



A Family's Guide to Handling Anti-Gay (LGBTQ) Harassment

First, take pride in your child's trust.

Only half the young people who experience anti-gay harassment and harassment based on gender identity or expression feel safe going to their families for help. Your child clearly sees you as a resource.

Then, support your child:

- Listen. If you ask questions, try to make them supportive, not blaming, questions.
- Make sure your child knows that you ...
 - love and believe in your child, no matter how you may feel about his or her being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (or someone thinking s/he is)
 - do not blame him or her for what happened or think he or she "deserved" what happened.
 - are upset that it happened – but angry not at your child, just at the offenders and those who let them think it was OK.
 - will do what you can to make sure school is a safe place for him or her.

You may want to gather information and support for yourself:

- Call a trusted school counselor, nurse, teacher, administrator or social worker.
- Contact another parent. Try PFLAG, Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: Phone: (202) 467-8180, Email: info@pflag.org. If your child was the victim of a hate crime, contact FUAH, Families United Against Hate: Email: Gabi Clayton (mother of a hate crime victim); Message phone: (360) 943-2590, voicemail box #2; Email: gabic@fuah.org; Web site: www.fuah.org
- Contact an advocate. Try GLSEN, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (212-727-0135 or glsen@glsen.org) or The Safe Schools Coalition (questions@safeschoolscoalition.org)
- Contact a local community resource, such as a gay-friendly minister or counseling agency. For information about support in your area, see the Safe Schools web site www.safeschoolscoalition.org/blackboard-organizations.html
- Find a book at your local library. These were **written by and for parents:**
 - Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences*, C. Griffin, M. Wirth and A. Wirth, 1997.
 - Trans Forming Families: Real Stories about Transgendered Loved Ones*, M. Boenke, 1999.

Next, you may want to talk with your child's teacher, if the problem is confined to a specific classroom:

- **Explain what happened** and what makes you think the harassment or violence was **bias-based**.
- **Explain that you want the teacher's help** to ensure your child's emotional and physical safety at school and in transit.
- **Discuss** with the teacher ...
 - how the **investigation** will be handled and how your child's safety might be considered in that process.
 - what the possible **disciplinary** outcomes are, if the offender(s) is/are identified, and whether that is **consistent** with the way other forms of malicious harassment are generally handled.
 - what the teacher will do to **stop** the harassment from continuing ... by the same offender(s) or any others.
 - what the teacher will do to reduce the chances of **retribution** against your child for speaking up and what to do if there is retribution despite his/her best efforts.
 - what the teacher will do to avoid a **recurrence** of the harassment ... against your child or anyone else's child next semester or next year.
- **Send the teacher a letter** thanking him/her for meeting with you and spelling out your understanding of what was agreed upon. Keep a copy of the letter.



If meeting with the teacher doesn't stop the abuse, or if it is happening in the halls and on the playground rather than in a single classroom, you may want to go through exactly the same steps ...

- with your **principal**,
- and if that doesn't solve the problem, with the assistant superintendent or the **superintendent**,
- and if that doesn't solve the problem, with the **school board president**.

If you do find yourself climbing this ladder of responsibility,

- Keep in mind that each new individual with whom you speak must care about children or s/he probably would not have become an educator. You have this in common, although of course you know and love your own child better than anyone does.
- Keep track of all the events, including dates, times, and witnesses to each act of harassment and each meeting of adults.

Do not hesitate to involve the police if your child is the victim of a crime ...

if, for example, his or her belongings were damaged or stolen or your child was threatened or physically injured because the offender thought she or he was gay or lesbian.

- Find out whether your state has a hate crime statute and whether it covers sexual orientation and gender identity and expression: www.hrc.org/ (click on "Laws in Your State").
- If it does, tell the police officer the specific name of the crime you are reporting. For instance, in Washington state, it's "*malicious harassment as defined by RCW 9A.36.080*." Stress to the officer that the crime was motivated by hate based on perceived sexual orientation. You don't have to say whether the child is actually gay and you shouldn't be asked.
- Describe *in detail* the hate or prejudice that was expressed and what caused your child to fear harm. For example, "*They called him 'faggot' and said they would 'kick his butt'.*" Or, "*They asked her why 'dykes' liked other girls and said they would, 'teach her to like boys'.*" If your child has any physical pain, make sure it is written down in the police report. Get the incident number from the officer and ask how to get a copy of the police report. Get the officer's name and badge number.

Some people also decide to:

- Contact the United States Department of Education's Regional Office for Civil Rights ... Phone: 1-800-421-3481, TDD: 202-205-5166; Email: OCR@ED.Gov; Web site: www.ed.gov/ocr
- Contact a lawyer about bringing a "civil suit" against the offenders:
- Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (212-809-8585 or lambdalegal@lambdalegal.org)
- American Civil Liberties Union (212-549-2585 or find your local chapter: <http://www.aclu.org/community/community.html>)
- Youth Legal Information Line at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Staffed (Pacific Standard Time): Monday - Friday 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. [noon-8, Eastern] Web site: www.nclrights.org ... Phone: 1-800-528-3257

The bottom line is ...

Your child deserves a safe education no matter what his or her race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, language of origin, or physical or mental abilities. You obviously agree or you wouldn't have read this far. Your child is lucky to have you for a parent. Together, you can help your school become a safe place.