

Sebastian is a talented dancer with a national ballet school that I trained with in Toronto. He is also gay. He can be himself in this community of artists and friends, some of whom are also part of the LGBTQ group.

For him, stepping outside that safe space isn't always easy, fair or comfortable.

Why should life be more challenging for Sebastian than heterosexuals and what can we do to be more inclusive and accepting?

We can start by examining our everyday language and preconceptions, avoid homophobic/biphobic/transphobic jokes or remarks like "that's so gay" and challenge our own and others' thinking.

This verbal bullying is often sexual in nature and often targets individuals' sexual orientations.

Don't stand by silently, laugh uncomfortably or storm off angrily thinking, I should have said something about such remarks.

In addition, if someone in confidence comes out to you, do not share it with others without that person's consent.

Studies have found that as more than 90 percent of teenagers hear derogatory and hurtful words about sexual orientation on occasion, with more than half of teens hearing such words every day at school and in the community. Twelve percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported that someone at school had used hate-related words against them and 36 percent of students saw hate-related graffiti at school during the previous six months. One percent reported that the words reflected their sexual orientation.

Three out of four students who are targets of such comments are not gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Seventy-

eight percent of gay teens are bullied in their schools, a percentage significantly higher than for heterosexual youth.

The most likely group to be bullied are kids who are gay or thought to be gay.

Bullying and harassment can have negative effects on the development and mental health of LGBTQ students, such as extreme anxiety and depression, relationship problems, low self-esteem, substance abuse and thoughts of suicide.

Students who had experienced anti-gay harassment are four times more likely than non-harassed youth to be threatened with or injured by a weapon.

Twenty-two percent of LGBTQ students had skipped school or dropped out of school. LGBTQ students are also at risk for not getting the support they need when they are being bullied due to their perceptions that adults at school may have intolerant attitudes or may not provide confidential help in which to deal with their situation.

Not just youth, but older generations also have a role to play in supporting this community.

In one Saskatoon high school, teachers were given signs to post in their classrooms, stating, "this is a safe space." That represents a place where all are accepted and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Schools can start with supporting training and education for staff about these issues and also creating a zero-tolerance stance on anti-homosexual slurs, stating that that no child or adolescent deserves to be bullied. They can also work with student government and other school clubs to hold programs on respect, school safety, and anti-bullying and be alert to signs of youth who may be in distress.

Youth being bullied should be encouraged to tell a teacher, counsellor or parent.

Confidential help from school counsellors or other mental health professionals should be made available, if a teacher or guardian is unsure about how to support a student.

It was difficult enough for a young dancer like Sebastian to come out to family and friends, fearing how he would be regarded or how the information would be received, so support is needed and classrooms need to feel safe as possible to allow students to focus on their education and training.

It is estimated that as many as nine percent of youth are gay or lesbian, bisexual or uncertain about their sexual orientation. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association say sexual orientation is not a person's individual choice, nor can mental health professionals change the sexual orientation of their clients.

We need to acknowledge this fact and examine our own attitudes to make this world more inclusive, safe and comfortable for citizens like Sebastian.

Many youth may already be struggling with their identities, dealing with puberty and facing discrimination, so it's important to support our friends and ensure there are safe spaces for all.