

That's So Gay!

Oh my God! Can you believe she's wearing that?
That's so gay!

No way! You went to the movies with your
parents. That's so gay!

"That's so gay!" According to Kevin Jennings, the founder and executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, "That's so gay!" is one of the most frequently heard insults among second-graders, second only to "That's so stupid!" Second graders are not the only ones to use this insult. These words are not said as a compliment. Gay, in this context, is not a positive. It does not refer to something happy or good. It refers to something bad, uncool, socially unacceptable or simply not ok. More significantly, this expression is a condemnation of a particular group of people in our society who defy the societal norms of loving and being.

Why should we care? It sounds so innocuous. It's not like calling someone a "faggot," "cocksucker," "bulldagger," "dyke" or "queer" -- or is it? And even if it is derogatory to homosexual and bisexual people, why should this be a "women's issue?" I'll tell you why.

Condemnation of homosexuality is an expression of homophobia - the fear or hatred of homosexuals. "That's so gay!" is an expression of homophobia. Still, you may ask, "Why should I care?" Here's why. Homophobia is rooted in misogyny - the fear and hatred of females. Think about it. When coaches call their male charges "girls" or "ladies," they are insulting them for being "like girls" or "like women." For little boys, that's the worse thing they can be. When boys on the playground say, "You throw like a girl!" they are insulting the person for being effeminate. When people obsess about "faggots" they are obsessed about men that they perceive to be like women. And let's be real. Society is much more obsessed (with angry, hateful thoughts) about two men kissing, fondling, or otherwise behaving sexually with each other, than they are about two women doing the same thing. At the same time, the terms, "dyke," "bulldagger," and "queer," are still used to keep women in their place because they indicate that such persons are even "lower" than women in society. It is a

label used to indicate that the female in question is even more despicable than a "girl" or a "lady."

So when we hear our children, or other people's children, say, "That's so gay!" and do nothing about it, we are tacitly letting them know that not only is it ok to hate people because they are different, but that it is ok to hate women.

More significantly, expressions such as "That's so gay!" help perpetuate a culture of anti-gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered (glbt) violence. According to the department of justice, gay and lesbian people are the most likely group to be targeted for a hate crime. When people who are presumed to be gay or lesbian (and note that this includes heterosexual people, bisexual people, and transgendered people as well as gay and lesbian people) are targeted, they are more likely to be beaten beyond recognition than persons targeted for their racial, ethnic or socioeconomic group. The gay-basher's weapon of choice is a baseball bat or similar implement. It's as if the attackers want to beat the humanity out of their victim. When murderers shoot or stab people that they presume to be gay or lesbian, it's not just once or twice, it's seven, ten, twelve times, as if the goal is to totally eradicate the person rather than to simply kill him or her. And in case you are in denial about what hate crimes are really about, think about Matthew Shepard, left to die on a fence post in Wyoming, or James Byrd (who, although he wasn't gay, was killed because he was black) who was dragged to death from a pickup truck in Texas.

Hate violence is not just targeted at adults. The Massachusetts version of the Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Youth survey (the only state to include sexual orientation in the questionnaire) indicates that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth are targeted with a great deal of harassment and violence at school. According to Massachusetts survey results, high school students who self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual were seven times more likely than other students to have skipped school because they felt unsafe. Data from different surveys in other states support Massachusetts' findings.

Being on the target end of this harassment is horrible. It's not uncommon for students who are perceived to be gay or

lesbian to be subjected to little and big acts of humiliation, to have "fag" or "dyke" written on their locker, to be "accidentally" pushed as they walk through the hall, to have their property vandalized, etc. One student in a self-defense class I taught, was "not allowed" to go into the bathroom at school if anyone else was in there. Another student was sexually assaulted because her perpetrator thought she was a lesbian. Given the hell that children perceived to be gay or lesbian go through, it's no wonder so many glbt or glbt questioning youth kill themselves. It also makes sense that authorities uncovered information indicating that the boy who shot 5 of his teachers and classmates in a school near San Diego had been subjected to anti-gay harassment. To me, the surprise is that such rampages don't happen more often.

So when you hear the kids on the playground saying, "That's so gay!" and do nothing about it, you are inadvertently supporting homophobia as well as misogyny and therefore bear some of the blame for the violence that happens as a result.

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