

Live Life to the Full

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Resources for Principals, School Leaders & Teachers

Frequently Asked Questions regarding the support of people of diverse sexual and gender orientation in Catholic Schools

INTRODUCTION

This resource has been adapted from the *Western Australian Equal Opportunity Commission Resource for Principals, School Leaders and Teachers Guidelines for Supporting Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools* (22 August, 2014) and has been used with the permission of the Commission. The resource is designed for those working in Edmund Rice Education Australia schools. These guidelines should be read in conjunction with –

- > EREA Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities Statement (2017)
- > Peter Norden, *Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities*, EREA, Melbourne (2017)
- > *The Charter for Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice Tradition*, EREA Council (2017)
- > *National Safe Schools Framework* (2010)
- > UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Bullying based on sexual and gender diversity causes significant impact on individuals and learning communities. Research tells us that students in schools which have policies prohibiting homophobic discrimination and bullying, report feeling safer and are more likely to feel good about their sexuality, sex and gender, than students in schools without such policies.¹

The following question/answer guide provides a quick reference resource in how to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying. The intent of the question/answer guide is to provide a supplementary resource in support of schools' existing policies and practices. Of primary focus is the development of safe, inclusive school communities in which all students feel safe and protected from bullying.

¹ Hillier Jones, Monagle, Overton, Gahan, Blackman & Mitchell. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTi3.pdf>.



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What is sexuality and gender based bullying?

Sexuality and gender based bullying can be similar to sexual harassment or sexual orientation discrimination. It can include, but is not limited to, suggestive comments or jokes, insults or taunts, pictures, emails or texts sent by the bully and intrusive questions about a person's private life.

What evidence is there that students are affected by sexuality and gender based bullying?

In 2010 the *Writing Themselves In 3* national survey found every school in Australia has same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students (SSAGD). Around 10% are same-sex attracted, 1.7% are intersex and 5% are transgender. 75% of SSAGD young people experience abuse on the basis of sexuality or gender identity and 80% experience homophobic or transphobic abuse in Australian schools.²

Who experiences sexuality and gender based bullying?³

- > Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI).
- > Young people who are thought to be LGBTI.
- > Young people who are different in some way – they may not act like other boys or girls.
- > Young people who have friends, family or their parents who identify as LGBTI.
- > Teachers, who may or may not identify as LGBTI.
- > Students in primary school.

Who does bullying based on sexual and gender diversity?⁴

- > Anyone, especially if they are not told it is wrong.
- > People who don't understand the responsibility of equal rights for everyone.
- > Includes primary school students who may not know what the words mean, but can use homophobic or transphobic language as a form of bullying usually mimicking what they have heard from adults.

Why is this relevant to EREA schools?

As Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice Tradition, EREA schools strive to authentically live out the following four touchstones –

- > Liberating Education
- > Gospel Spirituality
- > Inclusive Community
- > Justice and Solidarity

2 Hillier, L. et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTi3.pdf>.

3 Department of Children, Schools and Families. (2007). *Homophobic bullying. Safe to learning: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools*. Nottingham, UK: Government of United Kingdom.

4 Department of Children, Schools and Families. (2007). *Homophobic bullying. Safe to learning: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools*. Nottingham, UK: Government of United Kingdom.

Edmund Rice developed a system of education aimed at liberating all young people, particularly the marginalised, where the dignity of each student was paramount. As Inclusive Communities, EREA schools seek to address the specific needs and wellbeing of marginalised young people, including those who are same sex attracted and gender diverse.

As Catholic schools, EREA schools are guided by Catholic Social teaching which states that “each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status.”⁵

Homophobic bullying can negatively affect a young person’s attainment and future life chances, and can lead to an increased risk of self-harm and suicide.⁶

All Catholic school leaders have a religious, moral and legal obligation to ensure that their learning community is a safe and inclusive one, where all students, regardless of their perceived sexuality can learn and thrive.

School leaders are obliged to take all reasonable steps to prevent unlawful discrimination and harassment. Schools have the responsibility to provide a safe learning environment for everyone.

What does sexuality and gender based bullying look like?

Generally it looks like any other form of bullying but it may be hard to identify as students are often reluctant to tell.⁷

- a. Verbal abuse – including spreading rumours
- b. Physical abuse – including hitting, punching, kicking, sexual assault and threatening behaviour.
- c. Cyberbullying – using on-line spaces, text messaging, video and picture messaging.

Casual and everyday homophobic and transphobic language is often defended as not being intentionally homophobic and that ‘gay’ also means generally bad or weak. However, research notes most young same-sex attracted and gender diverse people find the use of homophobic language distressing to hear, with over 30% finding the language quite or extremely distressing.⁸

In primary school labels such as “gay” or “lesbian” may be commonly used without children really understanding the meaning. If the use of language is not challenged it may appear acceptable and this makes it more difficult to address, as a child grows and moves into secondary school.⁹ In secondary school the intent of homophobic or transphobic language may be to suggest a person is inferior, used to intimidate, undermine or bully a person or their family, or to socially isolate.¹⁰

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- 5 Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. (1996). *The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching: A statement by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.* n.13.
 - 6 Symons, C. et al. (2014). *The impact of homophobic bullying during sport and physical education participation on same-sex-attracted and gender-diverse young Australians’ depression and anxiety levels. “The equal play study”* [Research Report], College of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University and the Institute of Sport, Exercise, and Active Living (ISEAL).
 - 7 Symons, C. et al. (2014). *The impact of homophobic bullying during sport and physical education participation on same-sex- attracted and gender-diverse young Australians’ depression and anxiety levels. “The equal play study”* [Research Report], College of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University and the Institute of Sport, Exercise, and Active Living (ISEAL).
 - 8 Symons, C. et al. (2014). *The impact of homophobic bullying during sport and physical education participation on same-sex-attracted and gender-diverse young Australians’ depression and anxiety levels. “The equal play study”* [Research Report], College of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University and the Institute of Sport, Exercise, and Active Living (ISEAL).
 - 9 Symons, C. et al. (2014). *The impact of homophobic bullying during sport and physical education participation on same-sex-attracted and gender-diverse young Australians’ depression and anxiety levels. “The equal play study”* [Research Report], College of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University and the Institute of Sport, Exercise, and Active Living (ISEAL).
 - 10 Department of Children, Schools and Families. (2007). *Homophobic bullying. Safe to learning: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools.* Nottingham, UK: Government of United Kingdom.

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What is the effect of this type of bullying, discrimination and harassment?¹¹

- a. Self-hatred
- b. Depression and anxiety
- c. Self-harm
- d. Suicide
- e. Increased risk of drug and alcohol misuse
- f. Homelessness
- g. Conflict with their peers and parents
- h. Dropping out of school

How does this affect student learning?¹²

- a. Early school leaving
- b. Poor concentration
- c. Irregular school attendance
- d. Learning and academic achievement is lost

Some parents may not want to respond to homophobic bullying because of their Catholic beliefs. What do we do?

Staff would need to highlight the following –

- > The Catholic Church teaches that every person is made in the image and likeness of God and therefore has an inherent dignity.¹³
- > During his active ministry Christ was radically inclusive. (Luke 4:18-19)
- > In relation to the treatment of homosexual persons, the church insists that “They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”¹⁴

11 Hillier, L. et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTi3.pdf>.

12 Hillier, L. et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTi3.pdf>.

13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (1994), Rome. n 1934.

14 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (1994), Rome. n 2358.

I am a primary school teacher. I don't think that we need to address LGBTI issues in primary schools.

Students may have a sense of their sexual orientation in early primary school.¹⁵ As a result it is important that primary teachers become aware of this developmental factor and provide the necessary resources and support to ensure that LGBTI students develop a positive self-identity. It is also important for students who come from LGBTI families or who have LGBTI siblings to feel that their families and identities are a valued and visible part of the school community.¹⁶

Are primary school students too young to understand?

Primary school children may be too young to understand their own sexual orientation but homophobic and transphobic language may be used in primary schools without students necessarily realising what it is that they are saying. Strategies that are used to handle inappropriate language are important in challenging homophobic/transphobic language.¹⁷

What about transgender people?

Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different things and are easily confused. Gender identity describes a person's gender. Sexual orientation describes whether a person is heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. The description of someone as transgender refers to their gender identity.

Some young people come to realise that their gender identity does not match their biological gender and like others, may experience homophobic or transphobic bullying and should be protected from it.¹⁸

I teach in a Catholic school. Can I address LGBTI issues?

Yes, these issues are about the safety and health concerns of LGBTI students in schools.¹⁹ Work with your school administration to demonstrate that these are important issues that the whole school community ought to address.

The largest misconception that prevents faith-based schools (and educators) from addressing issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity is the conflation of sexuality and sexual practice as synonymous terms of identity expression. Because a student is an LGBTI person does not automatically mean that they are or will be sexually active. Fundamentally, when schools address the concerns and issues of LGBTI students, they should do so within the context of student health, safety and human rights. Sexual orientation and gender identity concerns can be addressed respectfully within all faith-based contexts.

The Catholic Church teaches that no unjust discrimination is acceptable towards people who are same-sex attracted or gender diverse.²⁰

15 Hillier, L. et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTi3.pdf>.

16 Department of Children, Schools and Families. (2007). *Homophobic bullying. Safe to learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools*. Nottingham, UK: Government of United Kingdom.

17 Department of Children, Schools and Families. (2007). *Homophobic bullying. Safe to learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools*. Nottingham, UK: Government of United Kingdom.

18 Nagosh, J., Bizuzu, S. & Terrell, H. (2012). *Deconstructing the complex perceptions of gender roles, gender identity and sexual orientation among transgender individuals*. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(4), 405-422.

19 Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia. (2003). *Dealing with bullying, harassment, aggression and violence (students): community policy 2-D6*. Retrieved from <http://internet.ceo.wa.edu.au/AboutUs/Governance/Policies/Documents/Community/Policy%20D6%20Dealing%20with%20Bullying%20Harassment%20Aggression%20and%20Violence.pdf>.

20 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (1993). Rome. n 2358.

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What do I do if teachers feel strongly that we should not be discussing this information in our school?

In terms of the Catholic context of EREA schools, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith – Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons clearly states the following –

“The human person made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.... The church provides a badly needed context for the case of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as a ‘heterosexual’ or a ‘homosexual’ and insists that every person has a fundamental identity; the creature of God, and by grace his child and heir to eternal life.”²¹

Therefore, it is the role of teachers in EREA schools to ensure that each young person is given the support and encouragement that they need to flourish as a human person loved by God. This means ensuring that schools explicitly support diversity and embrace all within their community. To adequately support the individual needs of all young people in our schools, this information should be and needs to be discussed in Catholic schools.

What if teachers think that these issues are too controversial?

In some communities, these issues may indeed be viewed as controversial. Remind teachers that these are educational issues; they are not about religious beliefs, moral views or sexual practice.

What if people say that I am advocating a homosexual agenda?

Schools and teachers who address LGBTI educational issues are not advocating or promoting a homosexual agenda; they are creating a safe, caring and inclusive environment in which all students and their families can expect to be treated with dignity and respect.^{22 / 23}

What if teachers tell me that no LGBTI students exist in their schools or classrooms?

It has been commonly accepted that one in 10 people is non-heterosexual. As a result, in a classroom of 30 students, on average three students may be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. In a staff of 40 teachers, on average four teachers may be non-heterosexual. This is an issue that affects the entire school community.²⁴

21 Congregation on the Doctrine of Faith. (1986). *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Rome. Vatican Publications.

22 Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs. (2010) *National Safe Schools Framework*. Carlton South. MCEECDYA Secretariat.

23 Hillier, L. et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTI3.pdf>.

24 Hillier, L. et al. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3* La Trobe University: ARCSHS. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/downloads/arcshs-research-publications/WTI3.pdf>.

What do I do if parents are concerned that discussion of these issues might confuse the sexual identity of their children?

Many young people experience some level of confusion as their sexuality develops. Some form of same sex attraction is a normal part of heterosexual development. Young people are likely to benefit from some education about these matters.

It is widely accepted that individuals do not choose their sexual identity, so education and discussion will increase understanding, rather than determine their sexual identity.

How might I respond as a teacher if a student confides in me in relation to their sexual orientation?

There is a popular misconception that the most appropriate response is to encourage the young person to 'come out' or disclose their sexuality to others. A more appropriate response as a teacher is to establish a safe and trusting relationship, and through that relationship, discern whether the young person needs professional support through this time. Remembering that the overall goal in caring for youth who are, or think they might be, gay, lesbian or bisexual is the same as for all youth: to promote normal adolescent development, social and emotional well-being, and physical health.²⁵

What do I say to staff who fear losing their jobs or not being appointed to positions of responsibility in EREA schools because they are same-sex attracted?

EREA schools are inclusive communities which embrace students, staff and family members irrespective of their (or perceived) sexual orientation. A person's sexual orientation has no bearing on their appointment as a staff member or to a position of responsibility.

**Our community is accepting and welcoming,
fostering right relationships & committed to the common good.**

Inclusive Community – Charter for Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice Tradition

25 Frankowski, et al. (2004) *Sexual Orientation and Adolescents; Clinical Report – Guidance for the Clinician in Rendering Pediatric Care* Pediatrics 113 cited in Parkinson, J. (2014) *Pastoral Care for School Students who Experience Same Sex Attraction*. Chisolm Health Ethics Bulletin. 19:4. p3.

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The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation. Everyone living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but challenges to growth, strength, talents and gifts as well. Today, the church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as a “heterosexual” or a “homosexual” and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: a creature of God, and by grace, His child and heir to eternal life.

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH,
LETTER TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE PASTORAL CARE
OF HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS, 1986

