

## Homophobic Bullying and Your Health

by Heather Boerner, 07.24.07

Kayla Johnson was 14 when the rumor started: A popular girl in her middle school class said she thought Kayla was gay.

One of Kayla's friends took that revelation and ran with it. A whisper campaign started. Kayla, who is 16 now and says she has lots of friends, was a loner at the time. The friends she did have took the rumor seriously and didn't quite believe her when she said she wasn't gay. People made fun of her in the halls. She became, for about a month, the school joke.

### When the Emotional Becomes Physical

Unsurprisingly, Kayla's health took a hit. She was depressed and anxiously tried to figure out why someone would target her like that.

"I felt like crap," said Kayla, who lives in Norfolk, Nebraska. "I think I cried almost every night. No one wants to be different in a bad way. When everyone is making it into this big problem, it doesn't feel good at all."

Unfortunately, Kayla is far from alone. A 2005 National School Climate Survey from the [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\)](#) found that three out of every four students surveyed heard anti-gay slurs, like "faggot," "dyke," and "that's so gay," frequently in the hallways. The survey also found that students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) were five times more likely to miss school than their straight-identified peers because they were worried about being bullied or attacked at school.

### What's Homophobic Bullying?

Homophobic bullying can be anything from teasing people for being gay or for being perceived as gay to calling them anti-gay names, even in jest, to spreading rumors about people's sexual orientation for the purpose of making fun of them to hitting, throwing rocks at, and isolating people who are believed to be gay.

According to a study in the *Journal of Early Adolescence*, such behavior is more than just a joke — it can have some serious, negative health effects for the people who go through it. Like Kayla, people who experience homophobic bullying are more likely to become depressed, anxious, feel like they don't belong, and to withdraw from their social circles.

### The Truth Doesn't Matter

You don't have to actually be gay to be the target of anti-gay bullying, or to feel bad because of it.

"One of most important findings of the study is that this form of bullying is experienced by students across sexual orientation," said V. Paul Poteat, the study's coauthor and a doctoral candidate in Counseling Psychology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. "This study also serves as impetus for parents, teachers, and administrators to act against homophobic bullying. Many administrators just ignorantly deny that there are any LGBT students in their schools, so they don't have a problem. Parents are not able to connect with the idea that their own child might be gay, so they don't think it's something they have to worry about. But what this study shows is that in a real way this is something that should be a major concern to you."

Among other things, the study found that



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- Boys were significantly more likely to have heard gay slurs and to have reported higher rates of anti-gay bullying than girls.
- Homophobic bullying was more likely to result in depression, anxiety, and lower sense of belonging in boys than girls.
- Girls were more likely than boys to withdraw from their social circles as a result of homophobic bullying.

### **Alex's Story**

Previous research found that being the victim of homophobic victimization is especially hurtful if you're actually gay. Alex Possner who is 17 and lives in South Pasadena, California, knows this first hand.

When he came out as bisexual in 2005, Alex's friends told him he would burn in hellfire — and his math teacher, who overheard this, agreed. He's heard, "That's so gay," and still hears people call him anti-gay names occasionally. He's had rocks thrown at him, and he has had to comfort his younger sister when she's come home from school in tears after being bullied for having a gay brother.

Alex has experienced lots of bullying in his life. As an overweight child, he was teased mercilessly about his weight. But the homophobic bullying was different. It sent him over the edge, he says. He tried to kill himself twice, and his grades slipped.

"Honestly, it's the emotional scars that have hurt me most," Alex says. "I almost didn't want to talk about this because I didn't want to open old wounds that haven't healed yet."

### **Hope and Help**

The study found that there are some things that can protect the emotional health of students who experience homophobic bullying. Supportive parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as school curricula that are supportive of all sexual orientations can protect people from some of the effects of homophobic bullying.

That's what Alex found. After the first few months of being teased, Alex says he found support in meetings of [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays \(PFLAG\)](#), at his church, which also has several gay parishioners, and in the gay-straight alliance at his school that he helped create.

"I've had so much support, I'm really lucky," Alex says. "I'd say to people who think that saying 'that's so gay' is no big deal, that it is a big deal. Even though you know and I know that it supposedly means 'that's stupid,' it still implies that gay people are stupid. That's offensive to me. I'm a very well-educated individual, and I'm gay, and that's insulting my intelligence. And I would appreciate if everyone saw 'faggot,' 'dyke,' and 'that's so gay' in the same light that American society sees the 'n-word.'"

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