

# Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Students in Schools

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## Abstract

Students from all walks of life have the need to belong and be actively supported. In schools, administration and building leaders set the tone for what these supports can or should look like; this is especially true for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students. LGBTQ young people display specific needs at school that may require a more tailored, inclusive approach. This presentation outlines a practice model for best practices to serve the LGBTQ population in a school setting. This practice model is grounded in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics and the biopsychosocial model. Further research regarding LGBTQ welcoming school districts and how these students respond to academics in these settings is needed to continue the conversation of active inclusion for all students. School administrators, school faculty, and school staff will likely benefit by promoting inclusive practices so that all students feel welcome and supported; thus, students can do their best to learn and focus on course content.

## Theoretical Framework

To provide a more holistic approach in the field of social work, it is necessary to use a theoretical lens to examine the policies and best practices in place for LGBTQ youth in schools. The theoretical perspective used will be the biopsychosocial model. In conjunction with this model, the NASW Code of Ethics, specifically 1.04 Competence, 1.05 Cultural Competence, and 1.15 Interruption of Services will be used. Each of these ethical standards prioritize serving the needs of youth in the LGBTQ community with knowledge, up-to-date training, integrity, and with continuity of services regardless of barriers or accessibility.

## References

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## Research

### Disparities

The research study by Baams (2018) explored the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) within individuals who identify as LGBTQ. This study illustrates the beginning of facing adversities for LGBTQ individuals; it demonstrates that LGBTQ people have faced unequal hardships virtually since the beginning of time, at different intensities. In a study by Robinson & Espelage (2012) the prevalence of bullying towards the LGBTQ community was explored. The LGBTQ students who participated in this study were three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to think about or attempt suicide due to bullying (Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Both studies show the significant differences between students who identify as LGBTQ and those who do not. It was shown in both studies that LGBTQ students face much higher levels of adversities than their peers which often leads to struggles with mental health or feelings of exclusion (Robinson & Espelage, 2012 and Baams, 2018). LGBTQ students face disparities in several aspects of life including mental health issues related to bullying and other injustices.

### Mental Health

There is a tremendous need for mental health services that are tailored to the needs of LGBTQ individuals. The articles written by Johns et al. (2020), Kidd et al. (2016), Felner et al. (2020), and Su et al. (2016) all explored the need for these specialized services. Johns et al. (2020) examined the need for protections in schools so that students who identify as LGBTQ are not harassed or bullied to such an extent that can be correlated directly with the higher levels of suicidal ideation or attempts within the community. Kidd et al. (2016) and Su et al. (2016) explored these levels of depression and severe mental illness within the LGBTQ community. Johns et al. (2020) and Felner et al. (2020) further elaborated the significance of having a support system at various levels; any support at all can help save the life of an LGBTQ person. Without a level of support from family, teachers, friends, or anyone who can pour love and support into young people, LGBTQ people are often left to fend for themselves and find ways to survive. Even still, this community has the need to feel they belong to a community or group bigger than themselves.

## Previous Best Practice Models

### School Wide Practices for Protection and Advocacy

According to the systematic review by Abreu et al. (2021), schools should be open to designing and implementing ways to protect LGBTQ students. Without explicit rules and expectations, acts of bullying or harassment based on a student’s sexuality or gender identity can be more difficult to address. Staff cannot be afraid to bring visibility to issues that are affecting LGBTQ students. Several of the studies included in the Abreu et al. (2021) systematic review found that school staff such as school psychologists were often tasked with creating the policies to protect LGBTQ students from bullying or discrimination and education to be implemented by all school staff in the building. This is an active practice that should be prioritized to ensure LGBTQ students are not excluded but instead are given a welcoming place to learn and grow. As Abreu et al. (2021) explained, school staff must be prepared and aware of issues within the LGBTQ community so that the school may be safe space for all students who attend.

### “All Students” Approach

As explored by Smith (2019), the “all students” approach gives each student the space to be who they are and learn in their own way. For LGBTQ students specifically, this practice provides teachers and staff with a framework to be intentional in including students of all gender identities and sexualities. This idea is an important part of creating an accepting and unified classroom environment that focuses on how each person in the classroom is the same on some level (Smith, 2019). Smith (2019) discussed using language to teach students about allyship and inclusion. A significant issue from this study was the stark difference between practices focusing on tolerance and practices focusing on recognition. By this, Smith (2019) was discussing the idea of actively including LGBTQ students. Not simply including LGBTQ students as one of the students and treating them as such but, truly diving into this community’s potential injustices or hardships. This is important so that students feel supported and safe to be who they are in the classroom and school environment (Smith, 2019). Faculty and staff in school buildings should be modeling behaviors and attitudes of tolerance and acceptance towards LGBTQ students. In doing so, other students and staff members may mirror this tolerance and acceptance.

## Proposed Best Practice Model

Below are the outlined steps for a best practice model to support a safe and welcoming school for all students, especially LGBTQ students. These steps are designed for classroom teachers and support staff but, building leaders could implement versions of each step schoolwide to encourage participation and active inclusion for all enrolled students.

**Step One:** Teachers create firm rules and expectations with students about how they should speak to one another while in the classroom and at school. The point of these rules is to build mutual respect and to ensure special protections are put in place for students who belong to minority groups such as students of color, LGBTQ students, or students from lower socioeconomic classes (Smith, 2019). This built-in protection would show minority students they are welcome and just as safe to be themselves as their peers. These protections in the classroom can help all students feel they belong in that space. Teachers are encouraged to take this a step further, if they feel comfortable doing so, to state during the creation of these rules that the classroom and school is a safe and welcoming place for every identity including LGBTQ students, students of every race or ethnicity, and so on (Smith, 2019).

**Step Two:** Teachers and building staff start the morning by greeting students as they arrive, this should be done by name and with a quick social-emotional check in. This check-in would give insight into how the students are feeling before the day begins. Perhaps a student says they are not feeling well and they need to go to the nurse, or a student had a huge fight with their parent at drop off and they are upset starting their day. These disclosures indicate that the student may need further support from the counselor or school social worker. As the teacher-student relationship grows, the classroom can feel more like a community that each student belongs to. Knowing how each student is feeling at the start of the day could help build rapport and relationships between the teacher and their students (Smith, 2019). It would also assist students who need further support to start their day off on the right foot.

**Step Three:** Teachers and classroom support staff should be encouraged to get to know students on a personal level including knowing what sports, video games, or hobbies their studenrs have to make relevant references in classroom discussions (Abreu et al. 2021). This strategy supports students’ interest and demonstrates that students are cared for. This could open the door to students who identify as LGBTQ to feel safe enough to come out to their teacher or peers in their classroom. While this is not the goal of this best practice, if students come out in the classroom teachers should know they have created a welcoming and safe space for all students to fully and authentically be themselves.