

Why This Guide

It is important for schools to create a welcoming environment for all children and their families and to prepare students for the increasingly diverse society in which we live.

- ***Introduction: A2-3***
- ***Why Welcoming Schools Are Important for ALL Students: A4***
- ***Why Discuss Family Diversity, Name-Calling and Gender in Elementary School: A5-6***
- ***Taking a Look at Some Concerns: A7-9***
- ***A Few Facts: Families, Name-Calling, Identity and Social Skills: A10-12***



Introduction

The Welcoming Schools Guide was initiated by a group of parents and educators to meet the needs of students whose family structures are not well-represented or included in the school environment. It is also a response to educators who have asked for help in addressing anti-gay name-calling and bullying that is prevalent among elementary school students. Additionally, it offers a wide range of resources for school administrators and educators who have asked for advice on how to support students who are on a unique gender path.

This guide is designed to provide administrators, educators and parents/guardians with a full range of materials to empower and encourage everyone to create learning environments in which all learners are welcome and respected. The basic premise of this guide is that schools should be inclusive — all students should feel that they belong.

This guide is not just for students who have LGBT parents or caregivers. This guide is not just for students who, as they grow older, may identify as LGBT. Rather, this guide is for all the students who are growing up in our increasingly diverse world so that all can thrive and work with one another peacefully and productively at school, in the community and at work.

Family Diversity

Family is the most basic element of self-identification for young children. It is family that shapes and informs a young child's sense of self and who they are in the world. Children identify themselves by their family structure. As children enter school, they may first experience diversity by noticing how their family is the same as or different from other families.

In order to succeed academically and socially, children need to feel that their family and — by extension, *they* — are “all right.” To put it another way, children need to know that their family “fits in” and is part of the school community in order to develop an attachment to their school community. Studies on academic performance draw significant associations between a student's perception of their educator and/or school and parent support and their academic performances. Students who perceive that they are more supported in school and at home generally have higher achievement levels.¹

For children whose family structure mirrors the traditional image of family (a mom and a dad of the same race and children biologically related to both), the majority of the visual and literary depictions of family reaffirms their reality. However, the U.S. Census shows that increasing numbers of children are growing up in families that do not mirror the popular image. These children have to reconcile their sense of self and sense of well-being in this context. As the poet Adrienne Rich so eloquently stated, “When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you're not in it, there's a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”²

In addition to this basic need to see themselves mirrored in their school environment, all children need to learn about the diverse community and world around them. Schools can provide a window to that world. This includes learning to see things from different perspectives and learning about different kinds of families.

Gender Stereotyping

This guide also addresses the ways in which children are pressured to conform to gender roles and stereotypes. The pressure to conform may limit children's full developmental potential. As Dr. Benjamin Spock noted, “When individuals feel obliged to conform to a conventional male or female sex stereotype, they are all cramped to a degree, depending on how much each

¹ See http://pathwayscourses.samhsa.gov/bully/bully_6_pg2.htm and <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SVP-0056/>.

² Adrienne Rich. *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, 1986.

has to deny and suppress their natural inclinations. Thus, valuable traits are lost to the society. And they are all made to feel inadequate to the degree that they fail to conform to the supposed ideal.”³

Children who do not adopt traditional gender roles are often targeted for harassment. Gender-based name-calling is very common in elementary school. Sometimes this name-calling takes on the form of anti-gay slurs and comments. It is incumbent upon educators to understand the damage that can be caused by all types of gender-based harassment and to effectively interrupt bullying. At the same time, if educators can expand on the expectations and expressions of gender for both boys and girls, this will help all children to thrive.

Name-Calling

Hurtful teasing, name-calling and bullying affect the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders. In other words, it affects the child who is slammed into a locker, the child who slams the other into a locker and all the children who watch the child being slammed into a locker.

Children who are victimized and students who exhibit bullying behavior have lower academic achievement.⁴ Meanwhile, bystanders lose self-esteem and empathy when they observe someone getting hurt and feel unable to stop it.⁵ Additionally, they live under the fear that they may become the next victims of teasing and/or bullying. A school environment that does not take a proactive approach to end bullying will negatively affect every student in the school.

Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students experience a safe learning environment. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, all students are guaranteed the right to a safe learning environment.⁶ Growing awareness of the severe impact of bullying and the responsibility to address it has prompted an increasing number of schools and school districts to adopt anti-bullying programs. A majority of these programs focus on issues such as emotional and social learning and character development. Welcoming Schools also includes tools to help foster social/emotional learning and character development.

What sets Welcoming Schools apart, however, and what makes this guide an important complement to other anti-bullying programs, is that Welcoming Schools includes very specific and explicit attention to family diversity, including LGBT families, and it addresses anti-gay bias within discussions of bullying. If your school has already adopted or is planning to adopt an anti-bullying program, you can work to integrate material from Welcoming Schools to enhance the impact on your school.

Research has shown that children who are exposed to diverse and integrated settings are less likely to harbor stereotypes as they grow older.⁷ The Welcoming Schools Guide offers educators the language, lessons, resources and skills to help children learn to treat everyone with respect.

Thank you for your courage and your vision of creating schools that are welcoming and inclusive schools of all children.

³ Benjamin Spock & Steven J. Parker, *Dr. Spock's Baby And Child Care*, 1998.

⁴ Joseph A. Dake, James H. Price & Susan K. Telljohann, "The Nature and Extent of Bullying at School," *Journal of School Health*, May 2003 (pp. 173-180).

⁵ Richard J. Hazler, "Bystanders: An Overlooked Factor in Peer on Peer Abuse," *The Journal for the Professional Counselor*, Fall 1996 (pp. 11-21).

⁶ See www.ed.gov/nclb/freedom/safety/keepingkids.html.

⁷ A.S. Wells & R.L. Crain, "Perpetuation Theory and the Long-Term Effects of School Desegregation," *Review of Educational Research*, 1994 (pp. 531-555).

Why Welcoming Schools Are Important for All Students

- Students who experience acceptance [at school] are more highly motivated, engaged in learning and committed to school.⁸
- When there is a positive relationship between families and schools, students perform better academically and socially.⁹
- Students in schools with a greater sense of community:
 - Are more academically motivated;
 - Have higher educational aspirations;
 - Enjoy school more;¹⁰
 - Are more likely to act ethically and altruistically; and
 - Are more likely to develop social and emotional competencies.¹¹
- Helping children develop social skills at an early age may have a greater impact on their academic abilities than concentrating solely on their academics.¹²
- School connection stands out as key to adolescent well-being.

The National Add Health study found that if students feel they are a part of the school, are treated fairly by teachers and feel close to people at school, they have better emotional health and lower levels of involvement in risky behavior.¹³
- In a study of middle-school students, early pro-social behavior strongly predicted subsequent academic achievement, even for those students whose academic standing at age 8 was not high.¹⁴
- Independent of race, ethnicity, family structure and poverty status, adolescents who are connected to their parents, families and their school communities are healthier than those who are not.¹⁵
- Student prejudice stands out as a risk factor for adolescents.

Based on a national study of adolescent health involving tens of thousands of teens (the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, or “Add Health”), researchers found by looking at a wide range of measures of the school environment, from type of school, to class size, to level of teacher education, to dropout rates or percentage going on to college, the only measure that stood out as a risk factor for poor mental health was student perception that other students in their school were prejudiced.¹⁶
- The Add Health researchers found that parents do, indeed, matter!

Across all socioeconomic levels, family structures and races and ethnicities, when teens feel connected to their families and when parents are involved in their children’s lives, teens fare better on a range of health-risk behaviors.¹⁷

⁸ K. F. Osterman (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323-367.

⁹ C.J. Pyszowski (1987), cited in C. Patterson, “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents,” *Child Development*, 1992 (pp. 1021-1042).

¹⁰ A. Bryk & M. Driscoll, “The High School as Community: Contextual Influences and Consequences for Students and Teachers,” National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, 1988. D. Solomon, V. Battistich, M. Watson, E. Schaps, & C. Lewis, “A Six-District Study of Educational Change: Direct and Mediated Effects of the Child Development Project,” *Social Psychology of Education*, 2000 (pp. 3–51). As cited in: Eric Schaps, National Association of Elementary School Principals, “Building Community: The Neglected Element in School Renewal,” September 2000. Available at: www.devstu.org/about/articles/building_community.pdf.

¹¹ Eric Schaps, V. Battistich & D. Solomon, “School as a Caring Community: A Key to Character Education,” in A. Molnar (Editor), *The Construction of Children’s Character*, Part II, 96th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, 1997. D. Solomon, V. Battistich, M. Watson, E. Schaps, & C. Lewis, “A Six-District Study of Educational Change: Direct and Mediated Effects of the Child Development Project,” *Social Psychology of Education*, 2000 (pp. 3–51). As cited in: Eric Schaps, Educational Leadership, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *The Heart of a Caring School*, March 2003 (pp. 31–33). See: www.devstu.org/about/articles/heart_of_caring_school.html.

¹² G.V. Caprara, C. Barbaranelli, C. Patorelli, A. Bandura & P. Zimbardo, “Prosocial Foundations of Children’s Academic Achievement,” *Psychological Science*, 2000 (pp. 302-306).

¹³ U.S. Department of Education. Day 1 – Why Connectedness Matters, *Lead & Manage My School: School Connectedness and Meaningful Student Participation*. Available at: www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/connect/school_pg3.html.

¹⁴ G.V. Caprara, C. Barbaranelli, C. Patorelli, A. Bandura & P. Zimbardo, “Prosocial Foundations of Children’s Academic Achievement,” *Psychological Science*, 2000 (pp. 302-306).

¹⁵ Robert Blum and Peggy Rinehart, “Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth,” University of Minnesota, Division of General Pediatrics, Adolescent Health, 1997 (p. 2). Available at: www.allaboutkids.umn.edu/cfahad/Reducing_the_risk.pdf.

¹⁶ Robert Blum and Peggy Rinehart, “Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth,” University of Minnesota, Division of General Pediatrics, Adolescent Health, 1997 (p. 21-22). Available at: www.allaboutkids.umn.edu/cfahad/Reducing_the_risk.pdf.

¹⁷ Bonnie Benard & Kathy Marshall, National Resilience Resource Center, “Protective Factors in Individuals, Families and Schools: National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health Findings” (p. 2). Available at: www.cce.umn.edu/pdfs/NRRC/capt_pdf/protective.pdf

Why Discuss Family Diversity, Teasing, Name-Calling and Gender in Elementary School

In embracing the vision of creating a welcoming and inclusive school, we have to come to an understanding of why this is important. We also need a level of understanding that allows us to explain this vision to others. Below are some of the educational ideals that inform the Welcoming Schools Guide.

Families are important to all children: When you talk about families with two moms or two dads or show books in which children have two moms or two dads, you are talking about FAMILY.

Across America in suburban, rural and urban schools there are children with LGBT parents, grandparents or guardians. When you talk about families with two moms or two dads, you are talking about one of the many kinds of families that support children. You are talking about parents who love and care for their children. It is important for children to learn about different family structures, even if certain kinds of families are not represented in your community.

Families are important to children. Families are often discussed as part of the curriculum in kindergarten and first grade. For children with two moms or two dads, it is important to see their families reflected in the classroom. At the same time, when all children learn about diverse families, they are taking a step towards learning about and understanding the diversity that exists in our world in a way in which they can identify.

Schools should be a safe haven for all children: Schools should be a place where children can learn and thrive without fear of hurtful teasing and name-calling of any kind.

To help all children feel safe and welcome, schools must pro-actively address name-calling and hurtful teasing, including the anti-gay and gender-based teasing that occurs in elementary schools.

Children need to understand what they are saying and who they are hurting when they use phrases like “That’s so gay” or “You’re such a fag.” Children start to use these phrases early in elementary school. They use them as insults, often not knowing what they mean. When an educator does not interrupt gay name-calling, children may believe that it’s acceptable to use these words as put-downs. This name-calling behavior hurts individuals directly and allows children to show disrespect for whole groups of people, which may include parents, relatives, neighbors or friends of children in the school.

When educators talk with students about what those phrases mean, they are simply defining terms so that children understand what they are saying.

When educators ask a student to stop using “gay” as a put-down, they are teaching respect and creating a safer environment for all students.

It is important for all children to feel seen and understood at school.

Not talking about something sends a very powerful message to children; not talking about something suggests that it is either not important enough to merit discussion, or it is to be kept secret, which suggests it is shameful. Either of these reasons or any others that keep educators from talking about children’s families can be hurtful. When children with two moms or two dads never hear their families mentioned or see their families reflected in the books or other materials used in their school, they may feel invisible, as if their families don’t count. Families are children’s first point of reference. They need to know that their families matter.

Children from other families who don't learn about families with two moms or two dads early in school may think that there is something wrong with that family structure. Silence may result in all children receiving a negative message.

Research has shown that when there is a positive relationship between families and schools, students perform better academically and socially.¹⁸

It is important to dispel harmful stereotypes and prejudices.

Learning what words such as “gay,” “fag” or “queer” mean in the context of the classroom clarifies students’ understanding. Instead of only hearing these words on the playground as put-downs, children can ask questions and get information that can help dispel stereotypes that can lead to insults and physical harassment.

Students who either are or are perceived as gay or lesbian are more frequently harassed, bullied or attacked.¹⁹ While many students who grow up and realize that they are gay overcome the painful experience of being a target of anti-gay behavior, many also look back on school as a time of harassment.

Learning that there are people who are gay or lesbian who have made significant contributions to society is another way to break silence and help prevent harmful stereotypes and prejudices. When an educator mentions that an author, a character in a book or a prominent historical or political figure is gay or lesbian, they are simply acknowledging one aspect of a person’s identity such as gender or ethnicity.

In some rare but traumatic incidences, some students who are called gay may retaliate with violence to the name-calling. In virtually every school shooting the perpetrators have said they were harassed by being called gay, homo or queer.²⁰

Gender-expansive messages empower children rather than limit them.

For all children to thrive, educators must create a gender-expansive environment where children can be whole, expressing every part of their personality — their emotions, their intellectual strengths and their physical strengths, their courage, their insecurities, their quiet side, their active side, their introspective self and their extroverted self.

At school it is important to widen the options so that children do not shut down a part of themselves to conform to adult or cultural expectations of gender-appropriate behavior. Develop messages that help all children achieve, whether it is academically, athletically, artistically or socially. Rather than “Boys don’t..., Girls don’t...,” messages should be “Boys can..., Girls can..., Children can...”

¹⁸ C.J. Pyszkowski (1987), cited in C. Patterson (1992), “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents,” *Child Development*, 63 (pp. 1021-1042).

¹⁹ Carol Goodenow, “Massachusetts High School Students and Sexual Orientation: Results of the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey,” Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006.

²⁰ Michael S. Kimmel & Matthew Mahler, “Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia and Violence: Random School Shootings, 1982-2001,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 46 No. 10, Sage Publications, June 2003 (pp. 1439-1458).