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New book tackles high school homophobia

Even as Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" project to support queer youth gains traction on the Internet, a new book by Simon Fraser University criminology researchers cautions that efforts to combat homophobic bullying should not be limited to occasional awareness campaigns.

In *Get That Freak: Homophobia and Transphobia in High Schools* (Brunswick Books), Rebecca Haskell and Brian Burtch encouraged 16 queer youth to speak for themselves about the extent of—and solutions to—the problem of homo- and transphobic bullying in high school.

Their verdict? It's everyday verbal abuse—and despite media reports to the contrary, not simply the threat of physical violence—that is the real problem. And that hurtful name-calling extends to students of either sex who stray outside gender norms whether or not they are, in fact, queer.

"Homophobic bullying occurs daily in high schools and can have a



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devastating impact,” says Haskell, pointing to a recent spate of teen suicides across North America. “Our efforts to counter it must likewise occur throughout the year—not just during an annual campaign.”

To that end, the authors recommend that teachers, parents and “anyone else wanting to reach out and support queer youth” strive to:

- Create “safe spaces” (such as Gay-Straight Alliances) for students to gather and share experiences
- Ask youth what they need and lend a listening ear if they want to talk
- Recognize and intervene in the classroom and beyond school boundaries when comments are intentionally hurtful
- Expand the definitions of what constitutes gender-appropriate behaviour

Haskell says the book “gives voice to positive stories as well negative ones. We heard many examples of things going right: a teacher who intervened, a Gay-Straight Alliance that offered support, or an accepting family. We wanted to challenge the familiar idea that these youth are helpless victims.”

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