

What Constitutes Transphobic and Cisnormative Bullying and Harassment



Most people are aware of explicitly transphobic terms such as “tranny,” “he-she,” “she-male,” “he-woman,” and would hopefully intervene immediately. In the school setting however it is unlikely that explicitly transphobic terms like those above would be used frequently, yet transphobic bullying still occurs in a variety of ways.

The list below is meant to outline the types of language and actions that constitute transphobic bullying. It is meant to give readers a better sense of what transphobia looks and sounds like.

The document has been organized to name the originating source of the transphobia, then outline some of the common transphobic phrases and statements that manifest as a result. For suggestions on how to interrupt transphobic bullying refer to the documents *Responding to Sexism, Homophobia and Transphobia: Tips for Parents and Educators of Younger Children* and *Tips for Parents and Educators of Youth and Young Adults*.

Purposeful Refusal to Acknowledge Gender Identity

- Purposefully not using the gender pronoun that corresponds to a trans person’s gender identity as they have requested.
EXAMPLE: Refusing to switch from “she” to “he” when a person has articulated they are a boy/man.
- Using de-humanizing pronouns such as “it” to refer to a trans person.
- Purposefully refusing to use the trans person’s chosen name, and insistence on referring to them with their birth name.
- Asking someone what their “real” name is, and then referring to them using the name they were assigned at birth.

Exclusion from Gendered Spaces Corresponding to their Gender Identity

- Removing or banning someone from a gendered space.
- Forcing a trans person to use a gender neutral option, despite their request to use the option associated with their gender identity.
EXAMPLE: Forcing a trans student to use the staff washroom, or the gender neutral washroom when they have clearly articulated they would like to use the washroom in alignment with their gender identity.
- Disallowing a trans student to be part of the Phys. Ed class or otherwise that corresponds to their gender identity.
- “You can’t play with us, this game is for girls/ boys.”

- “You can’t come to boys’/girls’ night.”
- “I’m only inviting girls/boys to my birthday party.”

- “You are just doing this for attention. You’ll change your mind.”
- “I don’t believe in ‘transgenderism’ or, ‘being transgender.’”

Comments That View Trans Persons as Sick or Diseased

- “I will not support someone who is indulging in their mental illness.”
- “This person is sick. They need help, not encouragement.”
- Any comment that implies that being transgender is something that is “contagious.”
EXAMPLES: Parents who request that their child not be in the same class as the trans student.
Parents who ask that the trans child not go on band trips/ Phys. Ed trips/ etc. that require sleeping arrangements or close quarters.

Purposeful Enforcement of Cisnormativity

To enforce cisnormativity is to impose a strict understanding of gender identity as always “aligning” with birth-assigned sex. For example, someone who was assigned male sex at birth must inevitably identify as a man, and express masculine.

Comments that are meant to assert that sex, biology, or genitalia, inescapably define someone’s gender identity are cisnormative, and may be motivated by transphobia.

Examples include:

Purposeful Portrayal of Gender Identity as a Choice

- “Why do you want to be a girl/boy/neither?”
- “Why would you want to mutilate your own body?”
- “Why would anyone choose to be something that they are not!”
- “I’ll just say I’m a girl so I can shower with the girls in gym class.”
- “Well I choose to be a giraffe today. Can I have my own ‘giraffe’ washroom?”
- “You’re only pretending to be a [gender] so that you can [action].”

- “You’re not a ‘real’ girl/boy.”
- “If you have a penis, then you belong in the boys’ bathroom.”
- “If you can create a baby, then you’re a woman. End of story.”
- “God doesn’t make mistakes, you can’t be born in the wrong body.”
“Wrong body” as a concept, in and of itself, can be considered transphobic language since it implies some bodies, and thereby some people, are “right,” and some are “wrong.”
- “Did you know that [name of person] is ‘really a boy,’ or ‘really a girl.’”
- “If you were born a man, and you look like a man, then you’re a man”

This can also manifest in teasing about, or asking personal questions about genitals and surgery:

- Comments that inquire about the trans person's genitals.
- Comments that tease about "sex change" operations.
- Asking someone if they are "pre-op" or "post-op."
- Asking a trans person if they look "all man" or "all woman" when naked.
- Telling the trans person that they will *have* to get surgery to "really" be a girl/boy.

Forcing gender roles on the trans persons as a result of their gender identity:

- "If you're a woman, then why don't you wear dresses and skirts?"
- "If you're a man then you need to act less feminine."

Purposefully attacking a trans person's ability to "pass" as their gender identity:

- "You're just a boy/man in a dress."
- "You make an ugly woman."
- "No amount of makeup could make you look pretty/ could make you look like a girl."
- "You make a girly/sissy little boy."
- "You will never be as strong/tough as a real man."
- "You're too pretty to be a boy."

Forcing the gender binary on non-binary, gender queer, gender fluid, gender variant and gender non-conforming persons:

- Comments that refuse to acknowledge that people exist outside of the girl/boy, woman/man binary.
- "Non-binary genders aren't real, they're just doing it as a political thing."
- "They just need to pick one or the other."
- "What are you, a boy or a girl?"
- "So you're a nothing?"
- Using the pronoun 'it' to refer to a gender non-binary person.
- Arguing that gender-neutral pronouns aren't "grammatically correct."
- "They is a plural pronoun – are you more than one person?"
- "You can't be non-binary unless you're also intersex."



Misogyny, Sexism and Transphobia

- “Any man who wants to emasculate himself.....”
- “Any man who wants to cut off his balls to be a woman.....”
- “To call a *man* a woman is an insult.”
- “Boys should not ‘dress like girls’ or ‘act like girls’ or ‘look like girls.’”
- “Of course she wants to be a man, who wants to be a girl!?”
- “He just wants to play on the girls’ sports team because then he’ll be the star player.”
- Sexualizing or objectifying a trans woman by whistling, or cat-calling them, accompanied by attitudes such as, “If you’re a woman you’ll consider it a compliment.”

This can also manifest in anything that portrays “men dressed as women” to be hilarious, a punchline, or a punishment of some kind:

- Halloween Costumes:
EXAMPLE: If a boy is assuming a feminine gender expression for Halloween, out of a sincere desire to allow for this possibility, or to dress up as a famous woman that they admire, then that’s wonderful. However, if a boy is assuming a feminine gender expression because “it’s funny” for a boy to want to be a girl, or for a boy to act like a girl, then it is not appropriate. It is a sexist manifestation of the ideology that to be a girl is lesser than, and a hilarious joke.

- Fundraising Goals:
EXAMPLE: Sometimes schools will set fundraising goals to motivate students. What becomes problematic is if goals include male staff persons “dressing like a girl.” For example, at \$5000 Mr. T wears a dress, or wears pink stilettos for the day. This portrays being a girl as a hilarious punchline, makes femininity a joke that a man reduces himself to, and renders being a woman a “humiliating consequence.”

Physical and Sexual Assault

- Groping or touching bodies.
EXAMPLES: Groping someone’s chest, “checking for ‘real breasts.’”
Groping someone’s crotch, “checking for a ‘package.’”
Grabbing someone’s neck to check for an Adam’s apple.
- Exposing bodies.
EXAMPLE: Flipping skirts, or dresses.
Pulling down someone’s pants.
- Non-consensual sexual contact sometimes described by perpetrators as the consequence of someone’s gender identity.
EXAMPLE: “You want to be a girl, so I’ll treat you like one.”



Further Considerations Regarding Transphobic Bullying and Harassment

TARGETS OF TRANSPHOBIC BULLYING

Transphobic bullying can occur in a variety of spaces with different intended targets:

- It can happen in a space in which the intent is to gain an audience rather than a specific target.

Note: Some such instances may actually rise to the level of “willful promotion of hatred” which is subject to prosecution under the criminal code.

- It can happen in a space which is meant to target individuals associated with the trans person, such as their friends, allies, sibling(s), or the person/people that are dating them.
- And of course, the bullying could directly target the trans person themselves.

In light of this, it is important to be attentive to the different ways bullying can take shape, and to the varying layers of oppression.

Sibling-Targeted Transphobia

- Exclusion and isolation as a result of their association.
- “Are your parents trying to turn you into a freak as well?”
- “So, did your parents sexually abuse you guys? Is that why you have a trans brother/sister?”
- “Are you a closeted [transphobic term] as well?”

Making a Joke of Intimate/ Sexual Interactions with a Trans Individual

- “I bet [name of target] would date [name of trans person] or [emphasis on pronoun]”
EXAMPLES: - “I bet Ryan would date Caitlyn Jenner!”
“He’s trans? Oh. Someone like Chloe would date *him!*”

- “I bet [name of target] would have sex with [name of trans person].”
- “Would *you* date [name of trans person]?”
- Homophobic bullying of a person who is dating a trans person.
EXAMPLES: Calling a boy who is dating a trans woman a “fag” or other homophobic language. Or calling a girl who is dating a trans man a “dyke” or other homophobic language.
- Transphobia and a culture of secrecy
EXAMPLES: Due to a transphobic culture and associated social stigma, many cisgender persons will hide their trans partner from their social networks and families.



SCHOOL CULTURE

It is also important to be vigilant for the types of “coded” transphobia that may exist in any given school culture. Kids are creative, and bullying can manifest in ways that are very specific to any given class or student body that may go unrecognized by school staff as harmful.

- As an example, the word “transformers” may be said to “signal” a disapproval of the trans student, or as a way to humiliate them. This word may be known to have this meaning by the student body, which could result in humorous smiles or snickering, however it may seem innocent to an educator who is not attentive.

With this in mind it is important to remain aware of the emotional reactions of the trans student in any given social context. Be attentive as to whether or not the emotional reaction(s) of the trans student is congruent with the reaction(s) of other students within the situation.

If you suspect bullying may be occurring, but are unsure of what coded language is being used or the precise situation, it is important to address the situation to the best of your ability in the moment. One way to do this is to clearly and explicitly state the school’s commitment to ensuring all students are treated with equal dignity and respect, and that if anyone knows of a situation where that is not happening that they are to let you know immediately so that those who are acting inappropriately or disrespectfully can be held accountable to their actions.

AREAS OF HIGH VULNERABILITY

It is also crucial to consider areas within a social and educational setting that pose increased risks to trans persons. Areas of high vulnerability include washrooms, change rooms and other isolated areas with decreased supervision or traffic such as certain hallways, stairwells, or areas on the school grounds. Given the very real risk of sexual assault, physical violence and targeted personal attacks posed by these areas, school staff need to meaningfully reflect on how safety in these areas can be increased.

Some suggestions may be to increase scheduled staff supervision within these areas. It may also be required that staff do their best to more frequently pass through these areas while going about their own personal day, to deliberately increase non-predictable staff presence within these areas. The school may also decide to put up posters, or reminders that visually signal the area to be a trans-inclusive space, and reiterate the responsibility of all students to abide by the school’s policies/ code of conduct to treat all school members with equal dignity and respect.

PLATFORMS

Cisnormative and transphobic ideologies and their manifested language can happen in person, as well as on-line. It is important that school staff take cyberbullying as seriously as that which may happen in person if the perpetrators/bullies are part of the student body.

Trans students and allies should be given explicit permission and encouragement to report online (texting, social media) instances of transphobic bullying. The perpetrators/bullies must be held accountable to the school anti-bullying, anti-harassment policies and codes of conduct.

If you are looking for resources to bring these conversations into the classroom, check out *Draw the Line* at <http://dtl.egale.ca/>