

School Bullying & Homophobic Harassment

Research More than a decade of research — often originating in US colleges and universities — has established the strongest possible links between middle school violence and gender norms.

Rite of Passage Learning to enact masculinity and femininity and being publicly acknowledged as a young man or woman is a major rite of passage for nearly every adolescent or teen. This can be especially true during the "gender intensification" years of ages 9-13, when interest in traditional gender norms intensifies, and belief in them solidifies.

Misnomer Yet the language of school violence often obscures the importance of gender norms. "Bullying" sounds like a problem of individual acts by singular malefactors. "Sexual harassment" sounds like sexual coercion or pressure being applied, yet adolescent bullying is almost never about sex *per se*.

Homophobic Epithets "Homophobic harassment" addresses straight-on-gay attacks, and references common taunts like "*That's so gay*" and "*You're a fag*." Although straight harassment of LGBTQ students is serious and pervasive, most middle schooling harassment of this type is straight males victimizing peers. And not only because only a small minority of middle school students are (or are perceived to be) gay.

In fact, researcher C J Pascoe spent a year living with Denver high school students and tracking the use of homophobic epithets. Pascoe found that that the vast majority of taunts like "*That's so gay*" and "*You're a fag*" were not directed at LGBTQ students, but rather straight males attempting to humiliate their peers to promote masculinity or punish gender non-conformity – similar to saying "*You cry/throw like a girl*" or a football coach who addresses his recalcitrant team as "*ladies*" ("*Dude, You're A Fag! Masculinity and Sexual in High School*," University of California, 2007).

Three Groups In fact, studies have repeatedly found that three groups of adolescents are consistently targeted for victimization in middle school:

1. Boys who are perceived as not masculine enough;
2. Girls who are perceived as not feminine enough; and,
3. Girls whose bodies mature before their peers.

In each case, policing gender norms or punishing some sort of perceived gender non-conformity is clearly integral to the attack.

Gendered Harassment Indeed, middle school bullying might be more accurately termed "gendered harassment"— which seeks to promote masculinity in boys and femininity in girls, keep girls in subordinate positions, regulate girls' bodies, and punish unmanliness in boys.

Ignoring Gender Despite this, prominent school violence programs and policies largely ignore the role of gender norms, instead focusing on animus towards specific groups (LGBTQ students), specific acts (sexual harassment or homophobic epithets), or promoting generic messages of tolerance and no name-calling. By avoiding focusing on the specifics of gender intolerance, these programs cannot be as effective as they must be.

Zero Tolerance In addition, these efforts are increasingly coupled with "Zero Tolerance" policies meant to offer offenders little or no reprieve.

Blackboard to Keyboard However as middle school violence moves from the blackboard to the keyboard, punishment-based policies won't work. Depending on how it's measured, online attacks grew from 500-900%, just in the four years from 2001 to 2005 (one of the last years for which we have good data), and that's well before social media took off.

Cyber-attacks via websites, Facebook, texting, video and email are anonymous, intrusive (think of a pager going off at 2 am), permanent (Google forgets nothing) and can quickly "go viral," scaling from a two or three classmates to tens of thousands of strangers within a matter of hours (as YouTube shows).

Root Causes Zero tolerance and similar punishment-oriented policies – or programs that focus on individual malefactors or identities – are simply mismatched for the digital age. Moreover, they may only drive face-to-face attacks online.

Instead, effective school violence programs must begin to focus on the harsh gender ideals which are the root causes and entrenched attitudes driving school violence. Only by addressing causes – rather than punishing behavior – can we hope to succeed in a digital age.

More than Half In closing, it is important to note that studies have consistently found that the majority of middle school students report being victimized by gendered harassment regularly. In many studies well over half of all students report being attacked in the past year, with rates in some studies reaching as high as 90%.

Norm, Not Aberration A behavior that involves a majority of students on a regular basis should not be conceptualized as an aberration to be stamped out. It qualifies as a significant cultural norm: a part of the daily fabric of adolescent social life, an integral component of how girls and boys learn the limits and imperatives of the gender system.

Systemic Approach As such, we should begin thinking of gendered harassment as a systemic problem, one which can only be successfully challenged through a systemic approach.

Our Work Gender transformative approaches highlight, challenge and change the systemic culture of gender conformity and intolerance that drives middle school social violence, both online and off. We believe research must begin to inform practice, and move gender norms to the center of the debate. TrueChild is committed to leading and helping in this effort.