



**Belong To** LGBTQ+  
Youth Ireland

# Belong To

# Education

# Resource

Phobic Language

## Tackling LGBTQ+phobic Language

Our *School Climate Survey* told us that 68% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing other students regularly make derogatory remarks at school.<sup>1</sup> These remarks, often dismissed as harmless banter, can have serious impacts on LGBTQ+ young people and escalate to bullying.

### Is It Really ‘So Gay’?

LGBTQ+phobic language connects the idea of someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity with something negative, embarrassing, or shameful. For example, the use of the word fag or gay. It can be intentionally directed at someone and rooted in homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia, or it can be intended as a joke or banter and not considered LGBTQ+phobic by the person using it. However, it can still cause real harm. The use of LGBTQ+phobic language can quickly turn into bullying.

LGBTQ+ young people commonly have their gender identity or sexual orientation used as a weapon against them. One of the most common examples of casual homophobic language is the use of ‘so gay’ to mean something is bad, uncool, or embarrassing. As this language targets a core part of who a person is, it can be particularly harmful. These insults can be directed at anything or anyone, even those who are not known or thought to be LGBTQ+. This is often why it goes unchallenged. However the phrase is almost always used in a negative or pejorative way. If an LGBTQ+ young person hears this every day, multiple times a day, the incessant negativity towards their identity (whether intentional or not) can impact their mental health.

### Transforming Norms

Young people tell us that in communities of young people, such as schools and colleges, much use of LGBTQ+phobic language such as ‘that’s so gay’ is not rooted in actual LGBTQ+phobic beliefs, but because it is a behavioural norm within the group. Like any norm, they can become deeply embedded and resistant to change. For some young people, use of these terms is not meant as an insult to LGBTQ+ people. For them it is just another term for something negative or bad. However, as discussed earlier, for young people who identify as LGBTQ+, or are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, hearing this can negatively affect their mental health.

When ‘gay’ is equated with bad, uncool, feminine, or embarrassing, and this remains unchallenged by those in authority, young people assume they have permission to use the term in that way<sup>2</sup>. This can create an

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environment where LGBTQ+ young people feel unsafe to be themselves, or can lead to an environment where LGBTQ+ bullying is more difficult to detect by educators and youth workers.

**GAY=** Bad / Uncool /  
Feminine / Embarrassing

**I AM GAY=** Does that mean I am  
Bad / Uncool / Feminine /  
Embarrassing?

The environment can feel hostile and unwelcoming. Young people feel they will not be supported by staff and their peers if they were to 'come out'. As a result, LGBTQ+ youth may not come out. The average age a young person realises they are LGBTQ+ is age 12 which means they are often in First Year of secondary school.<sup>3</sup> The average age they tell someone for the first time is 16. During these four years, LGBTQ+ youth are left to think about their identity by themselves, while absorbing the attitudes and opinions of those around them. During this time in an LGBTQ+ young person's life, they experience four times the level of anxiety and stress as their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Unfortunately, from age 14 to 18 this translates into experiencing twice the levels of self-harm and three times the level of attempted suicide.<sup>4</sup>

Much like sexist or racist remarks, often made by people who would not consider themselves sexist or racist, everyone has a responsibility to be mindful of both the intention of their words and their impact. Therefore, it is important for school staff to understand how to challenge this language, and to be consistent in challenging it.

It is important to note that if an individual is being repeatedly victimised or harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, including verbally, then they are being bullied and you should follow the process set out in your organisation's Anti-Bullying Policy.

# How to Tackle LGBTQ+phobic Language

## 1. Assess The Environment

Some staff feel that LGBTQ+phobic language is not a major issue in their school, Youthreach, or youth service, while young people report that it is used frequently. It may be that staff genuinely are not aware of it happening. When students feel that the issue isn't being tackled by staff, it may make them less likely to report other forms of victimisation or bullying. To really understand the experiences of young people, share a short, anonymous survey with them to find out what type of LGBTQ+phobic language is used, and how often they encounter it. Review the results with Senior Management and share them with your staff so they are aware of what is happening.

## 2. Create a Clear Process

A major challenge in trying to tackle LGBTQ+phobic language is that it is often treated differently from one classroom or group to the next. When some staff decide to call out every instance they hear – and others choose to ignore it – young people soon learn that they only need to modify their language in some settings.

Use your existing Anti-Bullying Policy to create a clear step-by-step process on how to recognise, intervene, and report LGBTQ+phobic language use. Simply telling someone to stop using the language will not have the desired impact, there are additional steps you need to take.

You will find a detailed process at the end of this resource on how to tackle LGBTQ+phobic language use in four simple steps:

- Recognise
- Intervene
- Explain
- Record

Work with members of your school, Youthreach or service community so they can feed into this new process. This process should be agreed with the Senior Management Team, and explained to all staff members in a staff meeting, to ensure that everyone is clear on what to do if they overhear LGBTQ+phobic language. Staff need to understand the difference between using LGBTQ+ terms in a general way and using them in a derogatory way. Words like 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual', 'trans', and 'queer' are terms that individuals might use to describe themselves and should not be taboo in schools, Youthreach, or youth services. However, when they are used to describe someone or something in a negative way, or as an accusation then this needs to be challenged. Check out the staff Powerpoint presentation in our Toolkit and adapt it to suit your needs.

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In the past the term 'Queer' was used as a slur. Today, many young people describe themselves as queer, although it can still be used as a slur. The best way to avoid any confusion is to refer to someone in the way they have asked to be identified.

### 3. Educate

If you are going to change your approach to LGBTQ+phobic language use, it is vital that the young people are aware of this. Talk to young people in your school, Youthreach, or service to plan the most effective approach. Hold lessons or groups where you explain the impact that LGBTQ+phobic language use can have. Talk about the new approach you are going to take and ask for input and feedback. By being clear on your expectations and the reasonings for your policy, you will be in a stronger position to address the issue if it persists.



## 4. Consistency

Once young people have been educated, it is time for staff to consistently use the agreed process in tackling LGBTQ+phobic language use. Some staff may be resistant, but their engagement is key. While LGBTQ+phobic language use is not always rooted in active LGBTQ+phobia, it still has a serious impact on LGBTQ+ young people, their allies, and the environment as a whole. LGBTQ+phobic language can often escalate to bullying. Leadership from staff is vital in recognising and changing this.

### **LGBTQ+phobic Language**

Language used with the intention or effect of discriminating against someone based on a person's actual or perceived LGBTQ+ identity.

Take action by following our 4-step process.

### **LGBTQ+phobic Bullying**

Repeated victimisation or harassment of someone based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Take action by implementing your Anti-Bullying Policy.

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## R.I.E.R. Process

When tackling LGBTQ+phobic language in your school, Youthreach, or youth service, it's helpful to have all staff using the same approach as much as possible. To help you remember the steps you should consider, we have put together the R.I.E.R. process – Recognise, Intervene, Explain, and Record.

**R**      **Recognise**

**I**      **Intervene**

**E**      **Explain**

**R**      **Record**



## Before you get started — Educate

If your school, Youthreach, or youth service is choosing to apply a new approach to tackling LGBTQ+phobic language, it is important that your staff and young people are educated about it before any interventions take place. You can use assemblies for the whole school or year groups to educate your students and young people about your new approach.

For staff, you can host a discussion or presentation at a whole team meeting to explain the new R.I.E.R process which should be applied consistently by all staff. PowerPoint presentation templates are available to download on our website.

It's important that parents/guardians are also aware of this new process. A letter could be sent home to all parents highlighting the new process and your commitment to supporting your LGBTQ+ community. You could also highlight it in your community newsletter if you publish one.

Stand Up Awareness Week is a great time to educate the whole community about this new approach.

The whole community should understand:

- Why LGBTQ+phobic language is harmful, and why it is being tackled.
- How LGBTQ+phobic language will be addressed in your setting.
- What the consequences will be for those who continue to use LGBTQ+phobic language.

As with all kinds of learning, you may need to reiterate and reinforce the messages several times.

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## R.I.E.R. Process: Recognise

It is important to ensure you can clearly differentiate between the normal use of LGBTQ+ related terms, and homophobic language. Not all language relating to sexuality or gender identity is inherently offensive or LGBTQ+phobic. It is essential that LGBTQ+ terms do not become taboo in your setting, as it may stop young people from discussing or expressing important parts of their identity.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ Is this word or phrase being used by someone to describe themselves?
- ▶ Is this word or phrase being used about someone else in a derogatory way, or to describe something as bad?

Remember, all LGBTQ+ people are individuals, and not all are comfortable with the same kinds of language that others are. One example of this is the word “queer”, which was historically used as a slur against LGBTQ+ people. While today there are many LGBTQ+ people who identify positively with the word, many others dislike it and do not identify with it at all. Therefore, context is key, and the reflection questions above will help guide you as to whether intervention is required.

Words that are commonly used by LGBTQ+ people in a neutral or positive way to describe themselves – such as gay, lesbian, bisexual/bi, or trans – should be generally acceptable in your setting and not require intervention. However, where these same words are used as a weapon against another person (for example, “you’re such a lesbian”) this would require intervention.

Other words are used by some LGBTQ+ people in a neutral or positive way to describe themselves – such as queer, fruity, camp, or queen (for people who identify as male) - are not accepted by all LGBTQ+ people, and therefore should be treated with caution. These words are still sometimes used as slurs, and therefore staff working with young people should pay attention to the context in which they are used, as they may require intervention.

There are a wide range of words which are sometimes, but rarely, used among LGBTQ+ people to describe themselves, but are likely to cause offence. Therefore, they will almost always require intervention. Even if LGBTQ+ young people use these words in a neutral or humorous manner about themselves, they should still be reminded that they can cause harm. These include, but are not limited to, faggot, dyke, tranny, “that’s so gay”, “you’re/they’re so gay”, fairy, poof/poofter, and fruit.

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The table below shows some examples of words and phrases that young people may use in relation to themselves and others:

<b>Words that are commonly used by LGBTQ+ people in a neutral/positive way to describe themselves</b>	<b>Words that are sometimes used by LGBTQ+ people in a neutral/positive way</b>	<b>Words that are commonly used about LGBTQ+ people in a derogatory way</b>
<b>Generally acceptable</b>	<b>May require intervention</b>	<b>Almost always require intervention</b>
Gay	Queer	Faggot
Lesbian	Camp	Dyke
Bisexual / Bi	Queen (for people who identify as male)	Tranny
Trans		That's so gay
		You/they're so gay
		Fairy
		Poof/poofter
		Fruit

## R.I.E.R. Process: Intervene

If you have recognised LGBTQ+phobic language in your setting, it is essential that you intervene. Consistency is key:

- By being consistent in intervening with all LGBTQ+phobic language, young people won't feel that they are being unfairly treated, or being punished more severely than their peers.
- By ensuring that all staff intervene consistently, a strong message will be communicated that LGBTQ+phobic language is unacceptable anywhere in your setting, rather than just when in the presence of certain staff.

Ultimately, this consistent approach will help make your setting a place where LGBTQ+ young people can feel safe to be themselves.

Your intervention should include an acknowledgement that you have heard the LGBTQ+phobic language and that it is unacceptable, as well as a reminder of the effect that it can have on LGBTQ+ young people, and what the consequences will be for people who continue to use it.

In the past, there were many examples of racist and sexist language that were commonly used but which are now considered unacceptable. You may find it useful to draw a comparison with LGBTQ+phobic language which should also be viewed as unacceptable.

Some staff may feel more confident than others in addressing LGBTQ+phobic language, especially if previously they have chosen not to intervene when it has been used. Remind them of the real-life consequences that it can have for LGBTQ+ young people, and offer them support from your own experiences of intervening.

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## R.I.E.R. Process: Explain

It is essential that after you have intervened, you follow up with an explanation. This should take a similar approach to the initial Education element:

- Why LGBTQ+phobic language is harmful, and why it is being tackled.
- How LGBTQ+phobic language will be addressed in your setting.
- What the consequences will be for those who continue to use LGBTQ+phobic language.

This helps reinforce that your school, Youthreach, or youth service is being consistent and fair in your approach, and that individual young people are not being unfairly singled out. You have already been clear on your expectations regarding LGBTQ+phobic language, and what the consequences will be going forward.

Also think about when your follow-up explanation takes place. While the initial intervention is essential to demonstrate that the language has been recognised and is unacceptable, you may feel that it is best to follow up with the individuals involved at a later stage (such as at the end of the class, or the school day). Alternatively, you might feel that the severity or context of the language is such that the explanation should take place right away. Either way, this step is crucial to the process.

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## R.I.E.R. Process: Record

Maintaining a record of the frequency of use of LGBTQ+phobic language is essential to allow you to track whether your interventions are having the desired effect, and if there are certain areas (such as particular friendship or year groups) where the language is still being used regularly. This will help determine whether you should take any further education actions, such as informal conversations, a specific assembly, or a review of your policy with colleagues.

You may also consider sending a follow-up survey to young people to allow them to report on how often they are encountering LGBTQ+phobic language. Not only does this allow you to understand their experience better, it also shows that you are making a strong commitment to addressing this issue, and that you are taking it seriously.



# Summary – How to Apply These Steps

## Before you begin

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### **Educate**

The whole community should understand:

- Why LGBTQ+phobic language is harmful, and why it is being tackled.
  - How LGBTQ+phobic language will be addressed in your setting.
  - What the consequences will be for those who continue to use LGBTQ+phobic language.
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## When you hear LGBTQ+phobic language

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### **Recognise**

Is this language LGBTQ+phobic?

- Is this word or phrase being used by someone to describe themselves?
  - Is this word or phrase being used about someone else in a derogatory way, or to describe something as bad?
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### **Intervene**

Your intervention should include an acknowledgement that you have heard the LGBTQ+phobic language and that it is unacceptable, as well as a reminder of the effect that it can have on LGBTQ+ young people, and what the consequences will be for people who continue to use it.

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### **Explain**

Follow up your intervention to explain:

- Why LGBTQ+phobic language is harmful, and why it is being tackled.
  - How LGBTQ+phobic language will be addressed in your setting.
  - What the consequences will be for those who continue to use LGBTQ+phobic language.
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### **Record**

Maintaining a record of the frequency of use of LGBTQ+phobic language will allow you to track whether your interventions are having the desired effect, and if there are certain areas where the language is still being used regularly.

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### How can I respond?

from: *Safe to Learn: Homophobic bullying; DCSF, 2007*

A pupil makes a homophobic remark such as 'That's so gay' or 'Oi, pass me a pen you dyke'. **Does the school have an explicit policy stating homophobic language is unacceptable?**

**NO**

Staff can intervene more effectively and respond to homophobic language if it is part of policies and procedures.

**YES**

Tell the pupil that homophobic language is not acceptable in school. Explain that homophobic language is offensive. **Does the pupil understand?**

**YES**

There may be some lapses, and you may have to say it again, but pupils begin to understand that homophobic language is unacceptable and it stops.

**NO**

The pupil continues to make comments, as does the rest of the class. Explain in more detail the effect that homophobia and homophobic language have on people and that like racist language, homophobic language will not be tolerated. **Does it stop?**

**YES**

The culture of a school is changing. In the same way pupils understand racism is unacceptable, they begin to understand that homophobic language is unacceptable.

**NO**

Remove the pupil from the classroom and talk to the pupil in more detail about his/her behaviour and why it's offensive. **Does the pupil stop?**

**YES**

It takes time to teach young people that homophobic bullying is unacceptable, especially if it has not been challenged in the past. Pupils who experience homophobic bullying will be more confident about discussing other incidents with you if the school is seen to tackle incidents.

**NO**

Involve senior managers. The pupil should understand the sanctions that will apply if they continue to use homophobic language. **Does this help?**

**YES**

The involvement and support of the headteacher and senior management in tackling homophobic language sends a strong leadership message that homophobic language and behaviour will not be tolerated.

**NO**

Invite parents in to discuss the attitude of the pupil. Even if parents and pupils think gay people should be treated differently, **this does not mean homophobic language or bullying is acceptable.**

**PARENTS RESPOND NEGATIVELY**



Take time to explain to parents why this policy is important as part of the anti-bullying policy of the school. Explain that all pupils should be able to feel safe at school. Reiterate that they have an obligation to help schools uphold policies.

<sup>1</sup> This resource has been drawn from 'Challenging Homophobic Language: Stonewall Education Guides', Stonewall. Available at: <https://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/Resources/PDF/L/LGBT-Guide-to-challenging-homophobic-language.pdf>

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## Endnotes

- 1** Pizmony-Levy, *The 2019 Irish National School Climate Survey Report*. Research Report. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- 2** Kibirige, H and Tryl, L. *Stonewall Education Guide: Tackling homophobic language*. United Kingdom.
- 3** Higgins A. et al. (2016). *The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*. Dublin: GLEN and BeLong To Youth Services.
- 4** Ibid.