

## Goals

1. Develop empathy and understanding of a range of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth experiences.
2. Explore the concept of “being an ally.”
3. Generate ideas and actions that students can personally take to be allies to LGBTQ youth.
4. Discuss what can be done at a school- and community-wide level to create more inclusive spaces—for LGBTQ youth and in general.

## Suggested Time

45–60 minutes

## Resources

“Got Your Back” film clips from *Straightlaced* Curriculum Disc

*Student Stories* sheets

Handout: *Understanding LGBTQ Experiences*

Handout: *Becoming an Ally*

Large sheets of paper and markers for each group

## Key Messages

- Happy and healthy people come in all genders and sexual orientations.
- LGBTQ youth often face challenges in school and society. Like all youth, they also have many strengths and resources.
- LGBTQ experiences are tremendously varied; there is no “one size fits all” way to understand young people’s lives or to create inclusive schools and communities.

(continued on next page)

# Got Your Back! Becoming Allies to LGBTQ Youth

1. Introduce the activity as follows: A number of the students in *Straightlaced* identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender—or talk about not yet knowing what their sexual orientation will ultimately be. As these youth explain, being LGBTQ in high school can be a complicated thing, full of both hopes and challenges. One goal of this activity is to better understand LGBTQ students’ varied experiences—including things like dealing with invisibility, coming out, dating and relationships, cultural expectations, family reactions, harassment, and what it’s like to find their place in the world. The activity also provides an opportunity to explore what it means for people of all sexual orientations to act as allies in creating spaces that are truly safe and inclusive.
2. For this activity, we recommend taking a few extra minutes in the beginning to review group agreements and set a tone of respect and exploration. For example:
  - Acknowledge that sexual orientation and LGBTQ experience don’t often get talked about in schools or other formal youth settings and that, because of this, for a lot of people, the topic can feel awkward or uncomfortable.
  - Assure students that the discussions in this activity are *not* about sex but about identity, family, friendship, discrimination, etc.
  - Be sure to explicitly state that participation in this conversation is for *everyone*, regardless of sexual orientation. Just as individuals of all racial backgrounds can and should discuss racial differences and issues of discrimination and equity, so too should straight as well as LGBTQ youth talk about the issues here. No one should assume anything about anyone else’s sexual orientation based on their interest or comments during this activity.
  - Because many groups include people who, for religious or other reasons, may feel they are “opposed” to LGBTQ experience, it is a good idea to address this directly by saying something like, “This activity isn’t about whether any of us think LGBTQ experience is right or wrong and isn’t about telling you what to believe. It is about understanding the lives of people in our community and figuring out how to make sure schools are safe for everyone.”

## Part 1. Understanding LGBTQ Experiences

3. Form small groups of approximately 4–5 people and assign each group (or have the group choose) one of seven students from *Straightlaced* to learn more about:

Briseida  
Micah  
Norma  
Lance  
Jessica  
Rae  
Josh

4. Ask each group to watch the clip about their selected student on the *Straightlaced* Curriculum Disc or have them read the appropriate *Student Stories* handout (pp. 98–104).
5. Using the *Understanding LGBTQ Experiences* worksheet, have groups analyze their student's experience and record key questions, hopes, challenges and strengths from the person's story. These can be specifically related to the person's sexual orientation or gender identity, but may also be related to other aspects of their identity (for example, race, class, culture, religion) or other parts of their life (school, family, friends, etc.). If the story a particular group is given does not include information in all worksheet categories, the group should fill in the missing sections as best they can with what they would imagine to be true for their student. In addition to having participants fill out individual worksheets, each group should also summarize their thoughts on a simple wall chart—providing enough detail for those in other groups to understand.
6. Circulate while the groups are working, providing support as needed and also culling from the discussions key insights, observations and threads about LGBTQ experiences and how they may connect with other aspects of identity.
7. Conclude Part 1 by bringing the full group back together and summarizing a few of the themes and reflections you noticed as you went from group to group. This is not intended as a time for group report-backs, as Part 2 will involve a “gallery walk” where everyone will get to see and comment on each other's charts.

## Key Messages *continued*

- Because bias will continue unless it's challenged, people who care about equity need to be proactive in supporting and standing up for groups that are marginalized.
- There are personal and institutional sides to being an ally.
- Everyone has the power to make a difference.

## Did You Know?

**Over the past year, 85% of LGBT students across the nation reported being verbally harassed, 40% reported being physically harassed, and 19% reported being physically assaulted at school because of their sexual orientation.**

(GLSEN 2009 *National School Climate Survey*, [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org))

**48% of LGBT students of color reported being verbally harassed in school because of both their sexual orientation and race/ethnicity, and 15% had been physically harassed based on both of these characteristics. In addition, almost half (44%) of LGBT female students of color were verbally harassed in school because of a combination of their sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and gender.**

(GLSEN 2007 *National School Climate Survey*, [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org))

**Having a Gay-Straight Alliance in school was related to more positive experiences for LGBT students. These included hearing fewer homophobic remarks, less victimization because of sexual orientation and gender expression, less absenteeism because of safety concerns, and a greater sense of belonging to the school community.**

(GLSEN 2009 *National School Climate Survey*, [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org))

## Part 2. Becoming Allies to LGBTQ Youth

8. Hold a brief whole-group discussion about what it means to be an ally. What are some dimensions of ally behavior? Why is it important for people to be allies to each other across lines of difference? What are some things that sometimes prevent us from doing this, even when we want to? Please see the box on p. 97 for some framing thoughts on this topic. In addition, we suggest noting that, while this activity focuses on being an ally in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, people can (and should!) be allies to each other on a range of issues—such as race, class, gender, religion, age, disability and so on.
9. Pose the following questions as the basis for Part 2 of this activity:
  - Returning to the *Straightlaced* student your group has been focusing on, what does that student *need* from an ally—both on a personal level and in dealing with external attitudes or discrimination they are facing?
  - What could individuals do to be an ally to this student?
  - What changes do you think would be needed in the larger school or community to ensure this student feels fully supported and accepted?
  - What kinds of policy or legal changes do you think would help address the prejudice this person faces?
10. Have groups go back to their charts and spend a few minutes adding answers to these four questions on a second sheet of paper.
11. Once all groups have finished, participants should take a “gallery walk,” reading the charts made by different groups about each student’s experience and adding their own thoughts to the ally sections.
12. Bring the full group back for a final discussion, focusing on the following questions:
  - What are some of the themes you noticed from the “ally” sections of the charts?
  - What are some of the most important things that people who identify as heterosexual can do to stand with those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning?
  - What are some ways that people who identify as LGBTQ can be allies to each other?
  - Which actions seem most doable?
  - One of the students in *Straightlaced* says: “*It’s one of the hardest things to do in the world to stand up to your friends and say that something is not OK with you. But through the years I’ve become more comfortable with myself to the point where I really don’t care if my friends think that, you know, I’m gay if I say something is not OK with me.*” Are there risks in standing up as an LGBTQ ally and, if so, how can you deal with them?
  - How would creating a greater climate of support for LGBTQ youth help those who are not gay as well as those who are?

13. You may wish to close this activity with a bit of inspiration, such as a personal story about standing up on a difficult issue, or share one of the following quotes.

"In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

Pastor Martin Niemoller, quoted during World War II

"You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Mohandas K. Gandhi

"It really does make a difference when somebody breaks away and tries to communicate with someone when you can see that they're different."

Jessica, *Straightlaced* student

## Ally

An ally is an individual who speaks out and stands up for a person or group that is targeted and discriminated against. An ally works to end oppression by supporting and advocating for people who are stigmatized, discriminated against or treated unfairly.

### Characteristics of an Ally

- Belief in the equality and dignity of people who are different from themselves
- Commitment to understanding others' experiences
- Willingness to stand up both publicly and privately against prejudice and discrimination and for the rights of a marginalized or "target" group
- Recognition of their own place (of privilege or marginalization) in relation to the issues involved in the ally work
- Willingness to engage in the personal growth necessary to be truly supportive
- Ability to look at both individual and societal issues of power, bias and discrimination
- Courage to interrupt the mistreatment of others—not by rescuing, taking care of, or taking over from them, but by standing shoulder to shoulder with those in need
- Willingness to "do the best they can," knowing that being an ally isn't always easy and sometimes involves risks, mistakes or times of discomfort

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#### SOURCES:

Frances E. Kendall, *How to Be an Ally If You Are a Person With Privilege*, 2001.

GLSEN Safe Space Kit, *Guide to Being an Ally to LGBT Students*, 2009, [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education, *What Is An Ally?* Adapted from handouts developed by Shawn-Eric

Brooks and Vernon A. Wall (1990) and by Velvet Miller and Kristina Testa, based on material from "Diversity Works" (1992), [www.occdhe.org](http://www.occdhe.org).  
*Tools for Building Justice*, January 2003, [www.socialjusticeeducation.org](http://www.socialjusticeeducation.org).