# Teen Suicide, Homophobic Bullying & Gender Norms

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## BACKGROUND

Efforts to address homophobic and transphobic bullying in middle school have acquired a new urgency in the light of recent teen suicides.

Many of these efforts have focused on sexual orientation or (to a lesser extent) gender identity. Yet in doing so they may have overlooked the real cause, which is intolerance for gender non-conformity.

Decades of research has found that middle school bullying and homophobic taunting is inextricably tied to masculine and feminine gender norms [1-3].

Boys are targeted because they don't fit prevailing ideals for masculinity [1-3], and girls because they don't fit ideals for femininity [3, 4].

As this study found, this is even true for LGBT youth who are themselves gay or transgender, but who reported strongly that the atmosphere of daily intolerance in which they are bullied and in which teen suicides happen is about gender non-conformity.

This may seem confusing, because the linguistic "frame" utilized by bullies usually references the victim's sexual orientation: i.e., "that's so gay" or "you're such a fag".

Yet as researcher C J Pascoe documented after a year of tracking homophobic middle school taunting, the use of such epithets—against gay and straight students—is less about sexual orientation than policing masculinity and punishing those who don't fit manhood ideals [5].
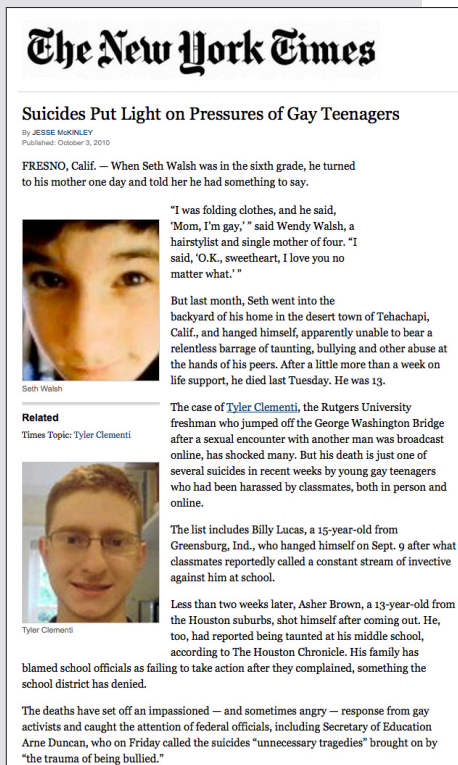
In sum, at age 18 calling someone "fag" is usually about sexual orientation; at age 8 it's about gender non-conformity and masculine norms. At least in this study, that turned out to be true not only for LGBT students, but especially true for LGBT students. And it is something they believe is directly linked to teen suicides [6-9].

## THIS STUDY

To better understand connections between gender non-conformity, middle-school bullying and teen suicides, the Bruce W. Bastian Foundation provided support for a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews with LGBTQ students in Salt Lake City who had themselves been bullied, as well as an extensive literature review of current studies.

Utah was chosen because it has consistently had one of the nation's highest rates of teen and adolescent suicide, often linked to homophobic taunting and bullying.

Our top-line results from the focus groups include the following—all findings which were echoed in the academic literature reviewed. (All of the students who participated were self-identified as LGBTQ, so these results do not include the experiences of straight, but gender non-conforming, students.)

## MAIN FINDINGS

**Middle-school bullying is often driven by intolerance toward another student's gender non-conformity [3, 4, 6], but the public, parents, and teachers fail to grasp the connection.**

Students felt strongly that what they get bullied over is the way they express their gender. Other students may make assumptions about their sexual orientation, but it's their gender expression that is the basis for these assumptions and the bullying that results.

Students also said that adults don't have any understanding about gender non-conformity, so any sort of homophobic verbal bullying automatically triggers an adult response based on sexual orientation.

One student summarized the situation succinctly: *"To them, everything is gay."*

**Students feel teachers and parents don't understand gender non-conformity and many don't see a problem with bullying triggered by intolerance of students' gender non-conformity.**

Explained one boy, *"Protections for physical and other forms of abuse really only exist if the person who is supposed to protect you can understand your identity. In high school, I was bullied a lot for being perceived as feminine. I think the administrators at my school didn't necessarily see a problem with that…[they thought/said] 'Oh that will make him a man now.' So if they don't understand your identity, they can't be there to help you in any regard."*

His concerns find support in GLSEN's 2012 report on "Playgrounds and Prejudice" Which found that that while 13% of teachers heard other teachers make homophobic remarks about young students, about three times that many overheard teachers make biased remarks about gender non-conformity (34% for girls and 39% for boys respectively) [10].

So LGBTQ participants' perception that educators "don't get" gender non-conformity, don't recognize gender-based bullying when they hear about it, and are quietly tolerant of it may be grounded in gender-phobic attitudes among adult educators themselves.

**Students want teachers, parents, and adult authority figures to "get it" about gender and their identities.**

Participants desperately wanted teachers, administrators, parents and therapists—in fact, any adult with the power to help them—to "get it" about their gender expression.



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### Anti-Gay Bullying Tied to Teen Depression, Suicide

Suicidal thoughts more likely for kids victimized over sexual orientation, research finds

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**By Randy Dotinga**
*HealthDay Reporter*

THURSDAY, May 16 (HealthDay News) -- Students targeted because they're believed to be gay -- as many as one in seven young teens -- are much more likely than others to be suicidal and depressed, a new survey finds.

More than 10 percent of eighth-grade boys and girls reported that they're victimized because of perceived sexual orientation, according to a large survey of students in Washington state.

"It has a profound impact on their quality of life and the way they think of themselves," said Donald Patrick, a professor of health services at the University of Washington in Seattle. "Those in eighth grade are in a particularly vulnerable position."

These children "feel alone in life, that they don't feel as good as other people and their self-esteem is highly affected," Patrick said.

The survey results, published online May 16 in the *American Journal of Public Health*, don't offer insight into whether bullying contributes to depression and suicidal thoughts in its victims. It's possible that kids with existing mental illnesses may be more likely to be bullied and perceived as gay.

Nor does the research establish a clear cause-and-effect relationship between bullying and suicidal thoughts. But Patrick said "it's clear that there's an association, and I wouldn't be so worried about the causation." Prior research has also suggested that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children are more likely to be suicidal and hurt themselves.

For them, gender non-conformity is not the visible symptom of their being gay or transgender; it is the primary basis of their self-identification.

Being recognized and acknowledged is very important to them and their sense of self-identity. By always and only seeing them as simply gay, adults kept misunderstanding their experience and how to support them.

The gap in understanding of gender non-conforming students from adults is only going to grow. Increasing numbers of students, even in our relatively conservative Utah samples, are identifying "off the binary," as genderqueer, or gender non-conforming or some sort of other identity. Today, many students do not identify within discrete identities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

Participants felt that educators, parents, and advocacy organizations are completely out of touch with them and how to talk with them or help them.

**Students feel re-victimized when they seek support from adults.**

Participants reported that, when students seek help from adults in authority, the adult doesn't get them, doesn't acknowledge their gender non-conformity, and keeps trying to fit them into identity boxes that don't fit. This led participants to feel re-victimized, enhancing their sense of low self-worth and social isolation.

**Students experience the lack of recognition of the importance of their gender expression as a painful and pervasive and accepted daily erasure.**

Participants reported that the bullying and ostracizing they suffer and witness is very common, and often relentless. Some participants reported being consistently excluded or ostracized in class, and in extracurricular activities, and feeling extremely isolated as a result.

Gender-based bullying is experienced less as a series of discrete acts against a student, and more like a ruthless, pervasive atmosphere that everyone knows but no one names. And participants reported that they feel there is no place they can escape it.

Explained one participant, *"Bullying is bad and hurtful—but the widespread acceptance and tolerance of [gender] bullying makes people desperate and hopeless."*

Students reported feeling that gender-based bullying involves "erasure"—a silent violence which involves a combination of ostracism, hostility, and lack of recognition of who and what they are.

Said another, *"Bullying is very often thought about as something very visible, very tangible…you can deal with it, you can see it. In my experience, it's been an atmosphere of silence and erasure…it enables a lot of violence which might not be physical."*

**Educators and administrators need training in recognizing gender-based bullying.**

Said one participant: *"There is no training for teachers or coaches or counselors or admin on how to even begin to deal with [differences in gender identity or sexual orientation], so I don't feel welcome in any of these spaces [at school]."*

As noted above, participants reported that teachers and coaches don't recognize gender intolerance when it happens, and lack any sort of training in how to respond to it. Even if a concerned teacher wants to help, their schools have few or no tools and resources for helping students with problems related to intolerance around their gender identity or expression.

One parent who was an advisor to the project (and who is transgender but whose child is not) explained that her daughter was consistently taunted about her parent's gender identity by other students. The school principal was alerted to the situation but took no action. The diversity officer, after repeated requests, addressed the issue by hanging a picture of two transgender individuals outside his office, ostensibly as a show of support. He later confessed that he was uncomfortable with the situation and didn't know how to discuss or handle a gender nonconformity issue.

**Students explicitly linked the erasure of their identity and the pervasive acceptance of routine gender intolerance to teen suicides.**

While bullying and ostracizing was extremely difficult for participants to handle, what made them "feel hopeless" was that they didn't feel they had anywhere to turn, there was no recognition of what they're up against, and there were no adults anywhere who were prepared to intervene.

Explained one participant: *"Youth that I know in our community who have committed suicide…these are not kids who were tossed down a flight of stairs. Certainly those things happen, but more often than not, these are kids who are very slowly picked apart by things like behind the back gossip, and like mass text messages to the entire high school. Things like that really get people."*

## SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

### 1. Institute gender trainings for adults.

Participants felt that adult authority figures did not have accurate information about gender non-conformity, had no idea how to support gender non-conforming students, and did not recognize or challenge the atmosphere of gender intolerance at their schools.

### 2. Provide access to understanding adult authority figures.

Participants consistently and repeatedly stated that what would help them is to have access to supportive and well-trained adults who could and would intervene and/or support them: therapists, teachers, school counselors, principals, and coaches in particular.

### 3. Address genderphobia among educators and adults.

Participants sense that many adults saw nothing wrong with bullying to make a gender non-conforming student "act like a man." This suggests that providing access to safe spaces for kids combined with anti-bullying training for adults will not be sufficient. Adults need gender diversity training as well, to challenge and change embedded attitudes.

### 4. Recognize students who identify as gender non-conforming and stop seeing them as gay.

Results suggest that an especially painful and ironic part of the pain of social erasure and ostracism that comes with relentless bullying is having your identity be swept under the carpet and re-erased by responsible adults. Educators and parents need to recognize gender non-conforming and transgender students for who they are in order to help and support them. Anything else simply furthers their social erasure.

### 5. Change school *gender culture* rather than just looking for discrete acts.

Students stressed that bullying wasn't a discrete act or acts, so much as a kind of ongoing, silent social violence. What they are really describing is a "gender culture," and the social norms at their schools.

Addressing this will not be a matter of labeling which acts aren't okay, much less generic "Zero Tolerance" or "No Bullying" campaigns.

Gender intolerance needs to be named specifically, and the quiet, general acceptance of such intolerance challenged proactively, rather than waiting to catch certain perpetrators or actions.

## CYBER-BULLYING: THE NEED TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

It is worth noting that participants repeatedly mentioned gender cyber-bullying—online harassment through texting, email, and via social networks like Facebook. This is a development that is beginning to change the rules of bullying prevention and is worrying parents and administrators alike, calling for an even greater focus on addressing root causes of gender intolerance.

Traditional zero-tolerance and anti-bullying strategies are based on surveillance and punishment. This is difficult, but can work when bullying is a discrete interpersonal act conducted on school grounds where it can be observed, reported, and stopped. Studies show most physical bullying is observed by others.

The explosion of online gender bullying isn't like that.

Online bullying is anonymous and instantaneous. It is seldom observed by others as it occurs, yet it can scale and spread to huge numbers of others uncontrollably.

In addition, it takes place off the school grounds and outside of school hours. Some of it is even covered by the First Amendment rights.

In other words, it is almost impossible for school officials to surveil and punish.

But that doesn't mean they can't combat it. It just means instead of waiting to punish gender bullying, they need to head it off before it occurs by attacking the root causes of gender intolerance. Only by attacking harmful attitudes before students bully can online harassment be reduced.

## CONCLUSIONS

Gay advocates' struggle against school bullying has made important progress in educating teachers, parents, and the public in helping them understand sexual orientation and homophobia. This is especially important for gay-identified students.

Yet for the LGBTQ teens we spoke with, this work misses the point. They feel misunderstood, unseen, isolated, and desperate.

For them, adults' relentless focus on gay identity and sexual orientation obscures the real causes, erases their sense of identity, and makes mounting an effective response impossible.

For them, not only don't their gender-phobic peers get it, but neither do the adults they turn to for help and support. This leaves them with no one to turn to, amplifying their sense of isolation and hopelessness. And it is this impossibility of being seen or understood by anyone, combined with the pervasive daily gender intolerance, that these students identified as the source of teen suicides in their community.

School officials, parents, and advocacy groups need to stop thinking of such suicides as the result of discrete actions by particular individuals which are prompted by victims' sexual orientation and can be observed and punished.

Instead, they need to recognize gender intolerance as more of a pervasive atmosphere of general hostility and ostracism, one which targets students because of gender non-conformity and is often tacitly shared by teachers and staff. And it is this toxic combination, rather than any discrete action, which wears teens down over time and makes them suicidal.

Changing this will require naming the issue of gender intolerance and acknowledging gender non-conforming students. It will also mean challenging the gender culture which encourages their victimization and prompts such hopelessness and desperation that, over time, they begin to want to take their own lives.

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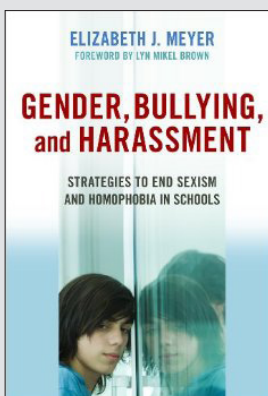
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