

Ask Lambda Legal

Our attorneys field your questions on the issues that matter to you most.

Q My daughter is in high school and recently came out. She's been experiencing harassment from her classmates, and I'm worried this will affect her health and schoolwork. What can I do to help her?

A While your daughter deserves to feel safe and respected at school, it's a distressing fact that 80 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) students report having been harassed within the past year. Harassment and violence have terrible consequences: academic performance is often compromised, and LGBT students who are subjected to discrimination are at higher risk for depression and suicide. Here are some steps you can take to help your child:

Support Your Child: It's critical for LGBT children to know that their families love and support them. Despite misperceptions, LGBT people do not choose their sexual orientation and gender identity, and those characteristics have nothing to do with a person's worth. Parents can also get support from organizations like PFLAG (202-467-8180; pflag.org).


Know Your Child's Rights: The U.S. Constitution guarantees all people—including your LGBT child—equal protection under the law, and state constitutions contain similar protections. In some states, schools are required to have nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. But even if your state does not, local city ordinances and school district policies may do so. Lambda

Legal has successfully gotten courts to agree that school-based discrimination against LGBT youth is legally unacceptable. If you have any questions about your child's rights, contact Lambda Legal at 866-542-8336 or visit www.lambdalegal.org/help.

Take Action: There are a number of actions you can take to make sure your child is safe.

- Create a safety plan with your child, which may include finding a safer way to get to and from school, arranging for someone to accompany your child and/or providing your child with access to a cell phone.
- Keep a written record about problems. Include dates, details about what happened, the people who were involved, where and when the incident took place, and whether there were any witnesses.
- Report all harassment and abuse to the school principal as promptly as possible. Counselors and teachers you can trust may be helpful, but they generally are not legally required to take action to the same extent as the principal.
- Put your reports and complaints in writing, and keep copies of all documents you send and receive.
- If you find that filing a complaint does not improve your child's situation, call Lambda Legal's Help Desk at 866-542-8336.
- If your child experiences serious threats or physical assault, contact your local police.
- Beyond the support you provide your child, consider meeting with school faculty, staff and parents to discuss issues like safety, nondiscrimination and inclusive curricula.

—Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, Staff Attorney



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DISCOVER HOW YOU CAN CREATE
A SAFE, NURTURING SCHOOL
ENVIRONMENT FOR LGBT STUDENTS:
www.lambdalegal.org/osr