Cara-Friend

Gay Straight Alliance
A Guide for: Youth Clubs and Secondary Schools

GSA Mission Statement:

All young people attending this group should feel included, valued and visible. This group celebrates diversity, champions inclusivity and promotes equality for all young people.

What is a GSA/GSW?

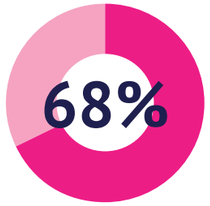
A GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) or a GSW (Gay Straight Whatever) is a youth-led organisation within a school or youth setting. Young people across all age groups come together to promote acceptance of and support for LGBTQ+ young people within these environments.

"GSW is a place in which I feel I can go and show my support to others in the group and to raise awareness for the group overall, it is a safe space for anyone to come along and they will be completely welcomed."

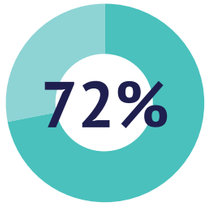
GSW Student - Hazelwood Integrated College Belfast

Why are GSA's important?

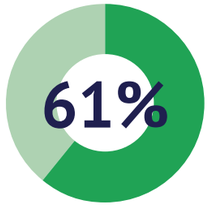
The Still Shouting Report 2017 (commissioned by the Education Authority) shows that:



of LGBTQ+ young people are bullied in Northern Ireland secondary schools because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

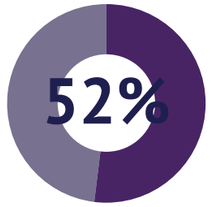


of LGBTQ+ young people experienced negative attitudes in school around their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.



of LGB young people reported contemplating suicide. 25% have reported attempting suicide.

of transgender young people reported contemplating suicide. 49% have reported attempting suicide.



of young people noted self-harming as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Schools and youth groups can be a challenging and even scary place for all young people. However, for those from the LGBTQ+ community find these environments have added complications. Young people can view their school or youth club as being negative and unaccepting.

Who can join a GSA?

All are welcome! This message is paramount and must be emphasised to all!

Gay Straight Alliances are not just for LGBTQ+ young people. They are a great way for straight allies to get involved as well as other minority groups within the school or youth environment.

A GSA should be promoted as a group that supports young people, celebrates diversity and one which champions inclusivity and promotes equality for all young people.

"I think our GSA Kaleidoscope has educated our school by letting us know the full extent of the LGBTQ+ community and how we can support them as an ally."

GSA Student - Brownlow Integrated College Craigavon

"The GSA or as we call it Kaleidoscope has created a very strong LGBTQ+ and Ally community within Brownlow Integrated College. It was quickly identified the school needed a platform for such community to raise awareness and acceptance of people of different gender identities, sexual orientations and sexualities. Pupils' confidence, socialisation and freedom of speech has been affected in an extremely positive way as LGBTQ+ pupils feel accepted for who they are with Ally pupils supporting, eager to learn and understand the complexity and diverse nature of the LGBTQ+ community. As Curricular Leader, teacher and member of the LGBTQ+ community I am very proud of the impact Kaleidoscope has had on Brownlow Integrated College through its inclusive and diverse approach to school life."

Victoria Bowman - GSA/Kaleidoscope Staff Leader - Brownlow Integrated College Craigavon

What happens in a GSA?

As these groups are peer-led, young people who attend the group will decide the agenda. Here are some possible activities for a GSA:

- Discussion and debate on issues that affect LGBTQ+ young people, to build awareness and understanding
- Discussion and debate on issues that affect all young people
- Preparing for assembly presentations or similar
- Design and maintenance for LGBTQ+ notice boards
- Preparing and promotion of upcoming LGBTQ+ events
- Guest LGBTQ+ speakers
- Day trips to LGBTQ+ affirming events
- Fun events
- Fundraising activities

"GSW has had a great impact on Hazelwood and it's noticeable with how much you can see that Hazelwood has improved in the last couple of years. The impact that GSW has had over the years is phenomenal through our Gender-Neutral uniform policy, Gender-Neutral bathrooms and from making Hazelwood an aware College on LGBTQ+ rights and how to stand up to bullying happening in the school. We've been able to bridge together friendships and build relationships between students and teachers."

GSW Student - Hazelwood Integrated College Belfast

How to set up a GSA?

A GSA can be set up in two ways: by a young person or by a teacher/youth worker.

These groups are ultimately peer-led, therefore teachers/youth workers can step back once the group is established. The teacher/youth worker should have a genuine interest in the GSA and a desire to develop this inclusive group. The teacher/youth worker will act as a liaison between the GSA and staff in either the school or youth club.

Young people can hold elections to appoint a group chair and deputy chair. There are also other support roles that young people can be appointed to, such as Administration Officer, Social Media Officer and Year Representatives.

CHAIR: This is the GSA leader and coordinates the efficient running of the group.

DEPUTY CHAIR: Assists the Chair in GSA coordination, runs GSA in the Chair's absence.

ADMINISTRATION REP: This is the liaison between the group and the lead teacher so that lines of communication are maintained.

SOCIAL MEDIA REP: Is responsible for maintaining the groups social media posts and informing the group if there are changes in meeting times and dates.

YEAR REP: There should be a Rep for each year group, the Year Rep is a link to the group for everyone in that year.

AWARENESS REP: Will update notice boards and make sure posters are placed around the school so that information is available to all students.

Running the GSA

- All a GSA really needs is a day, time, location to meet, agenda, young people and a teacher/youth worker who are ready and willing to create a safe space for all.
- If required, the lead teacher/youth worker or young person my wish to seek authorisation and support from the Principal and/or Board of Governors of their individual school or management of the youth centre.
- It is important that the group is run fairly, openly and democratically. Every member should have a voice.
- Groups should be formally informal in that members should come prepared for the group and participate, but it should also be a fun and relaxed atmosphere where all are welcome, valued and able to take part.
- A schedule of events is useful to set up and maintain throughout the school year so all members are aware of the topic per meeting, guest speakers, workshops or events members would like to participate in.

Age Appropriate

It may be appropriate to split the young people who attend the GSA into two groups, thereby discussions held are more age appropriate. In Cara-Friend we split our Belfast group into over and under 16 years of age.

Within a school or youth setting a name for each group could be established, for example (year 8-10 or 16 and under is the Kaleidoscope group) and (year 11 to 14 or 16 and over is the Spectrum group). Both are GSA groups and young people move from one to the other as they mature.

"GSW has aided Hazelwood in becoming a homophobic and transphobic free zone from creating a gender neutral uniform and bathroom to raising awareness of GSW and our principles through assemblies from year 8 to post 14. In my own opinion I believe GSW has helped mould Hazelwood into the diverse school it is today."

GSW Student - Hazelwood Integrated College Belfast

What does it offer Students?

A GSA is above all a safe space for all young people who attend. But it is also a place of learning, self expression and acceptance and a space to develop new and existing skills.

It is all about personal development:

- **Leadership**
- **Communication**
- **Public Speaking**
- **Teambuilding**
- **Self esteem**
- **Confidence**
- **Empathy**
- **Positive Mental Health**

"It doesn't have to be something entertaining or over the top, as long as every week there is a safe space to talk and where a conversation can happen."

GSA student - Shimna Integrated College Newcastle

Kaleidoscope has been improving my confidence especially with coming out as Asexual. It is very nice to see I am not alone in my struggles, not only just through the internet but by talking to people at the club whom have been through similar things.

GSA student - Brownlow Integrated College Craigavon

Topics for discussion and debate

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

- People cannot choose their sexual orientation. What do you think?
- Sexual orientation Vs sexuality - is there a difference?
- Sexual orientation is about attraction - discuss.
- What is pansexuality?
- What is asexuality?

GENDER IDENTITY

- What is gender identity?
- People cannot choose their gender identity. What do you think?
- How does gender identity differ from gender presentation or expression?
- Gender identity is more than just male and female - discuss.
- Discuss 'non-binary' as a gender identity.
- What other gender identities are there? How many are there?
- How are transgender students treated in this school?
- What are the challenges that transgender young people might face?

BULLYING

- What is homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying?
- How can HBT bullying be challenged?
- How can schools/youth centres promote a more inclusive and safe environment for all?

MENTAL HEALTH

- What is mental health?
- How can you look after your mental health?
- What is anxiety?
- How does anxiety make you feel? What are the physical symptoms?
- What are your coping strategies?

HOMOPHOBIA

- What is homophobia and how can it be recognised in society?
- How can you challenge homophobia?

TRANSPHOBIA

- What is transphobia and how can it be recognised in society?
- How can you challenge transphobia?
- Is there transphobia within the LGBTQ+ community?

BIPHOBIA

- What is biphobia and how can it be recognised in society?
- How can you challenge biphobia?
- Is there biphobia within the LGBTQ+ community?

TOILET AND CHANGING FACILITIES

- Is this an issue? Why do you think some may see this as an issue?
- Are they adequate within the school or youth environment?
- How can we make young people more comfortable in these spaces?

UNIFORM POLICY

- What is our schools policy?
- Should it be changed to make all young people more comfortable?

LGBTQ+ ALLIES

- What is the role of an LGBTQ+ ally?
- Discuss ways young people can be an ally in a school or youth environment.
- How can allies support LGBTQ+ young people?

HATE CRIMES

- Discuss HBT hate crimes.
- Who can be targeted?
- What are the repercussions of an attack?

DATING

- Is dating more difficult for LGBTQ+ young people?
- What are the challenges of LGBTQ+ dating?
- Are there any dangers in dating?
- How do you think your parents feel about you dating?

HOLIDAYS

- Are holidays difficult times for young people? For example Christmas or Summer?
- How can young people support each other out of school or youth setting?
- What ways do you cope being away from friends?

MARRIAGE EQUALITY

- What are your views on marriage equality?
- Why do you think people want to get married?
- Marriage Vs civil partnership - discuss.

PARENTS

- What do you do if parents are not supportive?
- How do you come out to parents?
- Are parents also on a journey?
- Supportive Vs unsupportive parent - How will this impact on a young person?
- Discuss why communication is important when dealing with parents?
- Do schools and youth setting listen to parents more than the young people?

PRIDE PREPARATIONS

- Is your school or youth group marching in Pride?
- Would you like to march with Cara-Friend?

Events to get involved in:

Transgender Day of Remembrance (January)
LGBTQ History Month (March)
International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (May)
LGBT Awareness Week (May)
Pride (Belfast, Newry & Foyle) (August - September)
National Coming Out Day (October)
Mental Health Awareness Day (October)
Anti-Bullying Week (November)

Considerations:

- Each GSA needs a supporting teacher/ youth worker to link in and report back the great work that the group is doing to the rest of the school or centre staff.
- Parents must be made aware of the existence of the group and that it fits with the schools/youth centres ethos of inclusivity while providing a safe space based on respect for all students.
- The Board Of Governors or management may want to understand the expected costs and preparations needed for this group.

"It is a personal rule of mine that I will let students know that I won't be asking them what their sexual orientation or gender identity is when they come to GSA. I might ask the whole group if anyone wants to talk about themselves, but I'll never ask individuals directly in front of the group. They are free to share it and I hope they will feel comfortable to talk about themselves as they experience the acceptance of the group. This means that anyone can come along to the group to see what it's all about and they will know that they'll never be put in an awkward position."

Shirley McMillan - GSA Co-Ordinator - Shimna Integrated College Newcastle

GSA Top Tips:

- Meetings should take place at least once a week, during lunch time or after school.
- The meeting space should be comfortable as well as functional – common rooms, not classrooms, if possible.
- Young people do not have to refer to their sexual orientation or gender identity. No young person should feel like they have to "out" themselves to be involved. A desire to join the group should always be enough.
- Pronouns may be very important to certain members of the group. This should be taken into consideration especially when new members join the GSA. Others will not be ready to share their pronouns. For example saying "Hi I'm Jack and my pronouns are he/him".
- Young people should never be forced to join a GSA.
- A GSA should be fun!

Argument Against Opposition to GSA:

Opposition to this group may come from Parents, Teachers, Students, Church representatives, Board of Governors, Youth Workers or other groups.

It is important to emphasise that a GSA is there to support young people, their mental health, well-being and personal development. It challenges bullying in general not just homophobic, transphobic and biphobic bullying. It is a safe space for all.

LGBTQ+ students attending Secondary Schools with Gay Straight Alliances report significantly fewer incidences of bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity expression and have a greater sense of personal safety compared to schools without GSA's.

"I think GSW has had a massive impact on hazelwood itself, from adding gender neutral toilets to further developing our school uniform guidelines. Most importantly, I think the biggest impact is on the students, as we're able to discuss these issues with younger year groups through GSW assemblies. Which allows us to ensure that students are aware of what is not acceptable in terms of transphobic or homophobic language and how we can keep our hazelwood community supportive and accepting."

GSW Student - Hazelwood Integrated College Belfast

A GSA is also an inclusive space for all minority groups and can help schools and youth centres deal with issues around sectarianism, racism, xenophobia, and sexism.

GSA and Pride

Depending on your location in Northern Ireland your school may be close to a Pride event location. Pride currently takes place in three locations Belfast, Foyle and Newry.

- Taking part in Pride will allow the group to experience the wider LGBTQ+ community.
- Inclusion in a Pride march would take place under a school banner.
- Participants may be young people, teachers, youth workers and parents.
- Pride is a positive and affirming atmosphere. It emboldens the sense of inclusivity, acceptance and community.

Additional Information:

Inclusive Schools Programme:

- In September 2016, Cara -Friend launched the LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools Programme across Northern Ireland. The programme covers all aspects of school which are important to improve the experience of LGBTQ+ students in Northern Irish schools.
- The Inclusive Schools Programme involves awareness training for teachers and school staff to help improve their professional practice, and to ensure they have the capacity to provide inclusive and responsive care to LGBTQ+ young people.
- It also provides an anti bullying workshop called ShoutOut, a fun and interactive workshop which aims to combat homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in a school environment.

Essentials

GSA's should be active both in and out of the school:

The GSA has a life both inside and outside of the school gates or youth centre. Young people should be supported in their attendance of events that promote inclusivity, equality and diversity within the wider community.

Assembly Presentations:

The GSA should have regular opportunities to speak to different year groups on a variety of subjects. This will encourage the normalisation of the group in school leading to greater acceptance in general.

Days Out:

The GSA group should be able to attend events being held throughout Northern Ireland that are LGBTQ+ related. This should be viewed as a positive and essential educational experience.

Social Media:

It would be beneficial for the GSA to have a social media outlet. The account may be overseen by a teacher/youth worker but the content would be for the group to decide upon. The passage of information on social media will be able to target more young people and enable the group to get its message of inclusivity to a wider audience.

Increase Visibility:

The GSA should be given space for a notice board within the school or youth centre to promote the group and events that are coming up. By doing so a school or youth centre is actively showing their support for the group.

Register your GSA with Cara-Friend

In order to keep track on the number of schools and youth centres across Northern Ireland that are operating a GSA we would ask that you register your GSA with us.

Registration is simple:

- Name of School or Youth Centre.
- Town or City
- Time and day of group meeting.
- Contact email of adult group admin.
- Would you like Cara-Friend to visit the group?

Send information to:

- **Tel: 028 9089 0202**
- **Email: admin@cara-friend.org.uk**
- **Reference: GSA Registration**

Cara-Friend would like to extend our services to you and assist you with any challenges you have establishing a functioning GSA. We would be happy to provide training to young people and staff. We also offer one-to-one support for any young person, teacher or youth worker who would like more information or support.

External Support From LGBTQ+ Organisations:

Cara-Friend

Cara-Friend is the LGBTQ+ youth service for Northern Ireland. They work with LGBTQ+ young people aged 12-25 and offer a variety of supports, including LGBTQ+ youth groups and one-to-one support. They also deliver the LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools Programme (see brochure on website) which offers organisational support and guidance for schools; one-to-one support for LGBTQ+ students; Gay-Straight Alliance support; and ShoutOut anti-bullying workshops, which tackle negative attitudes among young people towards LGBTQ+ identities. Cara-Friend is any school's one-stop shop for support, guidance and signposting when wishing to better support LGBTQ+ young people.

www.cara-friend.org.uk
Belfast LGBT Centre Office: (028) 9089 0202
Foyle LGBT Centre Office: (028) 7128 3030

The Rainbow Project:

The Rainbow Project: is an LGBTQ+ health organisation that works to improve the physical, sexual, mental & emotional health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people in Northern Ireland. One of the their core services is free counselling for LGBTQ+ people.

www.rainbow-project.org
Belfast LGBT Centre Office: (028) 9031 9030
Foyle LGBT Centre Office: (028) 7128 3030

SAIL NI:

SAIL NI is a support organisation for the families of transgender and gender variant people in Northern Ireland. They directly support families across the region, as well as advocating for trans people and their families at a regional, national and European level.

www.sailni.com
Belfast Trans Resource Centre: (028) 9532 0023

GenderJam:

GenderJam support and advocate for the young trans community in Northern Ireland. They are working to make the region better for trans, non-binary, questioning and intersex people. They also run trans-specific social drop-in groups for those aged under 25 in Belfast and Newry.

www.genderjam.org.uk
Belfast Trans Resource Centre: (028) 9099 6819

MORE INFORMATION

Cara-Friend's website is a wealth of information with numerous resources available for free download:

- A Young Person's Guide to Coming Out
- A Parent & Carer's Resource: Supporting Your LGBTQ+ Child
- A Teacher's Resource: Encouraging LGBTQ+ Inclusive Practice
- A Youth Worker's Resource: Encouraging LGBTQ+ Inclusive Practice
- Guide to Tackling LGBT-Phobic Bullying
- Guide to Transitioning in Education and Youth Services
- LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools Programme
- Mental health guide for young people.

Glossary of Terms

Androgynous	A term used to describe an individual whose gender expression and/or identity may be neither distinctly 'female' nor 'male', usually based on appearance.
Asexual	A sexuality characterised by lack of sexual attraction or lack of a desire for partnered sexuality.
Biphobia	The fear, hatred or intolerance of people who are bisexual.
Bisexual:	A person who is physically, romantically and emotionally attracted to their own and other genders.
Cisgender	A term used to describe people who, for the most part, identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.
Closeted	Describes a person who has yet to 'come out of the closet', i.e. they are not open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
Coming Out	The process of telling someone about your sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It is not a one-time event as an individual must come out countless times over the course of their lifetime.
Gay	A word used to describe someone of either gender who is physically, romantically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same gender. More often used for males attracted to males.
Gender Expression	Refers to how someone expresses their gender. This may refer to how an individual dresses, their general appearance, the way they speak, and/or the way they carry themselves.

Gender Fluid	When someone is gender fluid it means that they do not have a fixed gender identity. They have a gender identity which can change daily, weekly, monthly - or less regularly.
Gender Identity	An individual may have a gender identity which is different to or the same as their biological sex. Gender identity is a personal, deeply felt sense of one's own gender. It is important to note that an individual's gender identity is completely separate from their sexual orientation. Everyone has a gender identity, regardless of whether someone is transgender or otherwise.
Gender Neutral	A term used to describe facilities that any individual can use regardless of their gender (e.g. gender neutral bathrooms). This term can also be used to describe an individual who does not subscribe to any gender (sometimes referred to as 'Gender Queer').
Gender Non Conforming	A person who is, or is perceived to have gender characteristics that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations.
Gender Role	A societal expectation of how an individual should act, think and/or feel based upon their biological sex.
Heteronormative	A viewpoint or approach which assumes heterosexuality as the default, 'normal' or preferred sexual orientation, as opposed to one of many possibilities.
Heterosexual	People whose physical, romantic and emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex (also known as 'straight').
Homosexual	People whose physical, romantic and emotional attraction is to people of the same sex (see also 'gay' and 'lesbian').
Homophobia	The fear, hatred or intolerance of people who are gay or lesbian.

Intersex	People who naturally (without medical intervention) develop primary and/or secondary sex characteristics that do not fit neatly into society's definitions of male or female.
Lesbian	A woman or girl whose physical, romantic and emotional attraction is to other women or girls. Some lesbians identify as gay women.
LGBT-phobia	The fear, hatred or intolerance of people who are LGBTQ+.
LGBTQ+	An acronym which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning. This term acts as an umbrella term for the entirety of the community or subsection of the population whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender does not align with their sex assigned at birth.
Non-binary	A gender identity which does not fall into the traditional gender binary of 'male' and 'female'. Non-binary is an umbrella term and can describe a wide range of identities and experiences.

Outing	The act of publicly declaring (sometimes based on rumour and/or speculation, but often based on disclosures made) or revealing another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent. This is considered inappropriate.
Out	When someone is 'out' their sexual orientation and/or gender identity is not secret, and is disclosed comfortably by an individual.
Pansexual	Not limited in sexual orientation with regard to biological sex, gender or gender identity.
Pronouns	Pronouns are how we refer to someone in the third person, e.g. 'he', 'she' or 'they'. If someone is transgender then their gender identity is different to the sex assigned at birth, so an individual may choose to be referred to using different pronouns to that of their legal biological sex.

Queer	Traditionally a pejorative term, queer has been appropriated by some LGBT people to describe themselves. It is not universally accepted within the LGBT community and should be avoided unless someone self-identifies that way.
Questioning	The process of considering or exploring one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
Sex Assigned at Birth	When a baby is born the sex of male or female is assigned to it based primarily on the appearance of their genitalia. A child can also be intersex.
Sexual Orientation	The term used to describe an individual's physical, romantic, sexual and emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual ('straight') orientations.

Trans or Transgender	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Someone who was assigned male at birth may identify as female and therefore would be considered transgender. Note it does not have anything to do with alterations made to bodies, it relates to gender identity.
Transition	Transitioning is a process of changing one's birth sex to more accurately align with one's gender identity. It is a complex process which occurs over a long period of time. Transition can include some or all of the following personal, legal and medical changes: telling one's family; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; changing pronouns, hormone treatment, surgery, etc.
Transphobia	The fear, hatred or intolerance of people who are transgender.

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