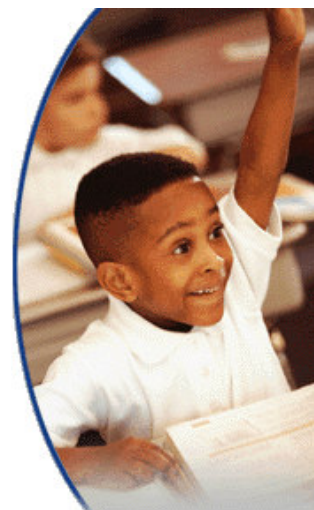




National Association of School Psychologists

Effective partners in the commitment to help school children and youth achieve their best. *In school. At home. In life.*

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Position Statement on Sexual Minority Youth

(formerly Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth)

Youth who become aware of and begin to consolidate their minority sexual orientation as well as those who question their sexual orientation—during childhood or adolescence are at greater risk for a number of dangerous or harmful situations or activities. The most prominent risks include suicide, physical and verbal harassment, physical violence, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV), and substance abuse. In addition, these youth, are at increased risk for emotional and physical rejection by their families and may become homeless as a result of the disclosure of their sexual orientation. Harassment and intimidation at school may result in academic underachievement or culminate in disruption of schooling in search of finding a safer school environment, or even lead to a student dropping out to avoid an environment perceived as unsafe. When surveyed, over 28% of sexual minority students reported missing at least one entire day of school in the previous month because they felt unsafe due to their sexual orientation. Members of other minority groups share their identity with families and communities which provide them with opportunities to learn effective coping strategies to counteract prejudice and discrimination. Society's attitudes and behaviors toward sexual minority youth render them invisible, with the result that sexual minority youth may lack resources to support healthy development and learn appropriate problem solving. These youth may develop an internalized sense of inadequacy and poor self-esteem. Sexual minority youth who also have disabilities or are members of other minority groups may encounter additional barriers to receiving appropriate education and mental health care within the school system and society as a whole.

The National Association of School Psychologists supports equal access to education and mental health services for sexual minority youth within public and private schools. This can be accomplished through: 1) education of students and staff, 2) direct counseling with students who are questioning or adjusting to their own sexual identity or who are experiencing difficulties with others due to actual or perceived minority sexual orientation, 3) advocacy for such youth within the school and the community settings, 4) support and dissemination of research about effective interventions and programs designed to address the needs of gay, lesbian, questioning, and bisexual youth in schools, and 5) support of health programs, including those for HIV prevention directed at sexual minority youth.

Violence and intimidation, whether aimed at an individual through direct harassment or directed at the entire group through antigay statements or biases, violate the right of sexual minority students to receive equal educational opportunities. Failure of educational personnel to address harassment and intimidation in the school setting perpetuates an environment that is unsafe and not supportive of academic or social achievement. NASP believes that school psychologists are ethically obligated to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity for the development of their personal identity in an environment free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse. To achieve this goal, education and advocacy must be used to reduce discrimination and harassment against sexual minority youth by both students and staff.

Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth

Schools must maintain campuses that are safe and conducive to learning for all students.

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NASP believes that efforts to create safe schools for sexual minority youth should include but not be limited to:

- **Establishing and enforcing non-discrimination policies that apply to all students.** Many schools already have non-discrimination policies, but these may not include reference to students who are considered sexual minority. Explicitly including these students in policy statements gives legitimacy to the school's commitment to educating all students. Staff and students need to be aware of the non-discrimination policy, and enforcement and consequences must be consistently applied across incidents of harassment and intimidation. School policies should mandate fair treatment of all students and equal access to educational and mental health services within the schools.
- **Education of students and staff.** Because many sexual minority students or those who are questioning their sexuality choose not to reveal their sexual orientation for fear of harassment, other students and staff are often not aware of their presence. Staff and students who are aware and supportive may fear that openly advocating for sexual minority youth may increase the possibility that they will become targets for discrimination. Many of those who are aware of sexual minority youth in their school maintain misconceptions regarding these youth and may lack information needed to address their needs. NASP supports educating students and staff about sexual minority youth and their needs through in-service training about the range of normal human diversity including sexual orientation, as well as providing information and training about relevant research, the risks experienced by these youth, and effective strategies for addressing harassment and discrimination directed toward any student and regarding how to improve the school climate. In addition, creating an educational context that includes the broad array of human diversity can help demystify minority sexual identity development. This includes infusing issues pertaining to sexual orientation in the curriculum, such as presenting theories about the development of sexual orientation in a science class, reading works of famous gay, lesbian, or bisexual authors in a literature class, or discussing the gay rights movement in historical context with other civil rights movements in a social studies class. In addition, including sexual minority issues in health education can increase decision-making skills for all youth, by preparing them to make positive choices and reducing unsafe behavior such as substance abuse, unintended pregnancy through sexual exploration, and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. By including sexual minority information within the curriculum, educators can help decrease the isolation gay, lesbian, questioning and bisexual youth often feel as a result of perceiving themselves as invisible or as misunderstood.
- **Direct intervention with perpetrators of harassment and discrimination.** As with any instance of school violence, harassment and discrimination against sexual minority youth should be addressed both through applying consequences and educating the perpetrator. Counseling and education should also be provided to the perpetrator to help prevent future episodes of harassment. Because school staff may, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminate against sexual minority youth, NASP believes that support for sexual minority youth must occur at all levels of schooling. Education should stress that discrimination and harassment must be addressed regardless of the status of the perpetrator and students, teachers, support staff, and administrators must all be educated to make policies effective.
- **Direct intervention and support for those students targeted for harassment and intimidation and those exploring their sexuality.** Nonjudgmental counseling should be provided for students who have been targets for harassment, those who are questioning their sexual orientation, those who may be perceived as sexual minority, and those who may become targets of harassment in the future by disclosing their status as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Students who have experienced harassment, intimidation or other forms of discrimination need intervention and support to process their experiences, as well as to identify resources and strategies that will allow them to experience safety in the school environment. An estimated one fourth of early adolescents may question their sexual identity. NASP believes school personnel should make no assumptions

about youth who may be questioning, but provide opportunities for students to develop healthy identities with the support of counseling. Sexual minority youth who also have disabilities or another kind of minority status often face additional challenges to healthy development and may need additional intervention and support.

- **Promoting societal and familial attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights within educational environments of sexual minority youth.** Overall, schools need to promote awareness, acceptance and accommodation of sexual minority students and their needs in a fair way. Within their own schools and in society as a whole, school psychologists can promote attitudes that affirm the dignity and rights of sexual minority youth by becoming aware of and eliminating biases from their own practice. They can model nondiscriminatory practice by making it clear that they are willing to provide services to all students regardless of sexual orientation or other minority status. School psychologists can promote and model affirming attitudes and use language that is nondiscriminatory and inclusive. They can also collaborate with other staff who understand the importance of affirming diversity and supporting healthy development, including sexual orientation. By educating students and staff, school psychologists can help change negative or indifferent attitudes toward sexual minority youth. However, school psychologists can function as more powerful agents of change when they actively address slurs and openly confront discrimination and they can address the actions or statements of other school staff who neglect the needs of sexual minority youth or who actively discriminate against them. Overall, school psychologists can promote accommodation of these students and their needs in a fair way. School psychologists can provide information, expert opinions and evidence-based strategies to assure that effective policies and practices are adopted and enforced. School psychologists can be instrumental in increasing the acceptance and tolerance of differences in the school environment by supporting development of student groups that promote understanding and acceptance of human diversity, such as gay-straight alliances. They should also be informed about programs in the community that facilitate and support healthy development of sexual minority youth and support their families, and become prepared to advise parents, school personnel and youth about these resources. Finally, school psychologists can encourage local, state, and national organizations to disseminate information to parents and other groups that need to be aware of the issues related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in the schools.

Role of the School Psychologist

Because school psychologists work directly with students as well as with staff and administrators, they are uniquely positioned to affect policies and practices within the school s. They can function as role models of ethical practice and inform staff and students that they are available to all students regardless of sexual orientation. School psychologists can address issues of sexual orientation in in-service training with teachers and programming for parents, and actively counter discriminatory practices. On an individual level, in counseling sessions, school psychologists can be mindful that sexual orientation encompasses a broad spectrum, and that many students question their sexual orientation. They should remember that without adequate information and support, sexual minority status can negatively affect self-esteem and peer relationships. To serve groups of students, school psychologists are also in a position to educate students on about a number of issues related to high risk behaviors that are especially frequent among gay, lesbian, questioning, and bisexual youth, creating a more inclusive and healthier environment for both the school population in general and sexual minority youth in particular.

Summary

NASP recognizes that students who become aware of or question their own minority sexual orientation and those who question their sexual orientation may be at risk for a number of dangerous and destructive behaviors as well as harassment, discrimination, and poor self-esteem due to psychosocial stressors. A successful program to address these issues

educates both those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against because of sexual orientation. School psychologists can participate in education and advocacy on a number of levels: Promoting non-discrimination policies, conducting school-wide in-service training, actively addressing discrimination and neglect of student needs, sharing information about human diversity and evidence based practices to address student needs, and modeling ethical practice through accepting and affirming attitudes, language, and behaviors in daily interactions with all students and staff. In addition, school psychologists can provide intervention to individual students. Any program designed to address the needs of sexual minority youth should also include efforts to educate and support parents and the community through collecting information about services and establishing involvement with other organizations committed to equal opportunity for education and mental health services for all youth. Schools can only be truly safe when every student, regardless of sexual orientation, is assured of access to an education without fear of harassment or violence.

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