

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION STUDY GUIDE



SPEAK UP!

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER YOUTH
A DOCUMENTARY BY JOHN KAZLAUSKAS
WRITTEN BY JEREMY EARP

CONTENTS

SPEAK UP!

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER YOUTH

NOTE ON THIS GUIDE	pg. 03
THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT	04
OVERVIEW	05
THE CLIMATE OF HARASSMENT & ABUSE	
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	06
OVERCOMING ABUSE: THE SAFE SCHOOLS MODEL	
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	09
CREATING SAFE ZONES: PRIDE & COURAGE	
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	11
Class Assignments.....	11

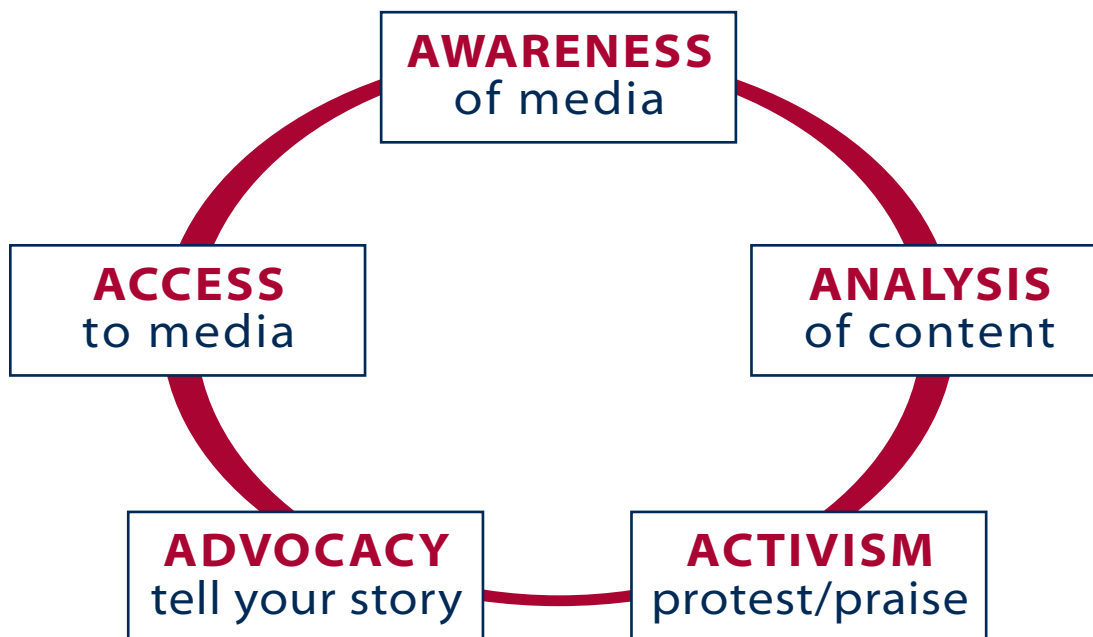
NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

This guide is structured to help you focus on three of the film's primary themes: the nature of the problem of anti-GLBT harassment and violence, the rationale behind the Safe Schools Program for dealing with this problem, and the need for positive and practical change. Each of these three sections presents key points from the film, along with questions and exercises that can be used to inspire and guide class discussion, or as topic questions for more formal writing projects.

USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

- » View the video prior to showing it to your students.
- » Review the study guide and choose which exercises you will use with your students.
- » Use the previewing activities to help your students prepare for the ideas presented by the video.
- » Encourage *active listening*. Because the content of this video is likely to elicit emotional responses from the students, it is important that the students engage with each other in ways that ensure everybody has the opportunity both to speak and to be listened to. It is advised that you set guidelines or norms to ways to “actively listen” in advance of classroom discussions. Check out MEF's handout, *Techniques for Active Listening*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/ActiveListening.pdf>)
- » Have the students keep a journal. It will be an effective place for them to explore their own attitudes and opinions and to record their observations about the media.
- » Review and discuss the handout *How to be a Critical Media Viewer*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/CriticalViewing.pdf>)
- » Incorporate activism and advocacy into your media literacy study. They are an important part of empowering students.

THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT¹



THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT EXPLAINED

AWARENESS

Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.

ANALYSIS

Students discuss the forms and contents of the media's various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

ACTIVISM

Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it – this can be in the form of praise for healthy media, protest of unhealthy media, or development of campaigns to educate others with regard to the media, to change media messages, etc.

ADVOCACY

Students learn how to work with media and use their own media to develop and publicize messages that are healthy, constructive, and all too often ignored by our society.

ACCESS

Students gain access to the media – radio, newspaper, internet, television, etc. – to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and how it works, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

1. Diagram and explanation adopted from E.D.A.P.'s GO GIRLS! Curriculum, (c) 1999 (<http://www.edap.org/gogirls.html>)

OVERVIEW

Speak Up! offers a powerful and empowering glimpse into the lives and experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) students and their allies. The film focuses on the daily violence and harassment faced by these young people, and explores the personal and institutional forces in our schools that have excused and perpetuated a climate of intolerance toward them. While acknowledging this disturbing reality, the film also highlights what some GLBT students and their allies have done to transform their schools into safer and more welcoming environments. The result is a film both informational and inspirational – a potentially powerful teaching tool that provides a unique opportunity for students and teachers to work together to make their classrooms and hallways safer.

The film features interviews with Judy Shepard, Danny and Julie from MTV's *Real World New Orleans*, actor/musician Anthony Rapp, and students and educators who are working to understand and change the mentality and behavior of those who harass GLBT students.

THE CLIMATE OF HARASSMENT & ABUSE

Dr. Carol Goodenow, Research Director of the Massachusetts Department of Education, reports that GLBT youth are significantly more likely to be harassed at school than other kids. Goodenow concludes that this disparity in harassment might help explain higher suicide rates among GLBT students – because, as she explains, there is a “strong association between being victimized in school and being suicidal.” The following chart illustrates the problem:

SCHOOL INCIDENTS	PERCENT (%) GLBT	PERCENT (%) STRAIGHT
Have been threatened or injured with a weapon	29%	7%
Have skipped in the past month because they felt unsafe	22%	5%
Have been in a fight in school	33%	13%

GLBT students are also more likely to get into fights that take place in school.

To lend context to the numbers above, and the questions that follow: You’ll find additional information about the safety of GLBT in schools in the GLSEN 2001 National School Climate Survey, conducted in collaboration with MTV, at www.glsen.org.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Matthew Shepard was killed because he was gay. In the public service advertisement featured in the film, a number of young people are shown shouting out homophobic epithets like “fag” and “queer.” Judy Shepard, Matthew’s mother, says at the end of the ad, “The next time you use words like these, think about what they really mean.”

- What do these words “really mean”? Are they just words? Do words have consequences? If so, when and how? What are some consequences? If not, why not?
- Do you feel that harassment like this has effects beyond the specific individuals involved? If so, how and in what specific ways?
- Why do you feel someone would resort to calling someone else these names?
- Do you feel that such harassment is usually offensive or defensive? In other words, do you think that “straight” students who harass others because of their sexuality do it because they are exerting their power as heterosexuals, or because they feel the need to defend themselves in some way? Explain your response.
- Are our ideas about what it means to be a “real man” in some sense defined in opposition to our ideas about male homosexuality or bisexuality?
- How does our use of language – the actual words we use – construct, reinforce and enforce ideas about gender?

2. The following is the Oakland Men’s Project Box Exercise – a class activity designed to expose how language helps construct gender identity and gender norms, while at the same time policing these norms.

- Draw a box on the board.
- Ask students to name characteristics typically associated with a “real man.” Write them inside the box.
- When the box is full, discuss what’s inside the box, specifically any themes that emerge (*e.g. toughness, strength, traditional masculinity*).

THE CLIMATE OF HARASSMENT & ABUSE

d. Next, ask students to list what boys and men are called when they don't measure up to what's inside the box. Write these outside of the box.

e. When you've gotten a sufficient number of words (e.g. "wimp"; "wuss"; "fag"), discuss the nature of the terms inside and outside the box. Talk about the differences between them with specific attention to any homosexual inflections of any of the terms outside of the box. Talk also about any "unmasculine" or "feminine" associations. Finally, discuss the significance of the connection between gay and "feminine."

f. The overall point here is to develop discussion about how boys and men are boxed in by these external terms, and how homophobia often guides definitions of what it means to be a "real man." With this in mind, you might then ask students to discuss the risks boys and men take when they move outside the box. Key here is to think about how homophobic and sexist language function not only to construct gender identity, and gender norms, but also polices those boys and men who challenge these norms.

3. Judy Shepard talks about being worried about her son's safety – because "he was small and shared his opinion."

a. Is there a relationship between physical size and how mainstream American culture (e.g. *media*) defines a "real man"? If so, how might this conception of what's "masculine" affect the way some men view the gender identity and sexuality of boys and men who don't measure up to this ideal?

b. One of the implications of Judy Shepard's fear is that if Matthew had been more silent, he might have been safer. If being silent increases safety, what does this say about the way power works? How does power relate to our ideas about who gets to speak and who doesn't?

You'll find additional resources on how to address homophobic language in the classroom at glsen.org, especially their Lesson Plan: What Do "Faggot" and "Dyke" Mean? available at: www.glsen.org/templates/resources/record.html?section=16&record=1049

4. Jason talks about being harassed, beaten, and called names in school. He also says that his teachers failed to report these incidents.

a. When a teacher looks the other way in such cases, what message does this send to the victims of harassment and violence?

b. When a teacher looks the other way, what message does this send to the perpetrators of violence and harassment?

c. What kind of climate might these unspoken messages create? Be specific: What values get reinforced? What definitions of courage? What ideas about power?

d. Brainstorm a list of possible reasons why teachers or school officials might not confront abusive students. (*Examples: Might some teachers believe that there are practical barriers to addressing homophobic or harassing behavior, thoughtfully and in-depth, during the course of a busy class period? What kinds of other pressures might undermine a teacher or administrator's willingness to deal with the problem? Could it be that some teachers are not conscious of the problem?*)

e. Brainstorm a list of possible reasons why it might be in the best interest of the teacher, students and the quality of education in the classroom, regardless of the subject matter, to confront homophobia and the harassment of GLBT students as it happens.

f. Come up with a specific and practical plan of action for educating teachers about these issues – based on some of the ideas that emerge in the two brainstorming exercises above.

THE CLIMATE OF HARASSMENT & ABUSE

You'll find additional information, exercises and questions about the connections between body size, masculinity and violence, go to the MEF study guide for *Tough Guise*, available at: www.mediaed.org/studyguides. See especially the section entitled "Upping the Ante".

5. Andrea says that she worries about the safety of her son much more than her daughter, "because our culture is much more afraid of gay men than lesbian women."

- a.** Do you agree with Andrea?
- b.** What do you think Andrea means by "our culture"?
- c.** What are some of the key forces that shape American culture?
- d.** In what specific ways do these cultural forces teach or enforce ideas about being a man, and about sexuality?
- e.** Whether you agree with Andrea or not, why might it be the case that our culture is more afraid of gay men than lesbian women?
- f.** Do you feel that our culture's definition of ideal manhood and masculinity contributes to a particular fear of gay men? Do you feel that sexualities outside the masculine ideal challenge the status quo and create risk in a predominantly male-managed institutional and media culture?
- g.** Andrea uses the word "afraid" to describe our culture's response to gay men. Do you agree with her use of the word? Why or why not?
- h.** Do you feel that gender is involved here? Would you agree with Andrea if her underlying point was that boys and men, specifically, are more likely to be afraid of gay men than they are of lesbians? If so, why?
- i.** Can you think of examples in American culture – television, film, etc. – where you've seen this fear expressed?
- j.** If Andrea is correct that gay men are more feared than lesbian women in our culture, does this mean that lesbian women are safe? Why or why not? What's the relationship between fear of gay men and fear of gay women?

OVERCOMING ABUSE

The Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students grew out of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, formed in 1992 by Massachusetts Governor William Weld to better understand what goes on in our schools, and to come to terms with issues such as youth suicide.

The Commission found that schools were particularly hostile to gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. As a result of these findings, the Board of Education adopted four recommendations for the Safe Schools Program:

- a. Create anti-discrimination policies in schools that include sexual orientation
- b. Conduct faculty training in crisis intervention and violence prevention in relation to GLBT students
- c. Form school-based support groups and student organizations like Gay-Straight alliances
- d. Work with family members of GLBT students

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Al Toney, of Safe Homes of Central Massachusetts, says that "one of the biggest myths I hear in talking to the kids is, 'Well, I don't mind if so-and-so is gay as long as they don't try anything on me.'"

- a. When someone says "as long as they don't try anything on me," what myths get perpetuated? What is implied in this statement?
- b. Do you feel this sentiment displays open-mindedness because it shows that the individual who holds it "doesn't mind" if "so-and-so is gay"?
- c. Have you ever heard someone who's gay or lesbian say that they "don't mind if so-and-so is straight, as long as they don't try anything on me"? If not, why not? If you have, is it as common an expression as the other way around? What do you think accounts for any differences between the two?

2. Toney makes the point that the sexual identity of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people gets mixed up in the minds of a lot of straight people with sex itself. He says, "Let's take the sex part out of that. It's not all about sex; it's about knowing who you are."

- a. What do you think Toney means by this?
- b. Why might it be that people commonly associate homosexual, bisexual or transgender identity with sex? Do people commonly make this kind of immediate association between heterosexual identity and the kind of sex they have? Talk about the potential reasons for any differences you see between these two views.
- c. If sex were to come to mind when we think about heterosexual people, would our images of it seem more "normal"? What does this say about our attitudes toward heterosexual sex? Is all heterosexual sex the same? Is it all "normal"?

3. Danny and Julie, from MTV's *Real World*, talk about how intolerance toward people because of their sexual identity often results from ignorance. Julie calls for talking about sexuality openly so that it's no longer considered "weird".

- a. The concepts of "weirdness," "strangeness," and "difference" all bear similarities. Look up and think about the literal definitions of these words, and compare them to the literal definitions of "queerness." Then compare all of these concepts to our common association of "queerness" with homosexuality. What do all of these words, at the level of the very definitions of the language we use, have in common?
- b. Based on all of these definitions, what do you think is necessary for something to be considered strange, different, weird or queer? Can something be strange or different in its very nature, all by itself, apart from its context?

OVERCOMING ABUSE

- c.** To view something as strange, do we also need to have a sense of what is normal? If so, where do our definitions of normal come from? What value does our culture place on normal? Give examples.
- d.** Can you think of examples where “normal” itself seems strange or queer?
- e.** Charlie McCarthy, the principal of Arlington High School, talks about the effects of language. He says, “racial epithets, homophobic epithets, they’re hurtful. Period. They can’t be accepted as something normal for kids to go through. It’s age typical behavior, and that makes it normal; but it’s not normal to accept it.” Talk about the two different senses of “normal” McCarthy uses here. Do you agree with his different uses of the word?
- f.** Is silence about something, or lack of exposure to it, enough to render something strange or different? Apart from issues of sexuality, can you think of ideas, concepts, events, or things that were once considered strange, queer or different – but are no longer considered that way? What does this say about silence and ignorance? About education and knowledge? And about the way these relate to our view of strangeness and difference?
- g.** Danny suggests that superintendents, administrators and faculty are afraid to talk about things that are taboo, and that this means that kids stay ignorant about these issues. What does “taboo” mean, and how does it relate to the themes and issues raised by the questions above?

For additional exercises and questions that deal with the issue of race, homophobia and masculinity go to the MEF study guide for the video *Tough Guise* – specifically the section entitled “The Tough Guise”. Available at: www.mediaed.org/studyguides

- 4.** Al Toney and Elena bring race into the discussion of sexuality. Toney says that “there are still a lot of communities – the African-American, the Latino, the Asian communities – that are still very closeted communities.” He goes on to say that, as a result, homosexuality in these communities is “still looked at as a white male thing.”
- a.** What do you make of Toney’s comment? What do you think he means?
 - b.** What theories do you have about why homosexuality might be viewed in some racial and ethnic communities as “a white male thing”?
 - c.** Toney mentions the importance of getting out images of gay people of color. How do you explain the fact there are far fewer mainstream representations of gay African Americans, Latinos and Asians than whites who are gay?
 - d.** How might this imbalance in representation contribute to cultural attitudes toward the manhood and masculinity of men of color? What effect might this have on the way white people – boys and men in particular – view manhood and masculinity?
 - e.** How might this imbalance in representation contribute to cultural attitudes toward the supposed “femininity” and ideals of womanhood for girls and women of color? How about for white girls and women?
 - f.** Elena suggests that misconceptions about GLBT people will not change without gay/straight alliances – just as racism cannot be overcome without inter-racial groups coming together to confront race issues. “When you’re talking about one form of oppression,” she says, “you can’t not talk about all of them.” Do you agree with Elena?
 - g.** What connections do you see between racism and homophobia? Consider the perpetrators and victims of both.
 - h.** Why, as many experts such as the sociologist Richard Majors have observed, might it be especially risky for men of color to come out?

CREATING SAFE ZONES

Kim Westheimer states that a safe school environment for GLBT students would include:

- a. Disallowing name-calling based on identity.
- b. Creating a place where students feel acknowledged in their identity – for example, telling the truth about history and literature in a way that shows that there have been prominent gay people before them.
- c. Allowing GLBT students to express who they are without fear of repercussion.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

1. Discuss why it might be that the harassment of GLBT students is most prevalent in middle schools. What is it about this age group that might exacerbate this larger cultural problem? And why are schools, generally, such hotbeds for this kind of thing?
2. What are some of the barriers kids face when they want to speak up against homophobia and the harassment of GLBT students? Do cliques play a role? If so, how?
3. How does bystander behavior contribute to these problems? How might bystander behavior change the climate in which abusive students operate?

THE NATURE OF SAFE SCHOOLS

1. What are some of the ways the Safe Schools approach to education might change the way students get an education? In other words, in what specific ways might it change both the environment and the curriculum? How do you feel it would affect the education of all students?
2. Do you feel that the Safe Schools approach to education might also help reduce bullying in schools more generally – even when the kid being bullied is presumed straight? Explain.

PRIDE & EXPRESSION

1. Reflect on Jason's poetry slam performance. What did you get out of it? What was he trying to say?
2. Pride is mentioned as a key to the self-esteem of GLBT students. Evan's mother expresses pride in her son, and there is a discussion of the importance of Gay Pride marches and parades. What do you think of Gay Pride marches and parades? What's your understanding of the motives behind them? What do you think they can accomplish – on both the personal and cultural level?
3. Have you ever heard of resistance to gay pride marches? If so, what kinds of things were said to justify this resistance? What do you make of these criticisms?
4. If someone were to say to you, "I have nothing against gays, but why do they have to have parades and push their lifestyle in our faces? After all, we don't have heterosexual parades" – would you agree or disagree with this statement? If you agree with it, how would you support your point of view? If you disagree, how would you support your argument?

CLASS PROJECT: TRANSFORMING THE CULTURE

1. Have your students brainstorm a list of specific qualities that would make a school safe for all students. In other words, what would a safe school look like?
2. When the list is complete, break the students into smaller groups.
3. Ask each group to come up with a list of at least 10 specific changes in their school to achieve these qualities – changes they feel are necessary and would be effective in creating a safe environment along the lines of the Massachusetts Safe Schools model.

CREATING SAFE ZONES

4. Reconvene the class and ask each group to present its 10 recommended changes.
5. List all suggestions on the board, and together as a class try to arrive at a final “10-point Proposal for Change”. This will require that students reach consensus about what changes are most important, and that they work together to prioritize, select and possibly merge individual group ideas. The goal of the exercise is for students to reach a deeper understanding and conception of the problem by focusing on practical change.