# Bullying of LGBT Youth

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"…[S]ticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. That quote is a lie and I don't believe in it. Sticks and stones may cause nasty cuts and scars, but those cuts and scars will heal. Insultive words hurt and sometimes take forever to heal."

-14 year old, Cyberbullying Research Center

In recent years, bullying amongst youth has received significant attention as the deleterious effects have become increasingly apparent. Approximately 20 percent of high school students nationwide endorse experiences of bullying. Rates of bullying and victimization, however, are especially elevated for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth (LGBT).[1] It is imperative that mental health workers and other service providers at the Kennedy Krieger Institute remain up to date on the research regarding the harmful effects of bullying directed towards LGBT youth.

## Defining Bullying

Gordon (2014) suggests that bullying can manifest in six forms: (1) *Physical bullying* - when one youth uses physical aggression (e.g., punching) to maintain power and control of another. (2) *Verbal bullying* - when one youth uses insulting words or statements such as name-calling as a means to maintain power and control. (3) *Relational aggression* - a covert and insidious form of bullying, involving a youth attempting to harm another's social reputation, relationship, or cause humiliation. This form of bullying may involve spreading rumors, social exclusion, or pranks. (4) *Cyberbullying* - involves the use of technology (e.g., cell phones, social media) to overtly or covertly harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise target another. This form of bullying is particularly harmful because access is unlimited. (5) *Sexual bullying* - the repeated use of harmful and humiliating actions that are sexualized. Examples include sexual name-calling, unwelcomed touching, or uninvited "sexting." (6) *Prejudicial bullying* - may consist of the above types of bullying although it targets another based on social identity (e.g., sexual orientation, gender).

Teen bullying may be subsumed as a type of microaggression, whereby verbal and nonverbal microaggressions act as catalysts for perpetuating bullying behaviors and maintaining perceived unsafe environments (Nadal & Griffin, 2012). Sexual orientation microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities (whether

intentional or unintentional) that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative heterosexist and homophobic slights and insults toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals" (Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus, 2010, p. 218). Transgender microaggressions are similarly defined but are targeted towards transgender persons (Nadal et al., 2010). An example of an intentionally enacted microaggression may be physical bullying (e.g., slapping), verbal bullying (e.g., threatening), or cyberbullying (e.g., posting hateful memes about target). A microaggression that can also be unintentional, yet still create an unsafe and unwelcoming environment, includes the use of homophobic or transphobic language (e.g., tranny, "no homo"). Nadal and Griffin (2012) explained that many LGBT teenagers are victims of the aforesaid types of bullying. However, LGBT youth are often directed to ignore the bullying. Unfortunately, it is often communicated that speaking up amplifies the situation- a message that can result in invalidating, dismissive environments for LGBT youth (Nadal &Griffin, 2012).

**Rates of Bullying and Peer Victimization Directed Towards LGBT Youth**

Research indicates that sexual minorities and transgender youth experience elevated levels of bullying compared to their peers (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). For instance, a national study of 7,559 adolescents found that 26 percent of heterosexual males reported being bullied compared to 35 percent of "mostly heterosexual" males, 35.7 percent of bisexual males, and 43.6 percent of gay males. Similarly, 15.9 percent of heterosexual females endorsed bullying experiences compared to 25.4 percent of "mostly heterosexual" females, 25.6 percent of bisexual females, and 40 percent of lesbians (Berlan et al., 2010). The 2011 Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey revealed that transgender students, compared to all other students, were most likely to report verbal and physical harassment and physical assault at school (Kosciw et al., 2012). Other gender non-conforming students also reported elevated levels of gender-related harassment at school.

Bullying and victimization towards LGBT youth can vary in presentation. For example, victimized sexual minority youth are most likely to experience name-calling including homophobic slurs (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Diverging patterns of homophobic name-calling across gender and time indicate that boys tend to use, and be targeted with, homophobic slurs increasingly with age in high school, whereas girls report decreased use and experiences of homophobic name-calling (Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012). Another

concern amongst youth is cyberbullying. Approximately half (55.2%) of a nationally representative sample of LGBT youth (ages 13-20) reported experiencing cyberbullying via texting and social media (Kosciw et al., 2012). Of concern, LGBT students are often unlikely to report serious bullying events to their parents or teachers (Kosciw et al., 2010); therefore, it is imperative that parents and teachers have access to resources to assist them in identifying common signs and symptoms that their child is experiencing bullying.

**Implications**

Physical and mental health disparities have been well documented amongst LGBT-identified persons (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003). Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) posits that stressors such as discrimination and prejudice due to minority statuses can partially explain some of those disparities. Thus, stressors such as LGBT-directed bullying and victimization pose a serious threat to the well-being of LGBT youth.

Suicidal behavior is a serious issue that can result from bullying and victimization. Sexual minorities and transgender individuals are at an increased risk for engaging in suicidal behavior as well as completing suicide (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Hass et al., 2011; King et al., 2008). Rates are particularly elevated amongst transgender individuals (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). Mustanksi and Liu (2013) found that gender discrimination and physical victimization were independently correlated with suicide attempt histories for their sample of transgender participants. Similarly, suicide attempts among LGB (in addition to transgender) youth have been linked to histories of victimization and other factors (Mustanski & Liu, 2013). Additionally, numerous psychological and life quality sequelae have been demonstrated amongst LGBT youth who have been bullied. Those effects include elevated levels of depression and anxiety, and lower levels of academic success, school attendance, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and perceived connection to peers (Kosciw et al., 2010; Kosciw et al., 2012; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

Given the serious consequences of bullying amongst LGBT identified youth, health care providers will benefit from being apprised of both local and national resources to facilitate affirmative services within the many contexts that affect the lives of LGBT clients and their families. To assist in this process, please find a preliminary list of resources below.

## Resources

- **Stop Bullying.Gov**
  - http://www.stopbullying.gov/atrisk/groups/lgbt/lgbtyouthtipsheet.pdf
- **PFLAG** aims to unite LGBTQ-identified individuals with families, friends, and allies. The organization works to advance equality and affirmation of LGBTQ youth.
  - http://pflag.org
- **Violence Prevention Works!** is the home of the The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
  - www.violencepreventionworks.org
- **The Trevor Project** is a national organization that provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ youth ages 13-24.
  - http://www.thetrevorproject.org/
- **Gay-Straight Alliance Network** (GSA Network) is "a next-generation LGBTQ racial and gender justice organization that empowers and trains queer, trans and allied youth leaders to advocate, organize, and mobilize an intersectional movement for safer schools and healthier communities."
  - http://www.gsanetwork.org/
- **The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center of Baltimore and Central Maryland** aims to unite and empower sexual and gender minorities in Baltimore and Maryland. See the website to learn about programs for LGBT youth.
  - http://www.glccb.org/
- See Russell et al., 2010 to learn more about student support groups and gay–straight alliances.
- See Russell et al., 2014 for policy development recommendations within the school system.

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