

School LGBTQ+ Social/Support Groups Guidance

Are you thinking of starting an LGBTQ+ group in your school community? Or do you already have one but it needs a refresh?

A school which has and supports an LGBTQ+ group puts out a strong message to those who already identify as LGBTQ+ and to the school community as a whole that "it's OK". For those going through that stage of their development from child to adult and who are getting to understand their sexual orientation or gender identity it can provide a safe space to work out who they are.

It is important to recognise that whilst some parents may be supportive of their child being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender etc many are not and young people who are starting to identify as such learn at an early age what their parents' attitudes and values are. They may not feel able to be out to their families but school can provide a safe environment in which they can explore and express their identity. Supporting and being involved in running a group in school can encourage students to have open discussion and conversations about LGBTQ+ matters and to explore their identity, regardless of their personal backgrounds without any fear of hostility or being excluded.

GayGlos has run a highly successful Youth group since 2012 which draws its membership from all over the county of Gloucestershire. Whilst there may be a variety of models as to how a group runs in a school, some key Group Rules have stood us well since it started and can provide a good basis for a group in school. (These are included at the end of this guidance.)

Important in making any decisions about the group is that young people are involved. It is likely that the impetus to start group has come from a cohort of students (however small it may be) and they need to be involved in the group's development. It may also be necessary to curb some enthusiasm in terms of what a group can and cannot do within the confines of the school environment.

In addition, there are some questions that need to be considered in establishing a new group (or perhaps even for reinvigorating an existing one). These fall under the standard 5-W's of: Who - What - When - Where - How?

WHO is the group for? Well clearly its primary purpose is for those who identify as fitting into the category of being LGBTQ+ or those exploring that possibility. But it could also be valuable to include 'allies', those YP who are not LGBTQ+ but supportive of their peers who are. The group also needs to have the full support of the school and at least one member of staff who is keen to be involved, as an important link with the staff team.

Another key issue can be the age group catered for. At GayGlos we settled on 14-18 as covering those with a reasonable level of maturity; though some mature 13 years olds have also joined more recently. In a school covering yrs7-13 it might be appropriate to have a group open to years 9-11/13 with a separate group for yrs7 & 8, perhaps facilitated by older members of the main group.

WHAT will the group be and do? Most young LGBTQ+ people in school want a safe space in which they can be with others who are 'like themselves'. What the group does will to some extent depend on the when/where/how elements which follow, as the group (and school) will need to be realistic and SMART in what it aims to be and do. Social interaction is key but the group may also want to include inputs as part of get togethers either from members of the group or from 'outside speakers', for example from GayGlos or other groups in the county.

There could an advantage in running some smaller 'intro' groups for new people wanting to join to relieve the anxiety that may exist for some young people. It will also be important to be aware of any other more specific pastoral needs for individual students that need to be dealt with that are not the primary function of the group.

The range of what the group does may well be dictated by how the school functions and so to the next 'W'.

WHEN can such a group meet? Most schools catering for yrs7—11/13 draw their students from a wide geographical area with many arriving (and returning home) via school buses. If the school generally runs after school clubs such a timing could be an option. However, it could put a limitation on some students attending as they may not be 'out' to their parents and may not want to have to explain staying after the school day ends. A meeting at lunchtime may be easier to accommodate for staff and student alike but while some schools have significant lunchbreaks (partly to facilitate the running of a variety of clubs) many have quite short lunch breaks which will impact on what the group undertakes. Accommodating those who bring a packed lunch will be fairly easy, those who want to eat in the school dining hall will not be quite so simple if the lunch break is short.

WHERE will the group meet? A key issue for many will be feeling that where the group meets is safe and that they will not be identified as 'attending the gay group' by others hanging around the area at the time. If there is a discreet location which is less busy at a time when the group meets that can be helpful. The ideal would be a space that the group can personalise though this may be more difficult to allocate. Another option is that the group moves where it meets using a variety of locations, though that can present its own issues of members know where to turn up!

HOW to start a group and how YP join? In getting a group started by advertising (posters around the school and whatever methods the school uses to communicate with students) it will be important to build in the mechanism for joining. Anyone who is interested must contact the members of staff who is taking the lead for the group (probably by email). In the school setting it may be that the staff member knows each individual who does get in touch with them unlike GayGlos where those wanting to join are not known to us. It will be important to build in a system that avoids the possibility of someone who is not really known and just wants to cause trouble being simply invited to a group meeting.

All of which leads to our GayGlos Group Rules as mentioned at the start.

These are all about maintaining the safety of the group itself and of its members as individuals. They were drawn up by the YP who were the members right the start of the group. Young people joining GayGlos Youth all physically sign up to these rules which also make it clear that breach any of them may make them subject to disciplinary procedures or possible exclusion from the group. (You may wish to use them as they are or adapt as appropriate to your group's needs. Some have been adjusted slightly to include the school setting.)

Confidentiality - Maintain the confidentiality of the group, its location and members in order to ensure a safe place for all.

Identity - Protect the identity of members of the group including when you are no longer a member of the group. Greeting someone from the group when they are in school (or town with their family or friends) might 'out' them by mistake.... Not a good idea.

Joining - Joining the group is through the GayGlos vetting/introduction process. You can't just bring along a friend without going through the process. They will need to understand the rules before joining... just like you did. *(For your school this would be through your member of staff.)*

Respect - Respect others in the group who may be different and have different views, opinions, beliefs and lifestyles.

Bullying - No bullying, mental, physical and emotional. That includes communication e.g. text, email and website.

Social Group - We are a Social Group where we meet others to make friends, learn things, support each other and HAVE FUN. It is not a 'pick up' group

I accept the rules of "GAY-GLOS Youth" Group (signed and dated by the new member)

We hope these guidelines will be helpful in setting up a group in your school/college, endeavouring to support young LGBTQ+ people to grow confident in who they are both in the school environment and in their future lives.