HOMOPHOBIA: LET'S WORK ON IT TOGETHER!

**ACTION PLAN TO PREVENT AND
DEAL WITH VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS
2008-2011**

Reference Tool

Québec 🟦🟦

Homophobic bullying occurs in schools and it affects a large number of young people, not just gays, lesbians and bisexuals. It is important to address homophobia, not only to protect young people, but also to promote a caring school climate. The potential impact of homophobia on the well-being and mental health of all young people make this an issue that deserves special attention. As such, the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport has developed this reference tool on homophobia in keeping with Measure 1.1.3 set out in the Action Plan to Prevent and Deal with Violence in the Schools.

WHAT IS HOMOPHOBIA?

The Conseil permanent de la jeunesse has defined homophobia as "psychological and social aversion to sexual diversity. Homophobic behaviour is directed not only at homosexual persons; it can also target persons whose appearance or behaviour does not conform to traditional gender stereotypes."[1] Homophobia is a type of discrimination based on personal characteristics, specifically sexual orientation or sexual identity.

A related concept, heterosexism, has been defined as follows: the affirmation of heterosexuality as a social norm or as superior to other sexual orientations; social practice that denies the diversity of sexual orientations and identities in everyday representations, social relations and institutions, in particular by taking for granted that all people are heterosexual.[2]

Whether expressed through verbal, written or physical actions or through social exclusion, homophobia may take various forms: physical assault, taunts, threats, taxing, insults, labelling, verbal abuse, contempt, harassment, exclusion from the peer group, rumours, bullying,[3] cyber-bullying, jokes, humiliation, etc. Words such as "fairy," "fag," "dyke," and "homo" may be used regularly, whether in name-calling directly to a person's face or in describing an object or a situation.

A study by Chamberland et al.[4] analyzing students' perceptions indicates that homophobia is often overlooked by school staff and the school system. Furthermore, few people report homophobic behaviour. The findings of this research indicate that 51% of students who said they had experienced such behaviour did not report the incidents, because they did not consider these to be serious enough. Also, 38.7% of students who witnessed such episodes said they did not report them because they felt these were none of their business; 38.3% of them did not report the incidents because they felt these weren't serious enough to report. Furthermore, it appears that action is seldom taken in response to homophobic bullying. Based on the study, 27.1% of students who had experienced this type of bullying and 22.5% of students who had witnessed incidents did not report them because they had the impression nothing would be done. This indicates that a code of silence still exists around homophobia in school environments.

[1]   Québec, Conseil permanent de la jeunesse, *Recherche-avis:Sortons l'homophobie du placard... et de nos écoles secondaires* (Québec, May 2007), 8.

[2]   Québec, Ministère de la Justice, *Policy Against Homophobia* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2009), 14.

[3]   Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, *Bullying: Let's work on it together!* (2010)
      http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/en/current-initiatives/bullying-and-violence-in-the-schools/

[4]   Line Chamberland et al., *Homophobie en milieu scolaire* (2010, report pending).

In a context where homosexuality or sexual diversity is perceived as outside the norm, homophobic attitudes may affect interactions:

- between young people
- between staff members
- between staff members and young people

Just like any other form of violence, homophobic words, actions and attitudes cannot be tolerated. This type of behaviour is unacceptable and requires intervention.

Homophobic bullies

To date, very few researchers have sought to establish a profile of people who engage in homophobic bullying. As a rule, negative attitudes and feelings about homosexuality are more prevalent among boys. Students and adults who are prejudiced against or are uncomfortable with sexual diversity:[5,6]

- are poorly informed about the issues
- have had little or no contact with homosexuals
- experience greater discomfort in talking about a homosexual of the same gender as themselves

Although homophobic insults and taunts can often be heard in classrooms and hallways, threats and assaults most often occur when teaching staff are not around. According to studies by Alain Grenier,[7] incidents of homophobic bullying usually occur when and where few adults are present. The most common places are the following, listed in decreasing order:

- school hallways
- the farthest location from the school entrance or the main school building
- school grounds
- cafeteria
- the school entrance and school buses
- streets
- classrooms
- locker rooms

[5] RRSSS-Lanaudière, Direction de la santé publique, *Étude exploratoire sur les attitudes, les sentiments et les connaissances d'élèves de secondaire IV et V de la région de Lanaudière, envers l'homosexualité et la bisexualité*, (April 2001).

[6] Gilbert Émond, *Contextes de l'inconfort des élèves du secondaire avec l'homosexualité. Faits saillants. Résultats préliminaires. Analyse des questionnaires 2002-2003*, GRIS, (Montréal, September 2004), 3.

[7] Alain Grenier, *Jeunes, homosexualité et écoles:Enquête exploratoire sur l'homophobie dans les milieux jeunesse de Québec, Rapport synthèse*, GRIS, (Québec, 2005), 71.

In schools, these incidents are most likely to occur during:

- break
- idle time
- meals
- physical education classes

For transsexual and transgender students, who typically identify as such at the end of secondary school or during the transition to college, problems most often arise in places such as washrooms and locker rooms, and during activities that set boys and girls apart, such as physical education classes, as well as in connection with certain rules, such as the requirement to wear a uniform.

Victims of homophobic bullying

Although homophobic bullying occurs and has negative effects at the elementary school level, homophobia is more prevalent in the attitudes and behaviours of secondary school students. During this period of transition to adulthood, young people go through an intense process of identity development. They are also going through many physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual and social changes. They question their identity and seek to assert their individuality, all the while seeking affiliation, recognition and a sense of belonging to a peer group. Students are under strong pressure to conform to the majority. During adolescence, many students question their sexual orientation and identity, a process that is a normal part of development.

Based on the *Enquête sociale et de santé auprès des enfants et des adolescents québécois 1999*, published by the Institut de la statistique in 2002, verbal assault (name-calling, verbal abuse) is the most common form of bullying in schools. Similarly, most homophobic bullying is verbal. These incidents are reported by boys to a greater extent but they decline in frequency with age.

Many students are the target of homophobic behaviour, yet these victims do not necessarily have a homosexual or bisexual orientation. Sometimes homophobic harassment is aimed at people perceived as being different from the peer group because of their attitudes, specific physical traits, clothing, etc. These people may:

- experience mood swings and feelings of anger, fear, shame or self-doubt
- look sad, depressed or unhappy
- lose their motivation to do school work, resulting in a decrease in school performance and poor self-esteem
- develop an excessive focus on school, social activities or sports
- get to school late, miss classes, leave school or take detours on the way to school
- feel anxious, lonely, isolated, withdrawn or less confident; experience a decrease in appetite and sleep disturbances

- think about dropping out of school
- abuse alcohol or drugs
- exhibit behavioural problems and hostility
- develop suicidal ideas

Witnesses

Owing to the close link between bullying and homophobic violence, some students who witness homophobic incidents may:

- experience feelings of anger, shame, guilt or powerlessness
- worry about being targeted themselves or about being associated with the victim, the perpetrator or the bullying
- actively assist the bully by participating in the assault (active assistant)
- help the bully as an active bystander by laughing and encouraging the behaviour (reinforcer)
- indirectly support the perpetrator by failing to do anything or passively observing (outsider)
- help the victim by turning to an adult for help (indirect defender)
- directly assist the victim by standing up to the perpetrator (active defender)

PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH HOMOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

As a code of silence often exists around homophobic bullying, the entire school team needs to be involved in intervention. It is important for the school to take a clear stance by establishing an anti-bullying policy or a similar measure. This will reassure victims and witnesses alike and send a clear message to bullies that their behaviour will not be tolerated. A clear position statement that explicitly mentions homophobia also reassures students and staff that the school will take action in response to homophobic incidents.

As mentioned in the MELS brochure on bullying,[8] the planning of anti-bullying approaches must be integrated into a local action strategy for preventing and dealing with violence in schools. The strategy will be more effective and easier to implement if it involves a mobilization process, the adoption of a clear position, concerted action, planning, implementation and evaluation. In addition, it must specify the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including those of parents and members of the larger community. All students and adults involved must be informed of the school's position, which must be given concrete form and incorporated into the school's code of conduct.

---

[8] Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, *Bullying: Let's work on it together!* (2010)
http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/en/current-initiatives/bullying-and-violence-in-the-schools/

Intervention is complicated by the fact that homophobia and heterosexism have very diverse roots, including personal and social prejudices, and cultural, family and religious values.

All too often, adults in authority avoid talking about homosexuality, out of fear, embarrassment or antipathy, or because they feel they do not have the necessary knowledge or expertise. They may not know what to say or how to say it, what stance they should adopt or what steps they should take. In short, adults may fail to intervene because they don't know how to. Failure to act can, however, further marginalize the victim. It is essential therefore to talk about sexual diversity (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgender persons) and LGBT families (families with lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-identified parents), and to emphasize that everyone deserves the same respect.

Efforts to accept difference and integrate people perceived as being different into society may fail without appropriate information and elimination of prejudice. To reduce homophobic violence in schools, the school community can:

- identify and acknowledge homophobic behaviour and the associated consequences
- provide appropriate answers to young people's questions about sexual diversity
- make material on sexual diversity available and display it in the library
- demystify homosexuality and sexual diversity
- raise awareness among students, teachers, other staff members and parents about the manifestations of heterosexism, and about the prejudice, effects and stigma to which members of sexual minorities are subjected, particularly young people
- outline the facts and myths concerning members of sexual minorities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgender persons; and persons unsure about their sexual identity) and LGBT families
- teach the importance of equality, inclusiveness, and healthy and respectful relationships
- support initiatives and provide opportunities for meetings between sexual minority students and heterosexual students, and support initiatives to foster tolerance

To deal with bullying effectively, the school must implement a strategy with the following key characteristics:

- Good fit with the school
  - Make sure that the situation really involves homophobic violence rather than some other form of school violence by taking into account all episodes of violence or by questioning the school community about homophobia specifically.
  - Follow a democratic approach by allowing all students and school personnel to state their views.
  - Review the situation periodically.
  - Incorporate guidelines and actions intended for all students and adults in the school, including victims, witnesses and bullies, as well as the larger school community.

- **Support of all members of the school community**
  - Under the principal's leadership, get all staff members involved in all stages of the process: selecting orientations, planning and implementing actions.
  - Provide favourable conditions for teamwork.
  - Recognize the role that all adults in the school environment can play in terms of addressing prejudice and discrimination (words, attitudes, actions, etc.).
  - Have students participate in initiatives designed to prevent homophobia.
  - Work with organizations seeking to demystify homosexuality in the education sector.
  - Integrate into school activities the tools made available as part of International Day Against Homophobia.

- **Shared understanding**
  - Provide clear, concise definitions of homophobia, heterosexism, sexual minorities, homophobic behaviour and discrimination.[9]
  - Make sure that all those involved know about and can recognize homophobic violence and the impact it has on everyone and on the school climate.
  - Make school personnel more aware of the reality of sexual minorities in school settings.
  - Raise staff awareness about the reality of young people from LGBT families.
  - Learn about the approach used in sex education.[10]
  - Become familiar with relevant sections of the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.
  - Increase staff members' sensitivity to homophobia, their comfort level and their readiness to address the issues, and help them improve their listening skills.
  - Provide correct and objective information about sexual diversity.

- **Includes proactive measures (educational and punitive) adapted to the students**
  - Train personnel so that they have the requisite knowledge and skills to deal with an incident or a complaint.
  - Set up activities or programs aimed at fostering respect, open-mindedness and acceptance of differences:[11]

■ beliefs	■ race	■ interests
■ gender	■ colour	■ religion
■ disabilities	■ ethnic origin	■ social class, etc.
■ language	■ sexual orientation	

---

9 The Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse offers workshops and training sessions on the topic: http://www.cdpdj.qc.ca/en/formation/seances-charte/Pages/seance-8.aspx

10 *Sex Education in the Context of Education Reform* : http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/en/school-administrators-public-and-private-schools/dossiers/sexuality-education/

11 Éthique et culture religieuse : http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/enseignants/aide-et-soutien/services-complementaires/animation-spirituelle-et-engagement-communautaire/ (in French only)

- Foster critical thinking among students in order to open a dialogue and help them understand and prevent violence and discrimination.
- Include homosexual realities and representations of homosexual persons in school activities.
- Include homosexuality and homophobia in discussions about other social issues (racial discrimination, love, families, etc.).
- Give students access to resources (books, films, etc.) that help to demystify homosexuality.
- Teach inclusive values and foster a culture of personal responsibility:
  - respect, empathy and consideration for others
  - responsibility for one's words and actions
  - acceptance of the consequences of one's actions
- Provide confidential means for students to report homophobic incidents they experience or witness in school and encourage students to use them:
  - mailbox
  - Internet address
  - contact information for an adult at the school to whom students can turn
- Establish mechanisms for handling complaints.
- Establish mechanisms for communication:
  - between staff members
  - between the school and the families of the victim and the perpetrator
  - between the school and the families of any witnesses
- Provide support services:
  - for victims, witnesses and perpetrators
  - for students who are questioning their sexual orientation
  - for parents who believe their child has been involved in a situation of homophobic violence
- Inform students about resources related to sexual orientation during adolescence and encourage students to use them.
- Establish the means to keep track of all incidents of violent behaviour (physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, etc.) and record them in the personal assistance file of all students involved or affected.
- Consider victims, witnesses and bullies in setting school rules and disciplinary measures and, in particular, support services for suspended or expelled students.
- Procedures for managing violations:
  - consequences and restitution
  - conditions for the victim's return to school, if absent, and for the bully's return to school, if he or she was suspended
- Provide support for parents and raise their awareness of homophobia.
- Establish procedures for securing the assistance of appropriate professionals.

When it comes to preventing and dealing with violence, there are no magic solutions. No single approach can put an end to violent behaviour. Implementing a strategy for dealing with violence takes time and entails sustained effort. Often, a major obstacle to implementing such an approach is the sense that immediate action is required; this may prompt the school to take a reactive, incident-specific approach rather than a proactive, planned approach. An intervention system that is focused on assigning blame and punishment can generate resentment, strengthen group solidarity, increase the desire to continue bullying behaviours, label the victim and prompt the bully to develop more subtle strategies. This could make it more difficult to detect bullying and complicate intervention. Ensuring students' safety is everyone's business and calls for constant vigilance.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HOMOPHOBIA AND HOMOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

- Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (learning situations)
- Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal
- Institut national de santé publique (INSPQ)
- Ministère de la Justice, Québec Policy Against Homophobia

RESOURCES

- Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. *Sex Education in the Context of Education Reform*, (2003)
- Groupe de Recherche et d'Intervention Sociale de Montréal (GRIS-Montréal)
- GRIS-Québec
- GRIS-Chaudière-Appalaches
- Interligne
- Kids Help Phone
- Tel-jeunes
- Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ)
- Coalition des familles homoparentales [training kit]. *Regard sur les familles homoparentales: S'ouvrir à leurs réalités pour mieux répondre aux besoins des enfants*