



## Discussion Guide

For Adults Working with Teens

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### Harassment in the Hallways

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John, 18, of Middlesex County, NJ, who is gay, was constantly verbally harassed during high school by a heterosexual teen.

“This sent me into a state where I would go home and cry about it sometimes. It wasn’t until my senior year that I finally spoke up and reported it as harassment, and he was reprimanded,” he says.

John is like many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) teenagers who are faced with verbal harassment at high school. In fact, 84 percent of GLBT high-school teens in the United States reported hearing homophobic (anti-homosexual) remarks, like “faggot” or “dyke,” frequently or often at their high schools, according to the 2001 National School Climate Survey, by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) of New York City.

Like many GLBT teens, John heard numerous comments about his sexual orientation.

“I’ve been called ‘fag,’ ‘queer,’ you name it,” he says.

Chelsea, 17, of Edison, NJ, had a student deliver a tirade of verbal abuse in class because she is bisexual.

“I could handle the whispers or the exclusion, but it was the first time I encountered such brute hatred for what I was. That day and long afterward, I felt ashamed and angry,” she says.

Nineteen-year-old Adia, a lesbian from Indiana, was the target of verbal abuse by heterosexual teens during high school. She developed plans to try and deal with it.

“I tried to find another way to class, some way to avoid them, but everywhere I went, they were there. I’d simply keep walking, even if they shoved or tripped me. But once I got to my next class, I’d have to leave because I’d be so upset, crying and having anxiety attacks. I never wanted to let them get the best of me, but, in the end, they always did,” she says.

## **Roots of Hate**

Where does this hostility come from? GLBT teens commonly associate it with heterosexual teens’ stereotypes about them. Mary Kate Cullen, public policy director of GLSEN, explains how stereotyping leads to harassment.

“Harassment often occurs because certain teens don’t have an understanding of GLBT people in history and society. They may not be familiar with authors who might be gay or understand the context of gay civil-rights issues. There’s evidence for this—80 percent of students in our survey saw no positive portrayals of GLBT people in history or in school,” says Cullen.

Many heterosexual teens are familiar with stereotypes about GLBT teens.

Paul Robinson, 17, of Los Angeles, states:

“Some common stereotypes are that homosexual males act more feminine than males are ‘supposed’ to act. And that most tend to have more high-pitched voices than ‘normal.’ ”

Victoria Fine, 14, of Los Angeles, reveals her thoughts.

“Most of my stereotypes are physical. I think of lesbians as being butch, with short hair and stocky. I tend to think gay guys are thin, more pretty than manly, and good dressers. I feel guilty about my stereotypes, because I feel I should be open-minded.”

## **Closing the Gap**

Despite the stereotypes and verbal harassment of GLBT teens, there is still hope for reform. Preventative measures are in effect to improve conditions in schools and between GLBT and heterosexual teens.

“In the past decade, a number of states have passed laws protecting students by spelling out their rights and the responsibilities of schools to protect GLBT students,” says Cullen.

Cullen believes that education will pave the way for greater understanding on the part of heterosexuals. And she firmly supports changing school curricula to offer more GLBT education.

“We need to reach students across the spectrum of education by applying GLBT issues in many subjects, like mentioning health concerns in health classes and civil rights issues in history classes,” says Cullen.

There is hope for the future, with more GLBT youth getting active and many gay-straight alliances forming in high schools.

“More and more, students are taking action after many years of keeping silent,” says Cullen.