



## Position Statement Regarding the Impact of Bullying and Harassment on Gender Non-Conforming and LGBT Youth

The American Psychoanalytic Association condemns bullying in our schools, playgrounds, youth organizations, and communities and endorses education and programs to protect our youth. Gender-nonconforming and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are especially vulnerable targets of bullying. For example, gender-nonconforming and LGBT youths hear anti-gay slurs an average of 26 times a day.<sup>1</sup> Seventy-eight percent of gay or perceived gay youth are teased or bullied in their schools and communities,<sup>2,3</sup> with thirty-one percent of LGBT youth having been threatened or injured at school in the past year<sup>4</sup>. This is significantly higher than for their peers. Sadly, four out of five LGBT students say they know of no supportive adult at school.<sup>5</sup> As professionals devoted to listening to and fully appreciating each individual's unique story, psychoanalysts are exquisitely aware of the importance of the positive regard of others to help each person reach full potential. We are also aware of the emotional pain and destructive power of invalidation of core identity and the innate human need for love and friendship. Thus, we feel compelled to speak for this vulnerable population. The American Psychoanalytic Association endorses the following to further the goal of combating bullying:

- Implementing preventive measures, such as those identified below, that improve the school climate for gender-nonconforming and LGBT youth and enhance the sense of community and belonging.
- Establishing graduated systems of discipline for bullying and harassment of gender non-conforming and LGBT youths. Policies should carefully define all infractions, and staff trained in appropriate means of speedily handling each distinct type of violation.
- Including sexual orientation and gender identity in school antidiscrimination and anti-harassment policies.
- Establishing comprehensive school-wide education programs for administrators, teachers, staff and students to specifically address harassment of youth based on sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation and gender expression. Such programs are an effective means of transforming the culture in schools to reduce the incidence of bullying.<sup>6,7,8</sup>
- Providing confidential individual and group support for gender non-conforming and LGBT youth in schools and in the community through groups such as the Gay-Straight Alliance and other student diversity clubs.
- Instituting programs to help educate school and community teachers, administrators, and staff on how to identify and assist youths in distress.
- Increasing funding to study bullying and its effects on gender non-conforming and LGBT youth, and study ways to minimize the incidence of bullying.

### Rationale

Bullying operationalizes an imbalance of power between aggressor and victim and contains an intention to cause distress through physical victimization, verbal harassment, social shaming and exclusion, or

cyber bullying. It is unacceptable in all its forms. Too often our schools, churches, sports teams, and other youth organizations tolerate or ignore this destructive behavior.

Victims of bullying suffer higher rates of suicidality,<sup>9</sup> depression<sup>6,10,11,12</sup> and anxiety;<sup>6,10,11,13</sup> lower self esteem;<sup>6,11,13</sup> increased feelings of loneliness;<sup>12,13</sup> increased rates of substance abuse;<sup>13</sup> and increased rates of school absenteeism.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, bullying can lead to the victim's suicide or murder. As psychoanalysts, we see the effects of bullying in the lives of our young patients as well as its repercussions in the lives of our adult patients. The threat of physical aggression and social scorn can have a lasting and devastating effect on development. Bullying is particularly destructive to the sexuality of LGBT and gender-nonconforming youth. The potential for a positive self-image and identity is lost and what can emerge instead is an identity built on internalization of the hatred and loathing of the aggressors. For many people, only years in a therapeutic relationship, such as is found in psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy, can restore a positive identity and reconnection with the social fabric.

We are aware that there are many groups of youths who are vulnerable to being bullied. However, the most vulnerable population with the highest rates of being bullied is young gender non-conforming and LGBT youth.<sup>14,15,16,17,18</sup>

The negative impact of bullying on LGBT youth is supported by the following additional data:

- LGBT youths are two to three times as likely to commit suicide as heterosexual youths and may account for 30 percent of all completed youth suicides.<sup>19</sup>
- As many as 93 percent of youths hear derogatory words about sexual orientation at least once in a while, with more than half of youths surveyed hearing such words every day at school and in the community.<sup>2</sup>
- Twenty-two percent of LGBT students are absent from school each month for safety concerns<sup>4</sup> and twenty-eight percent of LGBT youths drop out of school - three times as many as their peers.<sup>1</sup>

Gender non-conforming and LGBT youth need the support of teachers, ministers, neighbors, guidance counselors, and their family members and peers to help them feel safe and to ensure a sense of positive identity and of belonging to the larger community. Without increased awareness, education, and research our most vulnerable youth will continue to be at high risk for both physical and psychological injury.

This position statement is part of the American Psychoanalytic Association's strong ongoing commitment to removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual, bisexual and transgender identities and gender non-conformance; promoting the health and well-being of gender non-conforming and LGBT adults and youth; eliminating violence against gender non-conforming and LGBT people; working to ensure the equality of gender non-conforming and LGBT people, both as individuals and members of committed same-sex relationships, in such areas as employment, housing, public accommodation, military service, licensing, parenting, adoptions and access to legal benefits; and confronting stereotypes and educating the public about the reality of the lives of gender-nonconforming and LGBT people.

We seek to extend this commitment and protection of the gender non-conforming and LGBT community to its most vulnerable members--its youth.

## References

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