



Creating Safe Schools: Information for parents on the role of partnerships with schools in supporting sexual and gender diversity.

As parents of children in schools, you have the right to expect your children are educated in environments in which they feel safe and valued. Unfortunately, some young people who do not conform to what some consider normal find their experiences at school to be largely negative. Australian research has found that one group that tends to experience school as an unsafe and unsupportive place is students who are, or perceived to be, gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender. These young people are often unable to achieve in the full range of school programs and activities because they experience persecution, feel unable to get support, and do not see people like themselves represented in positive or affirming ways in either the school curriculum or environment.

Many schools around Victoria are currently working to address these issues. This booklet contains information on why and how this is being done and addresses the importance of working in partnership with you as parents.

Definitions of terms used:

The following list draws on the definitions of the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health's 'What's the Difference' Report (1). In concert with the committee we would like to stress:

- definitions concerning gender and sexuality are subject to ongoing debate,
- members of the GLBT community, given the way that labels have often been used in the past to pathologise and regulate them, are wary about being labeled,
- GLBT people attach great importance to self-definition.

Sexual Orientation and Sexuality: The direction of sexual and romantic attractions. For some this is mainly or exclusively towards people of the opposite gender, for some it is mainly towards people of the same gender, for some it is towards either gender.

Heterosexual: People whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily or exclusively for the opposite sex.

Homosexual: People whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily or exclusively for the same sex. People who feel this way often identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Gay: People whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily or exclusively for the same gender. In Australia this can mean men or women, though tends to be used mainly for men who identify themselves as gay.

Lesbian A woman whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily or exclusively for women.

Bisexual or Bi: those whose sexual and romantic feelings are for both men and women.

Transgender: An umbrella term for those whose gender identity or behaviour fall outside of stereotypical gender norms. Transgender people are those who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. This includes those who identify with the opposite gender to their biological sex, for example someone who is born anatomically 'female' but feels this is at odds with their inner sense of being male. There are other transgender people who do not identify with either sex/gender or may feel bi-gendered, challenging the notion that there are only two mutually exclusive genders.

Transsexual: Those individuals who are born anatomically male or female but have a profound identification with the opposite gender assigned to them at birth.

Intersex: A biological condition where a person is born with reproductive organs and/or sex chromosomes that are not exclusively male or female. The previous term for intersex was hermaphrodite.

Same Sex Attracted (SSA): those who are attracted to people of one's own sex. The term has been used in the context of young people whose sense of sexual identity is not fixed, but who experience sexual feelings toward people of their own sex

GLBTI: Acronym that stands for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex.

Gender Identity: a persons internal feeling of being female, male both or neither.

Homophobia: Individual or societal ignorance or fear of gay and lesbian people. Homophobic actions can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment and acts of violence brought on by fear and hatred.

Queer: an umbrella term that includes a range of alternate sexual and gender identities.

EVERYONE SHOULD FEEL SAFE AT SCHOOL

The facts:

Australian research has revealed that between 8-11% of students say that they have experienced sexual attraction to people of the same sex (2). *Writing Themselves In* (3), a national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young people aged 14-21 found that:

- one third of those surveyed believed they had been treated unfairly or discriminated against because of their sexuality. Many of these students compare their experiences to those who experience racial discrimination, and complain that their schools fail to act on homophobic discrimination whilst they see that racist behaviour is not tolerated
- Almost 70% of the abuse disclosed had taken place at school, indicating that for those surveyed, the school environment was a more violent place than the streets.
- Same sex attracted youth did not see themselves or their issues recognised at school. Relationships, role models and sexual health information relevant to same sex attracted youth are absent from school curriculum.

Additionally:

- American research shows that same sex attracted students are more than four times more likely to have truanted from school because they feel unsafe (4) Forthcoming Australian research is expected to show the same trend.
- A recent study found that 16% of the Melbourne homeless youth surveyed identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure. This data indicates that young people attracted to the same sex and/or both sexes are over-represented among the homeless population (5)

Being same sex attracted does not increase a young persons risk for suicide or risk taking behaviour. It is the broader social context, and the factors associated with being same sex attracted such as rejection, isolation and victimisation that do.

Research also reveals:

- Drug and alcohol use is shown to be significantly higher in same sex attracted youth populations (6)

- Same sex attracted youth are more sexually active and more likely to be engaging in unprotected sexual activity with partners of both sexes (7)
- Young gay, lesbian and bisexual males and females were 3-4 more times as likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have attempted suicide (8)

'Society makes it not so great so I don't feel great. If society accepted it, I would feel great' (Matt, 17 years)

In spite of the overwhelming hardships same sex attracted youth are facing, the fact remains that over half surveyed felt positive about their sexuality. Of the young people surveyed in *Writing Themselves In* 60% felt great or pretty good about their sexual orientation.

Transgender young people are a much smaller percentage of the population, and as yet there is little formal research about their experiences. The small amount of research that does exist along with the anecdotal evidence would suggest that the transgender young people's experiences of discrimination and marginalisation are similar to if not worse than those of same sex attracted youth.

WHAT STRUCTURES ARE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT GLBT STUDENTS?

Legislation, policies and programs have been reviewed and developed to ensure that schools recognise sexual and gender diversity. These aim to prevent and respond to the range of health issues revealed in the research.

The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools

This was developed by the Department of Education and advocates a 'positive, safe and supportive school environment that facilitates students achieving their full potential' (9). This framework defines the responsibility of schools to create cultures and environments that are supportive of all students and of individual difference.

Anti-discrimination legislation at both State/Territory and federal levels

These are relevant frameworks for creating and maintaining safe and supportive learning environments free from harassment and discrimination for all students. Schools are both providers of services

and are employers, and have legal and moral responsibilities for the 'duty of care' of students under both State/Territory and Commonwealth legislation.

The Equal Opportunity Act 1995 clearly sets out the responsibilities schools have by:

- Making discrimination and harassment unlawful in public life
- Making it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, perceived or otherwise. The Act states that: 'Staff and students have a right to be treated fairly by staff and fellow students regardless of gender, sexual orientation and race' (10)
- Stating that 'inaction may also amount to an implicit authorization or encouragement of discrimination or sexual harassment. This means that the teachers or principal who 'turns a blind eye' to discrimination or sexual harassment by students may be liable on the basis of authorizing or assisting discrimination' (11)

It is therefore unlawful to treat someone unfairly or harass them on the basis of their actual or presumed sexual orientation or gender identity. The school your child attends is obliged by law to ensure it is an environment free from discrimination and harassment.

The policies and legislation described do not give same sex attracted and transgender students 'special rights'. They are designed to ensure that the learning environment of schools is as safe and relevant for these students as it is for others.

CREATING MORE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS:

'I do think that the demonstration of such positive values as justice and tolerance is a very real measure of a school capable of truly great things' - Sharyn, Mother

Schools are social institutions that have a role in promoting acceptance and celebrating the diversity that exists in student populations. Whole school approaches that are inclusive of sexual diversity are being implemented in schools around Victoria.

This involves:

- Recognition of and discussions around sexual and gender diversity in classroom curriculum
- Addressing negative school based incidents
- Changing language and teaching materials that assume all students are heterosexual
- Training staff on inclusive ways of working with same sex attracted students
- Including discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in bullying policies.

These measures ensure that the values students learn through the curriculum are supported by policy, guidelines and practices in the student welfare and pastoral care areas.

It is important that schools work in partnership with parents in addressing these issues. Such partnerships have the potential to:

- Provide parents with skills and knowledge to initiate and carry out informed discussion with their children
- Improve student health
- Enable a greater awareness of issues by students and their families
- Ensure that consistent messages discouraging harassment and positively promoting acceptance are being heard by young people.

Talking honestly about these issues with your children means you will continue to teach important values, model healthy behaviour and ensure they can trust you for information.

Addressing homophobia and supporting sexual and gender diversity are some of the ways schools are working to promote social justice and counter discrimination. Understanding and celebrating diversity enriches all our lives. All young people are entitled to education without fear of violence and harassment and should feel they are valued members of school communities. The strategies that are being developed and implemented around sexual and gender diversity are designed to:

- make schools safer places for all students
- promote better educational outcomes
- foster more cohesive school communities.

This approach recognises that it is all of our responsibility to make our schools places where prejudice is not tolerated.

THINGS YOU CAN DO...

If you are wanting to follow up these issues with the school your child attends here are a few starting points:

- It can be useful to talk to a range of people in the school including student welfare staff, along with senior staff
- Find out about the school's anti-bullying policy
- Let your schools know you support these initiatives
- Raise the ideas with the school council, parent association and policy subcommittee of your school council
- View the following websites which include frameworks developed by government departments that address bullying, discrimination and diversity:

-Department of Education and Training:

www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/bullying/index.htm

-Student Wellbeing Policy-Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Schools:

www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/wellbeing/welfare/framework.htm

-Framework that outlines the Government's vision for enhancing the lives of young people developed by the Office for Youth:

www.youth.vic.gov.au/youth/framework/default.htm

Parents of students in government schools wanting support can contact Parents Victoria for information on: 9417 4140, parentsv@vicnet.net.au, or web: www.parentsvictoria.asn.au

IF YOUR KIDS ARE Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and/or Transgender:

Parents are likely to have a range of reactions if their child is or thinks they may be gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender.

It is important for you to be aware of several contact points that you can use for more info or support:

- PFLAG (Parent Friends of Lesbians and Gays): social and support opportunities for parents of gay lesbian bisexual and/or transgender children: 9827 8408, p_flagvic@hotmail.com, www.pflag.org.au
- Gay & Lesbian Switchboard: trained phone counselors for advice, referral and information: 9827 8544, 1800 631 493

- Many local government youth services and community health centres throughout the state have support programs for gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender or questioning youth.

Above all else your child needs to know that you will always support and love them.

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- (9) Department of Education (1998) *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools*, Department of Education, Victoria.
- (10) Equal Opportunity Commission (1996), *Rights and Responsibilities Under the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995*, Melbourne, p3
- (11) Equal Opportunity Commission (1996), *Rights and Responsibilities Under the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995*, Melbourne, p14.

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