

Responding to homophobic language

Even if LGBT students are not directly experiencing bullying they are learning in an environment where homophobic language and comments are commonplace. According to Stonewall's *The School Report* (2012) 99% of young people surveyed hear the phrases "that's so gay" or "you're so gay" in school and 96% had heard remarks such as 'poof' or 'lezza' used in school. Only ten per cent of gay pupils report that teachers challenge homophobic language every time they hear it. If homophobic language is allowed to persist it is likely to encourage homophobic bullying.

'The misuse of the word 'gay' meant that it was only when I was sixteen I knew what the word really meant. I think it's important that teachers challenge the use of the word 'gay' as a negative term. They should encourage kids to use other words as an alternative, such as 'rubbish'. By doing this, pupils will (hopefully) realise the potential impact it can have on the pupils who are lesbian or gay, or questioning their sexuality.' Joe, Allsorts

Some key skills and tips for challenging prejudice

- Ensure you are aware of school policy and that you follow school policy and legal requirements such as reporting racist incidents
- Challenge all incidents, behaviour and language and be seen to be doing this
- Be calm and constructive (responding and helping to build skills). Take time, remain silent if you are upset or angry until you regain control
- If appropriate remove them from an audience or the scene of the incident, although be clear with the whole group that the language / behaviour was unacceptable
- Role model how to challenge/how to take a stand in a non-aggressive way so that the group can be effective without you
- Be mindful of what happens next with friendships and other spin-offs
- Show that you are delaying judgement (in some cases) by asking questions
- Allow them space to reflect on what they have just said or done
- Give them a chance to back-track: self-justify, own or modify their behaviour
- Be critical of behaviour and language, but not of individuals and so allowing the challenged child/person to still feel OK and able to move on
- Build a sense of empathy, co-operation and shared rules "we all agreed..." "how would you feel if..." Linking back to ground rules at all times
- Be firm and clear about diversity and rights – and what is not acceptable. This should be supported by policy

- Show upset and hurt if appropriate
- Search for the personal, individual concerns which may lie behind their words or reflect
- Use stories/scenarios as distancing techniques – to help find solutions to issues that have arisen within the group
- If required by school policy / the law record the incident for monitoring purposes and report to relevant school personnel.

Challenging prejudicial language – a ‘palette’ of responses

organisational response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The groundrules we agreed at the beginning of the lesson said we would show respect to others</i>• <i>The school anti-bullying/behaviour policy is clear that homophobic language will not be tolerated</i>• <i>This school does not tolerate language like that</i>
question	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What do you mean by that?</i>• <i>What makes you think that?</i>• <i>Do you mean that as a compliment or an insult?</i>• <i>Do you realise that what you said is homophobic?</i>• <i>Would you feel happy if someone was talking like that about your sister / brother ?</i>• <i>Can you explain what you mean by calling that {object} gay?</i>
confront	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Language like that is not acceptable</i>• <i>You might not think that remark's offensive, but many would</i>• <i>Let's talk about why people think like that</i>• <i>Gay? You mean Good As You?</i>
personal response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I'm not happy with what you said</i>• <i>I'm really surprised to hear you using that type of homophobic language</i>• <i>When you use homophobic language it offends me. I don't want to hear it again.</i>• <i>What you've said really disturbs/upsets/angers me</i>

See also DCSF, 2007 *Homophobic bullying* Downloads 12, 16 & 17

Responding to homophobic language: some example responses to scenarios

Scenario 1

You are walking past a group of year 9 boys (13 year olds) who you don't teach. You over hear one say "Mr. Kennedy is a right shirt-lifter. Make sure you don't stand with your back to him."

Responses

Organisational responses:

- "That kind of language is homophobic and you know it's against school policy to make homophobic remarks. Homophobia is as bad as racism and sexism."
- "The school policy says that we are all responsible for making the school a safe place for students *and* teachers. That kind of language is homophobic and will make people feel unsafe. Therefore it is not acceptable."

Questioning/exploring responses:

- "What makes you think that every gay man is going to fancy you? You don't fancy every single girl you meet do you so what makes you think a gay man is going to fancy every man he meets? Do you really think that you're so attractive that every gay man is going to fancy you and pounce on you? What makes you so special?"
- "Have you ever considered what it must be like for gay people to hear that kind of stuff? How do you think it's going to make them feel?"
- "What is it about gay men that scares you so much?"
- "Would you think it's ok to make racist comments about one of your teachers or another student? Well, it's not ok to make homophobic comments about them either."

Confronting/challenging responses:

- "Gay men aren't just interested in sex, you know. It's about love, not sex. They just happen to fall in love with other men. If they love and care for each other, what does it matter if they're of the same sex? How does it affect you?"
- "You can't tell whether someone is gay or straight just from how they look or behave. Gay people are all very different, just like straight people are."

Personal responses:

- “I’m really surprised and disappointed to hear you say that. I hoped you would recognise that it is important to treat everyone, including gay people, with respect and that it is therefore wrong to use such homophobic language.”

Scenario 2

Abdul is new to the school and is in your year 7 tutor group. As the tutor group come into the class you hear Sarah say "Abdul, those trainers you're so wearing are really gay."

Confronting/challenging responses:

- "What do you mean they're 'gay'? Is that a compliment? You're right; Abdul's trainers are very nice!"
- "Trainers can't be gay. Are you saying that they're attracted to trainers of the same sex?!"
- "You wouldn't say that someone's trainers are so 'black', would you? So it's not acceptable to say that they're so 'gay' either."
- "If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say it at all."

Organisational responses:

- "That kind of language is homophobic and you know it's against school policy to make homophobic remarks. Homophobia is as bad as racism and sexism."
- "The school policy says that we are all responsible for making the school a safe place for students *and* teachers. That kind of language is homophobic and will make people feel unsafe. Therefore it is not acceptable."

Questioning/exploring responses:

- "Have you ever considered what it must be like for gay people to hear that kind of stuff? How do you think it's going to make them feel if they keep hearing the word 'gay' used in a negative way?"
- "What do you mean by that? Are you saying Abdul's trainers are 'girly'? Who cares? Boys and girls should be free to wear whatever they like."
- "How would you feel if people said 'that's so straight'? You wouldn't like to be made to feel that fancying the opposite sex is a bad thing, would you? Gay people are just as normal as straight people so we should treat them with the same respect."
- (If the phrase 'that's so gay' is used in a way that is not targeting a particular person e.g. "that TV programme was so gay": "What do you mean by that? Do you mean it's rubbish/uncool? Well, why can't you use the words 'rubbish' or 'uncool' rather than 'gay'? Using the word 'gay' makes it sound like being gay is a bad thing which isn't true. It's just as normal/natural to be gay as it is to be straight and gay people should be treated with the same respect as you would expect.")

Personal response:

- “I’m really disappointed to hear you talking in that way. I hoped you would welcome new students and make them feel supported. I also thought you would realise that using the word ‘gay’ in a negative way is offensive to gay people and therefore would not use that kind of homophobic language.”

Scenario 3

You are using the Channel 4 videos to teach sex and relationship education to your year 4 class. Afia says loudly to Victoria, "Your mum is just like those dirty lezzies in the DVD."

Organisational responses:

- "Afia, in this school, we do not use homophobic language like that. There is nothing wrong with being a lesbian."

Questioning/exploring responses:

- "How do you think Victoria feels hearing you talk about her mum like that? How do you think her mum would feel? Would you like it if someone said nasty things about your mum?"
- "What do you mean by 'lezzies'?"

Confronting/challenging responses:

- "There are lots of different types of families including families with two mums or two dads. All types of families are as good as each other."
- "It doesn't matter whether someone has two mums or two dads. The important thing is that they love and look after each other and that they love and look after their children."

Personal responses:

- "I'm really disappointed to hear you talk like that Afia. I hoped you'd realise that it is important to be kind to everyone."

Scenario 4

Jamal is 5 and likes to play in the home corner. He sometimes wears nail varnish to school. Jamal comes in from break crying and another boy says to him, "Stop being such a sissy gay boy Jamal."

Organisational responses:

- "In this school, we try to be kind to everyone."

Questioning/exploring responses:

- "What do you mean by 'sissy' and 'gay boy'?"
- "How do you think Jamal feels? How would you like it if someone called you names like that?"

Confronting/challenging responses:

- "There's nothing wrong with crying. It's not 'sissy'. It's just as normal for boys to cry as it is for girls."
- "Boys can wear nail varnish if they want, just as girls can play football as they want."
- "'Gay' is a word we use to describe people who love people of the same sex, not a nasty word to use against people."

Personal responses:

- "I'm really sad to hear you talk like that. I hoped you knew it was important to be kind to everyone."