

## Beyond Homophobia: We Need to Make it Better

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Guest Contributor

Within the past several weeks, seven young men in the United States and two young women in Canada have tragically committed suicide due to homophobic bullying, harassment, and societal prejudice. Research indicates that suicide is the number one cause of death amongst gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in North America. However, it is not the number one cause of death for heterosexual youth. What explains this difference?

Important risk factors for adolescent suicide include experiences of substance abuse, feelings of hopelessness, sexual abuse, a history of family dysfunction, and the recent or attempted suicide of a close friend or family member. In addition to these more general risk factors, sexual-minority youth also face additional distinctive risk factors such as a lack of family acceptance, age at which they come out, gender atypicality, and bullying or conflict because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. On average, sexual minority youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.

Researchers suggest that this startling discrepancy may also be rooted in sexual minority youth's experiences at school. For example, [Egale Canada's](#) recent national safe schools climate survey, which involved more than 3500 youth, found that 70% reported hearing expressions such as "that's so gay" every day in their schools. In addition, 47% of students heard, on a daily basis, derogatory remarks such as "faggot" and "dyke." If homophobic epithets are amongst the most commonly used derogatory language heard in schools today, why are they the least responded to by teachers? As this survey and recent traumatic events indicate, schools are dangerous spaces for those students who are or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Despite progressive and inclusive changes to law and legislation (i.e. same-sex marriage in Canada), and increasing positive representations of sexual minorities on television (i.e. [Will & Grace](#), [Glee](#)) and in the media (i.e. [TransAmerica](#), [Boys Don't Cry](#)), schools still remain strongholds for hate and homophobic bullying.

Some educators have described our nation's schools as the last bastion of tolerated hatred towards sexual minority youth and youth with same-sex parented families. The reality is that many youth go to school each day in fear.

American columnist Dan Savage, in response to what has been described as an epidemic of anti-gay bullying, recently launched the [It Gets Better](#) social media campaign to speak directly to youth who may be struggling with their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and corresponding experiences of bullying, violence, and self-harm. This campaign has become a viral sensation with hundreds of youth, adults, parents, and celebrities uploading often inspiring and, at times, heartbreaking video testimonials about their experiences with [homophobic](#) and [transphobic](#) bullying. While the It Gets Better campaign and its message of "just wait till you get out of high

school,” is laudable, youth deserve more than adults telling them that they should simply just try to survive their hostile hallways. All adults – and teachers in particular – need to take the responsibility to help these youth move from simply trying to survive to a place where they can grow and thrive. It doesn’t get better on its own. As responsible educators, parents, and community members, we need to actively work to make it better. This is the message of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network’s *Make it Better* campaign, which focuses on stories and strategies to help youth to transform their hostile school environments, rather than having to transcend them. In Canada, programs like *Camp fYrefly*, which is Canada’s largest leadership retreat for sexual minority and gender variant youth, work to help youth develop the personal resiliency and leadership skills necessary for them to become agents for positive social change in their schools, families, and communities. These kinds of innovative asset-creating programs teach youth that important adults in their lives do care about and love them. Fundamentally, all youth need to be supported to grow into resiliency and successfully transition into adulthood. Sexual-minority youth shouldn’t have to change who they are to find support and acceptance. These youth need to be reminded that they are normal and beautiful just the way they are. It’s the school-sanctioned culture of homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia that needs to change.

Some critical ways in which we can actively work to foster this much-needed educational change and make it better for sexual minority youth include:

First, we need to create positive representations – Sexual minority youth need to see themselves, and their history, reflected in the curriculum, resources, and images in their classrooms. Silence equals erasure.

Second, we need to improve family and parental acceptance – Family is the number one resiliency factor in the lives of all youth. Unfortunately, for many sexual minority youth their family is also their biggest source of discrimination.

Third, we need to foster positive peer and school relationships – A sense of belonging and attachment are critical to personal and academic success. Anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia teacher training and LGBT inclusive school policies are critical factors in addressing homophobic language, bullying, and discrimination. Inclusive policies indicate that diversity is welcome and embraced as an important part of the school community.

Fourth, supportive networks are needed – Creating and sustaining gay-straight student alliances (GSAs) in schools and supporting LGBT community-based youth groups help to foster a sense of connection and work to reduce feelings of isolation, alienation, and despair. New research indicates that GSAs can help all students who identify outside of the mainstream to find a measure of acceptance in their school environments. GSAs often represent the one legitimized safe space in schools where it’s okay to be different, regardless of what that difference might be.

Fifth, there is a need for comprehensive sexual health education – All students need access to age-appropriate and non-judgmental information to be able to make informed decisions about the issues that impact their lives. Teaching about comprehensive sexual health is not about special rights or sexual rights, but human rights.

Used collectively, these and other strategies can help to support youth to develop a resilient mindset in which their self- and social-esteem is enhanced. With these supports in place, youth will undoubtedly realize that they don’t have to wait for things to get better: they can be encouraged to reach out and find support to help make things better now.

We can't afford to wait until another young life is tragically lost to bullying or suicide. If we are to build a truly responsible and respectful Canadian society, then we all must stand up and denounce the conditions of oppression whenever we see or hear them, and, in turn, announce new possibilities for the creation of a more just, humane, and ethical world.

We can't wait for this world to happen on its own; we need to make it happen right now, and we need to start in our schools.

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