

## **Who are Sikhs?**

Sikhs are members of an independent religion, stemming from Punjab, a region in South Asia. There are over 23 million Sikhs in the world, making it the fifth largest world religion. Sikhs have been in the United States for over 100 years, and there are half a million Sikhs that call America home.



Sikhs have a distinct, external appearance to show their commitment to their faith. Sikhs maintain unshorn hair, which Sikh men are required to keep covered with a turban. Some Sikh women also wear turbans, and younger Sikh boys wear a smaller turban, called a patka. Sikhs maintain these articles of faith because they signify commitment to Sikh values. The Sikh articles of faith should always be treated with respect.

Sikhs believe there is one God for all people, and that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, irrespective of religion, gender, ethnicity, etc. Sikhs also believe in living and working in an honest way, remembering God on a daily basis, and social justice for humanity.

## **Sikh Students Experience Pervasive Bullying**

School bullying is widely acknowledged to be a pervasive problem in the United States for Sikh children. In the last few years, Sikh children have experienced a spate of bias-based bullying in the form of physical and verbal assaults, harassment, and intimidation. Sikh youth are targeted for many reasons. Their external appearance makes them stand out, and also after 9/11, Sikh articles of faith, such as the turban, are inappropriately and ignorantly linked with media images of terrorists.

Sikh Coalition community surveys taken in New York City reveal that 60% of young Sikh males who maintain turbans/patkas state that they have been harassed and verbally or physically abused because of their faith.<sup>1</sup> Of those children, almost 40% reported being hit or involuntarily touched because of their appearance.<sup>2</sup>

Specific examples of bullying that Sikh children have experienced, include:

- Having their religiously-mandated hair forcibly cut;
- Being punched, pushed, and otherwise physically assaulted;
- Having their religious headwear forcibly removed or disrespectfully touched; and
- Routinely being subjected to slurs, such as “terrorist,” “rag-head,” and “Osama”

## **How Educators Can Address Bullying Against Sikhs**

Schools have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that all children—regardless of religion, race, sex, national origin, and sexual orientation—have the right to enjoy a safe and healthy learning environment at school.

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<sup>1</sup> “Making Our Voices Heard: A Civil Rights Agenda for New York City’s Sikhs,” Sikh Coalition, April 2008, available at <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/RaisingOurVoicesReport.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

Specific steps schools can take to prevent and respond to bullying:

- **Create a Systemic Approach to Address Bullying**
  - All schools should adopt a yearly written plan available to the public on efforts to create a bias-free school.
  - All schools should have a policy that: 1) defines and prohibits bias-based harassment; 2) lays out the consequences of violating this policy; 3) includes a protocol for filing and addressing bullying complaints; 4) publicizes the protocol among parents and students, including those with limited English proficiency; 5) tracks and monitors action taken to address complaints of bullying and harassment; and 6) periodically reports back to the public the number of bullying complaints filed in the school district.
- **Educate Students and Staff about Sikhism**
  - According to the Sikh Coalition’s survey, almost two-thirds of Sikh youth believe it would be beneficial if someone came into their school or classroom to talk about Sikhs and Sikh practices.<sup>3</sup>
  - Schools should ensure that school curricula include a discussion of Sikh history, traditions, and social contributions as a means of reducing bias against Sikhs.
  - See section below for tips on how the Sikh Coalition can help.
- **Educate Sikh Parents about their Rights and Responsibilities**
  - Over half of Sikh youth reported that their parents need to be educated about the American schooling system.<sup>4</sup>
  - Schools should work with Sikh organizations and activists to create culturally sensitive trainings and outreach material that educates Sikh parents about their rights within the school system and the resources available to them to help their children feel safe at school. For example, parents should be informed about the process for filing bullying complaints and be given guidance on identifying signs that their children are being bullied.
- **Encourage Students to Report Bullying**
  - Sikh youth are often too scared to report bullying and harassment. 40% of Sikh youth surveyed stated that they did not report bullying and harassment to school officials.<sup>5</sup> Schools should encourage students to report all potential incidences of bullying and harassment.

### **Sikh Coalition Resources Available to Prevent Bullying**

In order to dispel myths and stereotypes about the Sikh faith and increase awareness about Sikhs in general, the Sikh Coalition frequently delivers ‘Sikh Awareness’ presentations in schools around the country. If you are interested in a presentation, please contact [education@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:education@sikhcoalition.org). For lesson plans, videos, and other teaching resources, please visit <http://www.khalsakids.org/teachers.php>.

We have also worked with the New Jersey and Texas Board of Education to include Sikhism in the Social Studies State Standards. Now, students in those states will learn about Sikhism alongside the other major world religions. By proactively educating students about Sikh religious practices (e.g. why Sikhs wear a turban and keep their hair long), we hope to eliminate bias-based bullying and harassment against Sikh students.

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*