

MAKING SCHOOLS SAFE FOR OUR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDERED CHILDREN

BRIEF AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SAFE SCHOOLS TASK FORCE
VANCOUVER, BC
DECEMBER 5, 2002

PRESENTED BY BETTY EWING

I represent PFLAG Vancouver (Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), which includes bisexual and transgendered as well, though not included in the name. PFLAG is an international non-profit organization which offers support and information for parents and family members of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (hereafter glbt) loved ones.

Our concern is for our children who are glbt, or who might be questioning their sexuality. We are also concerned with our children who are perceived to be gay, and might be bullied to death, e.g. Hamed Nastoh. Lastly, we are concerned with our children who live with at least one parent who is not heterosexual, or who is transgendered.

EXPECTATIONS, ASSUMPTIONS AND SELF-ESTEEM

Parents, educators, and society in general assume that everyone is heterosexual, and that all children live with a mother and a father. All of us receive messages throughout our lives from family, the media, authority figures, and our houses of worship that we will fall in love with and marry someone of the opposite sex, and be contented in our role as a man or a woman. Our glbt children hear the same messages, and it doesn't feel right. They feel isolated and worthless, thinking that they are the only person in the world like themselves. They absorb all the negative messages they hear, and can come to hate themselves.

I can talk about glbt children because many people knew from the time they were little that they were different in some way, although they could not express it in words. Some realize their differing sexual orientation or gender identity when they are teenagers; some realize it when they are adults.

As for children in families with one or two parents who are not heterosexual, Statistics Canada recently released data about Canadian families and households based on the 2001 census. In the Maclean's article about those findings, Barbara Wickens wrote: "...According to one StatsCan spokesman, his unofficial tally shows same sex couples living in all but six of Canada's 301 federal electoral districts." (1) In other words, there are same sex couples reported in 295 electoral ridings across the country. If you extrapolate to couples who didn't declare themselves, and single people or people in other living arrangements who identify as not heterosexual, surely they cover the entire country. And think about how many of that population have children, either from a previous relationship, or in the current family unit. Trustees and administrators can no longer hide their heads in the sand and say "There are no gay or lesbian families in our school district".

In every school there are undoubtedly children and adults who are not heterosexual or whose gender identity does not conform to conventional patterns.

We ask that teachers, counsellors, and administrators always be aware that a child might not be heterosexual, or might have a gender identity which does not match their body.

TAKING ACTION

Children will persecute, verbally or physically, the kids whom they think are gay. Heterosexual children who are perceived as gay suffer as much from this bullying as the gay children do.

When a teacher, counsellor, or vice-principal hears a homophobic slur she can stop it immediately. She can explain then and there why this behaviour is detrimental, or deal with it later during a class or in a CAPP period.

If a teacher or counsellor or administrator wants to change his approach and gain knowledge about the issues, but doesn't know how, there are resources available.

- The BC Teachers Federation will send a facilitator to any school district in the province to conduct a workshop for teachers, staff, and administration. (2)
- The handbook *Challenging Homophobia in Schools*, (3) produced by GALE-BC and distributed to every elementary, middle and secondary school in the province by the BCTF in September 2000, contains a wealth of information, plus specific lesson plans and resources. Administrators might have suppressed this useful tool in some schools, but the teachers and counsellors can search for it. Individuals can also order their own copies.
- There are other organizations around the province that would be happy to send speakers to schools to conduct workshops, to speak to staff or students, or to take part in a forum. PFLAG and Youthquest! have groups or contacts in several locations throughout the province; the GAB Youth Pridespeak program operates in the Lower Mainland and will travel elsewhere when requested. Many cities have glbt resource centres or community centres that would be happy to provide speakers for schools.

We ask that teachers, counsellors, staff, vice-principals and principals stop homophobic name-calling and physical assaults when they happen, and provide education and information about the harm of homophobic abuse.

VALIDATING OUR CHILDREN

Our children who are glbt, or who live with at least one parent who is not heterosexual, or who is transgendered, do not hear about themselves and their families in classes, or see their families represented in books, videos and other school material. They never hear that famous people in history, such as Michelangelo and Alexander the Great, were gay; they might not know that celebrities such as k.d. lang and sports heroes such as Mark Tewkesbury are role models for them because of their sexuality.

- It isn't difficult for teachers to make some changes in the classroom. They can make sure that all kinds of families are included in discussions. They can dispel gender stereotypes when discussing sports, careers and dress. When discrimination is being discussed in social studies, sexual orientation and gender identity can be dealt with as well as racism and religious persecution.
- The library can include books about families with two mothers or two fathers; books offering practical information about safe sex which include same-sex relationships; novels for young adults which deal with questioning sexuality, and about happy, fulfilling same-sex relationships.
- If the CAPP program is the only module, which considers sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, then it should not be cut back. If a teacher or counsellor is going to deal with sexual health and relationships only once during the school year, then let it be dealt with five times in a student's high school life, not only once in Grade 12.
- Sex education should include all sexualities. And yes, as we all know now, HIV/AIDS is not only a "gay man's disease", and should not be a taboo topic because of that stereotype.

We ask that teachers, counsellors and librarians include all sexualities in curriculum content, books and other media materials.

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

Teachers, counsellors, administrators must act upon children's complaints about bullying, name-calling, and vandalism to lockers and personal property which is based on homophobia. If the child is brave enough to tell his parents about the problem, and the parents complain to the school, the teacher, counsellor or administrator must listen to the concerns and deal with them, without moral judgment.

The verbal and physical abuse is a reality, regardless of what the adults in authority believe about homosexuality and transgender. If the complaints go to the school board, the trustees must not deny that there is a problem.

We ask that teachers, counsellors, administrators and trustees acknowledge and act on complaints of abuse caused by homophobic actions.

WORST CASE--BEST CASE SCENARIO

Consider this scenario: a child has come out to her parents, or her parents have discovered she is a lesbian because of a magazine left lying around or an e-mail. The parents are very angry and, instead of loving their child and asking questions and learning about her life, they abuse her verbally or physically, or shun her, or kick her out of the family home. The child ends up in a foster home with caregivers who are as insensitive as her own parents.

Where is this kid going to turn? Where does this child spend most of her waking hours? In school. Wouldn't it be wonderful if school can be a safe and comfortable place for that child?

In that school, the people in authority support and protect all the children. The students are respectful of each other, the glbt staff members are out to their colleagues and students, and can be role models for the glbt kids. There is a gay-straight alliance, and no one is afraid to go into the room for fear of being targeted (or perhaps the GSA is no longer needed). The transgendered kid doesn't have to act macho and join in demeaning locker room talk.

What happens to the child in my scenario if the school is not safe? Obviously life is not worth living. He might end up on the street, he might mutilate himself, turn to alcohol or drugs. And then he might commit suicide. It is estimated that 30% of teenagers who commit suicide are gay. But we'll never know --we've already lost them.

Every time I hear in the news that a teenager has committed suicide, I think "Was he gay or bisexual?" "Was she a lesbian or transgendered?" It makes no difference what the speculation is ^ the parents might say there was no sign, their child got high marks in school; the experts will list signs of depression to look for ^ but no-one will mention the possibility that this kid felt isolated and scared because his sexuality didn't fit the norm.

I challenge you to think of that, the next time you hear that another teenager has committed suicide.

REFERENCES

- (1) How we live, by Barbara Wickens. Maclean's, November 4, 2002, p. 46
- (2) One workshop is titled Addressing Homophobia in Schools. A second workshop is titled Taking Action on Homophobia. This workshop includes a Gay-Straight Alliance component.

(3) Challenging Homophobia in Schools: a K to 12 resource for educators, counsellors and administrators to aid in the support of, and education about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender youth and families, produced by GALE (Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC), 2000.

PFLAG CHAPTERS AND CONTACTS IN BC

PFLAG Comox Valley (Courtenay)
308-840 Braidwood Road
Courtenay BC V9N 3R9
e-mail comoxvalleypflag@shaw.ca

PFLAG Duncan
500 Voutrait Road, R.R. #2
Mill Bay BC V0R 2P0
e-mail pflagduncan@yahoo.com

PFLAG Kamloops
2280 Nechako Drive
Kamloops BC V2E 1S5
e-mail pflagkamloops@hotmail.com

PFLAG Prince George
5635 Moriarty Crescent
Prince George BC V2N 3P7
e-mail caroletkachuk@shaw.ca

PFLAG Vancouver
8602 Granville Street
PO Box 30075
Vancouver BC V6P 5A0
e-mail info@pflagvancouver.com
web www.pflagvancouver.com

PFLAG Victoria
PO Box 5474, Station B
Victoria BC V8R 6S4
e-mail geofyl@telus.net
web www.gayvictoria.com/pflag

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bisexual: an individual, male or female, who is attracted to and may form sexual and affectionate relationships with both men and women; does not usually mean non-monogamy.

Coming Out: or "coming out of the closet" is the process of becoming aware of one's gay, lesbian or bisexual orientation or transgendered identity, accepting it, and telling others.

Gay: a person who forms sexual and affectionate relationships with those of the same gender; often used to refer to men only, but many women also use this term to identify themselves.

Gender identity: one's internal and psychological sense of oneself as male or female, or both, or neither, regardless of and separate from sexual orientation. People who question their gender identity may feel unsure of their gender or believe they are not of the same gender as their physical body.

Homophobia: fear and hatred of glbt people, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence.

Lesbian: a woman who forms sexual and affectionate relationships with other women

Sexual orientation: refers to a person's deep-seated feelings of sexual attraction. It means who we desire sexually, with whom we want to become intimate, and with whom we want to form emotional relationships. May be lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual.

Transgendered: a person whose gender identity, gender presentation or expression, and/or physical appearance or anatomy do not fit into conventional expectations of male and female. If a person transitions from male to female, or from female to male with the help of hormones and/or surgery, she or he will self-identify as transsexual.