Effective Messaging
Communicating with Parents and School Personnel
The Basics of Effective Messaging

- **Know your audience.** The manner in which you approach the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression will largely depend on the person to whom you are speaking; be mindful of this.

- **Be respectful.** Although you may disagree, it is important to show respect and acknowledge any concerns.

- **Find common ground.** Although sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are often controversial matters in school, most educators and parents can agree on at least two points: (1) all students deserve to feel safe and supported at school and (2) when students feel safe, academic performance improves. Finding common ground is a good place to start.

- **When applicable, share a personal experience.** Data and statistics, although important, are abstract; personal experiences are concrete and, therefore, tend to produce a significantly different response. If you decide to share a personal experience, be sure to protect the confidentiality of others involved.

- **Be mindful of language.** Words are powerful; one word can significantly alter the way in which others react to a statement. Choose your words carefully.

- **Develop a primary message and supporting messages.** Doing so will allow you to maintain focus. In discussing safe schools, an effective overall message might be, “anti-LGBTQQ bullying negatively impacts all students.” With regard to supporting messages, you could mention legal and ethical implications, introduce data which demonstrate how bullying negatively impacts academic achievement and mention that anti-LGBTQQ bullying also affects heterosexual students who are often targets of homophobia and heterosexism.

- **Reframe the conversation.** Maintain control of the conversation by bringing it back to the primary message.

- **Consider opposition framing.** Prior to speaking with parents or school personnel, consider commonly held oppositional perspectives and develop effective responses (refer to “Addressing Difficult Views or Questions” page).

- **Practice and preparation!** Practice delivering your message. Be prepared with statistics and data; you’ll be taken more seriously.
A Framework For Collaborative Negotiation*

The Ben Marion Institute For Social Justice, Inc. believes that kindness, empathy, personal responsibility and respect for others are the essential values that assist adults and children in leading humane and productive lives.

One of the guiding principles of The Ben Marion Institute is listen first for understanding, then for being understood. Most of us do not realize that many of the things we say communicate a lack of acceptance of the others’ point of view and therefore make them less likely or willing to have a conversation. In all our work around communication and conflict we have found most people do not listen with the intent to understand but rather with the intent of replying. We are either speaking or preparing to speak. We are filtering everything through our own lens. This section is just a reminder of what you as counselors have already learned and hopefully have put into practice.

Conflict Resolution Tips:

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<th>Stages</th>
<th>Tasks (examples)</th>
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<td>Planning:</td>
<td>Decide if the conflict is negotiable. Separate (Needs) from positions (Wants). Try to see the other side’s point of view.</td>
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<td>Creating climate for negotiation:</td>
<td>Establish trust and rapport</td>
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<td>Informing and questioning:</td>
<td>Use “I” statements and inform the other side as to your needs. Ask about the other side’s needs.</td>
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<td>Finding common ground:</td>
<td>Identify problems that affect both sides. Try to consider the issues in terms of shared needs.</td>
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Brainstorming: Freely suggest ideas for solving the problem, withhold judgment.

Choosing solution: Narrow down suggestions for solutions to the most promising ones for a lasting resolution.

**Conflict Resolution procedures:**
1. Find a good time and place to talk
2. Discuss the problem:
   - Get the facts
   - Use Active Listening- show interest; ask questions, pay attention, repeat back to make sure you have it right.
   - Use “I” messages to say how you feel.
   - Focus on the problem, not the person.
   - Avoid communication blockers:
4. Choose a solution that works for everybody.
5. Try the solution. If the solution doesn’t work: go back to Step Three

**Flow of Communication:**
A. **At the Beginning**, mediator is talking first, setting the ground rules, clarifying everyone’s role, and nurturing the trust of participants in the mediation.
B. **During the middle** of the process, communication is focused on clarifying each person’s position.
C. **The conclusion** of the process involves very precise oral and written communication as specific details are set down in an agreement.
D. **Controlling The communication**
   - Be in command of the process
   - Allow for feelings
   - Nurture trust
   - Be tough
   - Demonstrate respect for all parties in the dispute by demonstrating active listening; be reluctant to respond to interruption; communicate a sense of time without pressure; and
   - Respond readily to questions
E. **Be Yourself**
F. **Be aware of Communication Blockers**
Below are some examples of communication blockers and how they may be characterized:

Ordering:  “You must…”  “You have to…”  “You will…”
Threatening:  “If you don’t…”  “You better or else…”
Lecturing:  “You ought to…”  “Don’t you realize…”
Judging:  “You are just crazy..”  “You are lying..”
Denying:  “I don’t see the problem…”  “Why are we even here…”
Laying Blame:  “It’s your fault…”  “If he had done his job…”
Focus on Self:  “My problems are much worse than yours…”

Specific Techniques of Active Listening
These following techniques foster a language of resolution and help to model effective communication skills.

1. **Summarize:** State exactly what a person has said.
2. **Paraphrase:** Summarize the essence of what a person has said.
3. **Reflect Feeling:** Verbalize a feeling you are hearing.
4. **Reframe:** Turn a negative statement into a positive one and place the focus on the speaker instead of the one spoken about.
5. **Validate:** Acknowledge emotions and willingness to work on solutions.
6. **Reality Test:** Question unrealistic outlooks or demands.
7. **Probe:** Ask open ended questions to obtain further information.

Remember that many times when people are in conflict, they will communicate in a way which can dissolve or “block” effective communication, therefore:

1. **Never make** assumptions about the issues.
2. **Be aware of your personal biases**, they can distort your perception of people and what is happening. Try to start at point zero (with an open mind) at the beginning of any negotiation.
3. **Maintain an atmosphere of respect** use your own behavior and attitude as an example.
4. **Accept the values** (beliefs of what is true, moral or correct) and perceptions (mindset that shapes what we see and hear based on our experiences) that are presented.
   - Don’t give in to the temptation to impose your own!

5. **Along with the other parties in the negotiation**, you, as the counselor, are also responsible for the process, as well as the outcome or outcomes (there sometimes can be more than one outcome!).

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Safe Schools Talking Points*

- All students are affected by homophobia, and the learning environment is negatively impacted as a result. Open homophobia is often the first symptom of an environment where bullying and harassment are allowed to flourish.
- Homophobia is the first weapon of choice against those who somehow don’t “fit in”, and homophobic remarks and taunts often have nothing to do with a student’s real sexual orientation. Instead, homophobia is an unscientific, blunt and cruel- but sadly effective- weapon against anyone who is different. It reinforces collective stereotypes and lowers the self-esteem of those who don’t somehow “fit in.”
- Homophobia also affects non-gay students who are perceived to be gay but may not conform to accepted gender norms.
- The average high school student hears 25 anti-gay slurs daily.
- 97 percent of high school students regularly hear homophobic remarks
- According to a 2005 survey, 90% of LGBT students polled (vs. 62 percent of non-LGBT teens) say they have been harassed or assaulted in just this past year. The startling results come from a Harris Interactive poll conducted on behalf of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). “From Teasing to Torment” is the first national survey on bullying in American schools to include questions about anti-gay harassment.
- This harassment takes its toll: Gay students are far more likely to skip classes, drop out of school and/or commit suicide.
- In a report released in October 2004 by the National School Boards Association, it is noted that:
  - Like all other individuals, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students are guaranteed equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution and free speech and association under the First Amendment.
  - Like other student clubs, GLBT-related student groups, often called GSAs, are guaranteed equal treatment and access under the Equal Access Act.
  - Additionally, some courts have held that Title IX offers protections to GLBT students in certain circumstances; Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits gender-based discrimination in educational programs that receive federal funding. Although Title IX does not protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation generally, GLBT students may be able to sue under Title IX for a school district’s failure to protect them from harassment.

*Information replicated with permission from PFLAG (www.pflag.org)
Addressing Difficult Views or Questions*

What follows are some arguments that are commonly used by school administrators, policy makers and vocal community critics to block efforts to make schools safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) youth, along with information that will be helpful in addressing these arguments. Use these suggestions with your personal stories and those of your friends and loved ones to address objections.

There are no people like that in our school. This is not a problem here.

This myth accepts the stereotype that all GLBT people are somehow always obvious. It places the problem of harassment on the shoulders of those who are being harassed rather than on a school climate or system that tolerates homophobia. Make clear that all GLBT students are probably in every classroom, every day, in every school, and that all students face intense peer pressure; pressure that often takes the form of anti-gay name-calling and harassment whether they are GLBT or just perceived to be, and it is bad for everyone.

Youth who violate norms for gender expression, including those who are transgender, may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or still questioning their sexual orientation. Regardless of their actual sexual orientation, their visible challenge to our society’s notion of what it means to be a man or a woman, male or female (the effeminate boy or the tomboy girl) makes them targets of abuse. Other targets include children, siblings and friends of GLBT people.

Emphasize that whether adults know who they are or not, GLBT youth deserve a safe learning environment just as much as non-GLBT students. Our goal is to make schools safer for all students, including GLBT youth or those who are erroneously perceived to be. Try countering this argument by linking issues that GLBT students face to a broad array of safe schools issues.

Note: Same-sex sexual orientation and transgenderism are not the same thing, though prejudice and hostility toward either characteristic is usually undifferentiated. It is erroneous to assume a person dealing with same-sex orientation is also dealing with transgenderism, or that a transgender person is therefore homosexual or bisexual. Sexual orientation is someone’s sexual and affectional attraction for others of the opposite sex, the same sex, or either sex. Gender identity is a person’s internal sense of being masculine or feminine, male or female regardless of sex.

These issues have no place in our schools. We are here to teach the basics, not to teach homosexuality.

This position ignores the rampant anti-gay climate that already exists inside and outside of schools. When students observe, participate in, or are targets of anti-gay or anti-trans hostility, harassment and abuse, and when there is no official policy in place with education professionals trained to enforce it, the message is very clear:
this kind of abuse is acceptable. Working to change the hostile climate in schools is the only way to challenge and change this lesson. The argument also attempts to sidestep a key responsibility of all education professionals: to create and maintain a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of any personal prejudices.

The phrase “teaching homosexuality” or similar language is cleverly crafted to confuse the issue. At best it suggests a profound misunderstanding of how most people come to understand and express their sexual orientation and gender identity, and at worst it is a deliberate attempt to cause uncertainty about legitimate discussions of policy and academic content. It is designed to stir up baseless fears and mythologies about “causes” of homosexuality. It assumes that to implement appropriate policies, to have accurate information available, or to establish student GSAs will express an official approval of homosexuality, which will somehow lead young people to decide to become gay. It underscores how much inaccurate and unexamined information is out there about sexual orientation and gender identity, how it gets misused, and how important it is to bring accurate information to light. This is intentional manipulation of language takes away from the real issues and work ahead: making schools safe for all students.

We need to provide “balance” on this issue.

This strategy is used to try to apply negative opinions about the morality of homosexuality to policy decisions, counseling guidelines and curricula content. People will have differing views on this, but policy, counseling practices and curricula should be based on the best researched and professionally reviewed information available, not personal opinion. This argument disregards the fact that through both systemic omission of accurate information about GLBT language and behaviors, there is currently a severe imbalance in affirmatively addressing sexual orientation and gender identity. Organizations that have invested significant resources in the promotion of “reparative therapy” and “transformational ministries,” which have been widely discredited by all major medical and health professional associations, also encourage this call for “balance.”