

# RESPECT in Practice

Preventing LGBTQ+ Bullying Through the Lens of Bí Cineálta

Primary school classrooms reflect the diversity of cultures, identities, backgrounds and families that make up Ireland. Primary school teachers work with children from a wide range of diverse backgrounds and families and they strive to create a positive and welcoming climate in their classrooms to ensure that all children can flourish to the best of their abilities.

One facet of this diversity is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) members of our schools. These may be LGBTQ+ pupils, parents, guardians or wider members of our school community. Since the publication of the *'Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools'* by the Department of Education and Skills in 2013, primary schools have had an explicit obligation to engage in preventative and educational strategies to counter homophobic and transphobic bullying. This responsibility was again conveyed in the *'Bí Cineálta: Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools'* in June 2024. These procedures replace the 2013 version and apply to all recognised primary and postprimary schools and to centres for education<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the Wellbeing curriculum<sup>2</sup> calls for pupils of all ages to learn about diverse family structures, including same-sex parent families (p.29) and for 5th and 6th class pupils to develop an understanding of sexual orientation (p.24).

The Bí Cineálta procedures connect with the four key areas from the *'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice'* that are essential for a holistic, wholeschool approach to wellbeing promotion - Culture and Environment; Curriculum (Teaching and Learning); Policy and Planning; and Relationships and Partnerships<sup>3</sup>. They ask schools to ensure there is a positive and inclusive school culture and environment; foster inclusion and respect for diversity through the teaching of curriculum subjects; centre the wellbeing of the school community at the heart of school policies and plans; and strengthen relationships and partnerships between members of the school community.

**This guide, based on the Bí Cineálta procedures, is intended to support the whole primary school community in promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion, and in preventing and addressing LGBTQ+ bullying as part of their responsibilities under Bí Cineálta.**

1. Bí Cineálta: Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024, p.12).

2. Wellbeing Specification For Primary and Special Schools (NCCA, 2005).

3. Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).



## Developing a School's BÍ Cineálta Policy

The following information must be contained in the school's BÍ Cineálta policy:

- ✓ a statement of the school's commitment to prevent and address bullying behaviour
- ✓ a statement acknowledging that bullying behaviour interferes with the rights of the child
- ✓ the core definition of bullying behaviour as provided in Section 2.1 of the procedures
- ✓ how the school engaged with the school community to develop the policy
- ✓ how the school engaged with the school community to review the policy
- ✓ how the school prevents bullying behaviour (based on Chapter 5 of the procedures)
- ✓ how the school supports students who experience, witness and display bullying behaviour
- ✓ what happens when bullying behaviour is reported
- ✓ the teacher(s) in the school responsible for addressing incidents of bullying behaviour
- ✓ how oversight of bullying behaviour will be managed
- ✓ how the school will communicate its BÍ Cineálta policy

# LGBTQ+ Experiences in Irish Primary Schools

The most common age for a person to realise their LGBTQ+ identity is 12 years old<sup>1</sup>. For a transgender person, this can be much younger as knowing your own gender is not related to feeling attraction to others. The messages and experiences that children have leading up to this point can impact upon how they view themselves when they make this realisation.

In 2024, research on LGBTQ+ inclusion in primary schools found that only 66% of teachers knew that their anti-bullying policy mentioned homophobic or biphobic bullying and only 31% knew that their policy mentioned transphobic bullying<sup>2</sup>. Almost a half of respondents said that either their policy did not include education and preventative strategies with regard to LGBTQ+ based bullying or they were not aware whether or not it did. This is despite the fact that all schools have been required to have this in place since the publication of the 'Anti Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools' in 2013.

71% of staff were very confident or somewhat confident in dealing with an incident of LGBTQ+ based bullying, while only 57% of staff felt very confident or somewhat confident teaching about LGBTQ+ identity-based bullying.

84% of teachers said they had heard subtle, derogatory comments or jokes about LGBTQ+ people. However only 67% of these teachers intervened when they heard these comments. Similarly 86% of teachers said they had heard statements like 'that's so gay' but only 75% of these teachers said they always intervened when they heard this. When LGBTQ+ phobic language is overheard and ignored, it sends a message that it is acceptable.

Experiencing LGBTQ+ bullying often has long standing and serious consequences for those involved. They have a higher chance of developing depression, anxiety, high levels of stress, problematic alcohol use and poor self esteem<sup>3</sup>.

1. Higgins, A; Doyle, L; Downes, C; Murphy, R; Sharek, D; DeVries, J; Begley, T; McCann, E; Sheerin, F and Smyth, S (2016) *The LGBTIreland report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland.*

2. Neary, A. and Power, J. (2024) *Belong To Primary: New Foundations for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity in Primary Schools.*

3. Higgins, A; Doyle, L; Downes, C; Murphy, R; Sharek, D; DeVries, J; Begley, T; McCann, E; Sheerin, F and Smyth, S (2016) *The LGBTIreland report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland.* p. 139.

# What is Bullying Behaviour?

Bullying is targeted behaviour, online or offline, that causes harm. The harm caused can be physical, social and/or emotional in nature. Bullying behaviour is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power in relationships between two people or groups of people in society<sup>1</sup>.



## Who is vulnerable to bullying behaviour?

Bullying behaviour is a substantial problem for many children in Irish schools. All pupils, but especially vulnerable pupils, need support in speaking up about and reporting bullying behaviour. While any pupil can experience bullying some children are more vulnerable to becoming targets of bullying behaviour than others. Such pupils include children with additional learning needs, children with disabilities, children from an ethnic minority background and migrant children, children who are members of the Traveller and Roma communities, children who identify as LGBTQ+, children who practise or display a religious faith, children experiencing homelessness and children who are experiencing health or mental health issues<sup>2</sup>.

## LGBTQ+ Bullying

While children can be singled out by other children as different and bullied for a host of reasons, sometimes it's because:

- They don't conform to stereotypical gender expectations or behaviour; for example a boy who plays predominately with girls his own age more than boys.
- They have a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ+) family member; for example they may have two mums or two dads or a sibling who is LGBTQ+.
- They themselves are LGBTQ+ or perceived to be LGBTQ+.

When children are bullied for the above reasons it is known as LGBTQ+ bullying. Inappropriate use of language can be a precursor to bullying and consequently needs to be challenged at every incident.

1. Bí Cineálta: Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024, p.17).

2. Bí Cineálta: Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024, p.27).

# Why This Resource?

## 1. Every primary school classroom has children from a diverse range of backgrounds and family types.

Every child needs to feel that they belong, are respected and valued. The average primary school classroom reflects the diversity of cultures, identities, backgrounds and family types of the general population in society. Primary school teachers know that children in their classrooms are the teenagers and adults of the future and consequently that the primary school years are critical in shaping the wider society. Children thrive when they feel that they, and by extension their families, belong, are respected and valued.

Children live in lots of types of families and while the family form of a married mother and father with children continues to be the most common form of family, many children come from a myriad of family types, including single parent families, step-parent families, blended families, foster and adoptive families, LGBTQ+ headed families, cohabiting couples with children, grandparent or other family member headed families, or children's residential care facilities. It's important for all children that their background and family is represented positively. This resource will support teachers in making sure that children who live in LGBTQ+ headed families, have LGBTQ+ family members or who themselves identify as LGBTQ+, feel that they belong, and are respected and valued.

## 2. All primary school teachers strive to make their classrooms welcoming, safe and inclusive for every child.

A positive and inclusive environment that fosters kindness is a key principle of the Bí Cineálta Procedures. School staff can prevent and address bullying behaviour by promoting empathy, intervening promptly and implementing policies that create this positive and inclusive environment. Primary school teachers are skilled in supporting children to thrive regardless of their background, identity, family type, belief system, ethnicity, ability or gender. They are supported to carry out this work by the primary curriculum which is child centred and which acknowledges the uniqueness of each pupil and caters to the needs of each child.

However, identity-based bullying does occur in our schools and some teachers find some types of related bullying behaviour challenging to address. This resource will provide teachers with the support needed to directly challenge LGBTQ+ based bullying and to prevent these and other forms of identity-based bullying from occurring.

## 3. The Primary School Curriculum is designed to reflect the needs of each child in the context of today's society.

Primary school teachers play a very important role in all aspects of the day-to-day development of the child (including spiritual, moral, cognitive,

emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical development). The role of the primary school teacher is to create an environment where every child can thrive and flourish, to support them in realising their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society during childhood as they progress through primary education<sup>1</sup>. The Primary Curriculum Framework emphasises inclusive education that provides for equity of opportunity and participation in children's learning. Inclusive education celebrates diversity and responds to the uniqueness of every child<sup>2</sup>.

One of the eight main principles of learning, teaching and assessment in the primary curriculum is 'Inclusive education and diversity'. Within the Wellbeing specification, this is detailed as:



- Fostering a culture based on human rights, democracy, equity, equality and social justice
- Challenging stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination and bias and promoting empathy, mutual respect and multi-perspectivity
- Recognising and affirming the diversity present within the classroom and in wider society<sup>3</sup>

Encouraging inclusive and respectful attitudes should begin in junior infants and continue right up to sixth class. This resource will provide concrete suggestions as to how teachers can support pupils to respond respectfully when they encounter differences in themselves or others.

1. Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (NCCA, 2023, p. 5)

2. Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (NCCA, 2023, p. 7).

3. Wellbeing Specification for Primary and Special Schools (NCCA, 2025, p. 4)



# How to prevent LGBTQ+ bullying

Identity-based bullying behaviour often stems from a lack of understanding or respect for difference. As primary school teachers, we have a responsibility to ensure that our classrooms are places where children learn about diversity as a positive element of our society. This kind of work is essential to prevent LGBTQ+ bullying. Some specific examples of what this might look like in the classroom and wider school are detailed below.

- Ensure your school's Anti-Bullying Policy meets the requirements of *Bí Cineálta* with regard to preventing and addressing LGBTQ+ bullying and make all staff aware of these requirements.
- Look for opportunities to include positive representation of LGBTQ+ identities across the curriculum at all class levels. This could take the form of incidental representation (using picturebooks with LGBTQ+ characters to teach literacy concepts or including maths word problems based around a family with two dads etc) or specific lessons looking at the contribution of LGBTQ+ writers, inventors, scientists, historical figures, artists, musicians etc. Be sure to explicitly mention the LGBTQ+ identity of people the children are learning about.
- Include key events related to LGBTQ+ history in your historical enquiries. For example, to meet the Social and Environmental Education Learning Outcome 'explore significant developments and/or conflicts in different eras of Irish history such

as Modern Ireland'' for 5th and 6th classes, you could explore the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland. The free resource 'Unveiling Our Past' gives a series of step-by-step lessons and resources to support this.

- Consider your everyday language and classroom discussions and think about whether they reflect different types of families and LGBTQ+ identities. If not, devise ways to make these more inclusive e.g. say 'give this letter to your parent or guardian/adult at home' instead of 'give this to your mummies and daddies'.
- Create an inclusive physical environment through the use of LGBTQ+ inclusive posters and displays (e.g. 'Different Families, Same Love' poster; displays of famous LGBTQ+ people who have made positive societal impacts - LGBTQ+ scientists during Science Week etc).
- Ensure your classroom library at all class levels contains a broad range of representation including books that feature LGBTQ+ characters. You can find suggestions of appropriate books on the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group webpage or in the 'Read with Pride' guide from Children's Books Ireland.
- Challenge gender stereotypes and behaviour that supports gender stereotypes as these are limiting for all children. Encourage the children to identify when gender stereotypes are perpetuated in fairytales, story books, films, shows etc.
- Create an LGBTQ+ inclusive staffroom through displaying and following the ideas contained within the 'LGBT+ Inclusive Staffroom' poster (available on the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group webpage).

# LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language Glossary

Using inclusive language is a key part of creating a school environment where all children feel respected, safe, and valued. This glossary provides teachers with clear, respectful definitions of commonly used terms related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and inclusion. It supports the development of inclusive classroom practices and helps ensure that both verbal and written communication reflects the diversity of the school community. For more simplified and child-friendly definitions, you can use the glossary in the 'Different Families, Same Love' resource.

<b>LGBTQ+</b>	A collective name for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.
<b>Biphobic bullying</b>	Bullying that is based on actual or perceived bisexual orientation. It is a type of identity-based bullying.
<b>Bisexual</b>	A person who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of more than one gender.
<b>Cisgender</b>	A person whose gender identity matches the one assigned to them at birth.
<b>Coming Out</b>	A term used to describe the process where a person realises that they are LGBTQ+ and may begin to disclose this aspect of their identity to others. This is not a one-off event but rather a continual process.
<b>Gay</b>	A person who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of the same gender, most commonly used by men.
<b>Gender Expression</b>	How a person chooses to express their gender identity externally e.g. clothes, haircut, general appearance etc.
<b>Gender Identity</b>	A person's strongly held internal sense of their own gender.
<b>Homophobic bullying</b>	Bullying that is based on actual or perceived sexual orientation. It is a type of identity-based bullying.
<b>Lesbian</b>	A woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to women.
<b>Non-binary</b>	A spectrum of gender identities that are not exclusively 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary people may use 'they/them' pronouns.
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	An enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction.
<b>Transgender</b>	A person whose gender identity differs from the one assigned to them at birth.
<b>Transphobic bullying</b>	Bullying that is based on actual or perceived gender identity. It is a type of identity-based bullying.

# A Primary School Teacher's Role

Issues related to LGBTQ+ bullying occur in every area of school life; in the classroom, in the playground, in policies and programmes and in the staffroom. The following sections provide practical suggestions to support primary school teachers in creating a positive school climate where LGBTQ+ bullying is prevented and where respectful attitudes are cultivated from junior infants onwards.



## In the classroom

### Questions & comments from children

### Suggested approaches

#### a. Talking about home.

Children talk about their families and home life a lot in school. This may lead to questions about other pupils, for example "Why does Conor have two mummies?"

It is natural for children to speak about their families and home life and every child should feel comfortable and safe in doing so. Your response is very important in providing this safe environment. Explain that there are all kinds of families, most have two parents, mostly with mums and dads, but some have two mums or two dads. In lots of families there is one parent. The key message is that every family is special and should be given the same respect.

When discussing family as part of your teaching, you should try to represent all family types (e.g. mother and father, single parent, carer/guardian, two mothers, two fathers, living with grandparent/aunt/uncle/extended family, families with adopted children, etc).

#### b. Improper language.

Children may use words inappropriately, either intentionally or innocently. Many children and young people use the word 'gay' and other homophobic terms pejoratively.

Children often hear the word 'gay'. They hear people using it to identify themselves. They also hear it used negatively by people using it as a pejorative term meaning 'rubbish', for example 'that bag is gay'.

Address such statements with the following distinction;

- Words that people use to describe themselves are acceptable (e.g. gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender).
- It is not acceptable to use those same words in a derogatory way or to use those words to try to hurt or embarrass others. Inform the child that this is called homophobic (or transphobic) language.
- If the child has used the term to refer to another child, explain to them that if this was to be repeated that it would be considered homophobic bullying, which is considered very serious in school.

# In the classroom

Questions & comments from children

Suggested approaches

## c. Asking questions.

Children may hear words that they don't fully understand but are curious about, for example, "What does gay/lesbian/trans mean?" They may also ask questions based on what they perceive in other children, for example, "Why does Sarah act like a boy?"

In terms of responding to the question "What does gay/lesbian mean?" remember that children can and do understand the concept of love, including the difference between loving their parents and siblings and falling in love. Explain that most people fall in love with people of the opposite gender but some people fall in love with people of the same gender.

A man who falls in love with men can be called gay. A woman who falls in love with women can be called lesbian. Some women also use the word gay. A person who might fall in love with a person of more than one gender can be called bisexual. A transgender person is a person whose gender identity doesn't match the one given to them when they were born. You can find simple explanations of the various terminology in the Glossary of the 'Different Families, Same Love' resource. You will also find some teacher guidance videos exploring these situations more fully on the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group webpage.

It is also important to reflect in your practice the expectation that not every child will act according to perceived gender stereotypes. The key message is that everyone should be treated with respect.

## d. Special occasions.

Children might attend or have a special role (flower girl, ring bearer, etc.) in a family member's marriage ceremony.

Encourage the child to tell the story about their special day. You may have to explain that in Ireland, and in many other countries, people can get married to whomever they love, regardless of their gender.

The key message is that everyone should be treated with respect.

# In the playground

Questions & comments from children

Suggested approaches

## a. Language.

Sometimes children use language inappropriately while they are at play by describing something as gay or calling another child 'gay' in order to hurt them.

Using words inappropriately in order to be hurtful should always be challenged. Not to do so is giving the implicit message that it is ok. See section b of 'In the Classroom' for how to respond to children who use the term 'gay' pejoratively. Challenge LGBTQ+ phobic comments as confidently as you would challenge any other discriminatory comments or name-calling.

When a child calls another child 'gay' as a way of hurting them, the intention to hurt is what should be challenged. The key message is that 'some people are gay and being gay is ok, it is not ok to use that word to try to hurt or embarrass someone else'.

## b. Gender and Play.

Children often divide in play according to gender, for example they may only allow boys to play football or girls to play skipping.

Encourage children to try out each other's games. Always challenge statements such as 'That's a girl's game!' or 'That's a boy colour!' The key message is that no game, colour or activity is a boy's or girl's game/colour/activity. Everyone can do everything!

## c. Blind Spot.

Children may think they are outside of adult hearing range and sometimes will use this opportunity to behave inappropriately.

When supervising the playground, be as vigilant as possible. Ensure that supervising staff are spread out to adequately observe all areas. Try to create a culture of 'telling' in your school so that pupils contribute to creating a safe environment. All members of the school community, including bystanders, have a shared responsibility to report incidents of bullying to ensure a safe and inclusive environment for every pupil.

The key message is that 'some people are gay and being gay is ok, it is not ok to use that word to try to hurt or embarrass someone else'.

## In policies and programmes

Questions & comments from children

Suggested approaches

### a. Anti-Bullying Policy.

Since 2013, all primary schools have been required to include LGBTQ+ based bullying in their anti-bullying policy and to engage in preventative and education strategies to prevent such bullying happening. This requirement is reiterated in the 2024 Bí Cineálta Procedures - "The policy must list preventative strategies that are used including those to specifically prevent cyberbullying behaviour, homophobic and transphobic bullying behaviour, racist bullying behaviour, sexist bullying behaviour and sexual harassment as appropriate<sup>1</sup>".

Familiarise yourself with your school's anti-bullying policy. Ensure that it meets the requirements of the Bí Cineálta Procedures and lists the preventative strategies for LGBTQ+ based bullying. Be sure that you know what your role is in implementing the policy and how to carry it out. This resource can be useful in this.

### b. Use Existing Programmes and Initiatives.

Programmes and initiatives that create learning opportunities relevant to this work include Stay Safe, Walk Tall, Friendship Week, Different Families Same Love and other similarly themed programmes that schools engage in.

As part of the Wellbeing specification, SPHE plays a vital role in children's learning and holistic development by fostering both personal and collective wellbeing. Many programmes linked to SPHE support the development of inclusive values, attitudes and behaviours. Additionally, some programmes, like 'All Together Now' are explicitly designed to explore the issue of LGBTQ+ bullying.

## In the staffroom

Questions & comments from children

Suggested approaches

As in the classroom, you can contribute to creating a positive school climate in the staffroom through a few simple practices:

- Acknowledge that LGBTQ+ people are part of the school community.
- Talk about issues that affect LGBTQ+ people in the same way that you would talk about other equality issues.
- If a colleague 'comes out' to you, acknowledge that it might have been difficult for them to do so and thank them for sharing that information with you.
- Be welcoming if an LGBTQ+ colleague brings their partner along to a social event.
- Display the INTO 'LGBT+ Inclusive Staffroom' poster prominently in the staffroom and follow its guidance.
- Show the short videos 'Teachers Like Us', 'The lived workplace experiences of LGBT+ teachers in Irish schools' and 'The Inclusive School' at staff meetings from time to time. These videos were made by INTO members and illustrate issues related to LGBTQ+ inclusion in Irish primary schools.

### Acknowledging LGBTQ+ Staff Members.

A certain percentage of any population will identify as LGBTQ+. School staffrooms are no exception. Many LGBTQ+ staff members don't feel comfortable about being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity in the staffroom as they don't know how their colleagues will respond.

# Educational Resources

## 1. [INTO LGBT+ Teachers Group](#)



## 2. [Different Families, Same Love](#)



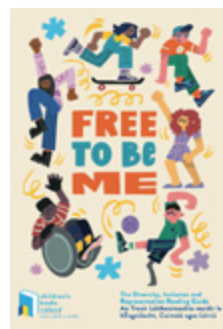
## 3. [We all belong](#)



## 4. [Unveiling our Past: The Struggle for LGBT+ Rights in Ireland](#)



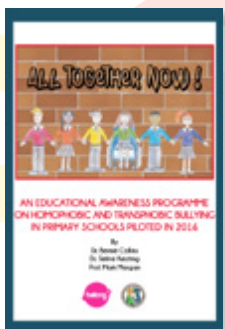
## 5. [Children's Books Ireland Free To Be Me Reading Guide](#)



## 6. [INTO LGBT+ Inclusive Classroom Poster](#)



## 7. [All Together Now!](#)



## 8. [Read with Pride 2025](#)

