

**SAFE
SCHOOLS
COALITION
VICTORIA**

www.safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au

CHALLENGING HOMOPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL STAFF



SSCV is a coalition of schools and individuals dedicated to creating safer educational environments supported by Rainbow Network Victoria and the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA).

SSCV is funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and is auspiced by Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria.

This resource has been developed to provide information and practical strategies on why and how to tackle homophobia. How can you help make sure your school is a safe school, where every family can belong, every teacher can teach and every student can learn?

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND KEY TERMS:

THROUGHOUT THIS RESOURCE WE USE SSAGQ TO REFER TO BOTH SAME SEX ATTRACTED AND GENDER QUESTIONING YOUNG PEOPLE. ALTHOUGH SSA AND GQ DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY, BOTH GROUPS OFTEN EXPERIENCE SIMILAR DISCRIMINATION AND TREATMENT.

Same sex attracted (SSA): An umbrella term often applied to young people to describe those who experience feelings of sexual attraction to others of their own sex. This includes young people who are exclusively homosexual in their orientation, bisexual, undecided young people, and heterosexual young people who have these feelings at some time.

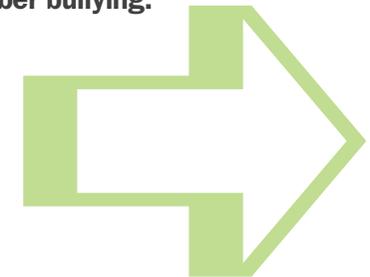
Gender questioning (GQ): Refers to the process whereby an individual comes to question the usefulness or validity of their current biological sex and/or assigned gender. This includes people who see the binary categories of male and female/masculine and feminine as meaningless or unduly restrictive, and those who feel that their gender does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth.

“At school I approached staff for help – who were amazing, very supportive and very effective. Since those early high school years there’s never been a problem at school” Emma, age 18

WHAT IS HOMOPHOBIA?

Homophobia can occur in schools in many ways, but the most commonly experienced form it takes is name calling and the use of homophobic language. This verbal abuse can include teasing or name calling, suggestive remarks or ‘jokes’, as well as spreading rumours that someone is gay.

Homophobic bullying, like any kind of bullying, can also include physical violence, sexual harassment, threats or damage to property, social exclusion and cyber bullying.



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WHY TACKLE **HOMOPHOBIA?**

Student's should feel valued for who they are and included as part of the school community. All students should be safe and supported in achieving their goals at school and be provided the opportunity to complete their studies in an environment free from discrimination and harassment.

All students have the right to feel free from the fear of bullying. There are a few simple and immediate things you can do to significantly reduce homophobic bullying in your school.

As with other forms of bullying, prevention should be a central focus for schools in addressing homophobia. From that starting point, schools can create a safe environment where all staff, students and families are clear that homophobia is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Under the Equal Opportunity Act 1995, it is against the law to discriminate in education or to harass a student at school on the grounds of their actual or assumed sexual orientation or because of the sexual orientation of their parents, friends, or family.

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Your school has same sex attracted and gender questioning students

Some students in your school will be experiencing feelings of same sex attraction. It is well established that around 10% of young people in Victoria experience these feelings – how many students in your school might be same sex attracted? There will also be students in your school who are gender questioning or gender diverse.

SSAGQ young people experience most homophobia in schools

Australian research shows that school is a significantly less safe place for some students than others. Over 75% of same sex attracted young people experience abuse – 80% of this happens in schools. (Hillier et al 2010). This research also found that only 19% of SSAGQ young people attended a school that they thought was supportive of their sexuality.

In a 2007 report that surveyed 253 transgender people in Australia and New Zealand, just over 87% of participants reported experiencing at least one form of stigma or discrimination on the basis of their gender. Half reported experiencing verbal abuse and social exclusion and a third had been threatened with violence (Couch et el 2007).

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“I left school/let my grades slip because I truly believed I couldn’t live in this world, and that I wouldn’t need an education because I’d kill myself before it mattered.”

Terry, age 17

Homophobia hurts

The detrimental impacts of homophobia and transphobia create real consequences in the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of students. Experiences of homophobic harassment can lead to low self-esteem, depression, school absenteeism and poor academic achievement.

Many students suffer as a result of homophobic violence, irrespective of their sexual feelings. Young people can also be damaged by inflexible notions of what boys and girls should be or do, particularly if they do not fit standard gender stereotypes, are gender questioning, or transgender.

Harassment and discrimination can make SSAGQ students feel fearful and unsafe. This is reflected in the differences in health outcomes for SSAGQ young people, who are more likely to leave school early, experience teenage pregnancy, and contract an STI. The rate of drug and alcohol abuse, depression, suicidal ideation and suicide is also higher for SSAGQ young people.

“At first I missed days, then quit school all together for a time, before finally moving to a new school, where no one really know much about me, but they all seem fine with anything”

Jo, age 15



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People who witness bullying of others can also experience the negative impacts of homophobia; they may feel powerless and unclear about what to do. A culture of homophobia is created when schools fail to challenge homophobic language and behaviour, impacting on student self-esteem, school performance and sense of belonging.

It is not only SSAGQ students that are impacted by homophobic language and bullying. Homophobia impacts on the whole school community, including staff, students and families. Any student or staff member, regardless of their sexual attraction, sexual or gender identity can be affected by homophobic name-calling or harassment.

Homophobia has an impact on the whole school, which is why the whole school must take steps to address it.

“After a particularly bad day in primary school after being teased mercilessly about my special friend I sat on my bed with a picture of her and planned out how I would die to escape it, thankfully she called me and helped me.” Julia, age 18

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“I hate that the word ‘gay’ is used as a synonym for stupid”

Matt, age 17

“... people often use the word gay, not even homophobic people. They don't see it as an insult, they're not trying to be insulting, but I'm insulted”

Tess, age 20

‘But they don't mean it that way’

Homophobic language such as name calling (‘what a fag/dyke’) is often intentionally used to explicitly discriminate against people who are or who are assumed to be same sex attracted or gender questioning.

Other homophobic language such as ‘that's so gay’, is often perceived as harmless because its use is not always intended to be hurtful. In particular, the use of phrases such as ‘that's so gay’ to refer to something or someone as inferior or stupid are often dismissed as being harmless because they are not used in relation to perceived or actual sexual orientation.

This type of language is homophobic, even if unintentional, its use has tangible negative consequences on individuals. Because it is often assumed that this type of language is not deliberately harmful, it often goes unchallenged. Failing to intervene when homophobic language is used in schools not only means that discrimination is being allowed, it also fosters an environment where those remarks are able to escalate into more overt or serious future harassment.

“At school, it was a vocal minority of only a few students who made intentionally homophobic utterances, but there was widespread unintended homophobia”

Josh, age 19

Most students and teachers in Victorian schools will hear homophobic remarks, including ‘that's so gay’ throughout any given school day. If these remarks go unchallenged an environment that is disrespectful and potentially unsafe is created. Tolerating the use of the word gay to mean something is stupid sends a daily message to students that gay and lesbian people are inferior and that it is acceptable to treat them with less respect.

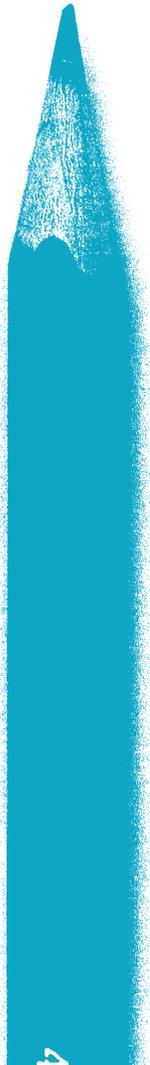
Creating an environment where all students can learn free from homophobia and bullying doesn't have to be time-consuming or difficult. Prevention of the use of homophobic language can be a powerful step in building an inclusive school culture that takes a zero-tolerance approach to this language.

Sometimes homophobic bullying takes place out of sight, making it difficult for school staff and parents to identify. Fear of being labelled gay or lesbian may prevent students from telling anyone that the bullying is happening. However, because school staff have daily contact with students, they are more likely than parents or other adults, to witness and therefore be able to respond to homophobia.

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HOW YOUR SCHOOL CAN RESPOND TO HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

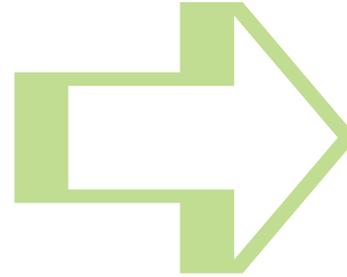


The first step in responding to homophobia is to acknowledge that it exists. Homophobic bullying may be less visible than other forms of bullying, but it still takes place in schools.

The following tips should help you get started:

Raise awareness

Ensure that the whole school community understands what homophobic bullying is and how the school will prevent and respond. The school community needs to understand why homophobic language is offensive. Schools always tackle racist language and the use of homophobic language should be addressed in the same way. Remind students that we never really know about someone's sexuality, but we do know that around 10% of the population is same-sex attracted. Name calling, the use of the word gay to mean something is stupid and other homophobic remarks are bound to be insulting or offensive to someone within earshot, whether we are aware of it or not.



Set clear rules and implement them

Implement clear anti-discrimination guidelines and practices that all staff and students are aware of. Ensure the explicit inclusion of homophobia and transphobia in your school's anti-bullying policies and procedures. That way, all staff and students can be clear on the procedures for dealing with complaints of that nature, and are clear on the consequences that will result for those that engage in homophobic or transphobic bullying. Anti-bullying procedures also need to provide clear intervention strategies for school staff to follow in all school settings.

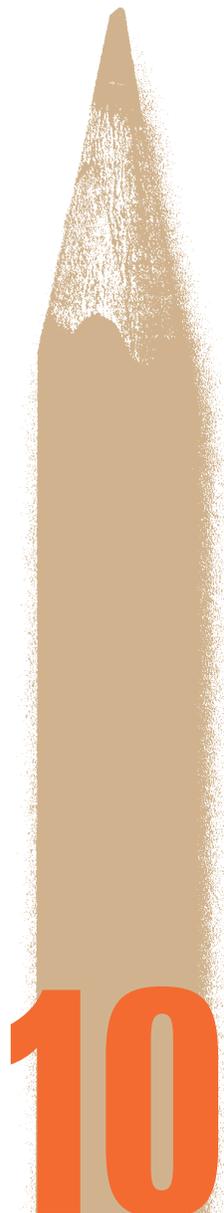
Take notice

Maintain a register of homophobic incidents and what the school did in response. Students should know about the register and feel comfortable in reporting information. The register should record clear and specific information about what happened and what kind of bullying took place. This information will help you to understand what is happening in the school, review policy and procedure, and make sure that anti-homophobia responses are having a positive impact.

Train staff to build confidence

Identify and deliver on staff training needs. Make sure that all school staff are confident and capable of intervening against homophobia. This means providing them with access to resources and training. SSCV can provide whole school staff training on supporting SSAGQ students and challenging homophobia, as well as offering support for dealing with specific incidents.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR CLASSROOM SAFER



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Avoid assumptions

Challenging your own assumptions of heterosexuality is important in creating an inclusive classroom space. Equally, try not to assume that you know which students or family members are SSAGQ. Of course, student experiences will vary and if a student comes out to you as SSAGQ it is important not to assume that they will be having negative experiences or feelings of shame. The best approach is to be open and to listen to what the young person has to say about how they feel and what they want from you. It is likely they will just want a supportive adult to listen to them. Many SSAGQ people have had the experience of being asked (if they are male) if they have a girlfriend, or (if they are female) if they have a boyfriend. This is a simple and seemingly harmless question, but it leaves little opportunity for SSAGQ individuals to respond. Try to avoid making assumptions about anyone's gender or sexuality.

Identify curriculum opportunities

Integration of positive examples of SSAGQ people and issues in the curriculum will allow students to participate in open discussions and can allow increased staff and student confidence and knowledge. Among others, English, History and Science provide opportunities to address topics relevant to sex and gender diversity. For example, in English there is a plethora of literature by gay writers, as well as a number of texts with same sex attracted, gay, lesbian and transgender characters and their histories. While you are at it, why not use the excellent context that Shakespearian cross-dressing provides for the discussion of gender roles and stereotypes.

Discussions in various curriculum settings are crucial. As well as providing reassurance for SSAGQ students that they are not alone, these discussions also encourage higher levels of acceptance. When sexual and gender diversity are positively depicted, students can see that gay and lesbian people are happy and can be celebrated just like anyone else.

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Speak up

Challenge homophobic language and behaviour every time you hear or see it. These situations provide schools staff with educational opportunities to challenge homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist opinions. Staff should work towards being able to connect with those who are engaging in bullying behaviour as well as those who have experienced bullying.

“... at school, after a couple of years stumbling around and not being confident, I ended up taking on an advocate role.. organising a GSA, changes to curriculum and policies etc. The guys who used to harass me, actually ended up basically respecting me” **Ben, age 20**

Recent research suggests that an increasing proportion of young people are responding to homophobia by actively challenging it and getting involved in social justice campaigns. Leadership and practical support for student activism aimed at challenging homophobia and creating safe environments is an important part of the schools role. This could include supporting the development of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group, participation in the annual Pride March, or running projects or campaigns around the school. Resources and staff time should be allocated to these activities.

“... for the abuse that happened at school I told a teacher that I trusted and know ACTUALLY would help”

Rebecca, age 18

Offer support

SSAGQ students who have access to supportive staff are more likely to feel safer at school and have better levels of attendance, meaning they have improved chances of completing their high school education. It is important that students have access to staff who are able to provide sensitive support and guidance, this includes staff being well equipped to respond appropriately and supportively when a student talks to them about their gender or sexuality.

Make it clear around the school that staff members are available to provide support to any student who wants to talk about gender or sexuality. Students need to know that the school is supportive of diversity and that they can talk to staff members. If particular specialist staff are recommended to students they must be able to offer reassurance, respect, confidentiality, and to provide further information or referral. This may require further training.

CELEBRATING YOUR **SAFE SCHOOL**

Your school may have already taken many steps towards creating a safe environment and dealing with homophobia. Celebrate your achievements – and tell others about them! If you haven't already, your school may choose to join Safe Schools Coalition Victoria.

WHAT DOES **SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION VICTORIA** OFFER?

The role of SSCV is to tackle and reduce homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism within school communities. SSCV does this by providing schools with support to address the needs of their SSAGQ students and to create a safer environment for all students.

SSCV provides this support through membership, training and resources.

School membership

Any school can join SSCV by completing a membership form signed by the principal. SSCV members will be listed on the website and will gain recognition from schools in the rest of the state for how well they are doing at supporting sexual and gender diversity. Leading schools are encouraged to share best practice with other members and potential school members. School membership is free.

Associate membership

Individuals who work in schools where the whole school is not a member, can become SSCV associate members. Associate members will need to complete some basic training. Associate membership is free.

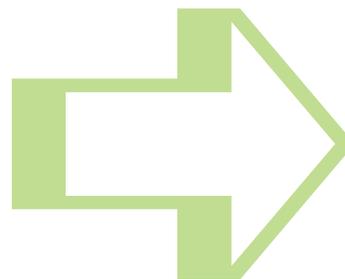
Friends of SSCV

Individuals and organisations who do not work in or with schools can become a friend of SSCV. Becoming a friend of SSCV involves making a donation on a sliding scale according to income or organisational size.

All members receive a regular e-newsletter from SSCV, all resources free of charge, and priority invitations to training sessions.

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WHAT DOES **SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION VICTORIA** OFFER?



Training

A package of training modules, that equip school staff and leadership teams with the knowledge and skills needed to provide a safe environment, is offered through SSCV. Some modules are delivered within schools and others at central locations across Victoria.

SSCV can provide training on:

- supporting same sex attracted and gender questioning young people
- preventing homophobia, supporting sexual and gender diversity and creating a safe environment
- focusing on the wellbeing of students – information for parents
- providing inclusive curriculum
- delivering inclusive sexuality education.

Contact SSCV to book a training session for your school or to find out more.

Resources

SSCV can provide the latest in useful and accessible resources for schools, staff and students in challenging homophobia and supporting diversity. We have an extensive library – if you have questions, we can help.

Consultancy

SSCV can provide tailored support and guidance for schools around specific issues or concerns. Any school can be a safe school, contact us to talk about how we can do it together.

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