

(Ottawa)

Gay-Straight Alliances

A Manual for Launching Alliances



PINK TRIANGLE SERVICES

For several months, Pink Triangle Services has worked to bring you what you hold in your hands. Through this manual, we hope that you consider making your school a safer, more open, and more fun place to be.

We hope that you consider starting a Gay-Straight Alliance.

You may be intimidated upon reading this. You may think you cannot start a GSA. But remember, there are people that have done so all over the place. From the big cities of Toronto and Vancouver to the rural areas of Iowa, people everywhere are learning about GSAs. If you need help, please refer to the Appendix near the end of this manual for contact information.

On behalf of Pink Triangle Services, I congratulate you on deciding to look at this manual. By the time you have finished reading it, you may feel the desire to take that first step to starting a GSA.

Please don't push it away. Welcome it.

Regards,



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Publication of this manual would not have been possible without the remarkable resources provided by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Thanks are also due to the Trillium Foundation, without whose generous assistance this manual could not have been printed.

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What is a Gay-Straight Alliance?

The first Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), was launched in Massachusetts through the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). It is a school-based support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning (GLBTQ) and heterosexual youth. Its focus is on creating a union of GLBTQ and straight youth, where everyone gets to have fun and learn about it between each other. Ridding society of homophobia is certainly part of a GSA. The end result is to create an atmosphere where people's differences generally become more acceptable. The groups are lead for youth by youth, with limited teacher/administration facilitation.

A GSA allows students whom identify as gay or are struggling with their sexual identity to explore themselves without fear of violence, discrimination and harassment. However, it is important to point out the following: *no assumptions are to be made of people's sexual orientation.*

People may:

- talk about their feelings and experiences regarding GLBTQ issues;
- learn about the effects of homophobia and heterosexism and how they affect everyone;
- educate the school community about homophobia, heterosexism and how they affect everyone; and
- learn from each other, go to movies and plays, attend rallies and marches, host speakers and workshops, play games and music, etc.

While a faculty advisor is recommended for each group, his or her role is not to lead the group. It is only to act as a counsellor and to make sure that policies are not disregarded. *A GSA is essentially run for youth by youth.*

Again, the objective of GSAs is to educate all people about homosexuality and create a pleasant atmosphere within the educational environment.

Why a GSA in My School?

The question is, “why not?” Even though Canadians have become much more politically aware and sensitive about GLBTQ issues in the last thirty years, homophobia still abounds. It is common for students to hear discriminating remarks in school hallways, despite measures such as the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board’s (OCDSB) policy against harassment. Meanwhile, many teachers and guidance counsellors are not attuned to these wrongdoings and many GLBTQ youth are left feeling isolated and hopeless.

With increasing awareness of GLBTQ concerns, unfortunately, there is also an increasing witch-hunt of “who is gay and who is not” in our schools. This means that those with effeminate tendencies, many of whom are not gay, become the object of discrimination.

The biggest problem, however, seems to be rampant heterosexism. This is the assumption that heterosexuality is preferable and that homosexuality is abnormal. This reinforces the beliefs that:

- all GLBTQ people are promiscuous and incapable of forming long-lasting relationships;
- GLBTQ people seek to recruit young children;
- it is a shame to the family to be GLBTQ;
- all GLBTQ people live exclusively in “gay ghettos”; and being GLBTQ is a choice, not an inherent orientation.

Indeed, GSAs seek to expose these myths and to *build unions of understanding and acceptance between GLBTQ and straight students.*

While GSAs acknowledge the horrific impact that homophobia and other forms of discrimination have on our society, they keep a fundamental focus on the forces of POSITIVE CHANGE.

Facts and Figures on GLBTQ Youth

Realization:

Many gay youth reported becoming aware of feeling “different” between the ages of 5 and 7 but did not link that to issues of sexuality (Treadway and Yoakum, 1992).

The average age at which GLBTQ youth become aware that their feelings of “difference” are linked to sexual orientation is 13 (Sears, 1991).

Suicide:

Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are three to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Gibson, 1989).

Isolation:

Eighty percent of GLBTQ youths report severe isolation problems including:

- having no one to talk to;
- feeling distanced from peers and family; and a
- lack of access to good information regarding GLBTQ issues (Hetrick and Martin, 1987).

Family:

Half of GLBTQ youths reported being rejected by their parents (Remafedi, 1987).

School:

2/3 of guidance counsellors harbour negative feelings towards GLBTQ people (Sears, 1992).

Less than 20% of guidance counsellors have received some training on serving the needs of gay and lesbian students (Sears, 1992).

Eight Steps to Launching a GSA in Your School

The following guidelines were retrieved largely from the GLSEN Web site:

STEP ONE: Follow Guidelines

Be sure to follow the procedure for launching clubs in your school, which is often located in the student handbook or planner. Administration approval is required to start a GSA. If refused, point out that the OCDSB Policy P.O53.HR, Section 2, Subsection c) if your school is part of the OCDSB; this section discourages discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. If approval is still refused or you remain unsure of the policy of your board, contact the Pink Triangle Youth Outreach Coordinator (the contact information is in the Appendix) for help.

STEP TWO: Find a Faculty Advisor

Note that a faculty advisor does not have to be “out” but merely sympathetic to GLBTQ issues. Be sure to approach someone who is likely to be receptive. This person can act as a liaison to the Administration.

STEP THREE: Inform the Administration of Your Plans

Aside from risking dissolution of the group if the Administration is not aware of plans, a GSA may miss out on many opportunities the Administration can help provide. For example, they can help arrange 1) days of awareness, 2) speakers for school assemblies, and 3) teacher sensitivity training.

STEP FOUR: Inform Guidance Counsellors and Social Workers About the Group

These people may know of students who are GLBTQ-identified and might be interested in attending the meetings. As well, attending these meetings may offer a wider view of GLBTQ concerns to those people who may not be aware of them. Remember, it is important to gain as many allies as possible.

STEP FIVE: Pick a Meeting Place

It is extremely important not to pick a conspicuous meeting place. In schools where homophobia abounds, some students might be frightened to join a “gay” group where they may be deemed as such by association. It is important to pick a room that offers some security and privacy. However, be sure not to close the door. This might give newcomers the impression of inhospitality.

As well, it is advised that snacks be provided for the meetings. This allows apprehensive newcomers a motive: I was hungry so I thought I'd come in and get a handful of chips. Also, be sure to meet at a time that will attract the most people, such as lunch or immediately after school.

STEP SIX: Advertise

In a time when so many GLBTQ youths feel isolated, it can be quite gratifying for them to see GLBTQ-positive posters, to know that there are others like them in the world. Other students may know someone close to them who is GLBTQ and may be relieved to see that there are people in the school who are addressing these issues.

The posters may spark public debate, but many people remain uncomfortable with homosexuality and may make it seem unclean and taboo. Nonetheless, the posters may encourage people to voice their opinions, thoughts and questions about the issues, thus encouraging dialogue. However, it is absolutely crucial to keep the posters positive.

Keep in mind that these posters may be torn down or vandalized. If this happens, keep putting up new ones. The more this happens, the less likely a violent response will be provoked. In the posters, be sure to include:

- meeting periods and location; and
- a description of what a GSA does and how the meetings are held;
- be sure to highlight that EVERYONE IS WELCOME.

STEP SEVEN: Hold Your Meeting

Be sure to hold the first meeting in a relaxed atmosphere. If you can, get some comfortable furniture. You might want to start with a name game that begins with a silly question such as, “If you could be any cartoon character, who would you be and why?” and then get to know everyone’s name. As well, emphasize that anyone is free to leave at any time.

Next, be sure to establish some ground rules. The following are suggestions:

- No one will make assumptions about members’ sexual orientations and therefore, CONFIDENTIALITY SHOULD BE MAINTAINED.
- Try to be sensitive to other people’s feelings but don’t feel as though you have to be politically correct all the time. Realize that everyone is learning about the issue. If someone says something homophobic, don’t outwardly reprimand that individual; discuss why the comment is problematic.

STEP EIGHT: Plan for the Future

Participants may have different ideas of what they want to do in the group. To establish a sense of order, you may wish to draw up an Action Plan, whereby the group identifies what it can do to make their school more GLBTQ-friendly. As well, be sure to use some humour on all activities; this is not a purely political operation.

Ideas for Great Meetings

1 “Things I’ve Always Wanted to Ask”

There are many questions people have about homosexuality and many preconceived notions are the result of blatant misinformation. Have participants write their questions anonymously on slips of paper. Then pull them out of a box and spend the rest of the period discussing the questions and providing answers. Remember that there is no such thing as a stupid question.

2 “Bring a Friend” Day

Since some people might be intimidated to come to the group on their own, the group could consider a “bring a friend” day in order to get more people involved. This method has been helpful in dispelling many people’s false perceptions of homosexuality.

3 No Adults (or Only One)

Some participants may find that their teacher-facilitators are too domineering. If this happens, do not be afraid to tell the facilitator. Host a meeting where the facilitator is only allowed to talk when necessary. This may offer the facilitator a view of what boundaries he/she has overstepped.

4 “What Would the World Be Like If Ten Percent of People Were Straight and the Rest Were Gay?”

What would it be like if we lived in a predominately homosexual society? If our parents wished that their children would grow up gay? What would it be like if we had to come out as straight? Asking these questions are a good way of pointing out the inaccuracy of stereotypes.

Games

While playing games is an excellent way to “break the ice,” they also allow participants to share more intimate details without being threatened. The group may, for example, have a mediator divide the group into women and men. The men ask questions they have always wanted to ask, and vice versa. Here, group members can really test each other’s perceptions of homosexuality.

GSA’s and Other Civil Rights Groups: Working Together

GSA’s and other Civil Rights groups share a common goal: to work for the dignity of every human being. Hate, in whatever form, including homophobia, sexism, racism, and classism, does not just affect the oppressed, but the oppressor as well. People hate for a variety of reasons and many become intransigent as a result. GSA’s and other similar groups may want to hold anti-discrimination seminars and info fairs, thus teaching people that homophobia, pure and simple, is unacceptable.

Coming Out

People who come out to their family, friends and acquaintances all do it differently. Some wait until adulthood and others choose to come out while they are young. Others tell their parents last, while some tell their parents first. Nevertheless, others never come out to their parents at all.

Indeed, coming out can be an emotionally draining process. But it can also be immensely liberating. In order to help people gain an understanding of what it is like, the group may want to bring in people from the GLBT community to talk about it, if some group participants themselves do not wish to do so.

However, in the likely event that there are GLBT participants in the group, it is advised that the following questions be handed out to the group at large so that GLBT members can weigh the pros and cons of coming out at a certain time:

- Why do I want to tell other people?
- What am I likely to gain? What am I likely to lose?

- What can I do to move the advantages to the disadvantages side?
- If I am faced with disadvantages, what can I do?
- If I do tell, what will the reaction be? What will I do then? Am I ready?

Without a doubt, it is crucial that the group emphasize support in the event of a person's coming out.

8 Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History

For many years, gay and lesbian history was not considered worthy of study. Now, many universities offer courses on it. The group may decide to give presentations on gay and lesbian history and issues, from the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 (the catalyst for the modern GLBT rights movement) to rock stars coming out.

9 "What is Transgenderism?"

Transgender people face a great deal of discrimination largely because by the very nature of their existence, they challenge the gender stereotypes that our society holds so dearly. Yet society at large is almost unaware of transgender persons and the group may want to hold discussions on the topic, bring in a speaker, write essays for the school newspaper, or show trans-positive films and documentaries. For information regarding this topic, refer to the Appendix.

10 Working for Change

As mentioned above, the school newspaper is a great way to spread the group's message. A variety of topics, from subconscious homophobia to "Why I'm a Straight Ally" can be discussed. As well, the group may want to create posters and hand out pamphlets. But don't feel limited to the school; try your community paper or bulletin board. Get out there and get involved!

11 Invite Other Schools

Students in other schools may feel daunted by the idea of starting GSAs. Yet if they see other schools in action, it may motivate them to try. Even those schools with GSAs may be interested in getting together so that they can exchange ideas on how to make their present GSAs even better.

Movies Galore!

Who doesn't like movies? There is a wealth of gay-positive films out there, from dramas to documentaries. Ask the clerk at your video store for GLBT-positive films or check out the addresses of other video outlets in the Appendix.

Revved to Read: GLBT Books in School Libraries

Many school libraries are woefully lacking in books with GLBT content. If such is the case at your school, why not get the group to make a list of popular (and appropriate) GLBT books for your librarian to order? If you are told that there is not enough interest, why not circulate a petition throughout the school, thereby demonstrating that there is? As well, you may want to ask friends if they have any such books they might be willing to donate.

Diversity Panels

A great way to educate people about GLBTQ issues is to select one and focus on it. For example, one group may decide to host a religious panel to show that most organized religions, while homophobic, do not have a basis to discriminate. To do this, the group should select some gay-friendly officials from each religion and invite them to come to the school.

A note of caution, however: *be sure to screen the speakers!* Make absolutely certain that they are, in fact, gay-positive and that they will not attempt to enforce their own personal views on the audience or other speakers. The goal is to maintain a relaxed, open atmosphere.

As well, a moderator is important, as the discussion can get off topic every now and then. Also, be sure to structure the event. For example, have the first half of the session be devoted to the speakers themselves and the second half devoted to questions from the audience.

Outreach to the Community

The group may be surprised by the support it may receive from the community at large. In Ottawa alone, there are many straight people and businesses that support gay and lesbian causes. Once the group has been firmly established, it might want to hold info-fairs explaining the activities of the group.

The Importance of Surveys

Surveys on GLBTQ topics, while they may not always be returned to the people who issued them, may still motivate people to complete them to question their perceptions. For surveys that are returned, their contents will help determine the level of homophobia in the school and what areas of outreach the group should focus on. Please note that it is **essential** the surveys remain **anonymous** and **confidential**.

Here are some example questions for a survey, “Am I Homophobic?”

- Do I have gay and lesbian friends?
- How comfortable am I talking about homosexuality? About sexuality in general?
- How do I respond to “dyke” or “fag” jokes?
- What was I taught about homosexuality? What do I believe?
- What would I do if a close relative or friend of mine came out as gay or lesbian?

Web Sites of Interest

Information

www.pinktriangle.org – Pink Triangle Services

Pink Triangle Services is one of Ottawa’s major social services agency for GLBT people. Aside from hosting Pink Triangle Youth, PTS is also responsible for many other groups, the Gayline and the library. Check out this site for more information.

www.yzb.on.ca – Youth Services Bureau

Another major GLBT youth service provider, YSB hosts the West End and East End Rainbow drop-ins as well as a 12-week sexual orientation workshop.

National

www.gaycanada.com

Canada's major GLBT Web site, complete with a search engine, listings of service providers, and gay-related news reports.

www.qtonline.com

This is the Web site of Canada's wildly popular GLBT-related show, Queer Television, which airs on CityTV (check local listings).

International

www.gay.com

An online community with international, health and entertainment news, columns, free e-mail, personals, local, national and international chat lines among other activities.

www.gaybc.com – GayBC Radio Network

This web site has a wealth of online radio programming on a variety of topics, among them current affairs and queer theory. There are also several comedy shows offered as well.

www.planetout.com

This site has everything that gay.com has, except that the chat lines are not as localized. Added features include a large youth section, with discussion boards, comics and even an arts and poetry exchange. Also offered is an online cinema of queer film shorts.

Youth-Related

www.colage.org – Children of Gays and Lesbians Everywhere

Web sites of organizations that offer support to children of GLBT parents. Includes information on the organization itself, a recommended reading list, links, and online resources.

www.elight.org

Fantastic site with sections for poetry, coming out stories and short fiction, among others. Includes extensive, safe personals and a variety of links to GLBT youth-related sites.

www.oasismag.com – Oasis Online Zine

Classy online zine with personal anecdotes, news and events, poetry and short stories as well as photography. Encourages online submissions.

www.outproud.org

American site with online resources, news and a forum for GLBT youth to exchange ideas.

www.safespaces.org

Provides a variety of online documents on a various topics, from coming-out to personal fulfillment (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader). Also has a discussion board.

www.youth.org

Webring of GLBT youth-related sites. Offers articles on coming-out and internet safety.

www.youth-guard.org

Provides a wealth of e-mail lists for coming-out in general, support from heterosexuals and being out at school.

Others

www.egale.ca – Equality for Lesbians and Gays Everywhere

Canada's GLBT legal organization that fights for the rights of GLBT persons in the courts.

www.ffef.ca – Foundation for Equal Families

Legal organization that fights for the right of GLBT families to be treated with equality and dignity under the law.

www.yahoogroups.com

Check out the gay and lesbian portion of this site for a sea of e-mail lists relating to everything GLBT.

www.pflag.ca – Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (Canada)

Support group for parents and friends of GLBT people. Includes listings of meetings throughout Canada as well as a recommended reading list, online resources, and related links.

www.qrd.org/QRD/ – Queer Resources Directory

The Diva of online resources. This site offers links and articles to a great variety of GLBT issues. Contains extensive listings for GLBT youth alone.

Appendix

For complete listings of the resources available for GLBTQ youth in Ottawa, consult the Rainbow Youth Directory. To obtain a free copy or if you have any questions regarding GSAs in general, contact:

Pink Triangle Youth Outreach Coordinator

c/o Pink Triangle Services
PO Box 3043, Station D
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 6H6

or e-mail: ptyoutreach@hotmail.com

Please be sure to give your return address and specify if you would like us to use discretion when mailing the Directory to you.

School Boards

Since board policies regarding GLBT issues and GLBT-contact persons change frequently, e-mail ptyoutreach@hotmail.com for more details. Below is the contact information (administration) for school boards in the Ottawa area:

Ottawa Carleton District School Board

Tel: 721-1820

Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board

Tel: 224-2222

Conseil des Écoles Catholiques de Langue Française du Centre-Est.

Tel: 744-2555

Tel (toll-free): 1-888-230-5131

Conseil des Ecoles Publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario.

Tel (toll-free): 1-888-332-3736

Major Resource

www.glsen.org – Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Fantastic site with everything GSA, including an on-line forum, how to guide, on-line resources and a link to its print publication, *Respect*.

Books, Movies

Pink Triangle Services – The Kelly McGinnis Library

177 Nepean St. (suite 508)

Tel: 563-4818

* Ring the buzzer, and someone will let you in.

** Call ahead to find out the time the library is open.

After Stonewall

370 Bank Street

Tel: 567-2221

mother tongue books / Femmes de parole

1067 Bank Street

Tel: 730-2346

Ottawa Public Library

Main Branch

120 Metcalfe Street

Tel: 236-0301

Elgin Street Video Station

258-A Elgin Street (at Somerset)

Tel: 236-1877

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INTERNET

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network – www.glsen.org.

