF "DYKE"

There are a number of theories about the origins of the word "dyke" as an anti-lesbian slur. One theory suggests that "dyke" came from the word "hermaphrodite," which used to be a very common term describing people born with ambiguous sex characteristics. "Hermaphrodite" comes from the Greek *hermaphroditos*, and entered the English language in the 14th century. When the word "hermaphrodite" was more commonly used, popular variations such as "morphodite" and "morphodike" sprang up. Some people believe that "dyke" came from "morphodike" and was used to reinforce the stereotype that all lesbians look and act like men.

No matter which theory is the most accurate, all point to the word "dyke" having its roots in beliefs about how women are supposed to look and act. Women who've refused to conform to society's expectations of them often have been labeled as "dykes," whether or not they've identified as lesbians.

NOTES

* Origin: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Words that hurt

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Sexual orientation	Labels or insults used	Why are these words used?	How would I feel if someone called me that?
Homosexual boy or man (gay)			
Homosexual girl or woman (lesbian)			

Reasons people use homophobic insults

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Limited communication skills	Peer pressure	Power	Making fun of difference / Having prejudices	Revenge
I couldn't think of anything else to say.	My friends told me to do it.	To be aggressive.	People use insulting language because they don't like gays, because they are racist, etc.	Everyone makes fun of me, so I defend myself.
Everyone does it.	I did it on a dare.	To always have the final say.		People sometimes call me those names, so now it's my turn.
Nobody listens to me unless I am insulting.	If I didn't do it, they would have insulted me.	To punish someone for not doing what I wanted.	Some people think it's not okay to be gay.	
When I'm angry with someone, I insult him or her.	Just to make others laugh.	To be mean.	To put down girls because of the way they look.	He didn't want to play with me, so I got even.
	So others wouldn't make fun of me.	To tease someone.	To make fun of boys who don't like sports.	
		To hurt someone.		
		To show who's strongest.		
		To gain the respect of others.		

Words that hurt

(long version)

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(This activity has been adapted from "Challenging Homophobia in Schools," produced by the Pride Education Network.)

Type of person	Labels or insults used	How would I feel if someone called me that?
Short		
Fat		
English is a second language		
Wears glasses		
Girl / woman		
Good student		
Native American		
Person with AIDS		

Continued on following page

Type of person (cont'd)	Labels or insults used (cont'd)	How would I feel if someone called me that? (cont'd)
Person with learning difficulties		
Underprivileged		
Special needs		
Homeless		
Old		
5-year-old child		
Adolescent		
Person with particular physical characteristics		
Person of colour (Asian, Indo-Canadian, black, etc.)		
Lesbian		
Boy / man		