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Hey, Lady Gaga: Make It Better, Not Criminal

Earlier this week, 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer died by suicide [1]. He was gay, he had been bullied and harassed because of his sexual orientation, and he had even created an It Gets Better video.

In response, Lady Gaga Tweeted [2]: "Bullying must become illegal."

Jamey's death is a tragic reminder, on the anniversary of last fall's series of suicides, that we still have far to go to make it better [3]. But it is also a reminder that, as we grieve, we must stay focused on the proven, positive ways to protect young people.

Too often, our desire to never see such a tragedy again -- understandable in the wake of this type of heartbreaking news -- leads to reactionary measures that only cause more harm. Already, Lady Gaga's message is catching on, with the University of Buffalo's Center for the Prevention of Bullying cautiously lauding [4] her activism. I support Lady Gaga's intentions and I'm devastated by Jamey's death, but criminalizing bullying is not the answer.

Bullies are children, too -- and they're acting out messages they learn from everyone around them. All students face immense challenges and barriers to graduating and getting a quality education. While bullying shouldn't be one of those barriers, neither should an overly punitive response to bullying.

If we value the right of ALL youth to an education, that of LGBTQ students as well as the bullies harassing them, we must ask ourselves: should that right come at the expense of their peers' education?

Moreover, when we criminalize and punish behavior, rather than intervene and correct it, we hurt all students. "Zero tolerance" and similar policies tend to harm most those we seek to protect, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. If a student suffering abuse fights back, how will the authorities judge who deserves jail or expulsion? Such policies assume that principals and administrators don't harbor the same human biases that their students exhibit, making it too easy for a bullied student to face double the punishment. We need to end society's prejudice, not the futures of the young people influenced by it.

We can Make It Better. It's great that Lady Gaga is bringing national attention to this problem, but now we must focus on real solutions. By writing letters [5], starting and supporting Gay-Straight Alliances, talking to teachers and administrators and mobilizing our communities, we can push schools to enforce existing non-discrimination policies in a way that doesn't contribute to an environment of fear and punishment, but rather fosters a culture of safety, inclusion, and respect for all students.
Sep. 23, 2011
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-valdez/hey-lady-gaga-mak... [6]
News Article
GSA Network responds to Lady Gaga on bullying
The Huffington Post
Laura Valdez

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Links:
[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/20/jamey-rodemeyer-suicide-gay-bullying_n_972023.html
[2] http://news.yahoo.com/lady-gaga-bullying-must-become-illegal-193211111.html
[3] http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/
[4] http://www.buffalo.edu/news/12902
[5] http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/write-letter-make-it-better
[6] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-valdez/hey-lady-gaga-make-it-better_b_978369.html