

**SAFE
SCHOOLS
COALITION
VICTORIA**

www.safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au

**SUPPORTING
SEXUAL
DIVERSITY
IN SCHOOLS:**

A GUIDE



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A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND KEY TERMS: THROUGHOUT THIS RESOURCE WE USE SSAGQ TO REFER TO BOTH SAME SEX ATTRACTED AND GENDER QUESTIONING YOUNG PEOPLE. ALTHOUGH SSA AND GQ DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY, IT IS A USEFUL TERM IN OUR DISCUSSION ON CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS, AS BOTH GROUPS OFTEN EXPERIENCE SIMILAR DISCRIMINATION AND TREATMENT.

Same sex attracted (SSA): An umbrella term often applied to young people to describe those who experience feelings of sexual attraction to others of their own sex. This includes young people who are exclusively homosexual in their orientation, bisexual, undecided young people, and heterosexual young people who have these feelings at some time.

Gender questioning (GQ): Refers to the process whereby an individual comes to question the usefulness or validity of their current biological sex and/or assigned gender. This includes people who see the binary categories of male and female/masculine and feminine as meaningless or unduly restrictive, and those who feel that their gender does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Homophobia: The fear and hatred of lesbians and gay men and of their sexual desires and practices that often leads to discriminatory behaviour or abuse. Homophobia can also affect gender questioning or transgender people.

Transphobia: A fear and hatred of people who are transgender that often leads to discriminatory behaviour or abuse.

Heterosexism: The belief that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual and that other types of non-heteronormative sexualities or gender identities are unhealthy, unnatural and a threat to society. Heterosexism includes both homophobia and transphobia.

WHY SUPPORT GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS?

...I was tired of trying to be someone I wasn't, so I came out... EVERYONE...has been terrific, everybody knows now, even my entire school. One day I walked into class, and two guys I barely knew, started asking me questions, like "what's it like to be gay?", "how do you know?" or "how do you meet other people?" and to my shock, it was just the beginning, suddenly heaps of people were talking to me, being nice to me, and telling me they respected my courage to come out while still in school... although if I knew I would have had this reaction, I would have come out a lot sooner...

John, age 16. *Writing Themselves in Again*

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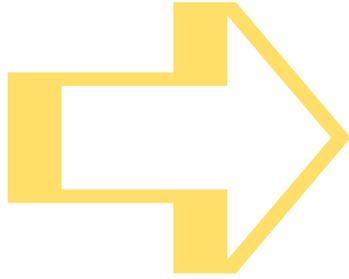
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WHY SUPPORT GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS?



Every school has an amazing capacity to shape student experiences and have a positive impact on young people's lives. Exploring sexuality and gender identity is a normal part of every young person's growth, and it is crucial that this can happen without fear of negative reactions from peers, parents or school staff.

There are gay students in your school.

Students in your school will be experiencing feelings of same sex attraction. Research tells us that around 10% of young people in Victoria experience these feelings – so how many students in your school might be same sex attracted? There will also be students in your school who are gender questioning.

Homophobia exists in schools.

Australian research shows that school is a significantly less safe place for SSAGQ students than for others. In 2010, 75% of same sex attracted young people reported experiencing homophobic abuse in some form and the most common place of abuse remained school. The good news is that there is a decrease from 2004 when 74% of those abused were abused at school (*Hillier, Turner & Mitchell 2005*).

For more information about the 2010 Writing Themselves in 3 (WTi3) report go to www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay

In a 2007 report that surveyed 253 transgender people in Australia and New Zealand, just over 87% of participants reported experiencing at least one form of stigma or discrimination on the basis of their gender. Half reported experiencing verbal abuse and social exclusion and a third had been threatened with violence (*Couch et al 2007*).

WHY SUPPORT GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS?

Homophobia has a major impact.

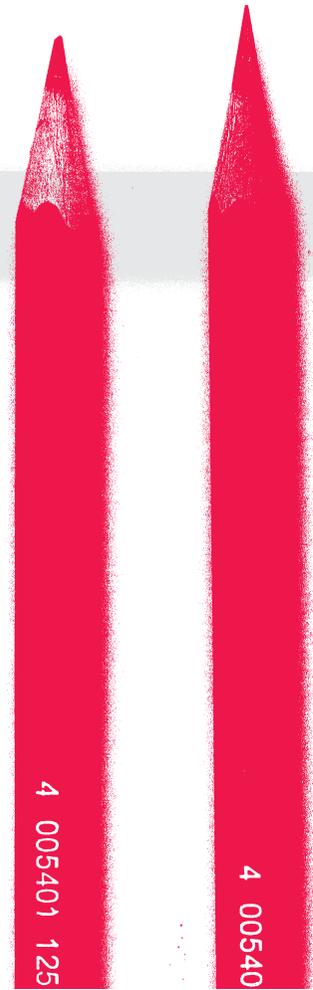
Homophobic bullying and assumptions of heterosexuality mean that many SSAGQ students feel frightened or less confident to attend school and/or feel unable to get support because it will mean they have to come out. This means that SSAGQ students experience interrupted access to the full range of school programs and activities, at times resulting in an inability to complete their studies or perform to their academic potential.

Homophobia or a lack of support for sexual diversity can create a significant burden on some students. Schools have the opportunity to reduce this burden, firstly by tackling the discrimination. Schools can then ensure that students of all sexualities and gender identities are supported, without the fear of criticism or community exposure. Many young people in the 2010 WTi3 research described schools which were supportive, and how much difference this makes.

In research conducted in 2004, 45% of young people reported that schools are positively tackling homophobia – this is a promising result, but schools have a way to go (*Hillier, Turner & Mitchell 2005*).

This resource provides an introduction to how you can make sure your school is a safe school, where every family can belong, every teacher can teach, and every student can learn.

For further resources, training, practical guidance and support please visit the Safe Schools Coalition Victoria website www.safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au.



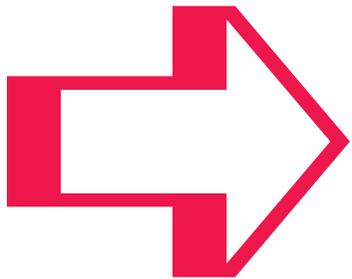
WHAT IS IT LIKE FOR SSAGQ STUDENTS?

“Back in high school, when I was bullied the most, I did think about killing myself. I was cutting my arms and feet for a long time until one day I just stopped and didn’t care anymore what people said or did to me”

Jess, age 18. Writing Themselves in 3

“My group of friends has stopped using ‘that’s so gay’ and ‘faggots’ as insults and are pressing for others to do the same. If we are not allowed to bring same sex partners to our school formals then we are going to kick up a fuss”.

Tim, age 15. Writing Themselves in 3



WHAT IS IT LIKE FOR SSAGQ STUDENTS?

Schools generally take action against racist behaviour, but SSAGQ students have reported schools failing to act when they see or hear homophobic language or bullying, leaving students feeling isolated, lonely and fearful. Much higher levels of substance use and self harm have emerged among SSAGQ young people than in the general youth population, as a result of homophobia.

Many students suffer as a result of homophobic violence, irrespective of their sexual feelings. Young people can also be damaged by inflexible notions of what boys and girls should be or do, particularly if they do not fit standard gender stereotypes, are gender questioning or transgender.

Harassment and discrimination can lead SSAGQ students to feeling fearful and unsafe. These feelings can also lead to increased feelings of depression, with greater numbers of SSAGQ youth committing or attempting suicide than in the general population of young people.

The detrimental impacts of homophobia and transphobia on the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of students can have real consequences on the academic performance of SSAGQ students. Not feeling safe at school often results in a reduction in levels of attendance at school – jeopardising overall performance.

All students should be supported in achieving their goals at school and be able to complete their studies in an environment free from discrimination and harassment.

All of these impacts are preventable if we TACKLE DISCRIMINATION.

WHAT MAKES A SAFE SCHOOL?

A safe school knows that violence and harassment are the problem, not the individual who is, or is presumed to be same sex attracted or gender questioning. A safe school uses the positive policies and support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to make sure that gender and sexual diversity are supported and celebrated in all areas of the school community.

1. THERE ARE CLEAR SIGNS OF SUPPORT FOR GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY AROUND THE SCHOOL INCLUDING;

- Posters displayed in prominent places, regularly updated, checked and protected from vandalism.
- Information in newsletters to students and parents about activities relating to sexual diversity.
- Leadership and practical support for student activism aimed at challenging homophobia and creating safe environments.

2. TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS GIVEN TO ALL SCHOOL STAFF INCLUDING;

- Whole school training on supporting same sex attracted and gender questioning students and challenging homophobia.
- Specialist staff training on providing a more inclusive curriculum in core subject areas.
- Specialist staff training on delivering inclusive sexuality education and providing appropriate support to same sex attracted and gender questioning young people.

3. ANTI- BULLYING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES ARE IN PLACE TO ACTIVELY TACKLE HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA INCLUDING;

- Naming homophobia and transphobia specifically in the school bullying policy.
- Having clear procedures for dealing with complaints about homophobia or transphobia.
- Having clear consequences for perpetrators of homophobic or transphobic bullying.

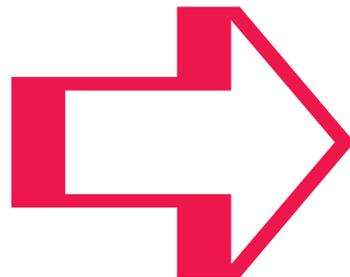
4. STUDENTS AND STAFF HAVE ACCESS TO RESOURCES THAT GIVE INFORMATION ABOUT GENDER DIVERSITY AND DIVERSE SEXUALITIES INCLUDING;

- Books, booklets, and pamphlets available in the school library.
- Online information about sexual diversity is accessible on school computers.

5. SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND OTHER AREAS OF THE CURRICULUM ARE INCLUSIVE OF GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY INCLUDING;

- Safe sex information for same sex relationships included in any sexuality education program.
- There is visibility of SSAGQ people included in teaching in other subjects. This might be the teaching of texts which have gay and lesbian characters or themes or the use of relevant case studies or examples of same sex attraction or gender diversity.

6. STUDENTS CAN TAKE THEIR SAME SEX PARTNERS OR SAME SEX FRIENDS TO THE SCHOOL FORMAL!



WHAT DOES A SAFE SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

IN A SAFE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

- No assumptions are made about students being heterosexual.
- Confidentiality is respected.
- Everyone knows you can't tell what someone else's gender identity or sexual preferences are, unless they tell you.
- Everyone knows and follows the rules about not engaging in discriminatory behaviours or harassment.
- Staff respond to homophobic remarks effectively – they address the use of the term 'gay' to mean something negative, and encourage students to be more creative with their language.
- Staff respond to homophobic bullying, name-calling and violence with 'zero tolerance' – they never ignore it or let it slide.
- Staff see the challenging of homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist opinions as an educational opportunity and do so without belittling whoever expressed those views.
- When students discuss human rights and discrimination, gender and sexual diversity are included in the conversation.
- In discussions about family and society, all diverse family forms are included.
- Posters and other resources that positively depict people of diverse sexual and gender orientations are on display in the classroom.
- Case studies, examples or texts are used that include positive depictions of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people.

WHAT DOES A SAFE SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

IN A SAFE SCHOOL STAFFROOM

- All staff feel supported, because they know that other staff members won't make assumptions about heterosexuality or gender identity.
- All staff know that the Department of Education and early Childhood Development has a Same Sex Attracted Employees policy – it is recognised and implemented.
- All staff feel like their workplace is safe and that the school is inclusive.
- All employees can fully participate in all school activities without fear of offensive, harassing, bullying or discriminatory behaviour

THE STUDENTS IN A SAFE SCHOOL

- Have access to a specific noticeboard that contains information on gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender community events and activities - including information about any local social and support groups for SSAGQ young people.
- Are encouraged to be active in challenging homophobia and addressing issues of equality and social justice.
- Know where to go to for support if they want to talk about their own gender or sexuality.
- Are encouraged to form or run a 'gay-straight alliance' type group/s within the schools – with allocated resources and staff time.



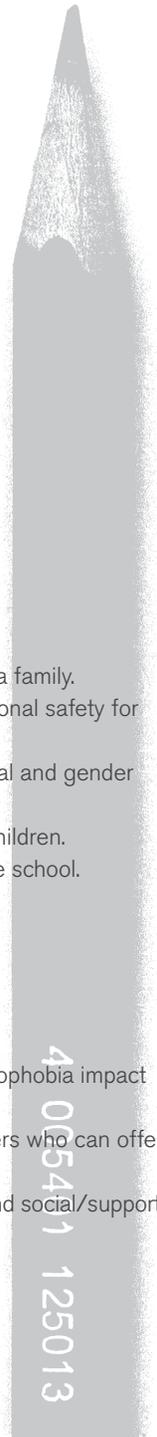
WHAT DOES A SAFE SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

THE FAMILIES OF A SAFE SCHOOL

- Are acknowledged and supported by the school regardless of who makes a family.
- Are given information on the importance of maintaining physical and emotional safety for ALL students.
- Are provided with information and access to training/open forums on sexual and gender diversity – including the impacts of homophobia.
- Are supported to take action against discrimination against them or their children.
- Have any concerns about issues of SSAGQ addressed appropriately by the school.

A SAFE SCHOOL IS CONNECTED TO COMMUNITY

- It understands the issues extend beyond the individual school and that homophobia impact on all of us.
- It is in contact with all local agencies, health professionals and youth workers who can offer further support and services to SSAGQ students.
- It has information relating to wider gay and lesbian projects, organisations, and social/support groups publicly displayed and available.



WHAT DOES SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION VICTORIA OFFER?

The role of SSCV is to tackle and reduce homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism within school communities. SSCV does this by providing schools with support to address the needs of their SSAGQ students and to create a safer environment for all students.

SSCV provides this support in through membership, training and resources.



REFERENCES

Hillier, L, Turner, A & Mitchell, A 2005, *Writing Themselves In Again: The 2nd National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-sex Attracted Young People in Australia*, Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

Couch, Pitts, Mulcare, Croy, Mitchell, Patel 2007, *Tranznation: A report on the health and wellbeing of transgender people in Australia and New Zealand*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, Melbourne.

School membership

Any school can join SSCV by completing a membership form signed by an authorised person. SSCV members will be listed on the website and will gain recognition from schools in the rest of the state for how well they are doing at supporting sexual and gender diversity. Leading schools are encouraged to share best practice with other schools. Member schools can work towards achieving the 6 stars outlined above with the support of training, resources and advice from SSCV. School membership is free.

Associate membership

Individuals who work in schools can become SSCV associate members. Associate members will be offered training and resources. Associate membership is free.

Friends of SCCV

Individuals and organisations who do not work in or with schools can become a friend of SSCV. Becoming a friend of SSCV involves making a donation on a sliding scale according to income or organisational size. All members receive a regular e-newsletter from SSCV, all resources free of charge, and priority invitations to training sessions.

Training

A package of training modules, that equip school staff and leadership teams with the knowledge and skills needed to provide a safe environment, is offered through the SSCV. Some modules are delivered within schools and others at central locations across Victoria.

SSCV can provide training on:

- supporting same sex attracted and gender questioning young people
- preventing homophobia, supporting sexual and gender diversity and creating a safe environment
- focusing on the wellbeing of students – information for parents
- providing inclusive curriculum
- delivering inclusive sexuality education.

Contact SSCV to book a training session for your school or to find out more.

WHAT DOES SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION VICTORIA OFFER?

SSCV is a coalition of schools and individuals dedicated to creating safer educational environments supported by Rainbow Network Victoria and the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA).

SSCV aims to create safer schools for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, and for students who have gay parents, siblings or other family members. In SSCV schools every family can belong, every teacher can teach and every student can learn.

SSCV is funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and is auspiced by Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria.

Resources

SSCV can provide the latest in useful and accessible resources for schools, staff and students in challenging homophobia and supporting diversity. We have an extensive library – if you have questions, we can help.

Consultancy

SSCV can provide tailored support and guidance for schools around specific issues or concerns. Any school can be a safe school, contact us to talk about how we can do it together.

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