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# Advocating for Adolescent Sexual Minorities

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**Abstract:** Sexual minority (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) adolescents experience bullying and mental health issues at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. It is important that teachers find ways to protect, support, and advocate for these students to prevent them from struggling academically and socially. Through the use of inclusive curricula, gay-straight alliances, and informal mentoring, educators can foster an environment of inclusion and respect for sexual minority students.

*Keywords:* gay, lesbian, LGBTQ, middle school

## Introduction

Millions of adolescents are victims of homophobic bullying, feelings of alienation, and resulting mental health issues every single year. My own adolescent years were rough because of the bullying and alienation I experienced as a result of my sexuality. The ways in which I related to my female classmates completely changed when they started to be “boy crazy,” so to speak, and I realized that I was different. I felt confused and shameful about my feelings, and I felt very alone. My peers could tell that I was different, and they did not take nicely to me at all. I was called homophobic slurs on multiple occasions, and very few of my teachers were outwardly supportive. It was a super complicated and distressing time for me, and I wish I had been better supported by my school. As I grew older, I realized I was not alone.

Sexual minority students are bullied at much higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. The Trevor Project’s 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health found that 50% of LGBTQ youth aged 13-17 reported considering suicide within the past year, and 18% attempted suicide. Within the entire 13-24 age range, 35% of gay males, 46% of lesbians, and 43% of bisexual people considered suicide (The Trevor Project, 2022, p. 5-6).

In GLSEN's 2021 survey on school climate for LGBTQ students, 76.1% of students reported being verbally harassed and 31.2% reported being physically harassed by their peers specifically because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender (GLSEN, 2022, p. 16). This type of bullying is more likely to occur in schools where students are not educated about sexual minorities in a positive way. Especially in more conservative states, the only impressions of sexual minorities students have may come from their families or churches, which commonly hold prejudices based on

religion. How a school represents and supports sexual minority students sets a precedent for how students should treat them.

Studies on LGBTQ students show that “in-school victimization is both directly and indirectly related to diminished educational outcomes” (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013, p. 54). A hostile learning environment is not just emotionally harmful, but academically harmful as well. Students may feel distracted, unmotivated, or afraid to go to school due to LGBTQ-specific bullying. The GLSEN survey reports that 15.6% of students were “prevented from writing about or doing school projects about LGBTQ+ issues” (GLSEN, 2022, p.18). When students are prevented from sharing their personal experiences and struggles with sexuality and identity, they are left feeling unimportant and excluded. Educational researchers claim “the heteronormativity prevalent in curricula might isolate and further marginalize students” (Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018, p. 32). Addressing heteronormative curricula and expectations is another important aspect of sexual minority advocacy.

Sexual minority adolescents may be ostracized from peer groups and rejected by their loved ones. They are often bullied because they are different and made to feel shameful, perverse or gross. Certain situations students may be put in will be particularly uncomfortable for sexual minorities. GLSEN's 2021 School Climate Survey reports “LGBTQ+ students most commonly avoided school bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education or gym classes, with approximately 4 in 10 students avoiding each of these spaces because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (45.1%, 42.6%, and 39.4% respectively)” (GLSEN, 2022, p. 15). This demonstrates the importance of creating school environments that are LGBTQ-friendly in design.

## Why Adolescents Need Advocates

Middle school is a critical juncture in the development of sexuality and peer relationships. Amid adolescent development, one develops a sense of sexuality and begins to take interest in romantic relationships for the first time. This is also a period in which peer relationships are extremely important, and students prioritize “fitting in” with their peers and forming identities. This is difficult to navigate for any adolescent, but when an adolescent is a sexual minority, they will encounter an additional set of struggles that are unique to them.

## Inclusivity in Curricula

Teachers can improve school climate through inclusive curricula. Students may never see people like them represented in their day-to-day lives or in their school curriculum. This lack of visibility can make them doubt the validity of their orientations and feel excluded. It also prevents straight students from learning about sexual minorities. Research on the topic stresses the importance of content that feels real and relatable to all students: “when curricular

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content becomes more prescribed, relational and human elements of English teaching can be weakened in favor of assessment and performativity” (Pearce & Cumming-Potvin, 2017, p. 83). Keeping curriculum close to your students in terms of relatability can make a significant difference in their performance, as they will easily engage in something that speaks to them so personally. Because reading and discussing literature often focuses on stories of everyday life, students learn by connecting to these stories personally or empathically.

Teaching with inclusive curricula is an excellent way to foster a culture of empathy and inclusion in the classroom. Doing so helps to engage LGBTQ students and make them feel included in the classroom environment. This may look like teaching LGBTQ liberation movements in history class or teaching with novels with LGBTQ characters in English class. If this is not possible, including novels with LGBTQ characters in a classroom library can be a small but meaningful gesture to show support. Curricula has an immense impact on how students see the world and one another, so it is absolutely vital that this curriculum portrays society’s most vulnerable populations in an accurate, positive way.

### Gay-Straight Alliances

Teachers may have the opportunity to advise a gay-straight alliance (GSA) in their schools. GSAs have been shown to improve school culture surrounding LGBTQ people (GLSEN, 2022, p. 20). Within a GSA, teachers can facilitate discussions, provide students with language to explain their feelings, arrange school pride events, and provide a space for LGBTQ students to make friends and feel a sense of community within their school. The presence of a school GSA makes LGBTQ students feel supported and protected while showing heterosexual students that homophobic bullying will not be tolerated.

### Barriers to Advocacy

Teachers may be afraid to advocate for LGBTQ students for fear of pushback from parents, other teachers, students, or administration. A teacher may be accused of discussing inappropriate topics with students by anyone who does not agree with them. When researchers surveyed GSA advisors among high schools, many expressed a fear of personal and professional consequences for advising the GSA, a lack of LGBTQ education, and a lack of school-based resources (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, Dever, Greenberg, Roach, & Morillas, 2015, p. 441). Certain states, primarily rural Southern ones, have laws which limit and prohibit the content that teachers can discuss in the classroom. Despite anti-sodomy laws being overturned twenty years ago, laws still exist that force teachers to portray homosexuality as an unacceptable, criminal “lifestyle,” if at all. Laws like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill and Alabama’s rules on sexual education are passed in the name of ensuring that class content is age appropriate, but they often prevent teachers from discussing LGBTQ topics at all (Rudrick et al., 2018, p. 529).

Protesting these laws and finding ways around them would be a worthwhile endeavor in advocating for LGBT students. The

ability to teach with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum is worth fighting for. Findings from a survey on LGBTQ secondary students report, “youth who had been taught positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events reported less victimization” (Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 47). True activism is never easy, and it can require great feats of courage. This tangible data on the difference LGBTQ advocacy can make on the lives of students may be the motivation that teachers need to exhibit that courage.

### Informal Mentoring Strategies

With their jobs on the line, it only makes sense that some teachers might steer away from inclusive curricula. While it is not always possible to advocate for sexual minority students in a public way, there are smaller ways to support these students. A less formal alternative to advising a GSA is simply acting as a supportive mentor to sexual minority students. Being available and trustworthy to students will draw in those who are in need of support. In pursuing a mentor, students report testing the waters, so-to-speak, with teachers and slowly building trust with continual affirmation of the teacher’s support (Mulcahy, Dalton, Kolbert, & Crothers, 2016, p. 409). Things they often look for are whether a teacher is a part of the LGBTQ community themselves or if they have visual markers in their classroom to signify acceptance, such as “safe zone” stickers (Mulcahy et al., 2016, p. 408). It is so important that teachers mind what they say and do around students, as it sends a message to students about one’s character and whether they are to be trusted. LGBTQ students are already vulnerable, and many have experienced victimization from people in their lives whom they once trusted. Additionally, the sensitivity of the adolescent brain causes adolescents to perceive neutrality as negativity more easily than adults. For these reasons, it is not enough to not be hateful, bigoted, or offensive to students. As a teacher, one must make an active and persistent effort to be supportive, inclusive, and respectful.

### Resources For Sexual Minority Students and Adult Advocates

Countless organizations exist to support and advocate for LGBTQ students. Teachers may be able to help students simply by connecting them to these resources.

- The Trevor Project is an organization with educational information and resources for LGBTQ youth. Visit [thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org).
- GLSEN is a national network of teachers, students, and local chapters working against LGBTQ bullying. It has resources for teachers and students alike. Visit [GLSEN.org](http://GLSEN.org).
- GSA Network provides resources and materials for school GSAs. Visit [gsanetwork.org](http://gsanetwork.org).

### Conclusion

The Association for Middle Level Education’s *This We Believe* states in its characteristics of a successful middle school: “The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). By advocating for sexual minority students, we as educators can help them to feel welcome, affirmed, and included.

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