



Game Plan for Coaches:
**Creating Safe and
Inclusive Teams for
LGBTQ+ Athletes**

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Introduction

All students have a right to a sense of inclusion and safety at school. Whether it's in class or in competitive sports, all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, have a right to play and to feel like they belong.

Being a part of a team builds important social and emotional skills. LGBTQ+ youth who participate in school sports report improved well-being and greater connection to their school than their LGBTQ+ peers who don't play sports. LGBTQ+ students who play on their schools' athletic teams also have an overall higher GPA.¹

And yet, too many LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their schools and avoid the activities or areas where they feel most unwelcome. Coaches and their staff play a critical role in student athletes' lives by cultivating determination, team work, commitment, health and wellness, communication skills, and positive self esteem. Research also shows that participation in sports positively impacts students' well-being and academic success.²

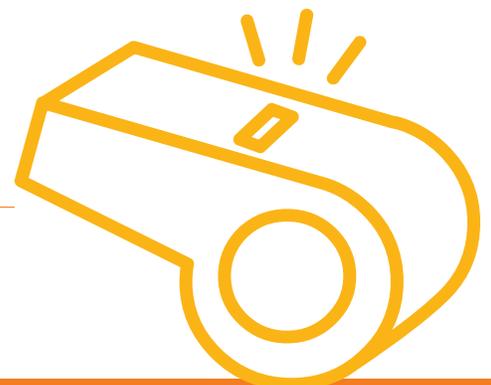
As a coach, you set the tone for your team's culture. You are responsible for finding ways to bring out the best in each of your players. This resource will help you, your assistant coaches, and volunteers intentionally create a competitive environment that is safe and inclusive for all players, including LGBTQ+ athletes.

The majority of LGBTQ athletes who compete in high school sports report feeling a positive sense of belonging at school.³

¹GLSEN (2013). *The Experiences of LGBT Students in School Athletics* (Research Brief). New York: GLSEN

²GLSEN (2013). *The Experiences of LGBT Students in School Athletics* (Research Brief). New York: GLSEN

³GLSEN (2013). *The Experiences of LGBT Students in School Athletics* (Research Brief). New York: GLSEN



Best Practices

The following are some best practices you can follow to become a better advocate and support LGBTQ+ athletes on your team.

Don't Assume

LGBTQ+ players exist in sports. Don't assume that you don't have LGBTQ+ players on your team. Research shows that four out five LGBTQ+ players aren't out to their coaches. That number is even higher for trans athletes. By incorporating inclusive practices and policies, you can make your team a safe and welcoming space for all your players by showing your support for LGBTQ+ issues.

Get Educated

Commit to learning about the experiences and challenges that LGBTQ+ athletes experience. If you and your coaching staff haven't already participated in LGBTQ+ inclusion training, this is a great place to start. This type of training puts you and your staff in a better position to support your LGBTQ+ athletes on and off the field.

LGBTQ+ Inclusion Training:

- Equip yourself, your staff, volunteers and athletes with resources and tools to better understand LGBTQ+ identities. Training can also help in diminishing and eliminating anti-LGBTQ+ bias. Ask your school administrators or your local GLSEN chapter for training. Visit GLSEN's website or contact GLSEN at sportsproject@glsen.org to learn more.

Use Inclusive Language

When you use inclusive language, it sets the tone for your team. Sometimes we don't realize that some of the common sayings and phrases in sports are derived from sexist, homophobic, transphobic, racist, or ableist ideas. The more we learn about them, the more equipped we are to consciously and intentionally remove them from our day-to-day communication.

- Respect everyone when addressing the entire group. Use phrases such as "Welcome, everyone" as an alternative to "Welcome, boys and girls" or "ladies and gentlemen," which excludes nonbinary or gender-diverse athletes.
- Always empower athletes with language like "let's go, you've got this!" instead of "suck it up" or "man up."



Create an Inclusive Team Code of Conduct

Create a team culture that recognizes that each player is a valuable member of your team. A code of conduct sets out the team's values, guidelines, and provides an opportunity to reflect on the specific concerns, experiences, and needs of all athletes on the team. Make this a collaborative exercise with your coaching staff and players. All coaching staff, volunteers and athletes should be accountable for creating and upholding the code of conduct.

Consider including the following in your team's code of conduct:

- Statement on anti-bullying and anti-harassment which includes the following:
 - Anti-LGBTQ+ slurs, taunts, calling people by the wrong name and pronouns
- Statement on support for the inclusion of transgender and nonbinary athletes

Support Transgender and Nonbinary Athletes

As a coach, there are a number of ways you, your staff, and volunteers can support transgender and nonbinary athletes on your team.

Respect Your Athletes' Privacy

Maintaining an athlete's privacy is critical. An athlete's gender identity should not be disclosed to team members, staff, parents, or opponents without their permission. Disclosing a student's gender identity could put them at risk and is a potential violation of **FERPA**.

Respect Your Athletes' Names

Respect your athletes by using the name they choose to go by. As much as possible, allow the athletes on your team to fill out any paperwork with the name they go by instead of, or in addition to, their legal name. You can accommodate this by making a space available on forms for ALL athletes to write in their chosen name for you to use for them. If an athlete has not shared that they are transgender or nonbinary, you could potentially be "outing them" and violating their privacy and safety around their gender identity if you use the incorrect name in front of others.

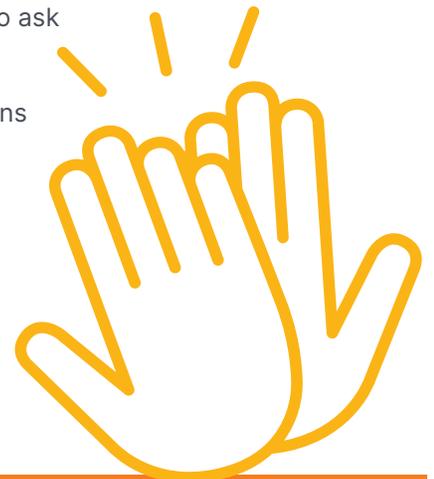
For more information on gender identity and terminology see GLSEN's **Gender Triangle Education Guide**.

Use Correct Pronouns

Respect your athletes by asking their pronouns, rather than guessing. Ask ALL athletes which pronouns they use, not just those who you suspect might be trans or nonbinary. If you single out a particular athlete in front of the rest of the team, you could potentially be putting them at risk for harassment from other team members. When collecting necessary information, make sure to leave a space on paperwork to ask ALL athletes what pronouns they use.

NOTE: Pronouns are not a "preference." When someone shares with you the pronouns they want you to use for them, you must respect this.

For more information and support around how to use correct pronouns, see **GLSEN's Pronoun Guide**.



Ensure Inclusive Facility Access

25.1% of LGBTQ students avoid school athletic fields or facilities and 43.7% avoid locker rooms at school because they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.⁴

Creating an inclusive team culture means ensuring that all the athletes on your team have access to the locker rooms and bathrooms they feel safest using. If you have transgender or nonbinary athletes on your team, ask them what they need to feel safe and comfortable. If an athlete requests privacy when changing, spaces should be made available to them.

If your team is traveling, connect with the opposing team or tournament conveners to ensure that transgender and nonbinary athletes on your team will have access to the appropriate facilities.

For more information about how you can make your facilities more inclusive for transgender and nonbinary students, see [Game Plan for Administrators and Athletic Directors](#).

Provide Inclusive Uniform Options

Your team's uniforms should be made to accommodate the safety and comfort of all athletes. For example, in some sports, all team members are expected to wear skirts. If one of your athletes is uncomfortable, allow them to swap out the skirt for shorts. For other sports like swimming, diving, or water polo, all athletes on the team should have a uniform option that allows them to cover their chest⁵.

Prepare for Travel and Overnights

Have a plan in place to ensure the safety of transgender and nonbinary athletes when competing in away games, tournaments, and competitions. Prepare ahead by making sure you know the rules and policies around transgender and nonbinary participation for the away competition. Understanding your district and state-level policies regarding transgender and nonbinary athletes and participation is crucial for preparing yourself, the team, and the athletes for any adversity you may face. Not knowing the rulebook or policies for the site of an event can result in falsely disqualifying or forcing the athlete to miss their chance to compete because of a dispute. Have the inclusive policies printed and on your clipboard should there be a challenge.

Check [here](#) for additional guidance on best practices and safety plans for overnight trips.

⁴ Kosciw, J.G., Clark, C.M., Truong, N.L., & Zongrone, A.D. (2020). *The 2019 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.

⁵ SHAPE America: Society of Health and Physical Educators. https://www.shapeamerica.org/standards/guidelines/Transgender/best_practice.aspx



Take Action Against Anti-LGBTQ+ Behaviors

“On the wrestling team I would hear transphobic, homophobic, and racist comments within 10 feet of my coaches, who would never say anything.”

— Aryn (he, him, his), 11th Grade, New York

As a coach, your job is to create a safe space for all athletes on your team, whether it's at practice, during a match, in the locker rooms, or in the stands. One of the most effective ways you can show solidarity is to respond to anti-LGBTQ+ behavior. By taking action and intervening when you hear anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment, you set the example for your team that this behavior will not be tolerated.

- **Address name-calling, bullying, or harassment immediately.** Too often, name-calling, bullying, or verbal harassment is excused as “locker room talk” but such words and actions create an unsafe and unwelcoming environment for all students.
- **Concentrate on Stopping the Behavior in That Moment**
 - Sometimes all it takes is a simple response like, “That language is unacceptable on this team” when you hear a derogatory term.
 - Make sure everyone in the immediate area can hear you.
 - Even if it feels uncomfortable, it is important to interrupt the behavior.
 - If you choose to overlook an incident, it implies that you are willing to accept hateful and harmful behavior on your team.
- **Name the Behavior**
 - Describe what you heard, saw, or what was reported to you. Let the person who said the slur or anti-LGBTQ+ phrase know that it is unacceptable and that it breaks the team's code of conduct.
- **Get to the Root of the Intention**
 - Meet with the person who caused the harm privately and ask them what their intentions were when they chose to cause harm. This conversation can help you determine whether there is a larger team issue you need to address.
- **Support the Targeted Athlete**
 - Meet with the athlete who has been the target of anti-LGBTQ+ bullying, name-calling, or harassment.
 - Don't make assumptions about what the student is experiencing.
 - Ask them what they need or want.
- **Accountability**
 - In addition to your team's code of conduct, check with your administration about the school's anti-LGBTQ+ policy and impose the appropriate consequences.
 - Make sure disciplinary actions are evenly applied across all types of name calling, bullying, and harassment.

Check out GLSEN's [Replacing Punitive Discipline with Restorative Policies and Practices](#) for further guidance.

Be a Game Changer

Join the team and become a Changing the Game ambassador!

We are all at different stages of our inclusion journey. No matter where you are or have been on this journey to greater LGBTQ+ inclusion, the important thing is that you are starting. Ambassadors are committed to speaking out about anti-LGBTQ+ behavior and celebrating LGBTQ+ student athletes, and supporting inclusive LGBTQ+ policies. That's not all! Receive the Changing the Game quarterly newsletter, training and webinars, swag giveaways, and more!

As a coach you can take the lead on creating a more inclusive team, but you don't need to do this alone. Your assistant coaches, volunteers, supportive parents, caregivers and guardians, and players can help as you make these changes. If your school doesn't already provide training or resources, you can enlist a community-based organization such as a GLSEN chapter to do training for your coaching staff, volunteers, and athletes. If you're looking for support, try reaching out to coaches at other schools to set up a meeting to discuss these issues and ways to support LGBTQ+ athletes. Bringing in supportive parents, caregivers, and families of LGBTQ+ students can also be a major asset to your team as they can be some of the fiercest advocates and supporters.

Your advocacy is powerful and necessary to ensure inclusive sports for LGBTQ+ students.

Bring GLSEN's Changing the Game program and resources to your school and support students, physical education teachers, administrators, coaches, and families.

Key Terminology

Transgender and nonbinary students may use different terms to describe their lives and experiences of gender. Terminology and language differ and evolve based on region, language, race or ethnicity, age, culture, and many other factors. Some examples of terms used by some youth include: trans, trans girl, trans boy, nonbinary, genderqueer, gender fluid, demi girl, demi boy, Two Spirit (amongst Native American, American Indian/Alaska Native, First Nation, or Indigenous communities), and many more. Some trans youth prefer simply to be referred to as boys or girls except when their trans status is specifically relevant. These terms often mean different things or refer to different experiences of gender. Staff and educators should reflect and use the terms that students use to describe themselves, and avoid terms that make these students uncomfortable.

These definitions are provided not for the purpose of imposing labels, but rather to assist in understanding this guide and LGBTQ+ identities. Students may or may not use these terms to describe themselves or their experiences.

GENDER IDENTITY: A person's deeply held knowledge of their own gender, which can include being a man, woman, another gender, or no gender. Gender identity is an innate part of a person's identity. One's gender identity may or may not align with society's expectations with the sex they were assigned at birth (male, female, or intersex).

GENDER EXPRESSION: Expression of gender, whether through hair styles, makeup, or personal fashion, changes over the course of a person's lifetime.

TRANSGENDER/TRANS: An adjective describing a person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. A trans woman is a woman whose sex was assigned male when she was born. A trans man is a man whose sex was assigned female when he was born. Some transgender people are not male or female, and may use terms like nonbinary to describe their gender (see below).

GENDER NONCONFORMING: A term sometimes used to describe people whose gender expression differs from social expectations, such as “feminine boys,” “masculine girls,” and people who are perceived as androgynous in some way. Being gender nonconforming is distinct from being transgender, though some trans people may consider themselves to be gender nonconforming. For example, a cisgender woman who has short hair and likes sports might consider herself gender nonconforming, but may not identify as transgender.

NONBINARY: A term used to refer to people whose gender identity is not exclusively male or female, including those who identify with a different gender, a combination of genders, or no gender. Nonbinary may be considered a subset of transgender or a distinct identity. Other similar or more specific terms may include genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, or Two-Spirit (for Native American students).

CISGENDER: An adjective describing a person whose gender identity corresponds with the gender society typically associates with the sex they were assigned at birth. The majority of people are cisgender, while a minority are transgender. For example, a cisgender woman was assigned female at birth and identifies as female her gender as a woman.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: A person’s romantic and/or sexual attraction to other people. This includes being straight, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, or many other terms used to describe sexual orientation. This is different and distinct from gender identity. Transgender and nonbinary people may be straight, gay, lesbian, asexual, or any other sexual orientation.

TRANSITION: The process in which a person begins to live according to their gender identity. Transition is a process that is different for everyone, and it may or may not involve specific medical treatments or changes to official documents. There is no one step or set of steps that an individual must undergo in order to have their gender identity affirmed and respected.

QTBIPOC: This is an acronym for Queer/Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

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