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What Is Heterosexism and What Can I Do About It?

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events



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Despite advances, LGBTQ people continue to face bias, discrimination and injustice in our classrooms, workplaces, media, streets and digital spaces. While great strides have been made in recent years, including marriage equality, there is still much work to do to achieve equity for members of the LGBTQ community.

What is heterosexism?

Heterosexism (sometimes referred to as homophobia), is defined as: “the marginalization and/or oppression of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or asexual, based on the belief that heterosexuality is the norm.” This means that heterosexism is based on the idea that romantic and/or sexual relationships and feelings between a man and a woman is acceptable, and that all other relationships or feelings are unacceptable or outside the “norm.”

Consider the following statistics:

- In 28 states, [there are no laws](#) that protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity in employment (work), housing and public accommodations (retail stores, rental establishments, recreational facilities, etc.).
- The FBI reports that of all [the hate crimes reported in 2018](#), (which are still under-reported in general) 16.7% of those were people targeted because of bias against sexual orientation. The FBI defines hate crime as a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.”
- In 73 countries, [being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is illegal](#). This means that more than 2.7 billion people live in countries where being gay is a crime.

How does heterosexism manifest?

On an interpersonal level, people experience heterosexism in a wide variety of ways including name-calling and teasing, bullying and harassment, anti-gay slurs, isolation and exclusion, microaggression, stereotypes, being judged, not being accepted or supported by family and others, and many more. It is important to note that many people—including young people—may unintentionally participate in or promote heterosexism because they don’t understand its harm or

because they are simply reflecting what they have learned indirectly from media, family, school and society.

Every day, in school classrooms, hallways and cafeterias, LGBTQ students hear biased language, experience harassment and assault and feel the effects of a hostile school environment. According to [GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey](#), LGBTQ students experienced the following:

- 98.5% heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) at school; 70.0% heard these remarks often or frequently, and 91.8% reported that they felt distressed because of this language.
- 70.1% experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened) at school based on sexual orientation.
- 59.5% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation.
- 55.3% who were victimized in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or feared the situation could become worse if reported.
- 62.2% reported experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school.
- 34.8% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

How can schools create safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ students?

On a positive note, GLSEN’s research indicates that when schools have inclusive LGBTQ curriculum, supportive educators, GSAs (Gender and Sexuality Alliances) and supportive and inclusive policies, the school climate is safer and more inclusive.

It is helpful to consider what we can do to [act as an ally](#) to those targeted by heterosexism. This can include challenging slurs when you hear them, reaching

out to someone who's been targeted, start or participate in a GSA, not participating in heterosexist name-calling and challenging heterosexism online.

Age

10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- What is your reaction to hearing this information? What was surprising and what did you already know?
- To what extent have you seen, heard or experienced heterosexism? How do you feel when this happens?
- Did you do anything and if not, how would you have liked to respond?
- Do you think you have ever participated in or contributed to heterosexism? What did you do and how did you feel?
- How is heterosexism similar and different from other forms of bias and injustice?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What are some ways you can challenge heterosexism in yourself, others and society?
- How can you act as an ally to LGBTQ people who are targeted by heterosexism?
- What can your school or community do to address heterosexism on an individual or institutional level?

Take Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Talk with your family about examples of heterosexism that you have seen, experienced or perpetuated yourself. Make a commitment to work on it and find ways to act as an ally to LGBTQ people.
- Help to organize a forum at school (or a committee that involves school administrators, staff, parents/families and students) to discuss behavior and policies that create a climate of respect, safety and inclusion for LGBTQ students.
- Get involved or start a [GSA](#) at your school or participate in a local LGBTQ rights organization in your community or a national organization that has local affiliates such as [GLSEN](#), [PFLAG](#) the [Human Rights Campaign](#).

Additional Resources

- [Understanding Heterosexism and How to Be an Ally](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)
- [Unheard Voices: Stories of LGBT History](#) (ADL Lesson Plans)
- [LGBTQ Pride Month and Education Resources](#)
- [Children's and YA Books about LGBTQ People and Heterosexism](#)
- [Stonewall and LGBTQ Equity](#) (ADL Table Talk)

BACK TO TABLE TALK