

LGBT equality in education

Frequently asked questions

What does LGBT stand for?

This is one of various acronyms referring to people's sexual orientation and gender identity; it stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. It is important to recognise that there are many words by which individuals refer to their sexual orientation and gender identity and that the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender are not adopted by everyone.

What does transgender mean?

When a person is born they are assigned a gender based on the appearance of the baby's genitals. People whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the gender they were assigned at birth are known as transgender, often abbreviated to trans.

Some parents say advancing LGBT equality is contrary to their family values. How can we respond?

Parents can be reminded that LGBT people – both children and adults – make up a significant part of our society and of any society. The fact that LGBT people exist is not up for negotiation.

Schools have a moral and legal obligation to make sure that LGBT pupils and staff, as well as those who have LGBT friends or family members, hear positive messages about LGBT identities in the way heterosexual and cisgender people take for granted. Schools would be failing their pupils if they did not challenge homophobia and transphobia consistently and if they did not educate all pupils about the important role LGBT people play in our society. The Equality Act 2010 places a legal duty on schools to eliminate discrimination and harassment, advance equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people who have, and those who do not have, a number of protected characteristics. Remaining silent about LGBT issues is not an option.

We think it is inappropriate to talk to young children about sex, so we cannot do much about LGBT equality in primary schools - correct?

When talking to children of any age, people frequently make reference to heterosexual orientation and relationships, without any mention of sexual activity. People in schools often refer to 'husbands and wives', 'mummies and daddies', or 'boyfriends and girlfriends' without any mention of LGB relationships. There is no reason why discussions cannot reflect the full diversity of families that exist in our society, without any worry that we are talking to young children about sex.

It is important to remember that the Equality Act 2010 places a duty on schools to recognise the existence of families based on same-sex partnerships, and to discuss these families as confidently and regularly as they do others. It is important that children from LGBT families feel that their families are recognised, accepted and respected.

The phrase 'that's so gay' is common and harmless among young people. why do we have to challenge it?

People who use the word gay pejoratively may mean no harm, but those who hear it can feel it. Any use of the word gay to mean that something is nonsense, broken, or otherwise substandard, belittles gay identities.

Pupils can be helped to understand the potential harm by being encouraged to imagine that the phrase was 'that's so Welsh (or German, or Christian, or any other significant aspect of their own identity)'. Gay identities are both entirely usual and a source of pride. Schools should ensure that all members of staff are equally committed to challenging any use of homophobic language.

What is transphobia?

Transphobia is a term used to describe discrimination experienced by trans people, people who are thought to be trans, or friends and relatives of trans people. Schools should ensure that anti-bullying policies address both homophobia and transphobia, while also making sure that staff and children are aware of the differences and overlaps between the two and feel confident in responding to each. Homophobic and transphobic incidents are both regarded as hate crimes within the legal system.

What should we do as school staff if a pupil comes out to us as being LGBT?

Young people come out to staff for a variety of reasons, including a need for pastoral support, a desire for information or redress for how they are being treated. The single most useful thing staff can do is simply be accepting and supporting. Child protection policies should be adhered to at all times but there should be no need for staff to share a simple disclosure of LGBT identity with anyone else unless a pupil requests it.

We take bullying seriously and deal with it effectively - isn't this enough?

Children and young people who identify as, or are perceived to be, LGBT (as well as those who have friends or family members who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT), face a very real and disproportionate level of discrimination and harassment in primary and secondary schools. In many schools homophobic or transphobic bullying are rife, but staff dismiss it as banter and do little, if anything, to challenge it. The Ofsted report No place for bullying (June 2012) suggests that this happens even in schools where other forms of prejudice-based bullying are more effectively dealt with. It is vital that schools consistently challenge homophobic and transphobic bullying but it is equally important to discuss and celebrate LGBT identities. It is the duty of all staff to ensure that every member of the school community feels valued, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or that of any family members. Just as racism cannot be fully countered by challenging negative incidents, it is important that schools help children and young people to understand heterosexist and gender normative attitudes, make them explicit and challenge them in a safe and supportive environment. Inclusive schools enable young people to be happy irrespective of who they are attracted to or how they choose to express their gender.

Where schools foster a safe, welcoming and respectful atmosphere, and where diversity is genuinely valued and celebrated, homophobia and transphobia are significantly reduced, if not eliminated entirely.