

Respect

8 page pullout

Creating a Welcoming and Positive School Climate to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying


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.

In primary schools diversity relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identity is becoming more visible. Primary schools are at various stages in addressing LGBT diversity, including addressing bullying relating to LGBT

issues and identity – which is called homophobic or transphobic bullying.

The new Department of Education and Skills *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* are based on the principle that a welcoming and positive school climate is the optimum environment not just to prevent bullying but also to encourage respectful relationships across the whole school.

This guide, based on those procedures is intended to support the whole primary school community in addressing LGBT issues, and in preventing and addressing homophobic and transphobic bullying.



When differences between pupils, particularly those related to identity, are treated with respect and dignity the confidence of *all* pupils to feel safe, supported and welcomed in school will flourish

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 culture, identity, background and family type 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 citizens of tomorrow. Children thrive when they feel that they, and by extension their families, belong, are respected and valued.

Children live in many 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 more children come from a myriad of family types, including step-parent families, lone parent families, foster and adoptive families, LGBT headed families and cohabiting couples with children. 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 LGBT headed families, have LGBT family members or who themselves identify as LGBT (research has shown that 12 years of age is the most common age for people to become aware of their LGBT identity – Note 1), feel that they belong, and are respected and valued.

Bullying in Irish schools

Bullying 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 disabilities, pupils from ethnic minorities (including Traveller children), LGBT pupils or those perceived to be LGBT (Note 1).

Bullying related to gender, homophobia and transphobia

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 or transgender (LGBT) family member; for example they may have two mums or two dads or a brother or a sister who is LGBT.
- They themselves are perceived to be LGBT or may be LGBT (Note 1). Further research has found that the majority of transgender people know that they are different from their peers before they leave primary school (Note 2).

When children are bullied for the above reasons it is known as homophobic or transphobic bullying.

Inappropriate use of language can be a precursor to bullying and consequently needs to be challenged at every incident. Research in the UK indicates that 70% of primary school teachers report hearing phrases such as 'you're so gay' or 'that's so gay'. Almost half of primary school teachers said that pupils in their school have experienced homophobic bullying. Many primary school teachers are aware of children who are perceived to be LGBT (Note 3).

3 things all schools are expected to do

The Anti-Bullying Procedures apply to all primary and post-primary schools. They give direction and guidance to schools in preventing and tackling school based bullying behaviour and in dealing with any negative impact within the school of bullying behaviour that occurs elsewhere (see DES circular 2013/45). All schools are expected to:

1. **Update the school's anti-bullying policy** to include the new definition: *"Bullying is unwanted negative behaviour, verbal, psychological or physical conducted by an individual or group against another person(s) and which is repeated over time. It includes relational bullying, cyber-bullying and identity-*

based bullying such as homophobic bullying" (DES procedures, Section 2.1).

2. **Name homophobic and transphobic bullying as examples** of identity-based bullying in anti-bullying policies (DES procedures, Section 1.4.1).
3. **Engage in education and preventative strategies** in relation to homophobic and transphobic bullying (DES procedures, Section 5.3.1). Every school must document the specific education and preventative strategies that the school will implement. This should include the strategies that explicitly address the issues of cyber-bullying and identity-based bullying including in particular, homophobic and transphobic bullying.

These guidelines will be of benefit to all primary school staff including principals, teachers and SNAs

GLOSSARY

LGBT: a collective name for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Bisexual: a man or woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of either sex.

Coming Out: a term used to describe the process where a person realises that they are LGBT and may begin to disclose this aspect of their identity to others.

Gay: a man or woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of the same sex, most commonly used by men.

Gender Identity: a person's internal feeling of being male or female, regardless of the sex listed on their birth certificate.

Homophobic bullying: bullying that is based on actual or perceived sexual orientation. It is a type of identity-based bullying.

Lesbian: a woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to women.

Sexual Orientation: refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes. Three sexual orientations are commonly recognised – heterosexual (straight), homosexual (gay or lesbian) and bisexual.

Transgender: refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex assigned to them at birth.

Transphobic bullying: is bullying that is based on actual or perceived gender identity. It is a type of identity-based bullying

7 facts about bullying in Irish schools (Note 4)

1. Over $\frac{1}{3}$ of children in Irish primary schools are involved in bullying behaviour.
2. Over $\frac{1}{5}$ of primary school children in Ireland are the target of bullying behaviour.
3. Any child can become involved in bullying behaviour.
4. A significant proportion of bullying is rooted in a lack of respect for difference. There is a growing acknowledgement of the prevalence and impact of this kind of bullying, also known as 'prejudice-based' or 'identity-based' bullying. Homophobic and transphobic bullying are types of identity-based bullying that are rooted in prejudice.
5. Some children are more vulnerable to experiencing identity-based bullying because of their actual or perceived difference.
6. There is a clear link between the experience of homophobic or transphobic bullying at school and serious negative personal and educational outcomes for young people.
7. Although bullying is repeated behaviour a single incident on social media can be considered bullying and a single incident of intentional negative behaviour may be considered harassment (Equal Status Acts).

Why this resource?

2 All primary school teachers strive to make their classrooms welcoming, safe and inclusive for every child – this is the best approach to ensure respectful relationships across the school community.

A positive school climate and culture is a key principle of the Department of Education and Skills Anti-Bullying Procedures. The Procedures encourage schools to prevent bullying behaviour by supporting a positive school climate and culture that is welcoming of difference and diversity, that is based on inclusiveness, and which promotes respectful relationships across the school community.

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 homophobic and transphobic bullying and to prevent these and other forms of identity-based bullying from occurring.



A primary school

Issues related to homophobic and transphobic 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 homophobic and transphobic bullying is prevented and where respectful attitudes are cultivated from junior infants upwards. Further resources are also suggested.

In the classroom

Questions & comments from children

Suggested approaches by the teacher

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 (e.g. as in the history curriculum for junior classes), 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.
- As the teacher, you should challenge the child to use words that mean what they intended, e.g. 'I don't like that bag because I don't like that colour'.

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. Men who fall in love with men are gay. Women who fall in love with women are lesbian or gay. People who fall in love with a person of the same gender or the opposite gender are bisexual. 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 civil partnership or marriage ceremony.

Encourage the child to tell his/her story about their special day. You may have to explain to the other children that a civil partnership is a life-long commitment similar to marriage, by two people of the same gender.

teacher's role

Linking to the Curriculum

"The school identifies aspects of curriculum through which positive and lasting influences can be exerted towards forming pupils' attitudes and values"

DES Anti-Bullying Procedures: Table A – Key Elements of a Positive School Culture and Climate

SPHE: Myself and my family

- Identify and name the people who constitute a family.
- Appreciate that all family units are not the same.

SPHE: My friends and other people

- Recognise and explore bullying behaviour; who is involved in bullying behaviour and the effects on different people.

SPHE: Relating to others

- Examine the various ways in which

language can be used to isolate and discriminate against people.

SPHE: Self-identity

- Recognise and appreciate that each person is a unique individual and that this individuality is expressed in many different ways.

History: Myself and my family

- Recognise the diversity of family forms, and people who make up a family in family trees and in family histories.

Why this resource?

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). Encouragement of inclusive and respectful attitudes should begin in junior infants and continue right up to sixth class.

The role of the primary school teacher is to facilitate each child in navigating his/her way through the curriculum in order to achieve his/her full potential, to develop a love of learning and to acquire lifelong skills. The Primary School Curriculum celebrates the uniqueness of each child, acknowledges that children live in and are a part of society, and that their personal development is deeply affected by their interactions in the home and with other people in society.

The relationship between education and society is dynamic and interactive. Education not only reflects a society but is an influence in shaping its development. It helps to equip children to share in the benefits of the society in which they live and to contribute effectively to that society's sustenance and evolution. The curriculum reflects the educational, cultural, social and economic aspirations and concerns of Irish society. It also takes cognisance of the changing nature of knowledge and society and caters for the needs of individual children in adjusting to such change.

Department of Education and Skills. *Aims of the Primary School Curriculum* (1999; 6).

This resource will provide concrete suggestions as to how teachers can support pupils to respond respectfully when they encounter difference in themselves or others.



A primary school teacher's role

In the playground

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 classroom section for how to respond to children who use the term 'gay' pejoratively. Challenge homophobic or transphobic 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'.

Further examples of how a teacher can deal with a particular situation are available online – see www.glen.ie/education.

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 or 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.



In policies and programmes

a. **Anti-Bullying Policy.** All primary schools must now include homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policies. They must also provide education and prevention strategies to prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying from occurring.

Familiarise yourself with the school's anti-bullying policy and your role in implementing the policy. This and other resources can support you in that role.

b. **Use Existing Programmes.** Programmes where it is particularly relevant to be inclusive in the language you use are Stay Safe, Walk Tall and Friendship Week and other similarly themed programmes that schools engage in.

SPHE presents an ideal context to be inclusive as it helps children to understand themselves, how to relate to others and how to establish and maintain healthy relationships.

Programmes within the SPHE curriculum are designed to build empathy and to enhance the self-protective skills of children in relation to bullying, amongst other areas. It provides an opportunity to discuss how words we use can hurt others and lead to bullying. This is a great opportunity to address wrong and negative use of words such as 'gay'. Friendship Week provides a similar opportunity.

c. **Inclusive School Policies.** All relevant policy areas (enrolment, admissions, etc) should refer to the nine grounds of the Equal Status Act (which include sexual orientation and gender, incorporating transgender). Inclusive school policies can and do make a difference. An inclusive learning environment fosters a welcoming atmosphere for all families and helps children feel safe at school.

The school's policies are sometimes the first impression prospective parents get of the inclusiveness of a school. If minority groups and different family types are named in school policies and documents it is a demonstration of a school's respect for difference and of a culture of inclusiveness in the school.



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 the staffroom

Acknowledging LGBT Staff Members

A certain percentage of any population will identify as LGBT. School staffrooms are no exception. Many LGBT 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.

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

- Acknowledge that LGBT people are part of the school community.
- Talk about issues that affect LGBT 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 LGBT colleague brings their partner along to a social event.
- Display the INTO Anseo Good Practice Guidelines poster prominently in the staffroom.
- Show the short video 'The Inclusive School' at a staff meeting. The video was made by INTO members.

General suggestions

• Anti-Bullying Preventative Strategies.

All initiatives and programmes aimed at building understanding of bullying should deal explicitly with identity-based bullying and in particular homophobic and transphobic bullying.

(Department of Education Procedures, 2013; 25).

Examples include:

- LGBT posters on notice boards;
- Discussions with parents about specific statements of welcome and respect for LGBT members of the school community;

- Include LGBT issues in Anti-Bullying Week, Friendship Week, etc.

- **Challenging Stereotypes.** Challenge gender stereotypes and behaviour that supports gender stereotypes, e.g. boys and girls can only wear certain colours, have certain hairstyles or play certain games. Encourage the children to see if they can identify gender stereotypes perpetuated in TV programmes, fairy tales, story books, films, etc or if they can identify examples of where those

stereotypes are challenged.

- **Resources.** Keep a broad range of books, posters and other materials that reflect the message that it's ok to be different.
- **Everyday language.** Use language that reflects different types of families and difference
- **Curriculum.** Look for opportunities in the curriculum to be inclusive of difference and different family types.

Information and ideas for the classroom

A cornerstone in the prevention of bullying is a positive school culture and climate that is welcoming of difference and diversity and is based on inclusivity and respect. A school policy on bullying is most effective when supported by a positive school climate which encourages respect, trust, care, consideration and support for others.

Department of Education and Skills Anti-Bullying Procedures (2013; 21)

A number of resources have been created by the INTO LGBT Teachers' Group to

support such a positive school culture, these include:

- **Different Families, Same Love Poster** and accompanying resources and lessons for each class level.
- **Lists and descriptions of pictures books** under the theme of different types of family.
- **Ideas for classroom activities** based on class year.

- **Anti-Bullying Resources** – a list of national and international anti-bullying websites suitable for primary schools.
- **Good practice Guidelines for the Staffroom** and accompanying short video, 'The Inclusive School'.

All the above resources were produced by the INTO LGBT Teachers group and are available through www.glen.ie/education.

Published by



The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), which was founded in 1868, is the largest teachers' trade union in Ireland. It represents teachers at primary level in the Republic of Ireland, and at primary and post-primary level in Northern Ireland. INTO aims include:

- To promote the interests of education and to support the concept of equal access to full education for all children, and to strive for the raising of educational standards.
- To promote the principle of equality in all aspects of education and the teaching profession.

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The vision of the INTO LGBT Teachers' Group is of inclusive schools, where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) teachers are visible, where diversity is valued and where equality is promoted. Our aims include:

- To enhance the appreciation of diversity
- To create a positive and inclusive space in primary schools and to challenge homophobic and transphobic bullying

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GLEN works to change policy and practice to ensure equality for LGB people in Ireland. A key priority for GLEN is to support schools and the education partners in ensuring that schools are safe, supportive and affirming learning environments for LGBT people and for the children and families of LGBT people. GLEN was part of the DES Working Group that produced the national Action Plan on Bullying (January 2013).

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Notes

1. Research shows 12 years of age is the most common age to become aware of LGBT identity. Mayock, P., Audrey, B., Carr N., & Kitching, K. (2009). *Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of Mental Health and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People*. GLEN and BeLONg To Youth Services.
2. Kennedy, N and Hellen, M. (2010). Transgender children: More than a Theoretical Challenge. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 7 Issue 2.
3. Guasp, A., Ellison, G., & Satara, T. (2014). *The Teachers Report: Homophobic Bullying in Britain's Schools*. Stonewall & Education for All.
4. See www.glen.ie/education for annotated version of this document.