

Bullying in schools: students' survival guide



• SCHOOLMATES •



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Schoolmates, teachers guide





Schoolmates

this booklet is thought for a young crowd. We want to give information, ideas, and practical advice on bullying. We will specifically, but not exclusively, focus on homophobic bullying (violence towards people who are or are perceived as homosexuals). But the “motivations” given for this kind of behaviour (homophobia, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism etc.) do not change what happens between bullies and bullied. So, the advice we give is useful in all situations.

It is translated into English, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish.







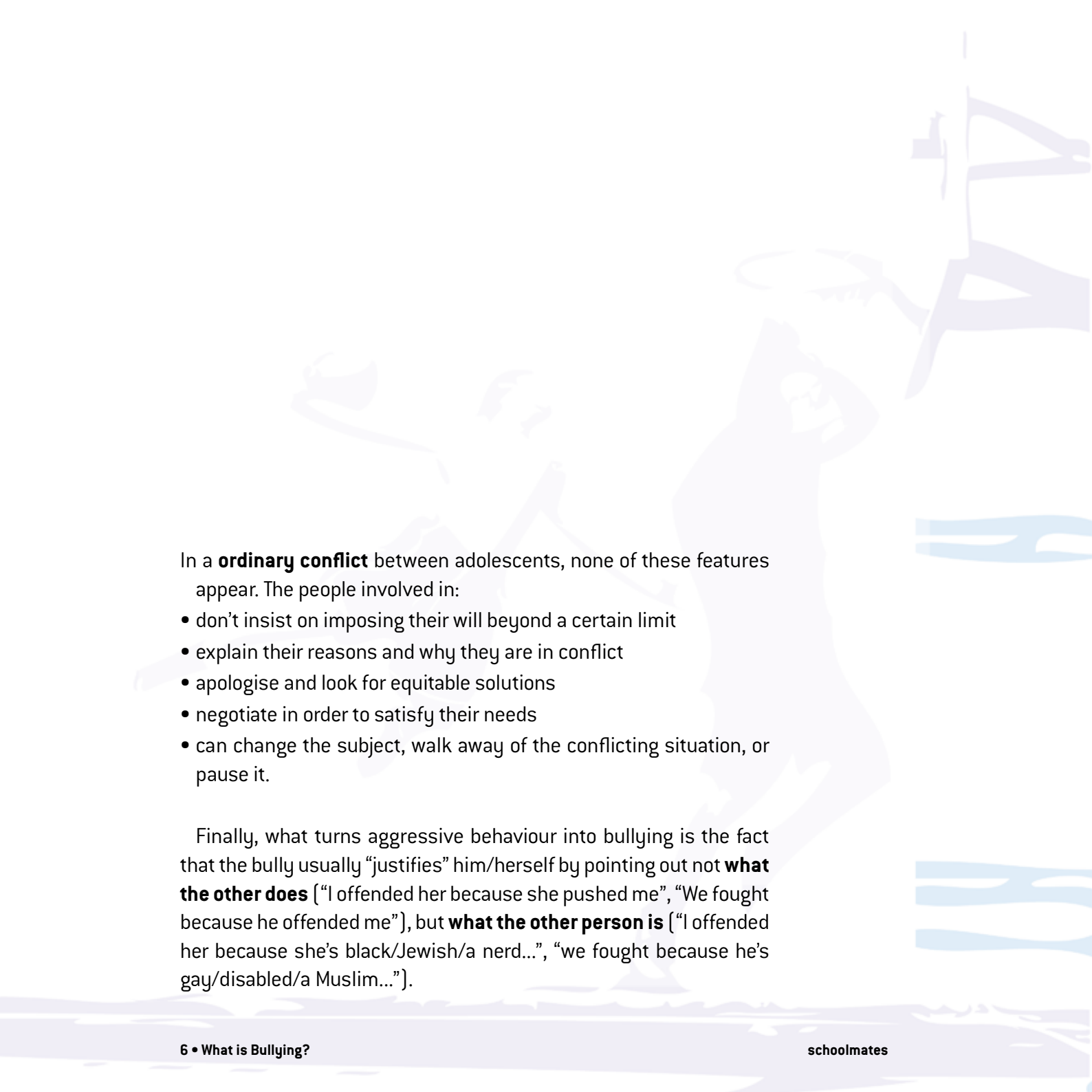
What is Bullying?

Bullying is aggressive behaviour with some specific features making it different from other types of conflict or aggression.

Bullying is **psychological, verbal or physical oppression, continuing over time. It's perpetrated by one person or by a group of people against another person (the target) perceived as being weaker and unable or unwilling to defend him-herself.**

Often, bullying is underestimated because we tend to confuse it with other types of conflicts among adolescents, but **bullying** has some specific distinguishing features:

- **Intention to actually harm the target**
- **Compassion does not act as a brake on the bully's behavior**
- **Persistent and frequent episodes**
- **Disproportion between the bully and the target** (the target is or is perceived as weaker than the bully)



In a **ordinary conflict** between adolescents, none of these features appear. The people involved in:

- don't insist on imposing their will beyond a certain limit
- explain their reasons and why they are in conflict
- apologise and look for equitable solutions
- negotiate in order to satisfy their needs
- can change the subject, walk away of the conflicting situation, or pause it.

Finally, what turns aggressive behaviour into bullying is the fact that the bully usually “justifies” him/herself by pointing out not **what the other does** (“I offended her because she pushed me”, “We fought because he offended me”), but **what the other person is** (“I offended her because she’s black/Jewish/a nerd...”, “we fought because he’s gay/disabled/a Muslim...”).



What are the possible manifestations of bullying?

When we think about bullying we immediately picture a fight or a group of people physically harassing the victim. This can be one form of bullying, but bullying has many different manifestations: an offensive remark can hurt as much as a black eye ...

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE	VERBAL VIOLENCE	PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• assault;• abuse / sexual abuse;• overpowering another person;• physical jokes / teasing;• sexual touching – feeling;• coercion, obliging another person to do unpleasant things;• throwing things;	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• insults;• direct offence;• gossip and bad jokes;• threats. <p>Verbal violence can also be indirect and aimed at relatives and friends in order to harm the victim.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• humiliation;• exclusion/isolation/silence;• writing on walls, in toilets or corridors;• vulgar gestures;• stalking/following/spying;• offensive SMS and MMS;• messages in chatrooms (which can also be completely anonymous, whereas cell-phone messages cannot);• phone calls and e-mails (threatening, ridiculing, intimidating, silent, vulgar);• thefts (ranging from stealing school supplies to extorting money)• damaging belongings;• intimidating/scaring;• staring;• blackmailing.

What are the usual excuses for bullying?

People with aggressive and bullying behaviour, often try to justify themselves. In this way they try to pin the blame for their own actions on the target of their violence. “I do it because he’s black, because she’s disabled, because he’s gay, because she’s an Arab...”. The possible reasons given are many; they usually target the identity of the victim (real or perceived):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• race (“he’s black,” “she’s an Arab”)• religion (“he’s Jewish,” “she’s Muslim”)• geographic origin (“he’s from the country,” “she’s from the east”)• economic status and access to objects that represent a status symbol (“he’s poor,” “she hasn’t got a cell phone”)• family characteristics (parents’ professions, criminal records, parents’ or siblings’ sexual orientations; absence of one of the parents...) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• sexual orientation (“he’s gay,” “she’s lesbian”);• gender identity (“he’s a sissy,” “she’s a tomboy”);• sexuality (“he’s still a virgin,” “she’s easy”);• age (“he’s a child,” “she’s old”);• gender (“he’s male,” “she’s female”);• physical features (“he’s fat,” “she’s short”);• aesthetics (“he’s a nerd,” “she’s ugly”);• social status within a peer-group (“he’s a loser and doesn’t like sports,” “she’s a nerd and hasn’t got any friends”)• disability (“he’s a cripple,” “she’s a retard”) |
|---|--|

In a few words: **what is getting bullied when bullying occurs? DIVERSITY.**

Anything different from ourselves scares us, makes us uncomfortable, embarrasses us and makes us face complex issues. Getting to know anything different from ourselves requires much effort, self-awareness and self-control. Often, it’s easier to just point out who’s different and use this difference to confirm our own identity and position. Whatever reason we may give for behaving disrespectfully to anyone, **physical, verbal and psychological violence ARE NEVER ACCEPTABLE OR JUSTIFIABLE.**



At school, have you again and again:

- been made fun of because of your appearance (because you wear glasses, because you have pimples, because you're big or small...)?
- found your belongings damaged, written on, or hidden?
- been molested by your classmates because of your ethnic origin or religion?
- seen someone consistently excluded by a group which thinks that person is gay?
- had your belongings stolen (food, phone, wallet...)?
- received anonymous or silent phone calls?
- received threatening e-mails?
- repeatedly heard gossip about another student?
- read writing on the walls in the toilets or in the hallways insulting a specific individual?
- witnessed repeated heavy-handed jokes that evidently made another person uncomfortable?
- seen someone addressed as "dirty nigger," "faggot," "dyke," "loser," "nerd," "fatso," "stupid cripple"...
- heard someone using vulgar or offensive words or gestures to specifically humiliate or mortify someone else?
- seen someone who was often physically assaulted by classmates?
- seen one of your schoolmates avoiding other people at school, because they're afraid of them?
- tried to intervene in order to point out that offensive jokes are not funny, stop gossip or offensive remarks or prevent assaults?
- have you ever been a WITNESS to bullying?
- have you ever been a TARGET of bullying?

Remember: episodes like these are unfortunately common in schools. An offensive remark, a joke, a theft or an act of violence isn't always an episode of bullying. They become so when:

- they're frequent and repeated
- they always target the same person (s)
- have the specific and explicit aim of hurting and harming him or her

What are the possible effects of bullying?

Sometimes what looks like an innocent joke has a very strong impact. The consequences of bullying on people can be devastating and must not be underestimated.

The effects of bullying can have a different intensity.

They change from person to person and may include:

- Loss of self-esteem and confidence in oneself and in others
- Distraction and nervous behaviour
- Isolation from the rest of the class
- Lack of concentration and poor school performance
- Fear and rejection of school, prolonged absences

Among the worst effects:

- Depression
- Self-harm
- Anxiety and panic fear
- Psycho-somatic disorders (allergies, eating disorders...)
- Suicide attempts

The effects of bullying can be **long-lasting**: like any scar, they can disappear as soon as the bullying behaviour stops, but they may last for life.

These are not over-reactions to harmless mischief or child's play; bullying causes deep distress in those who are targeted by it. Not everyone who is targeted by bullying reacts in the same way; different reactions may be a function of the type and the duration of bullying suffered, the degree of violence and humiliation, the sensitivity and the characteristics of the specific person, the people he or she can trust, and the situation in general.

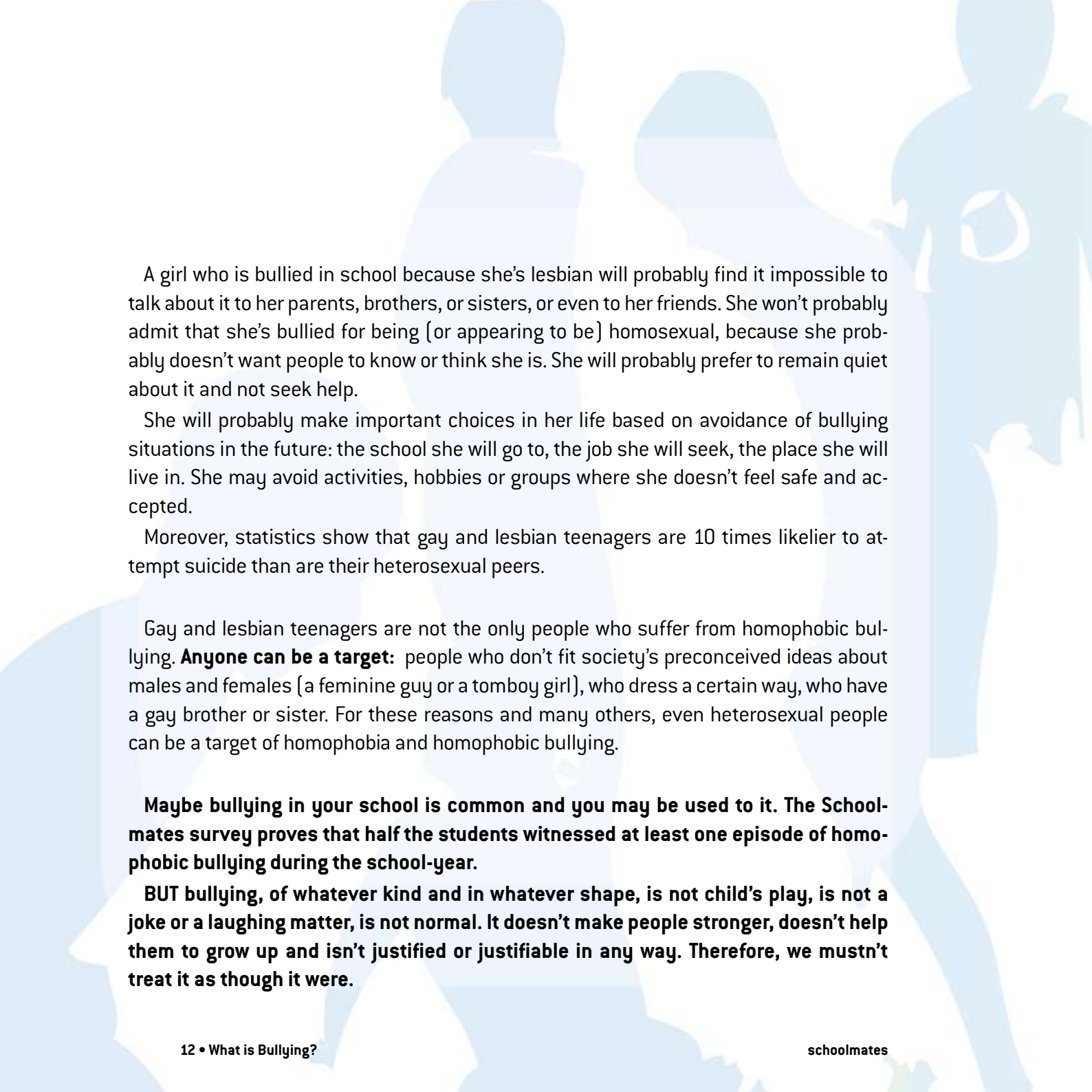


When bullies target someone because he or she is or appears to be homosexual, matters become more complicated. This is referred to as homophobic bullying. **Homophobia** is irrational fear, intolerance, hate and spite for gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

This situation presents some specific features:

- If someone is bullied for being black, an Arab, Jewish etc., he or she can find help and support in his/her family and community. On the contrary, an adolescent who is gay, bisexual or lesbian may not have come out to his/her family and friends or have been accepted by them, so it's much harder to seek and find help and support
- Gay and lesbian teenagers will try to become invisible in order to avoid offensive behaviour and assaults, isolating themselves and thus becoming an easier target for bullies
- Gay and lesbian adolescents who are the target of homophobic bullying will probably develop a negative self-image (my friends, my classmates and my teachers talk about homosexuals in negative terms, I'm being offended and harassed because I'm gay or lesbian, this means I'm "wrong," "sick," "worthless"...)

An example: if a girl is bullied in school because of the colour of her skin, she can seek help from her parents, find support in her community where she can talk about the wrongs she's suffering and find people who can help her wear her ethnic identity with dignity and pride.



A girl who is bullied in school because she's lesbian will probably find it impossible to talk about it to her parents, brothers, or sisters, or even to her friends. She won't probably admit that she's bullied for being (or appearing to be) homosexual, because she probably doesn't want people to know or think she is. She will probably prefer to remain quiet about it and not seek help.

She will probably make important choices in her life based on avoidance of bullying situations in the future: the school she will go to, the job she will seek, the place she will live in. She may avoid activities, hobbies or groups where she doesn't feel safe and accepted.

Moreover, statistics show that gay and lesbian teenagers are 10 times likelier to attempt suicide than are their heterosexual peers.

Gay and lesbian teenagers are not the only people who suffer from homophobic bullying. **Anyone can be a target:** people who don't fit society's preconceived ideas about males and females (a feminine guy or a tomboy girl), who dress a certain way, who have a gay brother or sister. For these reasons and many others, even heterosexual people can be a target of homophobia and homophobic bullying.

Maybe bullying in your school is common and you may be used to it. The Schoolmates survey proves that half the students witnessed at least one episode of homophobic bullying during the school-year.

BUT bullying, of whatever kind and in whatever shape, is not child's play, is not a joke or a laughing matter, is not normal. It doesn't make people stronger, doesn't help them to grow up and isn't justified or justifiable in any way. Therefore, we mustn't treat it as though it were.



Let's not give up!







Let's not give up!

IF YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE A TARGET of violence, derision, insults or exclusion, don't give in to the idea that "this is the way it goes and there's nothing I can do to change things."

What's happened or is happening to you **is not your fault**. Although the bullies may try to make you feel like you're to blame for their behaviour, remember that it's not true: only the people who offend, hurt or harm you are to blame for this situation. There's no acceptable reason to harm someone or to humiliate him or her: violence, of any kind (psychological, verbal or physical) is never justifiable.

You think you're the only one in the world having to put up with violence or offensive behaviour? You're not. Many students are in the same situation and have to face difficult times at school. Probably, they're very different from you, because the pretexts that bullies make up to behave aggressively and violently vary. Don't accept the idea that bullying can't be countered and defeated. **You have the right** to live in a safe environment, including your school environment: teachers and school personnel have an obligation to protect you and provide for your safety and well-being.

If you feel you can't make it on your own, learn to **ask for support**. Look around to seek schoolmates and friends who are willing to listen and help you, teachers and other people working in your school who can act and make a difference when the situation is out of your hands. Don't be afraid to talk openly about what's happening to you, because nobody deserves to be bullied or to feel unsafe in their own school.

Remember that, besides your school's staff, there are people, associations and organisations that can help and support you: **you're not alone!**

IF YOU HAVE WITNESSED bullying episodes or situations in your school, **don't look the other way**. You may fear that by standing out you would also become a target of bullying, or perhaps you simply don't feel like minding other people's business. But indifference won't ever improve the situation, rather, it will make it much worse...

School is the place where you spend most of your time, you have a right to a safe and welcoming environment: you should also care about the safety and the well-being of your schoolmates.

And it's not true that there's nothing that can be done or that you can do. In Toronto, Canada, for example, some guys mocked a boy and called him "faggot" because he was wearing a pink shirt. Two of his schoolmates bought hundreds of T-shirts of the same colour and the day after distributed them at school. Half of the students joined this pacific demonstration, creating a "pink river" against homophobia. Sometimes it doesn't take much to give a sign of hope and support.

You can start with small steps: if you hear offensive jokes or remarks, speak out and say that they're not funny. If you see someone being verbally or physically abused, talk to the school personnel about the situation. If you're afraid of the bully, you can do so anonymously. You don't have to say who the bullies are: it's not telling on people, it's making sure that safety is guaranteed to everyone in your school. If you realise that one of your schoolmates is often the target of mocking, insults or violence, if you think someone in your class is suffering from isolation, **talk to them, let them know they can trust you and that you're willing to help**. Encourage him or her to talk to teachers and school personnel to seek support.

Together with the school authorities, teachers and external organisations, you can build a safer school environment that will be more inclusive for everyone.

Being brave doesn't mean not feeling any fear; it means doing the right thing notwithstanding the fear you may feel.



● **What can you do to avoid** ●
or counter bullying?







What can you do to avoid or counter bullying?

IF YOU ARE A **TARGET** OF BULLYING:

What should you do if you're a target of bullying? The keyword is **assertiveness**, that is the ability to affirm yourself and your identity, being firm, not remaining passive toward the situation you may be in. Especially remember: **you have nothing to be ashamed of, for what's happening to you is not your fault, you don't deserve it, and you have a right to safety and respect!**

What you can do:

Be safe

- As much as possible, try not to be alone, especially in places that are unsupervised by adults (breaks, changing rooms, toilets...).
- If you feel unsafe, try and catch other people's attention.
- Try and avoid the bully, pass along without making eye-contact: never be afraid of appearing a coward and think of your safety first.



Seek help

- Talk to your friends about what's going on, ask for their support without being ashamed because you've got nothing to be ashamed of. Don't wait for the situation to get worse.
- Try and talk to your parents and the teachers you especially trust: it's not about telling on people. If you can't do it, try and write a letter or an e-mail.
- There are organisations outside of the school that may help you (Youth organisations, LGBT organisations, anti-discrimination organisations...)

Learn how it's best to react

- Try not react by getting angry or crying in front of the bully: it's exactly what s/he's expecting. Try to breathe regularly and act calm and confident.
- If you can, try and give clever, witty replies, prepare some possible replies in advance: try not to be provocative and aggressive and always keep in mind that it's best to lower the tension. If you can't, it's better not to reply and don't respond to provocations.
- If the bully wants to steal or damage some of your belongings, don't risk to get hurt to protect them: things are replaceable and your physical safety is the most important thing. As soon as you can, seek support by an adult.
- Try not to react to physical aggressions with more violence: you could make things worse, put yourself in greater danger, get hurt; you may even be blamed for the escalation.
- If you suffer from physical aggression, crouch and protect the parts of your body that are more vulnerable.
- If, in other contexts, you happen to face someone who's weaker than you are, resist the temptation to take your anger out on him or her: it won't help you solve your problems, and it won't make you look stronger to your friends.
- Try and focus on the fact that being aggressive isn't a sign of strength, but rather a way to cover up one's weaknesses.



Try and remember

- Although may understandably want to forget bad situations, remembering is important because it can help you to tell others what happened.
- Try and write down all the unpleasant episodes: it will help you keep track of the bullies' behaviour.
- If you receive threatening or offensive messages, keep them as proof.

Respect and have confidence in yourself

- Keep in mind that being mistreated by someone doesn't mean that you deserve to be offended or treated without respect: your worth and merits don't depend on the behaviour of others toward you.
- Don't try to hide those features that bullies may indicate as a pretext for their behaviour. Be authentic and proud of who you are (in many cases, for instance, coming out openly as gay or lesbian can stop the aggressive behaviour).
- Put everything into perspective: you shouldn't underestimate your situation, but remember it won't last forever, it's caused by just a few people, it only occurs in school, etc.
- If you don't feel safe in a group (sport-teams, scout groups...) and can't change the situation, you can change the group!
- Accept your feelings: you have a right to feel angry, and denying this could only do you harm. At the right time, a good cry can heal you more than you think.



IF YOU WITNESS BULLYING:

How can you intervene if you see someone being bullied? The key-word is **empathy**, the ability to understand what other people feel, being open to listening to and understanding others. It's not about friendship but about solidarity. In other words, the person you help, doesn't have to be your friend and you don't have to find them nice to support them in their time of need. Remaining indifferent may make the situation even worse and remember: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so don't underestimate the situation and don't wait to intervene.



What you can do:

Protect people targeted by bullies

- If you know that people in your class or school are being targeted by bullies, try and keep an eye on them and try not to leave them isolated. Involve other school-mates and friends: often you won't need to intervene, a group can be very supportive and protective just by being there.
- Try to integrate them as much as possible into your group of friends or school-mates, even if you don't particularly like them: solidarity and friendship are two different things. Try and do the same with the bully.
- Try and do the same with the bully, because being part of your group might be a inhibition threshold to violence.
- Accept that they may feel hurt and defenceless. Help them get out of this situation and develop abilities and self-assurance.
- Let them know that they can count on you, show that you are open to listening to them and supporting them. Keep in mind that involving you may be difficult for them and is a proof of trust. Keep confidential the things they're willing to share with you.
- Try to alleviate their feelings of powerlessness as well as the guilt and shame they may feel: there's always a solution to any situation and the violence they're suffering is never justifiable, whatever reason the bullies may give for their behaviour.

Counter the bully

- Don't laugh to jokes that may harm someone, but rather speak up and say that they're not funny.
- Don't expose yourself to harm, but try to face up to the bully, ask him or her to justify his/her behaviour, be firm and confident.
- State out loud that any kind of violence or offence is unacceptable and ask the bully to stop.
- Be harsh about the behaviour, not to the person.
- Don't exclude the bully from your group, just make him/her feel more accepted when they're not acting violently towards others.



Help to seek help

- Try to convince targets of bullying to seek support from an adult.
- Try to involve adults on the school staff by telling them what's going on, and don't be worried: you're not telling on people; if you were in trouble you would appreciate someone else's help.
- Ask your teachers to address in class the phenomenon of bullying or other relevant issues (racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination against disabled people...) through open discussions, workshops etc.
- Ask your school to dedicate specific resources to counter bullying and support students by appointing someone specifically to do this task, by opening a dedicated e-mail or help-line, etc.



**What if you're the one
behaving like a bully?**







What if you are the one behaving like a bully?

Did you think your jokes were harmless or were you using aggressiveness to be a group leader? Sometimes you can become a bully without realising it.

So, if you're the one who's picking on others, what can you do to stop and avoid getting into trouble? In this case as well, strange as it may seem, the keyword is **assertiveness**. You can learn to control your anger and express your opinion calmly and without offending anyone.

What if you're the one behaving like a bully?

- If someone makes you angry because of what s/he does, explain it to him/her and look for a solution together; if someone makes you angry because of what s/he is, you have no right to ask him/her to change: if you can't manage your anger, try to avoid or ignore him/her.
- Instead of exploding in anger, count to 10.
- An alternative and intelligent way to discharge anger and aggressiveness is in sports or physical activities.
- Try and think what you could do as an alternative to aggressiveness: instead of threatening, assaulting, criticising, humiliating, mocking, insulting... try and express yourself calmly and openly, state what you think, express your opinion (whatever it is) without offending anyone.
- Try and put yourself in other people's shoes: how would you feel if you were offended, assaulted, mocked...?
- Find something in common with the person who's the target of your aggressiveness.
- Think about the consequences of your actions: you could be punished or expelled from school; teachers may give you bad marks; your schoolmates may think you're uncool and avoid you.
- Think about other ways to take charge in your group: the real leader is respected, not feared.
- Try and foster the positive aspects of you character and things you do well.
- If you realise you've become a bully, try and talk to an adult that you trust, someone who can help you change your behaviour.
- Often, what most makes us uncomfortable and angry in others are features of ourselves we fear and repress: try and reflect on the real reasons behind your anger and discomfort and look for effective ways to deal with them.

Remember: you don't have to be friends with everyone; you don't have to think everybody's nice and you have a right to your own ideas. But be careful: your ideas are right only if your behaviour doesn't hurt or harm anyone.



The schoolmates project







The schoolmates project

The Schoolmates Project is an initiative of Arcigay (Italy), the Anti-Discrimination Unit for Same-sex Lifestyles of the City of Vienna (Austria) Wiener Antidiskriminierungsstelle für gleichgeschlechtliche Lebensweisen of the City of Vienna (Austria) and the Polish association Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (KPH, Campaign Against Homophobia) with the participation of the Spanish NGO Colegas. The project was co-funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Daphne II programme.

The objective of the project is to provide students and school personnel with tools and knowledge to prevent and counter verbal, physical and psychological bullying of anyone on any grounds, paying special attention to adolescents who are or are perceived as being homosexual.

The project was implemented in parallel in Bologna and Modena (Italy), Vienna (Austria), Warsaw (Poland) and Madrid (Spain).

The project started in March 2006 and finished in May 2008.

You can find further information on the project, its activities and results, and on the project partners here:

www.arcigay.it/schoolmates

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schoolmates

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