

# Tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying among school age children and young people

## Introduction and background

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study which was carried out between April and July 2014 to explore what works in tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying amongst school-age children and young people in England and Wales. It involved the following:

- A rapid evidence assessment to establish the types of HBT bullying thought to be happening;
- An online mapping exercise to explore which types of initiatives were being used;
- In-depth interviews with 20 teachers and other providers involved in the delivery of HBT initiatives; and
- Four school case studies.

The research aimed to identify and assess anti HBT bullying initiatives and to identify which barriers have hindered the effectiveness of some approaches. As the first study of its kind, this research fills gaps in the literature around what works in tackling HBT bullying and why.

The findings as presented below were organised around four main approaches to tackling HBT bullying, namely preventative approaches; interactive, discursive and reflexive teaching; playground or school life approaches; and reactive and supportive approaches.

### Key findings: preventative or proactive approaches

- More effective approaches to tackle homophobic bullying were evident when staff felt confident that they were supported by school and government policies.
- There was much less work on transphobic bullying and no work specifically focused on biphobia was found.
- Some schools used government guidance, aspects of the Equality Act 2010, relevant Ofsted criteria and empirical evidence on HBT bullying to gain support from their headteacher. This was considered essential in order to drive work forward.
- Despite some reservations, it was possible to undertake anti-HBT bullying in culturally and religiously diverse schools where the work was part of a wider school ethos which included respect for others, equality and fairness. Anti-bullying work in culturally diverse schools was more successful when links were made to other groups who might experience prejudice. School staff highlighted the usefulness of drawing out similarities between homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and racism or intolerance between different religions.
- Prevention and/or reduction of HBT bullying was seen as more successful when teaching about LGB and T people was incorporated into the curriculum in age-appropriate ways from early on. Teachers and providers thought that the best age to teach about HBT bullying was the last years of primary school. This was when children were considered mature enough to understand the issues, but before prejudices set in.

- Successful prevention of HBT bullying was widely considered to need a strategic, long-term approach in schools, including equality and bullying policies which included sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Tackling a “whole school” approach to HBT bullying was seen as more effective than stand-alone teaching on the issue. A whole school approach was also seen to normalize LGB and T people, thereby making HBT bullying less likely to occur.

### Key findings: interactive, discursive and reflexive teaching

- Teaching to address HBT bullying appeared to work better where teaching staff had received training on sexual orientation and gender identity, and where they had drawn on previous good teaching practice.
- It was considered to be better to separate work on transphobic bullying from homophobic bullying so that pupils did not confuse the two issues.
- Messages had more credibility where pupils had a degree of ownership in the issues through the design and delivery of anti-HBT bullying assemblies, equalities groups or discussions.
- Factors thought to make teaching on HBT bullying more successful were:
  - discussing the subject in the context of topical lessons or social issues;



- inclusion of small group work which enables pupils to ask questions and discuss issues without a perceived group “norm”; and
  - discussion of the harmful effects of HBT bullying.
- The same approaches were seen as good ways to address HBT cyber-bullying, with the addition of emphasising the legal implications of sending malicious messages and teaching pupils how to be ‘tech savvy’, e.g. reporting and blocking.

## Key findings: playground and school life approaches

- Staff working in schools found that conducting an annual assessment of bullying at the school allowed them to consider how to make the physical and social environment of the school less susceptible to bullying. A positive social environment included:
  - creating a visibly LGB and T-friendly environment through, for example, the use of an equalities notice board or pictures of LGB and T people;
  - providing positive LGB and T role models; and
  - staff and pupils learning ways to consistently challenge HBT bullying as it happens.
- Teaching staff thought that peer support or befriending pupils at risk of bullying would help to reduce the chance of this happening.
- Provided that schools included issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity in wider initiatives, they did not always need to have specific issues to tackle HBT bullying. Specific initiatives were, however, considered vital where there was a perceived or identified rise in HB or T language or behaviour in or around the school.

## Reactive and supportive approaches

- Reporting and recording of HBT bullying was seen by school staff to work better where there was:
  - a clear definition of bullying within the school
  - a clear policy for reporting and recording all types of bullying with action taken in all cases; and
  - a consistent response to reports of HBT bullying.
- Teachers and providers considered sanctions for HBT bullying to be more successful when they addressed the root causes. Where such bullying arose from prejudices, it was considered important to include an educational element. In more severe cases of HBT bullying, teachers and providers advocated investigating whether there were safeguarding issues for bullies in case they were learning such behaviours from home. They also supported the use of increasingly severe sanctions.
- It was considered that the best support for bullied pupils involved taking a lead from them within a range of possible options. It also involved pointing pupils who needed support about sexual orientation in the directions of local LGB and/or T groups and resources. Pupils interviewed said that this would help to avoid feelings of isolation or the

use of inappropriate adult dating sites to seek companionship and affirmation.

## Recommendations to government

- The government should make it clear to schools that it supports schools in tackling homophobic bullying and being able to discuss issues related to sexual orientation and gender equality which arise. Staff should be made aware of the legal framework under the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty which supports this.
- Schools should be encouraged to adopt a whole school approach to HBT bullying.
- The government should support schools by providing appropriate reviewed resources and facilitating good practice between schools.
- Schools should be provided with examples of where teaching about LGB and T people has been successfully integrated into a wider equality and diversity curriculum, including in religiously and culturally diverse schools.
- The government should recommend small group teaching formats to discuss HBT bullying.
- The government should promote good practice related to the assessment, reporting and recording of HBT bullying where it facilitates action at school or local level.
- Ofsted should be asked to ensure that all headteachers and staff are aware that they should be able to provide records and analysis of whether homophobic bullying exists at their school and describe their actions to challenge language which is derogatory or discriminatory.
- The government should encourage local authorities and other local stakeholders to ensure that appropriate local LGB and/or T youth groups or information are available for pupils who are being bullied.
- The government needs to consider the best ways of allaying schools’ fears that transphobic bullying is too challenging and complex to deal with

The full document can be downloaded from :

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homophobic-biphobic-and-transphobic-bullying-evidence-review>