

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Sydney, Age 15 Wants to Help

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"My name is Sydney... I am 15 years old... and need help. Although I am not gay, I am helping to try to make a difference at my school. I go to a sports school, and the whole 'tough guy' attitude is a big problem here. The kids at my school are very homophobic, and I am outraged because I am constantly hearing the word 'fag' used by kids that don't really understand who they are hurting by saying it. We have many assemblies about the subject but everyone takes it as a joke, and then, the next day, its back to the same problem. If there is a gay person at my school, then they are keeping it very hidden. My biggest fear is that they will hear the hateful word spoken by their peers, and end up going into depression or worse. I would love to hear about what you think I should do."

You're a terrific straight ally, Sydney, and your loving, thoughtful life is going to have a very positive impact on the happiness of many people. The fact that you are trying to make a difference at age 15 truly inspires me. Thank you. I'm proud of you, as I hope you are of yourself. I recommend that you contact [Gay Straight Alliance](#) and inquire about starting a Gay/Straight Alliance at your school, as has been done by over 4,000 schools in the United States alone. What your fellow students need is to see straight students standing up with confidence saying that, "It's not okay to be anti-gay." Every time they use the word "fag," they need to hear someone they respect say, "Knock it off. That's not cool." Or they should hear, "Hey, I've got gay people in my life. You're creeping me out." Eventually, the ignorant ones will get educated and be quiet, if not supportive. It works all the time, and has throughout history on every issue of difference.

I know that it's scary to stand up to your peers. Believe me; it doesn't get a whole lot easier when you're an adult. A lot of straight people in families and in corporations are afraid of speaking up in defense of the gay people they know and love. But I promise you, Sydney, when you do step forward and speak with a strong voice, other people will listen to you, and most people will agree with you. A lot of people feel as you do, but they don't have the courage to say anything.

The world is changing because of people like you. My spouse, Ray, and I just saw the film *21 Jump Street*. In it, two young cops pretend to be high-school students, and discover that everything has changed since they were in school. When they learn that it's not okay to be anti-gay, one of them insists it's because of the television program *Glee*. In *Glee*, straight students protect the gay students, as well as students with disabilities, students of different races and religions, and most recently, students who are transgender.

It's often harder for older people to change their views and behaviors than it is for younger people to do so. Young people have to deal with peer pressure, but their minds haven't yet been made up. When young people are exposed to differences that are treated with respect, as happened with me when I was in First Grade, they don't use bad names to describe people who are different. When I was seven years old, three of my best friends were black, short-statured, or Jewish. Biases don't have a chance to take root when the people around you let you know that being different is cool.

There are a lot of schools, perhaps yours too, that have "zero tolerance" policies on bullying. Many of them have assemblies, like those at your school, in which someone tells the students that bullying other students will not be tolerated. But until the students, faculty, and staff are made personally aware of the impact of bullying, and until they hear from their peers that bullying isn't acceptable, nothing changes. Policies don't change culture. One-on-one personal experiences change culture.

It's been nearly 50 years since I was your age, Sydney, and believe it or not, people who I was nice to in grade school and high school continue to contact me to say what a difference it made in their lives. They remember feeling small and insignificant, and having a popular kid be nice to them. I was on the phone a few days ago with someone I hadn't seen since I was your age. He was bullied at home and in school because of undiagnosed dyslexia. But he felt safe hanging around people like me who didn't make fun of him, or who didn't think of him as stupid.

The lives of the younger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students who follow you in school will be far happier because of you, Sydney. A straight kid with no personal investment spoke up on their behalf. Your challenging your peers on their hostility toward gay people may not make all of the other students into allies, but it will make all of them think. And because they start thinking that maybe their behavior is unacceptable to a popular straight kid, they'll start thinking before they speak. And if they think before they speak, maybe the children who are born to them who happen to be gay will have an easier time of it, all because of you, Sydney.

I promise you that if you announce a meeting for all the students at your school who see themselves as allies to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, the meeting room will be full. Initially, you might get push-back from those who don't want things at school to change, but in a short amount of time, you and your group will be respected, and your work will make a difference in the school culture.

You're now one of my heroes, Sydney. Thank you for being my ally. I promise to be yours too.