

# Homophobic and transphobic bullying in youth sport

## Background

Every child in every sports club or activity has the right to participate, train and play free from the fear of bullying of any kind. Everyone involved in children's sport should be working together to ensure that this is the case.

**Note:** The term 'children' describes any person under the age of 18.

Sports clubs, governing bodies and activity providers should take steps to prevent bullying behaviour wherever possible, and to respond to any incidents. A preventative approach safeguards the welfare of members and plays a part in creating an environment and society in which people treat each other with respect. Sports clubs and activity providers may already have general **anti-bullying strategies** in place. Preventing and responding to homophobic and transphobic bullying should be part of these strategies.

Discriminatory views about heterosexual or homosexual orientation or a person's gender identity are evident in all areas of society but are especially prominent in sport. Transphobia and homophobia are often driven by a lack of understanding which can strengthen stereotypes.

This can potentially lead to actions that may cause LGBT+ people to feel excluded, isolated or undervalued. If these values and actions are taking place at an organisational level, then the organisation itself could be deemed to be 'institutionally homophobic or transphobic'.

Many LGBT+ people in sport face discrimination simply because they are perceived to be different from the 'norm'. As well as causing many LGBT+ athletes to leave clubs or sport, negative treatment has in the worst cases resulted in self harm or suicide.

## Impact

All bullying has the potential to cause significant harm (physical, emotional or psychological) to young people and blights the sport where it takes place. Transphobic and homophobic bullying can be hard to spot as it may be happening out of view of adults.

Bullying can include a person being made to feel unwelcome, belittled, or harassed (through gossip, name-calling, jokes and other hate acts – both online and in the 'real' world). Sometimes, athletes witness transphobic or homophobic bullying, and even if they aren't LGBT+ and the subject of the abuse, they may be reluctant to report it to coaches or other adults for fear of judgement or rejection.

Generally, transphobic and homophobic bullying looks like other kinds of bullying. It may include:

- verbal abuse – including spreading rumours that someone is gay, with its implication that this is somehow inferior
- physical abuse – including hitting, kicking, sexual assault, threatening behaviour, and theft or destruction of property
- cyberbullying – using online spaces to spread rumours about someone or exclude them; this can also include text messaging, including video and picture messaging
- exclusion and isolation – for example, always being picked last for the team

### Facts about the impact

- 55% of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils have experienced direct homophobic bullying
- 99% of gay young people hear the phrases 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' in school
- 96% of gay pupils hear homophobic language such as 'poof' or 'lezza'
- 3 in 5 gay pupils who experience homophobic bullying say that teachers who witness the bullying never intervene
- 32% of gay pupils experiencing bullying change their future educational plans because of it; 3 in 5 say it impacts directly on their school work
- 41% of gay young people have attempted or thought about taking their own life directly because of bullying; 41% have self-harmed
- 83% of trans young people say they have experienced name-calling and 35% have experienced physical attacks
- almost a third of trans young people say they have missed lessons due to discrimination or fear of discrimination
- over a quarter of trans young people have attempted suicide

\* Stats taken from **Getting Started – a toolkit for tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in secondary schools**. Stonewall UK (2015).

### Challenging Myths

#### All transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual people choose to be 'that way'

All individuals discover, rather than choose, their gender identity or their sexual orientation. This process of discovery can take any length of time, sometimes happening during adolescence, sometimes later in life.

For transgender young people, the only point at which choice seems to come into play is how and when they choose to acknowledge and express their gender identity. This process includes self-acceptance, and responses from other people (both supportive and offensive) can have a profound impact on the person's wellbeing.

#### 'It's only banter' or 'It's just part of the culture of team sports'

This type of atmosphere destroys the opportunity for young people to develop self-esteem, confidence and leadership skills.

As an organisation, it's your duty to promote the benefits of sporting participation and celebrating difference to all young people, and to ensure that they are protected from transphobic and homophobic abuse and discrimination.

### Prevention

There are actions your club or organisation can undertake to help prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying and create a respectful, inclusive space.

#### Create an inclusive environment

Promote environments and behaviours in which difference is embraced and celebrated. This may include having discussions about positive transgender sports role models, running **anti-bullying activity sessions**, and displaying posters or signs that inform LGBT+ young people of 'safe spaces'.

### Have policies in place

Ensure relevant **policies and procedures** exist. If not already included, add transphobic and homophobic bullying to your anti-bullying policies and related policies, procedures and codes of conduct. Check that reports and referrals are acted upon.

### Keep track of bullying

Assess and monitor the extent of transphobic and homophobic bullying through regular reviews of **incident reporting forms**. For example, start a 'bullying box' where participants can anonymously report incidents. Evaluate the responses received and ensure negative attitudes and bullying behaviour are addressed.

### Raise awareness

Raise awareness of what transphobic and homophobic bullying is and how your sports organisation should respond. Sports leaders should attend specific training about sexuality, diversity and gender identity.

### Provide support

Know how to **provide sensitive support** to LGBT+ members. Help them feel safe, and able to tell adults in authority positions about incidents of bullying.

## Responding to homophobic and transphobic bullying

Coaches, and other staff and volunteers, should be aware of gender identity issues so that they will not only recognise transphobic or homophobic language but avoid using such language themselves and know how to challenge negative behaviours.

It's important that there are consequences for those who use homophobic or transphobic language or display discriminatory behaviours, in the same way that a club should challenge any form of bullying.

It's therefore important to challenge this language when it occurs:

- Ensure that members are informed that discriminatory language will not be tolerated in your sports setting.
- Make sure it is included in policies and procedures. For example, you could include specific statements in your codes of conduct (for coaches, young people and parents) explaining that they should display behaviour that does not discriminate on the grounds of religious beliefs, race, gender, sexuality, social class or lack of ability, and challenge those who do.
- If a member continues to make homophobic or transphobic remarks, explain in detail the effects that this kind of bullying has on the LGBT+ community.
- If it is a young person making the remarks, their parents should be informed – just as in any breach of your organisation's code of conduct or anti-bullying policy. Consider inviting the parents and carers to the club to discuss the attitudes of the young member.
- If a member's negative behaviour continues, they should be removed from the training setting in line with managing challenging behaviour guidelines. The Club Welfare Officer or club officials should talk to them in more detail about why their comments are unacceptable.
- If the problem persists, involve senior managers. The member should be made to understand the sanctions that will apply if they continue to use homophobic or transphobic language.

### Conclusions

Equality issues around gender identity and sexual orientation are still seen differently from comparable issues on race or disability. Although the underlying prejudices are different, the impact on the young person is often the same as it can cause distress, fear or isolation.

Therefore, bullying and abuse on the basis of a person's gender identity must be challenged with the same energy as other equality issues. Transphobic and homophobic discrimination and stereotyping are not just damaging to those who may be LGBT+ but risk affecting performance and participation amongst far wider groups.

Young people are seen as key to effecting change because they often express more enlightened attitudes to diversity than older generations. Sport can be a powerful influence both on young people's own personal development and on their attitudes to others. So, young people's openness to diversity is likely to continue even after their personal involvement in sport ceases.

➤ Visit our topic page for further guidance on [working with LGBT+ young people](#).