



CHALLENGING HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING: PRACTICAL ADVICE

Published September 2015
Last Reviewed January 2026

The Guidance

This guidance outlines some of the teachings of the Catholic Church, together with the statutory provisions on tackling homophobic bullying in schools and colleges in England.

The basis of the teachings of the Catholic Church are as follows;

1 Human Dignity and homosexuality

We are all unique, created in God's image and called to work for the common good.

"The Church asserts the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1700. It also asserts the love of neighbour is inseparable from love for God." Catechism of the Catholic Church 1878.

"The Church teaches that homosexual people must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Catechism of the Catholic Church 2358. In addition..... it must be quite clear that a homosexual orientation must never be considered sinful or evil in itself" Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales: Cherishing Life paragraph 111, 2004

"The Church teaches that sexual intercourse finds its proper place and meaning only in marriage and does not share the assumption common in some circles that every adult person needs to be sexually active. This teaching applies to all, whether married or unmarried, homosexual or heterosexual, engaged, single through choice, widowed or divorced." Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales: Cherishing Life paragraph 113, 2004

"It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law." Cardinal Ratzinger: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons paragraph 10, 1986 (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) (CDF)

"It is necessary to distinguish between sexual orientation or inclination, and engaging in sexual (genital) activity, heterosexual or homosexual. Neither a homosexual nor a heterosexual orientation leads inevitably to sexual activity....." Cardinal Basil Hume: A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality paragraph 6, 1997

"The particular orientation or inclination of the homosexual person is not a moral failing...." Cardinal Basil Hume: A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality paragraph 7, 1997

The relevant statutory provisions are as follows;

2 Statutory provisions

The Department for Education (DfE) issued advice in October 2014, entitled, *Preventing and tackling bullying*, [Preventing and tackling bullying](#)

This advice reminds schools and colleges of the statutory obligations to have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying. These statutory obligations arise from the following legislation;

- The Education and Inspections Act 2006
- Independent School Standard Regulations 2010
- The Equality Act 2010
- Safeguarding children and young people- the Children Act 1989 and

- Criminal law provisions including Protection from Harassment Act 1997, The Malicious Communications Act 1988, the Communications Act 2003 and the Public Order Act 1986.

3 What is bullying?

Bullying is a conscious and wilful repetitive act of aggression and/or manipulation by one or more people against another person or people. It is also an abuse of power by those carrying out the bullying, which is designed to cause harm. If bullying is allowed it harms the perpetrator, the target and the whole school community and the culture of safety and wellbeing in the school.

3.1 The Nature of Bullying

Bullying is considered to be:

- Deliberately hurtful (including aggression)
- Repeated often
- Often difficult for individuals who are being bullied to defend themselves against

3.2 Bullying can take many forms:

- Physical: hitting, kicking, taking belongings
- Verbal: name calling, insulting, making offensive remarks
- Indirect: spreading nasty stories about someone, exclusion from social groups, being made the subject of malicious rumours
- Virtual: such as phone, social media, "outing", "phishing" and other forms of cyberbullying

3.3 People may bully others because of varying perceived differences:

Bullying can take the forms of:

- Sexism, racism, religion or belief, academic ability, gender identity, homophobia, disability, perceived characteristic (e.g. hair colour or weight) or because of an associate (family member or friend), or vulnerability

3.4 What is homophobic bullying?

The DCSF (now DfE) produced guidance Safe to Learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools 2007, pages 16, 18 & 19 for schools on homophobic bullying that states the following;

Homophobic bullying is a specific form of bullying and occurs when bullying is motivated by prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning people (LGBTQ), or against those perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning. It can also be targeted towards pupils who are seen to be "different" in some other way, for example, because they may be considered shy by other pupils. In this way, a person's identity is used to abuse them and homophobic bullying can therefore be experienced by all pupils, regardless of their sexuality.

The bullying suffered can include verbal and physical abuse by an individual or group towards an individual or group of people. It can consist of:

- Verbal abuse such as suggestive remarks, 'teasing', jokes or name calling
- Non-verbal abuse such as mimicry, offensive gestures, or body language
- Ignoring or excluding someone because they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning or thought to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning
- Display or distribution of offensive material or graffiti
- Threatened or actual physical abuse or attack
- Unwanted physical contact, including sexual contact

- Threats and/or abuse made because of gender identity
- Bullying by proxy and
- Cyberbullying, including via social media and text messaging.

Homophobic bullying can occur in schools, colleges and manifests itself in several different ways.

3.5 Who experiences homophobic bullying?

Anyone can experience homophobic bullying:

- Young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ)
- Young people who are thought to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning
- Young people who are thought to be different in some way, for example, might work hard, or may not be as good at sport, or may have a particular hobby or interest
- Young people who have parents/carers or friends or family who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning and
- Teachers and other school staff, who may or may not be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning.

Homophobic bullying can also occur when a bully uses homophobic language to describe something, for example: "Those trainers are so gay". In this context, the general hurtful action is delivered in a way that is homophobic. The wide use of 'gay' to illustrate 'something bad' creates a hostile environment at school where difference and diversity is not respected.

3.6 Who does the bullying and why?

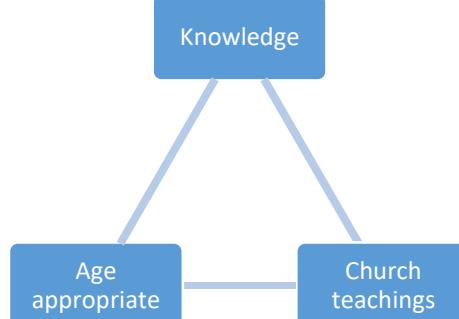
There is no one type of person who bullies in this way.

Pupils may justify homophobic bullying because:

- They think that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning people should be bullied, because they believe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning people are "wrong" or different
- They do not think there is anything wrong in bullying someone because of their sexual orientation. This may in part be motivated by an incorrect interpretation of what is taught by the faith to which they belong
- They do not realise that it is bullying
- They may have low self-esteem, poor communication skills, and were possibly bullied themselves.

4 How should Catholic schools and colleges deal with homophobic bullying?

In order to be able to address this matter, there is a need for the triangulation of knowledge; age-appropriateness and the Church teachings. As is similar in Relationship and Sex Education, although this area is covered across all ages of pupils, the information that is shared and discussed with a Year 2 pupil is materially different to the information that is shared with a Year 10 pupil.



5 Examples of what schools could do to avoid bullying

Schools may wish to highlight things they do to promote inclusive values. Here are some examples:

- Ensure Safeguarding of every pupil at school
- Have a Mission Statement that is inclusive
- Highlight the Church teachings in the Religious Education curriculum, for example the Ten Commandments, apply to all people.
- Stress that God's grace applies to all
- Promote mutual respect for all
- Have a clear Behaviour Policy that outlines what is not acceptable
- Have a robust Anti -Bullying Policy that ensures that all eight protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 are included in an age appropriate manner
- Implement the Anti-Bullying Policy when required
- Provide appropriate training so all staff become skilfully able to tackle any form of bullying, understand the Equality Act and Church teachings
- Ensure the school's British Values Policy is upheld (highlighting the rule of Law, Individual Liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs)
- Ensure that there is a whole school approach to policies (ie Safeguarding, Relationship and Sex Education, Behaviour Policy, Anti bullying, Homophobic bullying, Mission Statement etc are all interconnected)
- Ensure all pupils are listened to by the adults in school
- Promote emotional wellbeing being central to child development.

5.1 Other suggestions

Schools, and colleges may wish to highlight how bullying is tackled on a subject by subject basis. There needs to be age appropriate coverage of diversity, which should occur as a general part of school life.

5.2 Primary schools

In Primary schools, some curriculum areas such as those listed below may lend themselves to have discussions about homophobic bullying.

- Religious Education (RE) –Belonging- Family
- Relationship and Sex Education
- Personal Social Health Education (PSHE)
- Circle Time
- Drama groups
- Literacy

5.3 Secondary schools

In Secondary schools, some curriculum areas such as those listed below may lend themselves to have discussions about homophobic bullying.

- Religious Education (RE)
- Relationship and Sex Education
- Citizenship (if applicable)
- Personal Social Health Education (PSHE)
- History
- English Literature and
- Drama

Staff may need reassurance that there are no legal or canonical restrictions on discussing issues about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning within the curriculum. It is always

essential to inform the pupils about the Church teachings, whilst ensuring that there is no inadvertent promotion of homophobia within the school.

5.4 Sensitive issues

Schools may choose to identify aspects of the Relationship and Sex Education programme that are deemed sensitive and may be raised by pupils. These can all contribute to an understanding of homophobia. Below are examples of some sensitive issues;

Sensitive issues addressed within the curriculum
Physical and emotional changes during puberty
Managing changing relationships with family and friends
Sexual relationships
Contraception
Assessing risks, sexual activity
Sexually Transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS
Paedophilia
Sexuality
Pregnancy and abortion
Loss and change e.g divorce, bereavement
Marriage

In order to de-sensitise some of these issues and to enable discussions to take place staff make use of:

- Ground rules
- Teachings of the Catholic church
- Distancing techniques e.g create a character, storyboarding
- Specialist support where appropriate e.g school nurse, theatre group
- Regular CPD opportunities for staff to attend and discuss issues openly.

To assist staff in answering the more sensitive questions, staff may be asked to respond within the framework outlined above. Ground rules could be negotiated and agreed with pupils from the outset. Any discussion or negotiation and responses would have to be done in an age appropriate manner.

5.5 Other approaches to consider

Schools and colleges should encourage a culture whereby pupils are able to approach staff with concerns about bullying of themselves and/or about their friends.

This is a list of some of the resources that may be used by schools and colleges to promote such a culture. It is not an exhaustive list:

- Newsletters
- School diaries/journals
- Social media
- School website
- Use of plasma screens around schools
- Email to designated staff at a school email address such as *anti-bullying@*
- Posters around schools/colleges

There may be different scenarios which may occur within schools and colleges, for example a member of staff may notice and be concerned about a pupil who is the subject of homophobic bullying. There is a statutory duty for that member of staff to report concerns to the school's safeguarding officer. Another example being, a pupil may approach a member of staff

confidentially and disclose that they are the subject of homophobic bullying. The member of staff has a statutory duty to report the matter to the school's safeguarding officer.

The school's safeguarding officer may choose to take charge of who supports the pupil. It could be another member of staff or an outside agency. Any member of staff, providing support for a pupil may also need to be supported professionally. The most important aspect is that all pupils know that they are able to approach an adult who will listen to them and take their concerns seriously and that the adult who provides the ongoing support for the pupil has the pupil's trust and the support of the senior leadership in the school.

Here is a list of people whom pupils may wish to have discussions with about bullying in school. It is not an exhaustive list:

- Chaplaincy team
- Pastoral care team
- Teacher/adult in school you trust
- Safeguarding officers
- School nurse
- Community police officer

6 Frequently Asked Questions

These FAQs can also be found in DCSF's guidance Safe to Learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools 2007 and have been adapted.

1. Some parents/carers do not want us to respond to homophobic bullying. What do we do?

No parent/carer wants their child to be bullied. Nor do they want to hear that their child is a bully. Regardless of their views on LGBTQ, or sexual orientation, parents and carers have to understand that schools have a responsibility to keep pupils safe. Preventing and responding to homophobic bullying is essential if schools are going to fulfil their responsibilities. It is important to consult parents/carers about any steps to prevent homophobic bullying. Parents/carers also need to understand that homophobic bullying can affect anyone, regardless of whether or not they are LGBTQ.

2. We have to respect cultural and religious difference. Does this mean pupils can be homophobic?

Some religions or cultures (other than Catholicism) believe that homosexuality is wrong and LGBTQ people are not entitled to the same rights as heterosexual people. However, no religion or culture believes that bullying, including homophobic bullying, is ever acceptable. There can therefore be no justification for homophobic bullying. All young people can experience homophobic bullying, regardless of their sexual orientation, religion, or views, and they deserve to be protected. Tolerance and kindness should be integral to any school. A person can hold whatever views they want, but expressing views that denigrate others is unacceptable and does not conform to values of the Catholic school.

3. Primary school pupils are too young to understand. Surely we should not mention gay people?

Primary school pupils may be too young to understand their own sexual orientation but it is likely that some primary school pupils will know someone who is LGBTQ. This might be a member of their family, godparents, or family friends. Homophobic language is used in primary schools without the pupils necessarily realising what it is that they are saying. Primary schools should respond to homophobic bullying in an age-appropriate way, whilst demonstrating that it

is not acceptable in school. The same strategies can be used to tackle all forms of inappropriate language.

4. I think a pupil may be LGBTQ. What should I do?

It is important that you do not ask pupils about their sexual orientation, or assume that they are necessarily troubled by it. If a person does come out to you, it is important to be supportive. That way, they will be more likely to tell you if they are experiencing bullying. Creating a school ethos where all pupils feel respected is central to giving pupils the confidence to talk to staff if they need to. Use group discussion and classes to reiterate the school's anti-homophobic bullying policy.

5. How should I treat the non-biological parent of a pupil?

Like any other parent. Non-biological parents have the same rights and responsibilities as a step parent. It is important that schools treat non-biological parents in the same way as biological parents, and they feel able to be involved in school life and activities. Some non-biological parents may apply to adopt a child. Some others may apply for a parental responsibility order; this enables them to sign official forms from school for example.

6. Our child is about to start primary school. Should we tell his teacher that we are a same-sex couple?

You do not have to tell the school that you are a same-sex couple, but telling them will enable them to ensure that your child is included and supported. Telling the school will also enable them to keep an eye on your child, and intervene swiftly and effectively if there is any homophobic bullying. Schools' primary concern is the children in their care, not their views on their family arrangements.

7. What about transgender people?

Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different things. Gender identity may describe a person's gender. Sexual orientation describes whether a person is heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. The description of someone as transgender refers to their gender identity. Some young people come to realise that their biological gender is not the same as the gender with which they identify, that is, they are born a girl but feel like a boy, or a born a boy and feel like a girl. Some transgender young people can be heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual, but like all pupils can experience homophobic bullying and should be protected from it. Transgender pupils may not conform to accepted gender norms and roles and therefore may experience homophobic bullying as a result. It is therefore important to be alert to the unique sort of bullying they may experience and protect them accordingly.

The American Psychological Association defined the following terms in 2011 as follows;

Gender identity refers to "one's sense of oneself as male, female or transgender" when one's gender identity and biological sex are not congruent, the individual may identify as transsexual or as another transgender category.

Gender expression refers to the way in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture; for example, in terms of clothing, communication patterns and interests. A person's gender expression may or may not be consistent with socially prescribed gender roles, and may or may not reflect his or her gender identity.

Gender Reassignment

A person is considered transsexual, and considered to be undergoing gender reassignment if:

...the person is proposing to undergo, is undergoing or has undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning the person's sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex. Equality Act 2010 section 7.

During the passage of the Gender Recognition Bill the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales prepared a Briefing note, (CBCEW Briefing note on the Gender Recognition Bill from a Catholic Perspective, paragraph 11, 2004). Whilst the Briefing was prepared specifically to respond to the proposal to allow legal recognition of the acquired gender there is reference to the Church's view of its response to transsexual people. The relevant paragraph, which gives the Catholic perspective on gender reassignment is as follows:

"Transsexual people are fully entitled to help and support from the community, and as people suffering and in need have a special claim to help from the Christian community. In their interests and the promotion of the common good of society, there is a natural response to ease their suffering by providing appropriate medical and psychological help and support, and for those who chose to do so, to ease their life in society when they chose to live permanently as a member of the opposite sex."

8. We do not have any LGBTQ pupils at this school. Why would this be relevant?

Homophobic bullying can affect anyone regardless of sexual orientation. Anyone who is thought to be LGBTQ, or just thought to be "different" can be called "gay" or experience homophobic abuse. It is highly likely that your school will have LGBTQ pupils, even if they have not yet "come out". Even if you do not have any LGBTQ pupils, it is likely that pupils may have LGBTQ friends or family or may be aware of media coverage of LGBTQ issues and therefore it is relevant to them. Finally, there are LGBTQ people in the world (and in the workplace) and therefore tackling homophobic bullying is essential to a pupil's wider education.

9. How do schools with a religious character respond to homophobic bullying?

Along with all schools, schools with a religious character condemn and will not tolerate any form of bullying, including homophobic bullying, for at the heart of a successful Catholic school is Christ, who is love and bullying can have no place in such communities.

Appendix 1- Scenario examples

4.1 Scenario 1 –Primary school

Year 1 are making cards for Mothering Sunday. Sandeep says she wants to make two cards because she has two mummies. Some of the other children laugh and one calls her a lesbian. In order to diffuse things, Sandeep's teacher tells her for the meantime it would be better that she only makes one card.

This scenario and response in italics are from Ofsted's document entitled Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual and Transgender issues: Inspecting provision and outcomes for pupils in school-Flexible Learning materials Feb 2012

Sandeep's request is a fair and valid one and the teacher's reaction is poor. If the school ensures good equality and diversity it should take account of Sandeep and her parents/carers. Not all pupils are heterosexual, and neither are all parents and carers. The school has a duty to cater for all pupils and for all parents and carers.

Suggested preparatory work with class before activity

Mothering is a verb and can be defined as the process of caring for children as their mother or of caring for people in the way that a mother does. Therefore, this is an opportunity with the class to stress the importance of people who perform 'mothering' roles, such as carers, grandparents, other relatives, nannies and/ or au pairs (male and female), godparents and family friends.

Possible way of tackling the matter on the day of the incident

- Teacher should deal with the name calling. It was an inappropriate word used to hurt/or cause upset
- Teacher should reassure child 'of course you can make two cards.'

Whole class activity at another time

- Discuss the idea that there are many types of families for example, single parent families (with father only, or with mother only), one or two grandparents, parents who live with a child and a parent who does not live with the child, step families, adoptive families, foster families, surrogate families, guardianships (including with grandparents, other relatives and family friends), a family with an orphaned child/children and two parent families. There is love within all types of families.

Church teachings

- Discussion about how we are all unique and created in the image of God
- Discussion about God's love for all
- Marriage (age-appropriate)
- Maybe also extend the task by having children draw their families and people who care for them followed by prayer circle thanking God for those who care for us.

Scenario 2 Primary School

Everything is "gay" these days. Do I have to challenge every word?

This question and response is from FAQs from the DCSF's Safe to Learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools 2007.

Homophobic language is common and its use is often casual, but it is very difficult to respond to more serious forms of homophobic bullying if certain words and usage are allowed. Homophobic language also contributes to a culture of intolerance, and may have an impact on how young people feel about themselves. It is therefore necessary to have a "zero tolerance" approach to homophobic language, regardless of how it is used. Staff should make it clear that homophobic language is not tolerated by the school and that a 'hierarchy of sanctions' will be followed if it continues.

Possible ways of tackling the matter

- This is a case of name calling and explain that the derogatory use of this word is not acceptable. As such use of the word creates an environment in which being gay is constantly being likened to something that's negative, inferior and pejorative.
- Is the word used in a positive context?
- Discuss the meaning of the word.
- In line with the appropriate policies at school, how does the school deal with recognition, prevention, responding and monitoring to any form of homophobic language?

4.5 Scenario 3 – Secondary School

Tom is 16 and is openly gay. He has a boyfriend at another school. Sometimes they meet after school at the school gates and kiss. Tom has been receiving text messages and emails calling him a "bender" and saying "we're gonna get youand your boyfriend....queer!" He has been pushed and jostled in the school corridors and his bag has been vandalised. A few parents have also complained about Tom kissing his boyfriend in front of their children.

Possible way of tackling the matter

This is a case of homophobic bullying and a safeguarding matter.

Threats have been made.

Does the school have a policy that addresses public display of affection for all its pupils? If such a policy exists, all pupils are bound by it. If there is no policy about public display of affection, then all pupils are entitled to public display of affection.

Church teachings

Discussions about human dignity, chastity and homosexuality.

The Church asserts that '*The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.*' Cardinal Ratzinger: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons paragraph 10, 1986 (CDF)

References from the guidance

1. Catechism of the Catholic Church
2. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2004: Cherishing Life
3. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2004: CBCEW Briefing Note on the Gender Recognition Bill From a Catholic Perspective
4. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2014: Applying Equality Law in Practice: Guidance for Catholics and Catholic Organisations
5. Cardinal Ratzinger: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual persons 1986 (The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)
6. Cardinal Basil Hume: A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality 1997
7. Catholic Values and British Values CES Feb 2015
8. Department for Education: Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools, Nov 2014
9. Department for Education: Preventing and tackling bullying, Oct 2014, updated 2017
10. Department for Children Schools and Families: Safe to Learn: Embedding anti bullying work in schools 2007 (archived)
11. Ofsted Exploring the school's actions to prevent and tackle homophobic and transphobic bullying Sept 2013
12. Ofsted Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender issues: Inspecting provision and outcomes for pupils in school –Flexible Learning Materials – Feb 2012
13. Ofsted School Inspection handbook Jan 2015
14. Ofsted Inspecting safeguarding in maintained schools and academies Apr 2015
15. American Psychological Association definition of terms: Sex, Gender, Gender identity, Sexual Orientation Feb 2011

Useful resources

Catholic Children's Society (Westminster)

73 St Charles Square

London W10 6EJ

Tel 020 8969 5305

www.cathchild.org.uk

ChildLine

ChildLine is a free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK.

National Helpline: 0800 1111

www.childline.org