
Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Schools: Punitive Versus Supportive Strategies

Jack Day

SUMMARY

While all forms of bullying in schools are concerning, homophobic bullying—bullying based on the perception that someone is gay, lesbian, or bisexual—is especially harmful. Victims of homophobic bullying are more likely to have lower grades, drop out of school, use drugs and alcohol, and report being depressed. Students who are bullied may also feel that they do not have close and supportive relationships with other students and teachers, a concept known as “school connectedness,” which can lead to academic problems.

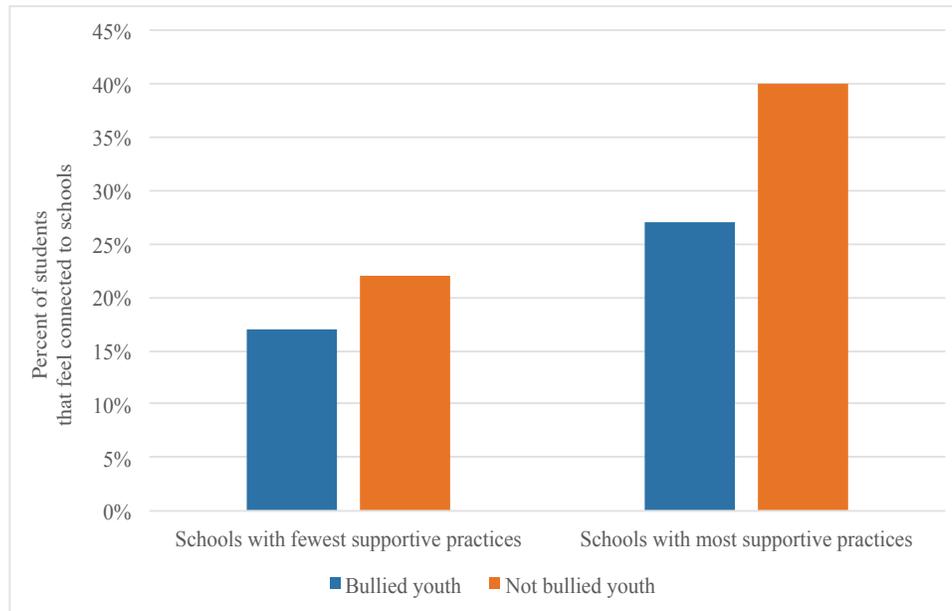
Schools have adopted two general approaches to address discipline issues, including bullying: 1) punitive practices, such as “zero tolerance” policies, suspension, and expulsion; and 2) supportive practices, such as counseling services and case-by-case discipline policies.

We used surveys from 337,945 middle and high school students in California (California Healthy Kids Survey) and 62,447 teachers (California School Climate Survey) to understand student experiences of homophobic bullying and reports of school connectedness. Specifically, we examined: 1) the prevalence of homophobic bullying in schools with more supportive versus punitive practices; and 2) differences in school connectedness among students who had experienced homophobic bullying in schools with more supportive versus punitive practices.

KEY FINDINGS

- > **Homophobic bullying was lower in schools with more supportive practices.** The percent of students bullied for their perceived or actual sexual orientation was over one third higher in schools with fewer supportive practices than in schools with more supportive practices—11% of students overall in schools with the fewest supportive practices versus 8% in schools with the most supportive practices.
- > **School connectedness was higher among bullied students when they were in schools with more supportive practices.** Students who had been bullied for homophobic reasons were less likely to feel connected to schools. Yet our findings indicate that supportive school practices may be protective. Students who experienced homophobic bullying in schools with the least supportive practices had the lowest school connectedness; students in schools with the most supportive practices were significantly higher in school connectedness.
- > **Bullying was not lower in schools with punitive practices.** Punitive practices were unrelated to the frequency of experiencing homophobic bullying; specifically, rates of bullying were nearly the same in schools with the most versus fewest punitive practices.
- > **In schools with fewer supportive practices, both students who had and had not been bullied experienced lower levels of school connectedness.** There was no statistical difference between levels of school connectedness among students who were and were not bullied in schools with the fewest supportive practices. Therefore, lacking supportive practices in schools may be just as detrimental to school connectedness as students experiencing homophobic bullying.

SUPPORTIVE PRACTICES IMPROVE SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AMONG STUDENTS BULLIED FOR HOMOPHOBIC REASONS



This chart illustrates the following: 1) Students who have been bullied for homophobic reasons are less likely to feel connected to schools. 2) In schools with the fewest supportive practices, fewer students feel connected to school, even compared to students who have been bullied in the most supportive schools. 3) In schools with the most supportive practices, more students feel connected, even if they have been bullied.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are currently no federal protections for students who are harassed or discriminated against in U.S. public schools on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Future policies and practices should promote supportive rather than punitive strategies.

Our findings are especially important as U.S. states consider how to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act. Supportive practices are effective for preventing bullying and fostering stronger connections to teachers and schools, whereas punitive practices neither prevent homophobic bullying nor promote school connectedness among bullied students. These findings support a growing call for limiting punitive practices and instead implementing supportive practices to address homophobic bullying and support school safety and connectedness.

REFERENCE

Day, J. K., Snapp, S. D., & Russell, S. T. (2016). Supportive, not punitive, practices reduce homophobic bullying and improve school connectedness. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 27*(4), 416-425. doi:10.1037/sgd0000195

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