



Safe and Caring Schools – A Resource for Equity and
Inclusion in Manitoba Schools

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS


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possibility



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INTRODUCTION

All children and youth have a right to a safe and respectful school environment, and inclusive education. Parents and guardians have a right to expect school officials to ensure that their schools are safe and respectful for LGBTQ students and families.



Parents and guardians are key partners in ensuring that schools are safe and inclusive regardless of one’s sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or any other aspect of a person’s identity.

Many schools have diversity policies, safe school programs, and codes of conduct in place. Unfortunately, bullying can still occur. Despite changing social attitudes, new legislation, and new efforts to reduce bullying and exclusion in schools, some students may still face intolerance and exclusionary behaviours by peers and others. Research, indicates that LGBTQ children and youth are particularly vulnerable to bullying.

Parents/guardians and allies of LGBTQ children can play a very important role in helping LGBTQ youth navigate through their lives and deal with the challenges that may present themselves. By listening, being supportive, and being prepared, parents and allies are in a position to advocate on behalf of LGBTQ youth. Equally important is that ally children and youth receive support and encouragement from their parents or guardians. Ally children and youth are essential in an inclusive and caring school environment

Many schools have LGBTQ support groups or GSAs to help create safe and positive learning environments, and have developed and implemented other supports. If you are a parent or guardian of a LGBTQ student who is struggling and lacking support at school it is important to address the situation by working closely with the school’s administration and staff. There are many excellent online resources and support groups for LGBTQ youth as well as their families. You can find many of them in the Resources section of *Safe and Caring Schools – A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools*.

While the school has the primary responsibility to ensure the emotional and physical safety of all students, parents and guardians are key partners in helping their children and educators create and maintain school spaces where all can feel safe. This section provides information for parents and guardians in general and parents or guardians of LGBTQ children and youth specifically that may be helpful in working with their local school divisions and schools to create safe and caring school environments for all. As well it provides information and resources that address the specific issues and needs of LGBTQ students and their families.



If you are not familiar with LGBTQ terminology and concepts, see the Terms and Concepts section of this kit.



SAFE AND CARING SCHOOLS INITIATIVES

Protecting students from bullying and discrimination in school and on the Internet is an important priority for Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning. Former Education Minister Nancy Allan announced a comprehensive anti-bullying initiative designed to further protect students and create safer and more inclusive environments in the Fall of 2012.

The broad anti-bullying strategy included:

- help for teachers including expanded training supports, workshops and other professional learning opportunities, and ongoing support for *Respect in School and Safe Schools Manitoba*;
- help for parents and guardians including new online information and resources on how to recognize, deal with and report bullying; and
- help for students including strengthened anti-bullying legislation and the Tell Them From Me Survey to allow schools to hear directly from students about bullying;
- amendments to the Public Schools Act made in 2013 broadened the requirements for the reporting of bullying and require school divisions to develop and implement respect for human diversity policies, which:
 - (a) promote and enhance
 - (i) a safe and inclusive learning environment,
 - (ii) the acceptance of and respect for others, and
 - (iii) the creation of a positive school environment; and
 - (b) address training for teachers and other staff about
 - (i) bullying prevention, and
 - (ii) strategies for promoting respect for human diversity and a positive school environment.

In preparing their respect for human diversity policies, school boards must have due regard for the principles of The *Human Rights Code*. In addition, respect for human diversity policies must accommodate pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that

- a) promote:
 - (i) gender equity
 - (ii) antiracism
 - (iii) the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people who are disabled by barriers, or
 - (iv) the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities; and
- b) use the name “gay-straight alliance” or any other name that is consistent with the promotion of a positive school environment that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils.

For Further information on Manitoba’s Safe and Caring Schools initiatives see http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/safe_schools/index.html



LGBTQ YOUTH AND BULLYING

(Adapted from PREVNET's *Parents of LGBTQ Youth*, <http://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/parents/parents-of-lgbtq-youth>)

All Youth Deserve To Feel Safe.

Questioning or accepting one's sexual orientation or gender identity can be a difficult process for teens, especially when coupled with the other stresses of adolescence. At any given time, approximately 4% of teens identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ), and many more are becoming aware of their same-sex attractions or their gender identity. They are more likely to be victims of bullying, sexual harassment and physical abuse and face a greater risk of social isolation.

The types of bullying experienced by LGBTQ youth (or youth perceived to be LGBT or Q) are often very similar to other types of bullying in adolescence, but students are not as supported due to the heteronormative, cisnormative, and homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic aspects of society. The result of these realities is that LGBTQ youth (and youth perceived to be LGBTQ) are often marginalized and excluded by their peers (as well as adults) and therefore often do not have the supportive networks to help them deal with bullying that other students have. It may also not be clear to whom students can go for support. In addition, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying are often not noticed, not taken seriously, not addressed, or not addressed in the same way as other types of bullying. It is important to note that students who are perceived to be LGBT or Q are also on the receiving end of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying.

Types of Bullying Experienced By LGBTQ Youth Youth (or those perceived to be LGBTQ)

- **Physical Bullying:** Hitting, kicking, shoving, spitting, stealing or damaging property.
- **Sexual harassment and humiliation:** aggressive or

insulting language, sexual assault, humiliating comments and actions.

- **Verbal Bullying:** Name-calling (“fag”, “dyke”, “lezzie”, “queer”, “freak”, “tranny” etc.), mocking or hurtful teasing, humiliating or threatening someone.
- **Social Bullying:** Excluding others from the group, gossiping or spreading rumours, setting others up to look foolish, and damaged friendships.
- **Cyberbullying:** Using email, cell phones, text messages and internet sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, socially exclude, or damage reputations and friendships.

Signs of Victimization Among LGBTQ Youth

Because of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia as well as heteronormativity and cisnormativity, LGBTQ youth often suffer from anxiety and depression or problem behaviours. They live with the threat of discrimination and violence, and the fear that friends and family will not accept them and/or support their decision to come out. LGBTQ youth may suddenly withdraw from family and friends to avoid discussing their sexual orientation or gender identity. They may act out against parents or peers to distract from questions about their sexual orientation or gender identity, or in defense against real (or feared) rejection and harassment.

Signs of LGBTQ Youth Victimization

Bruises and scrapes are easy to see. But there are other signs that your child may be being bullied. These may include:

- Change in behaviour, especially in social situations
- Symptoms of depression, anxiety, loneliness, sleeplessness
- Low self-esteem
- Reluctance to go to school
- Drop in grades

- Avoidance or fear of specific locations such as a neighbourhood store, playground, or school
- Crying before and/or after school or a group sport/recreational event
- Exhibiting symptoms associated with illness without being sick (nausea, weakness, headaches...)
- Suicidal thoughts/comments
- References to running away or quitting school or a team
- Loss of interest in social events that he/she might have enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained broken personal possessions, loss of money or personal items
- Sudden disinterest in using their computer or cellphone

Signs that your child may be bullying others

It's hard to admit, but sometimes our children bully others. Some signs may include:

- Change in usual behaviour, especially in social situations
- No lasting friendships; difficulty in maintaining friendships
- Symptoms of anger, depression, anxiety, loneliness
- Sense of entitlement; difficulty forgiving others' errors/hurtful actions
- Need for power; need for control over others
- Intolerance of differences
- Inappropriate, hurtful sense of humour
- Constantly hangs out at specific locations such as a neighbourhood store, playground or school for no reason

- Secretive; judgmental of others; blames others
- Thinks about suicide, running away or quitting school
- Loss of interest in social events that he/she might have enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained personal possessions, money, food
- Sudden, secretive behaviour when using a cellphone or computer
- Communication from the school with concerns about your child's behaviour

For additional information on bullying and bullying prevention. See http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/safe_schools/bullying.html.

Strategies for Parents to Help Youth Deal with LGBTQ Bullying

These strategies are with respect to preventing or reducing bullying as a result of a person's perceived or actual sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

- **Take time to listen**

Listen to your child and provide comfort and support. Let your child know that you will help them through difficult times. Whether your child has been bullied, has bullied others, or has witnessed bullying, feelings of being misunderstood, alone, and helpless are common. Your understanding and attention lets them know that they aren't alone, that you care and that help is available.

- **Lead By Example**

Demonstrate respect and acceptance of all sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions as well as other diversities such as ethnicity and body size. Do not tolerate homophobic, biphobic or transphobic slang for LGBTQ (e.g., fag, lezzie, dyke, trannie). Do not brush off homophobic, biphobic or transphobic comments made by others. Point out and challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity when you see it.

- **Challenge Your Own Assumptions**

Don't automatically assume your child or his or her friends are heterosexual ("straight") or cisgender as it could inhibit your child from seeking your support. Identify your own misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBTQ issues.

- **Encourage Youth to Report**

It is the parents' job to deal with bullying. LGBTQ youth are often afraid to come forward for fear of victimization or because they are not "out". Let your child know that you want to hear about every incident of bullying and harassment.

- **Listen Closely; Respond Quickly**

Parental support can be a powerful buffer against the negative effects of victimization. LGBTQ youth may deny bullying because of shame or fear. Parents must be aware of the signs of bullying. Treat every incident as important and intervene on your child's behalf.

- **Be Inclusive of All Youth**

Children are influenced by how their parents act. Create positive connections among all youth by encouraging and reinforcing respectful and cooperative behaviour whenever you see it. Treat LGBTQ youth as members of your family that you would expect to be respected and nurtured

- **Reduce the Chances for Bullying**

Peer support is very important for your child; seek to surround your adolescent with youth who will stand up for him/her. Enroll in school, community groups, and organized activities that support creating LGBTQ inclusive and safer spaces. Work with the school to promote an inclusive, respectful and accepting learning environment.

- **Seek outside support**

LGBTQ youth who are bullied often have difficulties with depression and self-esteem. Counsellors can provide support through individual counselling or support groups for LGBTQ adolescents who are having difficulty fitting in, and who may be marginalized or targeted by peers. The Resources section of this kit has a list of local resources, including counselling.

- **Publically Support LGBTQ Issues**

Speak up for LGBTQ youth by contacting the people responsible for policy development in school boards and provincial and federal governments. Increase policy makers' sensitivity to the issues faced by these youth. Support policies that recognize the existence of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. Attend a Pride parade if there is one in your area.

- **Educate yourself and get support**

If your child is LGBT or Q, educate yourself about the issues, and find a support group where you can ask questions, get information, meet other parents of LGBTQ children and youth, and talk about your successes, fears and worries. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) have chapters in Brandon and Winnipeg, and there is a PFFOTI group (Parents, Friends and Family of Transgender Individuals) in Winnipeg. You can find the information for these groups in the Resources section of this kit.





SUICIDE AND LGBTQ YOUTH

Adapted from Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, Guide for the Development of an LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (2012) (<http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/LGBTQ-YSPS-Conference-Paper.pdf>)

According to Statistics Canada, suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadians aged 15-24—only accidents cause more deaths. Every year, an average of 500 Canadian youth die by suicide (Statistics Canada, 2008). However, there is a lack of knowledge about how many of these youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, Two Spirit or queer, or are struggling with questions about their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQ). What is apparent is that LGBTQ youth experience a high degree of vulnerability to suicidal ideation and behaviour, both in Canada and the United States, particularly in comparison to their non-LGBTQ peers.

Increasingly, studies confirm that suicidal ideation and behaviour are disproportionately prevalent among LGBTQ youth in comparison to their non-LGBTQ peers. There is substantial data to demonstrate this trend among LGB youth; however, few research studies have focused on the minorities within this minority group, such as Trans, Two Spirit, questioning or racialized youth who identify as LGBT or Q (Haas et al., 2010). Some examples follow:

- Bullying can have a long-lasting effect on suicide risk and mental health. The relationship between bullying and suicide is stronger for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth than for their heterosexual peers (Kim & Leventhal, 2008).
- A study in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario revealed that 28% of transgender and Two Spirit people had attempted suicide at least once (Taylor, 2006).
- Over half of LGB students (47% of GB males and 73% of LB females) have thought about suicide (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006).

- In 2010, 47% of trans youth in Ontario had thought about suicide and 19% had attempted suicide in the preceding year (Scanlon, Travers, Coleman, Bauer, & Boyce, 2010).
- LGBTQ youth are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009).
- Adolescent youth who have been rejected by their families for being LGB are 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).
- Both victims and perpetrators of bullying are at a higher risk for suicide than their peers. Children who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying are at the highest risk (Kim & Leventhal, 2008; “Suicide and bullying: Issue brief,” 2011).

Schools are a critical source of both risk and protection for LGBTQ youth (Nichols, 1999; Taylor et al., 2011). According to *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools* (Taylor et al., 2011), LGBTQ youth face greater prejudice and victimization in their schools and a correspondingly lower level of school connectedness than their non-LGBTQ peers:

- 68% of trans students, 55% of LB students and 42% of GB students reported being verbally harassed about their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation.
- 20% of LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted about their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation.
- 49% of trans students, 33% of lesbian students and 40% of gay male students have experienced sexual harassment in school in the last year.
- 64% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe in their schools

(compared to 15% of non-LGBTQ students).

- 30% of trans students and 20% of LGB students strongly agreed that they sometimes “feel very depressed” about their school (compared to 6% of non-LGBTQ students).



Safe and caring school strategies that create safe and inclusive schools for LGBTQ students and all other students **are** an essential aspect of suicide prevention. **These include:**

- LGBTQ specific training for educators **and guidance counsellors** on cultural competency and suicide prevention.
- Legislation and **thoroughly implemented** policies regarding safety and inclusivity in schools that address sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Establishment of gay-straight alliances (GSAs), or similar LGBTQ-specific safe space and support groups
- **Respectful inclusion of LGBTQ issues, realities and role models in school life, including in the curriculum**
- Peer education initiatives that include LGBTQ suicide prevention



FACTS AND MYTHS ABOUT ANTI-HOMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-TRANSPHOBIA EDUCATION

Adapted from Facts and Myths about Anti-Homophobia Education from PFLAG Canada (http://pflagcanada.ca/pdfs/homophobia-myths_english.pdf)

Inaccurate information can lead to misconceptions that hamper the school's efforts to create safe learning environments for all children and youth. The following facts will help to dispel common myths about LGBTQ people and anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education.

Many people mistakenly assume that anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education means “teaching about homosexuality”. This is not the case. Anti-homophobia, anti-biphobia and anti-transphobia education (also known as LGBTQ inclusive education) is education that seeks to create safer schools and societies. It does so by promoting respect for all people, and addressing homophobia, biphobia, transphobia as well as heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Including LGBTQ people, issues and realities into the curriculum helps schools to become safer and more inclusive spaces. Intervening in bullying, speaking out about safer space, and supporting students in their creation of these spaces are also important components.

Myth # 1: Anti-homophobia, anti-biphobia and anti-transphobia education is about teaching homosexuality in schools and condones the lifestyle.

Fact #1: Firstly, LGBTQ inclusion is not about teaching about homosexuality, it is about the meaningful and relevant inclusion of LGBTQ people, issues and realities into the curriculum. Teachers often teach about unfamiliar topics to help students develop respect for other people and to acknowledge their contributions to society. A teacher's job is to present accurate, age-appropriate information to students. Secondly, lesbian, gay, bisexual, Two-Spirit, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) persons have lives like everyone else. There is no distinct LGBTQ “lifestyle.”

Myth #2: Anti-homophobia, anti-biphobia and anti-transphobia education involves talking about gay sex.

Fact #2: Anti-homophobia, anti-biphobia and anti-transphobia education can be done in a variety of ways. Most involve no discussion of sex or sexual practices whatsoever. The only exception may be in the human sexuality learning outcomes *Physical Education/Health Education curriculum* identified for Kindergarten and Grades 2, 5, 7, 9, 10 and 12 students. As with any discussions about sex in these contexts, it is important that it be done in age-appropriate ways. Otherwise, teachers may talk about LGBTQ role models in history, or read a story about same gender families. They may also discuss the oppression of LGBTQ people and focus on stopping homophobic name-calling in schools. These are just a few examples of age-appropriate anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education.

Myth #3: LGBTQ teachers have a “gay agenda” for public schools by introducing LGBTQ topics.

Fact #3: All teachers, principals and support staff have a legal obligation to respond to all forms of harassment and discrimination in schools. All students (and staff) have the right to attend school in a safe environment. They also expect to see their lives positively reflected in curriculum and classroom activities. Just as anti-racism and multicultural education have been embraced by educators, there is also a growing awareness that anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education need to be integrated within the curriculum. You do not have to be a person of colour to care about racism. Similarly, you do not have to be LGBTQ to counter homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heteronormativity or cisnormativity in schools or society at large. Including LGBTQ issues into the curriculum helps to create a safer and respectful environment for everyone – students, staff and parents.

Myth #4: Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs (GSAs) in high schools are a way to recruit students and encourage them to experiment with being gay, lesbian or transgender.

Fact #4: No one suddenly chooses to become LGBTQ simply because they heard about the topic in school, from friends, or via their social circles. A person's sexual orientation or gender identity is part of their make-up, whether that person identifies as homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or transgender. There is consensus in the medical and psychiatric world that we do not choose our sexual orientations or gender identity. Sexual orientation and gender identity are complex traits, and have been understood differently by different cultures and at different times in history. GSAs help all students to come together in a safer space to talk about issues that are important to them. GSAs help students to learn from one another and empower them to create a positive learning environment for all. Anyone can be the target of hateful slurs, irrespective of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

Myth #5: Students will become more sexually active and/or promiscuous if they hear about LGBTQ issues at school.

Fact #5: Hearing about LGBTQ issues does not increase sexual activity or promiscuity. The fact is some teenagers are sexually active. The decisions they make whether to be sexually active or not have little to do with LGBTQ issues or anti-homophobia education. However, lack of information about safe sex can have dramatic and sometimes tragic consequences for youth. Promiscuity and unsafe sexual behaviours often occur when students do not have access to age-appropriate, accurate information or feel they need to prove their sexuality.

Myth #6: LGBTQ issues are not part of the curriculum. Some schools are just making this up.

Fact # 6: Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning establishes the mandatory curriculum. *K-12 (K-S4) Physical Education/Health Education, Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes for Active Healthy Lifestyles* includes references to sexual orientation, discrimination, and sexual health. The Manitoba *Social Studies curriculum* includes the exploration of the diversity of families, Canadian society, citizenship, and human rights.

Public and funded independent schools have an obligation to be inclusive of the diverse communities they serve including LGBTQ students and families. They have as much right as anyone else to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

ANTI-HOMOPHOBIA, ANTI-BIPHOBIA and ANTI-TRANSPHOBIA EDUCATION IS . . .

- inclusive of all members of our school communities
- respectful of differences and inclusive of diversity
- respectful of the Human Rights Code of Manitoba and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- mindful that harassment and discrimination may be present in any school
- mindful that silence around certain topics can encourage harassment and can be a form of discrimination
- optimistic that a better school environment is possible for everyone

ANTI-HOMOPHOBIA, ANTI-BIPHOBIA and ANTI TRANSPHOBIA
EDUCATION LOOKS LIKE . . .

- schools where students and educators speak out against injustice and inequity
- schools that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for human diversity, including those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities
- schools where all members of the school community can be accepted and open about their lives without fear or shame
- classrooms which acknowledge and respect diverse family models
- classrooms which acknowledge and positively represent the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people across the curriculum
- schools where youth can take the lead on concerns that are important to them, school divisions where there is knowledge and expertise available to support schools in this work

Age-appropriate discussions on issues such as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia with children and youth can provide them with important tools for understanding and resisting the strong influence these phobias have within school culture and society at large. Children encounter and learn homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia very early in their elementary education, which means it's important for parents and guardians to address these topics (in age-appropriate ways) from an early age through adolescence. Here are some tips for getting started.

1) Use language your child understands

Concepts like homophobia, transphobia and biphobia refer to complex social phenomena which can be challenging for anyone to fully grasp. This means it's important to consider age-appropriate ways of addressing these topics in conversation. That said, the basic elements are fairly easily explained. Depending on the age of the child, consider framing these phobias in terms they can relate to, from "meanness" through to "bullying," from "dislike" through to "phobia", etc.

2) Be Prepared to Listen

Chances are your child will have already encountered a number of examples of homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic behaviour. If they don't volunteer their experiences, ask them to try and think of an example from their school, community group, or another activity they may be a part of. In either case, be prepared to spend some time listening. Try your best to weave whatever examples they share throughout your discussions, as this may help to ground some of these concepts in lived experience.



3) Use helpful media

There are a number of books, films and websites in existence that present narratives around LGBTQ identities as well as homophobia, and to a lesser extent, transphobia and biphobia. These can serve as excellent tools for conversation as they provide concrete, shared points of reference for exploration through discussion. Egale’s MyGSA.ca has information about the kind of materials available. There are also booklists and information on other media provided by various organizations. The Rainbow Books website may also be helpful (<http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>).

4) Try not to make things overly simple

While speaking age-appropriately is obviously important, it’s also important to frame your discussion realistically. While it can be easy to paint the world in black and white, where people who are homophobic, transphobic or biphobic are ‘bad’ and others the ‘good’ or innocent victims, the reality of schoolyard bullying is far more complicated. Keeping this in mind, consider describing homophobia as something that people “do” as opposed to a state of being or personal characteristic. There’s potential here to understand these phobias as hurtful behaviour with many victims, including even the aggressor. At the end of the day, almost all of us will at some time be implicated in a homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic statement or activity, meaning that we all have a responsibility to learn to address these issues.

5) Keep it personal

It can be really useful to personalize this conversation by including a LGBTQ-identified loved one. If no one in the immediate family identifies openly as a member of the LGBTQ spectrum, consider bringing in an extended family

member or friend to help bring the conversation to a personal level. This way, children and youth are much more likely to understand the humanity of these arguments, and some of the real-life consequences of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

6) Establish a strong network of support

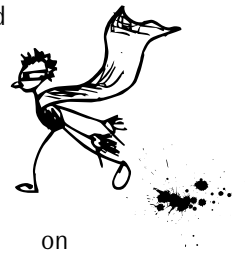
While it's great to provide children and youth with the tools to challenge homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, it is important not to expect them to stand alone. Firstly, make sure they know that this is not just a one-time talk you're having with them, and that they can come to you, or another designated family member, to discuss these issues in the future. Furthermore, it's worth following up at school to determine where the staff stand on issues of LGBTQ bullying. Look over some of the other sections in *Safe and Caring Schools – A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* to get an idea of how to approach teachers and administration around these issues. Finally, speaking with other parents and/or guardians in the school community, as well as their children, raises the chances that you won't be the only family on the block challenging these phobias, and working to foster a more inclusive and safer education for all.

To study up on the terms and concepts commonly used to talk about homophobia, transphobia and biphobia, as well as the many LGBTQ communities around the world, take a look at the Terms and Concepts section of this kit.



SUPPORTING A CHILD WHO WOULD LIKE TO START A GSA OR ANOTHER STUDENT-LED SAFE SPACE GROUP

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), or other student-led safe space groups, can make a big difference in the culture of a school. They can contribute practically by promoting awareness and addressing issues of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia as well as heteronormativity and cis-normativity, while also providing students with a safer and more accepting environment on school grounds. Furthermore, they can work indirectly as an acknowledgement of the administration's, board's, and student body's commitment to LGBTQ inclusive spaces.



Any student, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, is able to start a GSA to contribute to a safer school environment. As a parent or guardian, there are many ways you can help your child and other students at the school who want to establish a GSA or another student-led safe space group. Here are a few tips:

- **Talk with your child**

A GSA, or any student-led safer space group, is primarily a club for students, and so it's important that schools empower students to lead in its creation. Talk with your child and other LGBTQ-friendly parents and/or guardians to get a sense of what the climate is like at school. Has there been a GSA or similar group before? Has anyone ever tried to start one? Would students join if there were one? Is there a group of students ready to start one now?

Your actions don't have to hinge on the answers to these questions, but it's a good idea to establish and maintain a network with supportive students and families from the school. Students can find more information on starting a group in the *GSA Guide* section of the *Safe*

and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools document.

- **Encourage your Ally Children**

If your children are interested in being allies, support their efforts by encouraging them to educate themselves about the issues, talk with friends and family who are LGBTQ, and to think of ways to take action, like starting or supporting a GSA.

- **Talk with school staff**

Try casual conversation with any of your child's teachers who you think might be supportive. Is there or has there ever been a club that addresses LGBTQ themes? Ask yourself, are there any easily identifiable "champions" among the staff; someone who you think might help students set up a GSA or who would make a good staff advisor? Are students aware of this person? Why not help your child to organize a meeting between interested students and this staff member? See *Parents as Partners: Collaborating and Working with Educators and Schools to Improve Safety and Inclusion* at the end of this section for further information and suggestions.

- **Reach out locally**

Dozens of Manitoba schools already have GSAs. Help your child reach out locally to find out if there is another school in the area that has a GSA **or student-led group that includes an LGBTQ focus.** Help organize a meeting between interested students from your child's school community and the staff advisor or school administration and students of the school with an active GSA. Encourage students to take the opportunity to share and discuss strategies, struggles and successes with local GSAs. Egale Canada's *MyGSA.ca* website has a GSA section that lists GSAs from across the country. The **Rainbow Resource Centre** in Winnipeg provides support for GSAs and maintains a list of GSAs throughout Manitoba.

- **Inform yourself**

What do you know about your school's stance on LGBTQ inclusion at school? What about LGBTQ-targeted bullying? Is this information available to students in your school community? Consider helping your child research and provide information to the students at their school interested in starting a GSA or student-led safe space group.

Sometimes school officials believe there is no need for a GSA. For the most recent Canadian stats on LGBTQ-targeted bullying and harassment, check out Egale Canada's *Every Class in Every School* report. **For GSA-supportive documents** governing your child's own school, consult your school's website and the division's website searching for division policies, codes of conduct and any official documents related to equity, diversity and inclusive education. You can find some examples of inclusive education policies in the Guide section of this kit.

- **Be ready to help**

It is possible that staff at the school would like to be supportive, but don't know how. To prepare for this, consider providing your child or interested students with resources to share with staff about GSAs and student-led safer space groups in schools. To start, you can find many useful resources in the *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools*. This guide includes separate sections for guidance counsellors, administrators and educators, making it easy to customize the information you share. You can also find information on Egale Canada's *MyGSA.ca* website.

- **Privacy, confidentiality, and risks**

Before beginning this work, talk with your child and family to get a clear sense of your and their boundaries and expectations. It's important that no one be unintentionally "outed" in the process of creating a GSA or student-led safer space group. In addition, take some time to consider the ways in which your actions might affect your family's interactions with others at the school. Could bullying become an issue, and what's your plan if it does? Bullying could happen from a student to another student or from a parent/guardian or family to another parent/guardian or family. Assess your potential outcomes, including risks, and plan accordingly.

- **Seek a support Network**

It is important to seek out a LGBTQ support network as your child starts to consider establishing a GSA at school. There may be times when such a process has the potential to get stressful, and it's wise to find ways for you and your child to diffuse that stress. Talk about stress with your child, but be conscious of the boundary between helping your child with their stress, and burdening them with your own. Be sure to support yourself by reaching out to friends, allies, other LGBTQ families, and connecting with local LGBTQ organizations. The LGBTQ Resources section of *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* provides a list of local and national organizations which may be helpful.



SUPPORTING A CHILD WHO IS 'COMING OUT'

Coming Out

- The process through which LGBTQ people recognize and acknowledge their non-heterosexual orientation and integrate this understanding into their personal and social lives.
- The act of disclosing this orientation or identity to others.

From Terms and Concepts section of *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools*

Coming out is a challenging process at any age. That said, coming out as a youth can be particularly challenging given the array of social pressures youth face at school, at home, and in broader society. It's also quite common for family members to experience a number of challenges when their child or relation first identifies themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning (LGBQ) or another identity within the spectrum. The following list contains a number of helpful resources to address this issue.

- **Rainbow Resource Centre** in Winnipeg provides counselling and other supports for parents/guardians, family, and friends of LGBTQ community members who need information, education, and support in order to foster supportive relationships with their LGBTQ loved ones.
- **Sexuality Education Resource Centre** in Brandon serves the Brandon and Prairie Mountain regions of Manitoba. It provides support for individuals to access sexuality and LGBTQ information, as well as other sexual health resources. They have a presence at, and participate in, many sexual health-related events and activities in the community - with the aim to inform and educate people about SERC's services and supports.
- **When sons and daughters come out** – PFLAG Canada: This guide provides a basic resource for parents/guardians whose child has just come out as LGBT or Q. (www.pflag.ca)

- **Questions & Answers for Parents and Family Members of Gay and Lesbian Youth** – Vancouver School Board: A brief guide exploring some of the basic questions often considered by parents after their child has come out. See <http://pflagcanada.ca/en/foreign-language-e.html>
- **MyGSA.ca Book section:** Here you'll find extensive listings of resources 'tagged' for parents/guardians with a number focusing on the coming out process.

Seeking Support in your school community

Many parents of youth who identify as LGBTQ find themselves concerned for the safety and well-being of their children, given that discrimination and violence against LGBTQ individuals are serious problems in Canada and around the world. Part of this concern involves wanting to ensure a safe and inclusive school environment. Parents can work towards this in several ways:

- **Engage with your child!**

Perhaps the most important thing you can do to ease your child's coming out process is to stay open to communicating with them. They probably won't want to talk about their identity all the time (and neither may you) but it's important that you let them know that they have your support and love. Most importantly, encourage your child to come to you for support whenever they feel unsafe or disrespected— at school, or anywhere else. Make yourself available for conversation!

- **Engage with the school community**

Collaborate and work with teachers and administrators at your child's school to ensure a safer and more inclusive school community for everyone. Does your school or school division have an equity officer, or someone in charge of inclusive education? If so, consider also reaching out to this

person for further support and resources. Try to make sure there is at least one adult in the school that your child can talk to.

- **Engage with other parents/guardians**

Other parents and/or guardians within the school community can be great allies in helping a parent/guardian come to understand the needs of a LGBTQ child, and in working towards a safe and more inclusive school community. Consider reaching out to other parents/guardians whose children may openly identify as LGBTQ. These parents/guardians may be able to offer you perspectives on their emotional processes and will often be great people to speak to about issues you may not want to discuss with your child. Groups like PFLAG can offer great local support from other parents/guardians in the area.

- **Engaging with the local LGBTQ communities**

Do some research into local LGBTQ organizations and service providers such as community groups, or healthcare organizations. If you can't find anything specific to parents/guardians of LGBTQ youth, you may still find some organizations that can help address some of your questions and concerns. Volunteering with a local organization, such as a LGBTQ Pride group, can be a great way to indicate your support to your child, as well as allowing you to meet and interact with parents and members of the LGBTQ community. The Resources section in *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* provides a list of local resources.



BEING AN ALLY: HOW TO BE AN ALLIED PARENT/GUARDIAN AT YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

Ally: An individual who is supportive of the LGBTQ community. They believe in the dignity and respect of all people, and are willing to stand up in that role.

– From Vancouver District School Board's Policy ACB

“No one in my family is LGBTQ, how can I help?”

Parents and guardians of non-LGBTQ children) may not be subject to the same damaging stereotypes often imposed on LGBTQ parents/guardians, or the parents/guardians of LGBTQ children (e.g. myths of recruitment, pedophilia, the “gay agenda”, etc.). This means that they can play a critical role in the creation of safer and more inclusive schools.

While it is important to challenge these stereotypes, it's also important to understand and make the most of the incredible opportunity allies without LGBTQ children or family members have to advance safer and more inclusive schools. Here are some tips about how people who do not identify as LGBTQ can help make a difference.

1) **Talk with your child about LGBTQ inclusion**

By far the greatest impact you will have on your child's school is through your child and their beliefs, actions and words, much of which are learned from you. With this in mind, consider the way in which LGBTQ themes are brought up in your household. Do you ever discuss LGBTQ people? Do you have LGBTQ family members? Are they playing a full part in the life of your family? Have you talked about the use of homophobic language common in schoolyard conversation (e.g. “That's so gay”, “faggot”, “dyke”, trannie, etc.)? Make an effort to include **positive comments about LGBTQ individuals in your family conversations**. See the Role Models section of the *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* for some examples of local and national LGBTQ Role models. Being an ally starts at home.

2) Make your home a safe space

It must be stressed that being an ally starts at home. Consider establishing boundaries in your house so that everyone in the family knows that homophobia, transphobia and biphobia are not acceptable in your home. These rules can apply to everyone. For example, guests and friends should politely be made aware whenever they misstep (we all do!). Safe spaces require maintenance, and so these topics can come up over and over again, challenging your family to address the many varied aspects of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. At the end of the day it's about being supportive and responding to the behaviours of everyone in the home.

3) Support inclusion at school

Check out the MyGSA.ca School Climate Questions to get a sense of how inclusive your school is regarding LGBTQ topics. Ask yourself questions like “if I or my child were LGBTQ, would this make us feel included?” For instance, does your school allow for same-sex parents/guardians to register as “parents” or “guardians”, or must there be a “mother” and “father” on forms? Does the school have gender-neutral washroom facilities available? Are there resources available for transgender youth? Are there LGBTQ-themed books in the library? Are notable LGBTQ figures included in course material? Are LGBTQ identities acknowledged in course material? Is there a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or other student-led safer space group at the school?

4) Keep it up

Being an ally isn't always a clear-cut job. Sometimes it involves significant energy and dedication (like when supporting your child to set up a student-led group like a GSA or advocating for LGBTQ-inclusive policy) but it also includes the equally important small stuff, like daily words of support for LGBTQ families and other allies. One of the most common arguments against LGBTQ inclusion is that “there aren't any LGBTQ students, staff or parents/guardians

at our school.” This assumes that LGBTQ people are always out, and obviously so, which isn’t always the case. It’s always possible that LGBTQ people make use of the facilities, teach at, or attend the school, but simply don’t feel comfortable publically acknowledging their identity. With this in mind, don’t be disheartened if you, a non-LGBTQ parent of non-LGBTQ children, appear to be the only one doing this work. No matter who you are the work of an ally needs to be done!

5) Seek out a support network

Before actively taking on the role of an ally, consider establishing a support network. Perhaps there are other allied or LGBTQ families at your school who are interested in helping to make your school safe and more inclusive. Consider speaking with supportive friends, or parents/guardians and/or GSA advisors from other school communities.



CONNECTING WITH LOCAL LGBTQ FAMILIES AND ALLIES

These tips were written with the hope that they will assist you in connecting with a network of supportive LGBTQ families and allies within your local community, offering more opportunities for you and your children, and all students to feel supported both in and out of school. Each of these suggestions involves a variable amount of risk on your part. Navigating those risks is dependent on your unique understanding of local ideas and behaviours related to LGBTQ identities. Be sure to consider and prepare for potential responses to anyone in your family coming out publicly, or semi-publically, as LGBTQ or even as an ally. Safety first!

1) **Keep your ear to the ground**

The first step towards meeting more LGBTQ families and allies is talking to people in your school community. Be aware of both subtle and overt references to LGBTQ family members or partners. For example, your child may come home talking about how a classmate has two dads, or is challenging gender norms and how their family is supportive. You can be amazed at what you find out by engaging in casual conversation.

2) **Connect with school staff**

If your family is LGBTQ and had decided to come out at school or you identify as allies, let teachers and administrators know that safety and inclusion of LGBTQ students and families is important to you.

3) **Connect with local LGBTQ communities**

If you're in a larger city or town and are LGBTQ or have LGBTQ children, there may already be an LGBTQ parents' group or support group in place. Otherwise, you may want to try more informal methods, like looking up LGBTQ friendly sports leagues, activity groups or classes. Getting involved in community activities is often a great way to meet and

talk with LGBTQ folks and even their families. If you or your family identify as allies, check out local organizations to learn more about what is offered. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) have chapters in Brandon and Winnipeg, and there is a PFFOTI group (Parents, Friends and Family of Transgender Individuals) in Winnipeg. You can find the information for these groups in the Resources section of *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools*.

4) Connect on the web

Check to see if there are any local LGBTQ websites where you might be able to find other local LGBTQ families? The LGBTQ Resources section *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* provides a list of local and national organizations which may be helpful. Facebook and Twitter can also serve as excellent resources for reaching out to unknown allies in your community. As with anything on the internet, be safe!

5) Consider starting a group outside of school

Even a handful of organized LGBTQ family members and their allies can make a positive difference at school. Once you've found others interested in working with staff and students to make school safer and more inclusive, why not start a small group? Groups are valuable in that they can better organize efforts to help make school safer, as well as heighten the visibility of LGBTQ inclusivity at school and raise the likelihood of connecting with other LGBTQ families. It can be as casual or as formal as you like.



PARENTS AND GUARDIANS AS PARTNERS: COLLABORATING WITH EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Collaboration between parents/guardians, school trustees, senior administrators, principals and staff can lead to caring, respectful, inclusive, and, ultimately, safer schools for all children.

Partnering and collaborating with others to strengthen the local and regional schools can be demanding, however the results of these efforts can be significant. The following pages contain information and suggestions for parents/guardians who wish to collaborate with and work with their local education authorities and educators to build safer and more caring and inclusive schools. The information provided relates to both general diversity and safe schools initiatives, as well LGBTQ-inclusive policies and initiatives, and for working at the school division and school level.

Respect for Human Diversity and Safe Schools Policies and Initiatives

Amendments made to the Manitoba Public Schools Act in 2013 require school divisions to develop and implement respect for human diversity policies. As well, schools are required to develop safe school charters and codes of conduct. Parents/guardians can play an important role in developing and supporting the implementation of such policies.

Here are some points to consider in collaborating with school divisions or schools to influence and develop such policies.

- **Inform yourself**

It's important to know what policies are already in place. Check out the board or division's website for links to policy documents. You could also call and ask directly for policies relating to equity, inclusive education or discrimination,

codes of conduct, and related material. The Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning safe and caring school web pages provide information on policies and resource materials (see http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/safe_schools/index.html).

To get a sense of some of the policies developed by school divisions in Manitoba see the GSA Guide section of Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools. Egale's School Board Policy section of the MyGSA website also provides examples of school policies that are deemed to be comprehensive (see <http://www.mygsa.ca/setting-gsa/school-board-policies>). These policies are particularly comprehensive because they address the safety and acceptance of students based on a number of factors, as well as explicitly including their sexual orientation and gender identity or gender expression. You can compare and contrast your local school division's existing policies with some of these. This comparison may help you determine what's covered already, and what may need to be improved.

Once you've done your background research, clarify and write down your ideas about what changes may be needed and what you deem most important.

- **Get involved**

School divisions will often seek and provide opportunities for parents/guardians to participate in policy and decision-making processes through presentation to the board, written submissions, advisory groups, focus groups, and public consultation sessions. Contact the local school division to get information on upcoming consultations and opportunities for involvement.

The creation or updating of a board/division policy isn't always easy, and so it's important to work with a network of allies and interested parents/guardians from across the division. Try to reach out locally to other supportive parents/guardians and families from your school. At the same time, it

is often worthwhile to connect with regional groups as well as other LGBTQ organizations and service providers as they may have networks of parents and guardians with which you can build connections. Local and regional teachers' associations may also be able to connect you with educators who are supportive of your work. Finally, you will most likely want to reach out to your own school trustee and other trustees to express your thoughts and encourage their support.

Collaborating and Working with School Administrators and Teachers

School administrators and teachers play a vital role in the health and safety of children and youth, in the school, the classrooms, and in the broader community. Their work involves maintaining and improving on the systems in place to make the school community a safe and productive one for students, educators and parents/guardians.

It is important that educators are equipped with the tools and understanding to provide a safer and inclusive environment for all students (including LGBTQ students) that supports their achievement and wellbeing.

The following are some suggestions for discussing and collaborating with your school's administration and your child's teachers in addressing safe and caring schools and LGBTQ inclusion and safety

- **Inform yourself**

Before your meeting with an administrator or your child's teacher, do some research into existing school policies regarding sexual orientation and gender identity or more generally, inclusive education. Are these identities explicitly protected within the code of conduct? How well is the school doing this? If you can't find anything, ask the administrator or teacher during your meeting what is in place to foster

a safer, more inclusive and welcoming school climate specifically for LGBTQ students, and families. In Manitoba, every school division is required to have a respect for human diversity policy and safe schools charter in place, and it should be reflected in school-level actions.

- **Communicate with Your Child’s Teachers**

Whenever possible, it’s a great idea to foster ongoing communication and form a positive relationship with your child’s teachers in support of your child’s and other students’ achievement and well-being. As a LGBTQ parent/guardian or ally, this doesn’t always have to involve direct discussion of LGBTQ issues, but could include more subtle references to the composition of diverse families, gender roles and inclusion in general. Casual references to same-sex partners, gender non-conforming activities, or queer happenings about town, can be great ways to remind teachers about the size and scope of LGBTQ communities outside the school walls.

- **Clarify your goals or objectives**

Before your meeting with the school administrator, consider exactly what you wish to discuss and the outcomes you desire from such a conversation. Do you want improvements to the policy and code of conduct at the school, support for students in forming a GSA or student-led safer space group, more school-wide representation of LGBTQ themes, or something else? Consider sharing your desired outcomes with the teacher at the beginning of your conversation.

Before initiating a conversation with your child’s teacher, consider what you desire to be the outcomes of the conversation. Do you want help with a specific incident, more LGBTQ inclusive resources, a more positive and accepting classroom environment, or guidance around supporting your child who would like to establish a GSA or student-led safer space group?

- **Be prepared to get involved**

It's always a good idea to be prepared for a meeting with a school administrator, or teacher, so consider bringing resources and examples related to what you're discussing. For example, if you plan to talk to the principal about supporting your child and other students who want to form a GSA or student-led safer space group, consider bringing information on forming such groups and keys to their success. Refer the principal to the Information for Administrators section of *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools*.

Similarly, your child's teachers will welcome suggestions and resources you may wish to share with them. They will appreciate some information on LGBTQ inclusion in the classroom. The Educator's section of *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* has some examples, and they can be encouraged to consider bringing in some examples of age-appropriate LGBTQ-inclusive stories and or films.

- **Take notes**

It is a great idea to keep dated notes regarding what was said in meetings with administrators and your child's teachers. If you, an administrator, or a teacher, make a commitment, make a note so that you can follow-up later. If you wish to make a formal request to an administrator or teacher, it may even be a good idea to write them an email or a letter detailing your request. It can be helpful to schedule follow-up conversations with the administrator or teacher to assess progress and changes that you have observed. It can also be helpful to know what you've tried, in case things don't improve at any point later on.

- **Protecting confidentiality and privacy**

It is important that during the meeting with the school administrator or child's teacher that you protect your and other families rights to privacy and confidentiality. If you are a LGBTQ parent or parent of an LGBTQ child, before beginning a conversation with your administrator or teacher, assess the potential impact of that conversation. For instance, is there a risk that this conversation could lead to anyone in your family or another individual being unintentionally "outed" at school or in the community? Could your child or other children face (more) bullying as a result? Will you be asking the administrator and teacher to keep certain information in confidence, or would you rather they work to spread the message throughout the school? Take some time to assess your risks and determine what you're comfortable with. Plan accordingly.

- **Seek a support network**

It's important to feel supported in all your dealings with your child's school. If you are an ally or an LGBTQ parent, do you know of other LGBTQ families and allies or groups in your community? Consider reaching out to them for discussion and support. Find out if anyone else has approached the administration regarding LGBTQ inclusion, and what the results of that conversation were. Furthermore, consider whether or not you'll be scheduling meetings alone or with a supportive partner or friend.

The Resource Section of *Safe and Caring Schools: A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools* provides a list of potential allies in Manitoba. Egale Canada (mygsa@egale.ca) and other organizations may also be of assistance.



"Every parent knows the impact that bullying can have on children and their ability to learn." – Nancy Allan

**Safe and Caring Schools-
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