

Creating psychological safety for all supports healthy youth development

Adolescence is the time when young people get to do the developmental work that prepares them for adulthood.

- To succeed at this, youth need: caring adults; connections to their schools and communities; basics like food, shelter, and safety; and opportunities to test their values and make a difference.
- Mental health challenges can get in the way of healthy youth development: rates of depression and anxiety are high among adolescents, and suicide is a leading cause of death in this age group.
- According to the CDC's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, approximately 9% of high school students have attempted suicide.¹

Bias-based bullying exacerbates young people's mental health issues.



Aggression that stigmatizes a student's identity (e.g. gender, race or ethnicity, sexuality, body size) attacks the core of who they are, and causes cumulative harm.

Being resilient isn't enough. Experiencing bullying is linked to headaches and stomachaches, substance abuse, and poorer mental health, including suicidal ideation. These experiences also severely affect school engagement and academic performance.

81%

Suicidal ideation was reported by 81% of bisexual youth who identified as transgender or gender diverse when they were also the targets of bias-based bullying.

56%

But when NOT the targets of bias-based bullying, that 81% dropped down to 56% reporting suicidal ideation.

Having multiple minoritized identities increases a young person's likelihood of experiencing bias-based bullying.²

- Experiences of being stigmatized based on one or more minoritized identities are common among LGBTQ+ youth of color, especially African American youth.
- As many as 82% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe in school because of the stigma attached to at least one of their actual or assumed personal characteristics.³
- Young people with multiple minoritized identities experienced a third to half as much emotional distress when they did NOT experience bias-based bullying and harassment at school.⁴

EDUCATORS MAKE GREAT ALLIES.

“ [My English Teacher], without fail, every single time, would just shut [my bully] up. She would tell him, ‘Stop screaming your hatred in this classroom. I will not have it.’ She made sure that I never felt unsafe and hated.”

Incorporate language and topics into your lesson plans and curricula that include students' marginalized identities.

“ [My GSA teacher] compliments me about, like, if I'm doing anything with my hair or anything, like basically sharing gender-affirming compliments.”

For students with marginalized identities, proactive adult support is especially important.

“ [My teacher] made sure that he got my name down on the roster; he would make sure to call out my preferred name for attendance.”

Youth with minoritized gender identities report feeling safer when called by their affirmed name and pronouns.



Youth of color with minoritized gender identities told our researchers, “This is what safe space looks and feels like.”



¹ YRBSS results. Cdc.gov. Published June 29, 2023. Accessed April 25, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrebs/results.htm>

² Gower AL, Rider GN, del Rio-González AM, Erickson P, Thomas D, Russell ST, Watson RJ, Eisenberg ME. Application of an intersectional lens to bias-based bullying among LGBTQ+ youth of color in the U.S. *Stigma & Health*. 8(3):363-371. 2023.

³ Glsen.org. Accessed April 25, 2024. https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/NSCS-2021-Executive_Summary-EN.pdf

⁴ Eisenberg ME, Lawrence SE, Eadeh HM, Suresh M, Rider GN, Gower AL. Emotional distress disparities across multiple intersecting social positions: The role of bias-based bullying. *Pediatrics*. 2024;153(2):e2023061647. doi:10.1542/peds.2023-061647

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, DO SOMETHING. EVERY TIME.

Whether you encounter racial slurs, fat-shaming, homophobia, xenophobia, or transphobia, brief responses and questions are powerful interventions: “Were you trying to be hurtful with that word?” Or, “I don’t find that funny.”

Transphobia, in particular, is often expressed with other “isms.” Short, strong replies can shift power dynamics, humanize all individuals, and re-establish a safe space: “I don’t tolerate hate speech of any kind in my classroom.”

“When people stare at you as you walk in the room, or when they talk about you or point at you behind your back and they think you don’t hear about it or don’t see it: these things add up. They create such a feeling of un-belonging that I just never feel welcome in spaces with my peers anymore.”

Know that young people encounter bullying as a dehumanizing series of daily, negative interactions.

ADULT ALLIES ARE PROACTIVE, AS WELL AS RESPONSIVE.

Share early and often the process for students to report identity-based aggressions. Reinforce these expectations with your own words, like, “You are not alone here. I will have your back if you are not being treated with respect.”

“[My high school principal] had to fire a substitute for being absolutely disrespectful multiple times about my identity. He was like, ‘We will not have that in this high school.’ He’s told me that his office is a safe space if I need to rant about anything.”

Learn more about [psychological first aid for distressed students](#), your school’s protocol, when support staff are available, and when it is appropriate to call a crisis response team.

Follow up with students privately – whether they were the target or the aggressor. Ask open-ended questions like, “What started this situation?” Offer comfort and validation: “What happened here was not okay” and, “What do you need now and how can I help?”

“The GSA is the best place. It’s amazing, full of wonderful, unique people. There’s just a bunch of unique people, not just gay, straight, just all those amazing people. Being yourself is a big part of just going to high school. Nobody is going to matter in a couple years, so why not start being yourself now.”

Follow up with the distressed student to show your continued support. Offer to share formal school resources (GSA, counselor) after you have reinforced your personal allyship.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AN EXPERT OR PERFECT.

“My teacher was like, ‘Hey, I have a lot of cool resources I can show you,’ and we started having a conversation about it.”

Advocate for comprehensive anti-bullying policies and policies that support transgender and nonbinary+ students.

“She was amazing when I came out to her with my new name and pronouns. She used them right away, even corrected other people when they would misgender or deadname me... Even a lot of our teachers who are allies don’t go that far.”

Share examples with your fellow educators of proactive allyship, such as “I ask trans students what makes them feel safe in class in the same way I would access an IEP to support their learning.”

“If it’s a Black GSA or a GSA made to include Black people, you’re keeping in mind all the different aspects of the Black community: the Black trauma, Black issues, Black families, the issues with Black parents, even just some things like transportation, because a lot of times, Black people don’t have easy transportation to different places, even if it’s something as simple as school.”

Foster inclusion of all LGBTQ+ students in your site’s GSA or unity club.

“If someone mistakenly misgenders you, they automatically apologize and show that they care.”

Participate in community conversations about healthy and safe school environments. Host or provide building-wide professional development on LGBTQ+ issues.

Resources

Learning for Justice’s [“Speak Up at School Guide”](#)
[GLSEN](#)
[Advocates for Youth](#)

About the research

This research uses existing surveillance data from three adolescent health data sets: the Minnesota Student Survey, the California Healthy Kids Survey, and the LGBTQ National Teen Survey. Quotes come from interviews with 58 trans and gender diverse youth of color. To learn more about identity-based aggression, visit [the Healthy Environments and Stigmatized Youth Program](#).