

Why LGBTQ+ Youth Skip Physical Education and Sport and How Schools Can Help

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Research tells us that many sexual minority and gender diverse (LGBTQ+) youth feel unsafe at school (GLSEN, 2018) which could be attributed to the bullying and victimization that this group of youth experience (GLSEN, 2018). Scholars, policymakers, and educators have been studying and employing interventions to support safer and healthier school-based experiences for LGBTQ+ students (e.g., [Gender and Sexualities Alliances](#), [Safe Space Kits](#), [Welcoming Schools Professional Development](#)). While these interventions have been vital in enhancing outcomes of youth and school communities, there remains a critical need for increased supports.

The World Health Organization (2010) posits that youth should obtain about 60 minutes of physical activity per day. However, LGBTQ+ youth struggle to access adequate physical activity due to feeling unsafe in such settings (GLSEN, 2018).

Research from the [National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN](#) tells us that approximately 40% of LGBTQ+ youth avoid locker rooms and physical education classes and 25% of LGBTQ+ youth avoid school athletic fields or facilities due to feeling unsafe (GLSEN, 2018). [While there have been several athletes that have come out in recent years](#), there is minimal representation of LGBTQ+ related topics in physical education class (GLSEN, 2018). Further, research indicates that just about 5% of gender diverse youth participate in a school sport that matches their gender identity (GLSEN, 2018). Promisingly, if a gender affirming school-based policy is in place, this figure increases to approximately 42% (GLSEN, 2018).

Throughout the past five years, I have engaged in collaborative research endeavors pertaining to LGBTQ+ youths' experiences in school-based physical activity. I took a deep dive into the research by conducting systematic reviews (see [Greenspan, Griffith, & Watson, 2019](#); [Greenspan, Griffith, & Murtagh, 2017](#)) and found that while there is minimal research on this topic, literature continues to suggest that LGBTQ+ youth engage in less physical activity and feel less safe in this context as compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. This could be due to experiencing bullying, victimization, and hearing anti-LGBTQ language.

LGBTQ+ Youths' Experiences in School-Based Physical Activity

I recently collaborated with a group of colleagues to employ a mixed method study to explore LGBTQ+ youths' and allies' perceptions of school-based physical activity and sport (see [Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019](#)). In this U.S. sample of 71 total participants (n = 58 survey, n = 13 focus group), approximately 67% of survey participants reported that they do not or just seldomly engage in physical activity and approximately 40% avoid locker rooms and physical education classes. Over half of these youth reported that they have been assaulted or harassed while playing school sport due to how they express their gender, and 20% reported that if a homophobic or transphobic remark is made, and an athletic staff or physical education teacher is present, that staff member "never" responds. Results further illuminated that LGBTQ+ youth prefer playing individual sports to team sports (36% to 13%, respectively).

Focus group participants expressed experiencing low self-esteem, isolation, and rejection. Participants also indicated that they feel ambivalent about physical activity, as they want to engage, though feel unsafe to do so. Specifically, participants expressed a desire for co-ed sports and gender-neutral facilities. It is noteworthy that participants highlighted administrative and structural barriers to their successful participation including gender segregation practices and the presence of male-dominated hyper-aggressive sports that do not take into account the needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

Youth participants identified many suggestions to foster healthier and more affirming school athletic practices.

LGBTQ+ Youths' Suggestions for Improvement

- A private place to change in and out of uniform
- Use of a gender-neutral bathroom
- Use of their locker room of choice based on their gender identity
- The opportunity to wear a gender-affirming uniform
- The option to not participate in the days' activities if they so choose
- Targeted interventions to stop harassment/bullying behavior.

Participants also advocated for specific training for all school personnel to obtain increased foundational knowledge of allyship behaviour and appropriate pronoun usage.

Looking Forward

The perspectives of youth that participated in the aforementioned mixed-method study understanding has allowed for the conceptualization of an intervention entitled School Athletics for Everyone (SAFE; see [Greenspan, Whitcomb, & Griffith, 2019](#)) where school-based mental health professionals forge collaborative relationships with physical education teachers with the goal of increasing LGBTQ+ affirming physical education practices.

Components of this professional development intervention foundationally involve data-based decision making through [Professional Learning Communities](#) and [Job-Embedded Professional Development](#). Professional Learning Communities involve an interdisciplinary team of invested school stakeholders that meet consistently to keep their pulse on topics within the school (e.g., LGBTQ health) and may identify problem areas in the physical education context that could be improved. Through professional development opportunities, physical education teachers learn about stigma and risk, challenges of social norms pertaining to gender and sexual orientation, and tools and resources to improve upon their practices. Through robust data collection efforts, aspects of physical education teachers' practices that warrant improvement in affirming practice (e.g., increased gender-neutral activities, increased LGBTQ+ representation) are identified and they are provided peer coaching and consultation to support progress in attaining goals, and thus, enhancing affirming practices.

It is critical that researchers, policymakers, and educators continuing developing empirically supported interventions to support LGBTQ+ youth within the school-based sport and physical education context. Every youth has the right to play.

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