

POLICY MEMO

The Impact of Anti-LGBTQ+ School Policies on Teen Dating Violence Survivors

ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ youth experience disproportionately high risks of teen dating violence while simultaneously navigating school environments shaped by stigma, exclusion, and harmful anti-LGBTQ+ policies. Schools are uniquely positioned to serve as protective environments, but anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and lack of inclusive programming undermine that potential. This policy white paper examines the prevalence of dating violence among LGBTQ+ youth, the role of supportive adults as a protective factor, the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ school policies on safety, reporting, and well-being, and recommendations for protective and affirming policies that increase prevention efforts and available systems of support for LGBTQ+ youth survivors.

ANALYSIS

LGBTQ+ Youth Teen Dating Violence Prevalence

Research consistently demonstrates that LGBTQ+ youth experience dating violence at higher rates than their non-LGBTQ+ peers[i]. Several intersecting factors contribute to this heightened vulnerability. LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience bullying and harassment within school environments from peers but also, in some cases, from educators and other school staff[ii]. These experiences can erode LGBTQ+ youths' sense of safety and belonging, making it more difficult to identify trusted and safe adults and peers to turn to when facing relationship abuse. A school climate marked by discrimination and exclusion can also normalize harmful behavior and reduce the likelihood that LGBTQ+ youth will seek or receive help.

The lack of inclusive relationship and sex education further compounds these risks. When LGBTQ+ relationships are absent from sexual assault and domestic violence prevention curriculum about consent and healthy relationships, youth may struggle to recognize their own relationships or experiences as abusive. Without representation, it becomes more difficult for LGBTQ+ youth to name or validate what is happening to them, particularly when their relationships are already marginalized or stigmatized. LGBTQ+ youth are left to define and understand their own relationship dynamics, often in the context of the oppression and marginalization that they are experiencing, which leaves them vulnerable to violence and self-blame. This gap in knowledge is especially concerning given the harmful societal messages around power, control, and gender roles.

Many LGBTQ+ youth are exposed to messages that frame LGBTQ+ identities as inappropriate or shameful. Over time, these messages can negatively affect self-esteem and emotional well-being. Lower self-esteem has been linked to an increased vulnerability to victimization, as youth who do not see themselves as worthy of respect or care may be more likely to blame themselves for the harm they experience[iii]. In this context, dating violence is not only more likely to occur but also more likely to go unrecognized and unreported.

Taken together, these factors create a landscape in which LGBTQ+ youth face both higher risk of experiencing teen dating violence and greater barriers to identifying, disclosing, and escaping abusive relationships. Addressing these disparities requires acknowledging the structural and social conditions that shape LGBTQ+ youths' experiences and ensuring that prevention and intervention efforts are inclusive and affirming to LGBTQ+ youth.



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Supportive Adults as a Protective Factor

Safe and supportive adults play a critical role in promoting the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. Research has shown that having at least one affirming and trusted adult in a young person's life is associated with significantly better mental health outcomes and reduced risk of harm[iv]. For LGBTQ+ youth, who may face rejection, stigma, or isolation, supportive adults can be a protective factor against teen dating violence.

Schools are one of the primary settings where LGBTQ+ youth regularly interact with adults. Teachers, counselors, nurses, coaches, and other school-based professionals are often in a position to notice changes in behavior, overhear concerning conversations, or observe dynamics in student relationships that may indicate dating violence. When these adults are equipped with the knowledge and skills to intervene when dating violence is occurring, they can serve as a vital lifeline for students experiencing harm. Their ability to create a safe and affirming environment can encourage students to seek help and disclose difficult experiences.

The presence of supportive adults is especially important in the context of dating violence, where isolation and control are often central dynamics of abuse. For LGBTQ+ youth, barriers such as stigma, fear of disclosure, and lack of representation can make it even more difficult to reach out for help.

Types of Anti-LGBTQ+ Policies Being Implemented in Schools

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase of anti-LGBTQ+ policies within school systems across the United States. These policies take multiple forms, including mandatory outing requirements, restrictions on participation in school activities, limitations on access to facilities, and efforts to censor LGBTQ+ representation in school curricula. These policies create school climates that are unsafe for LGBTQ+ youth survivors of dating violence.

One of the most concerning increasingly common policies is the implementation of mandatory outing policies. Many states, jurisdictions, and school systems have enacted policies requiring school staff to disclose a student's LGBTQ+ identity to their caregivers if the student discloses their identity. While these policies are often framed as supporting parental rights, they can place LGBTQ+ youth at significant risk of harm. For LGBTQ+ youth experiencing dating violence, the requirement to disclose their identity in order to access support from school staff creates a dangerous barrier. Students may avoid seeking help altogether due to fear of being outed, potentially exposing them to further harm both within their relationships and at home.

Another major category of policy involves restrictions on transgender students' participation in school sports. Across many states, laws have been passed that prohibit transgender girls from participating on girls' sports teams. The exclusion of transgender youth from sports not only reinforces stigma but also eliminates an important avenue for social connection with supportive peers and adults. This is particularly impactful on LGBTQ+ youth because belonging and positive peer relationships are key protective factors against violence and poor mental health outcomes[v]. Policies regulating transgender and nonbinary students' access to facilities such as restrooms and locker rooms further contribute to hostile school environments. Requirements that students use facilities aligned with their sex assigned at birth can increase the likelihood of harassment for transgender and gender-expansive youth[vi]. These policies also signal to transgender and nonbinary students that their identities are not recognized or respected, which can increase isolation and vulnerability to violence.



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There has also been a growing movement to eliminate LGBTQ+ content in school curriculum or pride celebrations. Policies that restrict discussions of LGBTQ+ identity and history reduce opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in educational materials and to learn about healthy LGBTQ+ relationships. For LGBTQ+ youth, the lack of representation makes it more difficult to recognize the signs of unhealthy or abusive relationships. These policies also contribute to a broader climate of silence and stigma, reinforcing messages that LGBTQ+ identities are inappropriate or should be hidden.

These anti-LGBTQ+ policies create environments in which LGBTQ+ youth are less able to access supportive adults, less likely to seek help, and more vulnerable to harm. In the context of teen dating violence, these barriers can have profound and potentially life-threatening consequences, underscoring the need for policy approaches that prioritize safety, inclusivity, and the well-being of LGBTQ+ students.

RECOMMENDATION

The high rates of dating violence that LGBTQ+ youth face are not inevitable. They are shaped by policy choices and institutional practices that can either increase risk or foster protection. Schools have a unique opportunity to serve as safe and affirming spaces where LGBTQ+ youth can access support and develop healthy relationship skills. But policies and practices must intentionally center the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ students.

A critical first step is the implementation of inclusive and affirming teen dating violence prevention education within school curricula. Programs should reflect LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, ensuring that LGBTQ+ youth are not left without critical information about consent, communication, and healthy relationships. When students see their experiences represented, they are better equipped to recognize harmful behaviors and seek help when they are experiencing violence.

Confidentiality of LGBTQ+ youth's identities when they are disclosing to school professionals is another critical protective factor. Policies that require or encourage disclosure of a student's sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent can create significant barriers to help-seeking and may place students at risk of harm. Additionally, inclusive training for school staff is essential. School-based professionals need ongoing opportunities to build their knowledge and skills related to LGBTQ+ youth experiences, teen dating violence, and trauma-informed responses. This training should equip staff to recognize warning signs of abuse, respond appropriately, and connect students with resources in a way that is affirming and culturally competent.

Policymakers should also reject measures that increase vulnerability for LGBTQ+ youth, including exclusionary practices related to sports participation, facilities access, and curriculum content. Instead, policies should aim to create school climates that foster belonging, safety, and respect for all students. Ultimately creating affirming and inclusive school environments is a critical strategy for preventing violence and supporting the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. By prioritizing policies and practices that center safety, representation, and access to support, schools can play a transformative role in reducing harm and promoting healthier outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.



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