

## An Educator's Guide To Intervening In Anti-Gay Harassment

### **First, stop the behavior:**

- *Cut it out!*
- *Keep your hands to yourself!*
- *That's way out of line!*
- *Stop it right now!*
- *Out of the room!*
- *Whoa, that is **not** OK!*
- *Leave him alone!*
- *Hey, that was uncalled for!*
- *That is unacceptable!*
- *(Name of offender), I said knock it off.*

### **Then educate:**

- *That was a stereotype. Stereotypes are a kind of lie and they hurt people's feelings.*
- *That was a putdown. I don't think it belongs at (name of school).*
- *You may not have meant to hurt anyone, but that was a really derogatory gesture ... It implied he was Gay in a really disrespectful way.*
- *That's bullying. It's against school rules. And besides what business is it of yours if somebody's Gay?*
- *That's mean and it's sexual harassment. It could get you suspended.*
- *Do you guys know what that word means? It's a put down for a Gay man. That's like putting down people of a different race from yours or a different religion.*
- *She may or may not be Lesbian, but writing graffiti and spreading rumors is wrong.*

### **Educating is a crucial step.**

It is not enough to stop the behavior. Students may interpret a simple, "Stop it right now!" to mean that it is OK to bully Johnny, but not during math. And while stopping to educate may take a moment in the short run, it will save time and energy, not to mention some child's heart, in the long run. And that child might not be the one who was targeted. It might be the bystander or the bully. You may be preventing a much more serious assault or a suicide down the road. It is worth the extra moment.

### **Do you educate on the spot or take the offender aside and educate in private?**

Sometimes one is more appropriate; sometimes, the other. On the one hand, the target and the witnesses need to hear what you have to say. It can be a very valuable chance to model standing up for someone. And it can reassure them that your classroom really is a safe space. However, allowing the child who said the slur to save face *may* lead to sincere regret and changed behavior. And pursuing the issue at length in front of the target may only embarrass him or her. Use your professional judgment. The point is to support and educate *all* the children.

## **What if the offender retaliates against you for speaking up, by demanding, "Why do you care? Are you gay??!"**

You have lots of choices:

- You can ask, "Why? Do you think only gay people have the courage to stand up against bullying?"
- You can say, "I hope I would speak up about meanness no matter **what** my orientation was!"
- You can answer the question honestly. For example: "No, but what difference does my sexual orientation make?" or "Yes, I actually am. But the issue here is that you are harassing Chris, Pat. That's not OK in my class or in any other class in this school!"
- You can decline to respond, falling back on previously established classroom ground rules, "That's a really personal question. Remember we had a class ground rule that we would all protect our own, and other people's, privacy here? And anyway, I think my identity is irrelevant."

Of course, some students will assume that you would not be declining to answer if you were really heterosexual. **If you are heterosexual**, being ambiguous about it may be difficult for you, while it provides a valuable learning experience for your students. **If you are actually a sexual minority**, ambiguity may be almost as emotionally and practically risky as coming out.

On the other hand, **authenticity is a very important component in developing a climate of community and trust in the classroom**. So there is something to be said, if the political climate in your school and district allows it, for a genuine answer to a direct question, even if the question is a defiant, angry one. Young people need sexual minority role models who are not afraid to be open and openly heterosexual role models who object to anti-gay harassment and violence.

Again, your professional judgment must ultimately determine how you respond. The point is to think about it ahead of time and to **practice** how you will handle this kind of situation, so that your fear won't get in the way of protecting children.

## **What if I am not sure I have my administrator's support?**

You still have a moral and legal obligation to protect every student from harassment and violence. So do stand up for targeted children.

But **definitely** talk with your supervisor about the problem, before you begin to intervene in it. Share a copy of the Safe Schools Report, "*They Don't Even Know Me: Understanding Anti-Gay Harassment and Violence in Schools*." Discuss examples of harassment and ostracism you have witnessed in your own building, or about which students have told you.

If your supervisor agrees that something must be done, make a proposal. Explain how you would like to address the problem. Try to agree on a strategy.

If your supervisor explicitly forbids you from intervening in peer-on-peer anti-gay harassment, do **not** become "insubordinate." Talk with your union representative. If you don't belong to a union, or if your union is unresponsive, contact:

- GLSEN, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (212-727-0135 or [glsen@glsen.org](mailto:glsen@glsen.org))
- Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (212-809-8585 or [lambdalegal@lambdalegal.org](mailto:lambdalegal@lambdalegal.org))
- Or, in Washington State, the Safe Schools Coalition (1-888-3079275 or [intervention@safeschoolscoalition.org](mailto:intervention@safeschoolscoalition.org)).

But defying an explicit directive can jeopardize your job. We don't recommend it.

If, on the other hand, you leave the conversation with your supervisor still unsure of where you stand, and if you happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, we would urge you to find a way to object to bullying that doesn't require your "coming out." We know that young people need role models, but without your supervisor's support it can be professionally risky to be honest ... and losing you altogether as their teacher will clearly not help your students.

## **The bottom line is ...**

Legally and ethically, you must do whatever is necessary to stop the harassment against children and teens who are perceived to be gay. Seeing you stand up against bullying will make every child, gay and straight alike, feel safer at school. Only when they feel safe, can students learn.