

# School Safety: The Right of Youth and Responsibility of Adults

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Adolescence is a time of questioning one's identity and where one falls on the sexual spectrum (Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Regardless of whether adolescents are attracted to the same gender, the other gender, both genders, neither gender, or are unsure about their attractions, all adolescents share the basic need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging is not merely about "fitting in" to one's community. Belonging entails a sense of safety and connectedness, which stem from being valued by a community which the adolescent her/himself values (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). One such community is high school where youth spend the larger part of four years interacting mostly with their peers and teachers from the larger community.

Peer acceptance within the school context has been positively linked to youths' sense of belonging (Osterman 2000), whereas peer rejection has been linked to several negative consequences, one of which is diminished school attendance and school dropout (McDougall, Hymel, Vaillancourt, & Mercer, 2001). To date, research on the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning (LGBTQ) youth have predominantly focused on peer rejection and other negative peer experiences. Consistent with this research, our survey of Canadian secondary students (Darwich, Hymel, & Waterhouse, 2008) showed that, relative to straight youth, students who identified as LGBQ youth reported more skipping school, more victimization regarding their sexual orientation, and less belonging at school, with lesbian/gay and bisexual youth reporting the most negative and least positive experiences.

Although such research has raised awareness about the negative consequences of homophobia and heterosexism, experts in the field have called for a focus on the positive side, on what is working for LGBTQ youth in schools. For example, one US study showed that having Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) in schools was positively associated with LGBQ youth feeling a greater sense of safety in schools (the study did not include trans and questioning youth). Also, the youth who perceived that they had a school staff member who they could talk to about a problem were almost one third less likely to report being threatened or injured than LGBQ youth without adult support at school (Goode-now, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Thus, supportive adults in high school can play an important role in promoting the sense of safety among LGBTQ youth, who like all youth, have a basic right to education and to safety.


The purpose of the study briefly described below was to examine the sense of school safety of LGBQ youth in a Canadian context and how this related to their perceptions of

having supportive adults in their secondary schools. Data were collected as part of a district-wide survey conducted by a large, ethnically and economically diverse urban school district in British Columbia. Of the youth who completed the survey, about 12% identified their sexual orientation as lesbian/gay (236), bisexual (592), or questioning (1426). Does adult support matter to these youth? Our findings showed that 68% of lesbian/gay youth who reported a lack of adult support at school never or almost never felt safe at school. Similarly, 50% of bisexual youth and 47% of unsure youth who reported lack of adult support at school reported never or almost never feeling safe. In contrast, 76% of lesbian/gay youth who perceived that adults at school were supportive reported feeling safe most or all of the time at school, as did 85% of bisexual and 82% of questioning youth.

These findings underscore the fact that adult support at school is a must because the safety of LGBTQ youth, like the safety of all youth, is a basic right. Although gender identity was not included in the study, the school district, in which the survey was conducted, has been actively committed to the safety and support of trans youth. For example, a month ago, a workshop on gender identity and trans student support was held for teachers, counselors, parents, and principals. The workshop provided information on gender identity, clinical care, and options for trans youth and discussed student support and inclusive teaching. Also, the district is providing all its school with various resources (a book and 2 recent films) about trans youth.

Undoubtedly, more collaborative research and action among the adults of the larger community are needed. The creation and sustainability of safe schools is the duty of all adults, who need to be proactive and committed, at every level of the community (Selberg, Schwartz, Santos, & Green, 2008, <http://www.independent.com/news/2008/feb/21/homophobia-our-schools>).

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