

# LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Equality in Primary Education



## Event report

In October 2017, The Rainbow Families project hosted the event [‘Talking about Rainbow Families’](#) and one of the key topics raised by attendees, was around parents and carer’s experiences of LGBTQ+ inclusion in primary education. In response to the evident need to explore this topic further, the project hosted a follow-up discussion event on Thursday 15th March.

Graeme Ross from [LGBT Youth Scotland](#) joined the event, as he is working towards improving LGBT equality and inclusion in Scotland’s education settings.

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## About the event

The event forms part of a series of quarterly discussion and information events for LGBTQ+ adult family members, with a focus on parenting and the experiences of LGBTQ+ families, delivered in Edinburgh by staff from the Rainbow Families Project. Events and support are also provided by the Rainbow Families Project in Glasgow.

This event provided an informally facilitated, intimate discussion setting to share experiences, raise concerns and make connections. It was a safe space to discuss the sense of inclusion and safety of their children and families in primary school settings and what can be done if parents or carers are unhappy about it.

6 people participated, including a trans parent, a parent of a 9 year old trans boy, parents in same-gender couples and a nursery school teacher who is also the parent of a bisexual child. The event was for adults over (16+), to give people the chance to speak and listen freely.

## Initial responses to the topic

After an initial welcome, introductions and the chance for people to share something about their situation, there were some general observations made about the topic that most participants agreed on:

- LGBTQ+ issues in primary schools are often not addressed. These topics are given attention more in secondary/high school education
- there is a general lack of communication and a lack of support for LGBTQ+ parents or parents of LGBTQ+ children in primary schools
- Nursery school teachers often have much closer relationships with parents than those in primary school. For example, in nursery, teachers see parents every day and have the chance to ask them about their life, and engage more with the issues affecting their family. There isn't much space for that in primary school

## Case studies

During the course of the event, participants shared details about their family situations, their children and their experiences of primary education. From this information we have created some anonymous case studies that help to capture real situations and the experiences that some 'rainbow families' are facing at present.

### Case study 1: Trans Dad

A father of a 9 year old girl had to make the decision to home-school her because of the lack of support and engagement shown by the school she was attending. The father explains that the school was not at all equipped to provide support or information about

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*“Just because a school claims that they are “LGBTQ+ inclusive, doesn't mean they know everything. There's more to learn”*

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LGBTQ+ inclusivity. He shared that his daughter had to work hard at censoring herself and use a “filter” in school, always worrying what was okay to say and what wasn’t. This caused stress and distress for both parent and child.

The father highlighted that the school was quick to praise their approach to inclusion, simply by acknowledging that they have a child with lesbian parents attending the school, implying that their job is done, and they are inclusive. They aren’t currently working towards any inclusion initiatives for transgender children or parents.

## Case study 2: Trans child

A parent of a 9 years old trans boy talked about their struggles with making the school accept their child’s identity. The parent who shared their experience said that they were told to first “have him diagnosed as trans” before they could ask for anything from the school.

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*“If you had told him to behave, this would never have happened”*

- Response of GP in 2014, when hearing of the child’s gender issues

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They visited their GP, who then proceeded to tell them that “if you had told him to behave this wouldn’t have happened.”

It has taken 5 years of conscientious, exhausting lobbying and advocating, to get the school to accept that their son describes himself as trans and wishes to tell his class mates.

## Case study 3: Two mums

A mother shared her experience of dealing with her son’s school and her concerns about their inclusivity. The issue started when her child came home and said some very homophobic things which shocked and upset his Mums.

The Mums worried that he was parroting something he had heard or been taught at school, however they struggled to know the best way to deal with the issue.

The Mums worry that if they consult with the teacher and question where these statements have come from, it may impact how the teacher responds to and behaves with their son. They do not want to make his life harder.

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*“We don’t want to make his life harder”*

- In response to the considering approaching the head teacher

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After some personal interactions with the teacher, the Mums feel concerned about how accepting and supportive the teacher is of LGBTQ+ families. It has also made them question how supportive the school is in general. These worries have caused a lot of stress and they feel they need to approach the head teacher, to find out more. Ahead of doing this, they contacted the Rainbow Families Project to get some emotional support and information, to help them prepare to make contact with the school. Staff helped them to create an agenda for a meeting with the head teacher, and suggestions for affirmative action to help the school address ways to provide reassurance and a more supportive environment for LGBTQ+ families.

## Barriers to LGBTQ+ inclusion and equality in primary education

During the course of the event, informed by their experiences, participants continued to highlight the reasons they believe schools are not doing enough to create an inclusive and equal environment for LGBTQ+ families and issues:

*“A simple LGBT poster or rainbow flag would communicate a lot”*

- parent

### Barriers

- School officials are in general afraid of the topic of LGBTQ+ and sexuality
- Some parents and teachers are afraid that talking about LGBTQ+ issues will mean they have to talk about sex - which is not the case at all
- According to the national curriculum – the government expects a 7yr old to know/understand what sexual orientation is, but teachers don't seem to be comfortable or knowledgeable enough to deliver this teaching effectively
- A parent who wanted to have transgender-inclusive and affirmative materials in school was told by a school official that “people want to protect their child from that kind of a thing.” A recent example of how attitudes are standing in the way of children and parents feeling safe from discrimination and judgement
- Not many schools have positive messages of inclusion, visible to students and parents - a simple LGBT poster or flag would communicate a lot
- Religious schools are less likely to promote LGBTQ+ / different families; in teaching or through visible materials

## Examples of positive change

Graeme Ross, Education Capacity Building Officer from LGBT Youth Scotland is also a former primary school teacher. In his role with LGBT Youth he now works with schools to help them become more LGBTQ+ inclusive. Graeme provided a lot of useful insight and suggestions as to how schools *can* and *do* make positive change.



He shared that in his experience, it is often that all schools think they exist in isolation. He said that “we want to encourage schools to take ownership of change and LGBTQ+ inclusivity.”

### A positive case study: Head Teacher seeking support

Jennifer Sorrie is a teacher with a 30 years of experience. Recently, as far as she was aware, she encountered a trans student for the first time in

her career. She called Graeme (LGBT Youth Scotland), eager to learn more in order to help the student.

She had lots of questions for Graeme. She admitted that she knew nothing about transgender issues and in particular how to help an 'out' trans child feel safe and accepted in their classes.

Together with LGBT Youth Scotland, the child and their parents, they came up with a supportive plan. They accompanied the child to go to a different room, whilst they took 30 minutes to explain to the other children in the class about the trans child's situation. The class were able to ask questions about being trans and share their initial thoughts and reactions.

Once these initial reactions were shared and responded to by the teacher, they then re-introduced the trans child back to the class where they were met with a standing ovation from their class mates.

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*“The issue is that schools don't always know that they are not doing enough.”*

- Graeme Ross, LGBT Youth Scotland

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Graeme explained that Head Teachers hold all the power in schools and that teachers can be afraid to speak up. When the Head Teacher is proactive, it makes it easier for teachers to make suggestions and feel more supported to source more inclusive materials or lesson plans. Without a proactive and supportive Head Teacher, schools are often left lagging behind in inclusion and equality achievements.

There may be those who complain, warns Graeme, such as the parent at Jennifer Sorrie's school who complained that the school was “plastered in trans posters” (there were 4 posters). However, at the end of his time working with Jennifer Sorrie's school, the feedback from students was that it's just “a nicer place”.

“That” says Graeme, “is what it comes down to – places that are inclusive and look after their students are just nicer.”



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Here is an example of a school using posters to encourage, discussion and promote inclusion and equality

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## What to do if you are concerned about your primary school

Graeme shared some useful advice for anyone concerned about inclusivity or equality issues at their school:

- ! Investigate and make a note of the specific things that the school is doing wrong – if it seems they are taking a very general approach to “inclusivity” then it’s not good enough. Schools are required to make an effort into providing a safe environment for their students
- ! Record everything – all instances/issues that you notice or your child talks about or that other parents or children talk about
- ! Go and talk with the teacher. Or if this doesn’t feel possible, arrange to speak to the Head Teacher. Have everything written down to help you address everything you need to. You could also bring another person to the meeting who speaks about the issues on your behalf if you feel unable; someone who cares about your situation but who is not as emotionally involved as you are
- ! Go in with a solution. This could mean bringing a list of stuff that works, i.e. here is a book, here is the exercise you can do with the book about LGBT+ inclusivity. That way it feels less like an attack and more like you believe that positive change is possible

## Wish List: what do you need your head teacher to do?



A parent who attended the discussion said that everything seems okay so far for her young daughter in primary school. She and her wife haven’t encountered any issues so far, but she worries what might happen as the daughter grows older. Graeme Ross suggested being proactive in advance, to prepare for any inclusion matters that arise in the future.

This led the group to making a **Wish List** of things that these parents need the head teachers of their children’s school to do, to help make their family feel welcome and included:

### Head Teachers, here is what we need you to do:

- 👍 Use resources to get a range of LGBTQ+ books
- 👍 Be proactive rather than reactionary – help your staff get comfortable with LGBTQ+ books, and the questions and answers they invite
- 👍 Take the LGBTQ+ books off the ‘special shelf’ and put them into the family section

-  Don't just have LGBTQ+ books – USE them
-  Nominate and support a dedicated, informed staff member who you can point people to if anyone starts to question the importance of keeping inclusive literature in your school, and why the school is making an effort to be as inclusive as possible
-  If your school is doing something that works – tell others!
-  Arrange whole school staff LGBTQ+ training. Schools have a budget for training, so use these funds to ensure staff are knowledgeable and equipped. If you discover an issue with funding, then utilise the Pupil Equity Fund
-  Commit to educating your staff and students about equality and inclusivity so that you don't find yourselves coasting along and ignoring issues
-  Be mindful about the messages you are putting out about gender – ask why you need to separate 'girls' from 'boys', don't use gender stereotyping in your resources, visuals, language and behaviours. There is no such thing as 'girl' or 'boy' things or activities
-  Promote an environment where children know that they can be themselves and explore who they or their families are without fear or filtering
-  Don't make assumptions about your staff or students gender identities or what they do or do not understand
-  Nurture an environment where all children are able to talk about their families and if any staff are uncomfortable with any identities or language, provide support, information and relevant training
-  Use posters, rainbow/pride emblems and positive inclusion messages and make them visible to students, staff and visitors. Parents want and need to feel safe in order to be able to interact with the school's staff - being a minority gives a sense of otherness. Parents may need additional reminders that you are approachable
-  Stop saying that LGBTQ+ children are “complicated” – people just want to be able to be themselves and need support, encouragement and time to explore
-  Keep listening
-  Talk to parents and talk to children. It's about knowing the language that feels appropriate and engaging for the right age groups.
-  Talking about LGBTQ+ issues does NOT mean talking about sex. So don't panic! It's about feelings, love, acceptance, being yourself, identity / who you are, how you feel inside and what makes you feel comfortable. Use positive

stories to highlight how inclusivity can be easy, effective and make schools friendlier, safer spaces



Call Graeme Ross at LGBT Youth Scotland - they can help!

### Where to start?

Graeme Ross suggested that schools could create an anonymous questionnaire for staff about how much they know about LGBTQ+ identities and issues, and see what arises. This would provide an insight into the level of awareness within the staff team and provide a starting point to think about what kind of training and support is needed.

It may also be useful to create another questionnaire for the students of your school, and ask them:

- Which teacher would you talk to about LGBTQ+ issues?
- Who would you never ask about LGBTQ+ issues?

### Tackling homophobia, biphobia and transphobia

On the subject of teachers and their confidence in addressing inclusion and equality issues, Graeme Ross and the parents discussed some suggestions for tackling phobic behaviour at school. Graeme also highlighted a useful resource:

- Question why children are using the language they're using. Why would a child say "**That's gay**" as an insult? Talk to them about why they say it and whether they know what it means and then inform them it's unkind and not acceptable in your school
- Be a role-model, don't allow homophobic, biphobic or transphobic language to go un-challenged and without a reason why it's unacceptable. It's not enough to say "stop"
- Report it. So that you can monitor instances and where it is happening most often. Perhaps there is a teacher who needs more support
- **Read** - ['Effectively challenging homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in schools'](#)

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the parents at our event want their primary schools to be more proactive, which they learned means having a head teacher who inspires (and insists upon) inclusivity within their schools. If your school does not appear to have this, there is always room for improvement and school staff can access information, support and help to change.

Graeme Ross concludes, it is NOT the parents' job to fix the school, instead there are institutions designed for supporting and dealing with equality and inclusion issues; local authorities, LGBT Youth Scotland and Stonewall Scotland.

Finally, the group agreed it is hard being that person who challenges the authority and has to fight for the right thing for your child. It can be intimidating and scary and often, the voices of phobic people are the loudest. But as one of the parents said, their child had an Anti-bullying week at school and during it, realised that they were not being treated right. The teacher had put a poster on the wall in the classroom which said, “**You don’t have to like me, but you have to respect me.**” and it was enough to help them speak out. Proving it doesn’t take much to start making a difference.

## Resources and contacts



**Stonewall Scotland** campaigns for the equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people across Scotland.

They have downloadable posters and resources to share with your school:

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/get-involved/education/different-families-same-love>

**LGBT Youth Scotland** support LGBT youth in Scotland aged 13-25yrs and can also support your school! Teachers and primary school staff in Scotland can contact Education Capacity Building Officer, Graeme Ross, for help, information and advice:

T: 0131 555 3940 E: [graeme.ross@lgbtyouth.org.uk](mailto:graeme.ross@lgbtyouth.org.uk)

<https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/resources/>



**LGBT Health and Wellbeing** support LGBTQ+ people in Scotland aged 16+, and can provide individual support and information for parents and carers of LGBTQ+ families.

**Edinburgh:**

T: 0131 523 1104 E: [jules@lgbthealth.org.uk](mailto:jules@lgbthealth.org.uk)

**Glasgow:**

T: 0141 271 2330 E: [benn@lgbthealth.org.uk](mailto:benn@lgbthealth.org.uk)