

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SUPPORTING

LGBTQ+ Youth

LGBTQ+ Youth Stressors

Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ face a wide array of stressors due to homophobia and transphobia in our society, leading to increased rates of:

- Discrimination (Almeida et al., 2009).
- Victimization (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012; Hatchel et al., 2019).
- Bullying in school (Berlan et al. 2010).
- Family non-acceptance (Ryan et al., 2010).
- Rejection in the Church (Levy & Harr, 2018; Bozard & Sanders, 2014).
- Homophobic and transphobic state and federal laws (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021)
- Social stigma (Pew Research Center, 2013)

Youth are impacted by the values and attitudes of those around them in their immediate family, community, and country. When youth face negative messages surrounding LGBTQ+ in society, these ideas can also become internalized, placing youth under significant stress (Meyer, 2003).

Protective Factor Against Negative Mental Health Outcomes for LGBTQ+ Youth

- Parental support (Ryan et al. 2010; Gower et al., 2018)
- Parental attachment (Koeppel et al., 2015)
- Earlier LGBTQ self-identification (Fish & Pasley, 2015)
- Supportive LGBTQ community: ex. LGBTQ events, LGBTQ youth organizations (Watson et al., 2020)
- State-based equality and anti-discrimination policies (Watson et al., 2020).
- School-related protective factors
 - School connectedness (De Pedro et al., 2017)
 - Adult support in school (De Pedro et al., 2017)
 - School-based Gay-Straight Alliance group (Konishi et al., 2013)
 - Anti-homophobia school policies (Konishi et al., 2013)

Your Kids Still Need You, Even if They Act Like They Don't.

Your child may not act as if they need you in their lives anymore, but do not let that fool you. Your support is still one of the most vital indicators of positive well-being.

Even though adolescents spend less time with their families (Larson et al., 1996), having a solid support system at home is key to helping them feel safe in the world (Moretti & Peled, 2004). Despite youth's gravitational pull towards their peers in adolescence, research tells us that your child's perceived parental support is more strongly correlated with the reduction of high-risk activities (Piko, 2013, & Wills et al., 2004) and adverse mental health outcomes (Macalli, 2020).

The Negative Impacts of Stressors on LGBTQ+ Youth

Because of society's stressors on LGBTQ+ youth, this population faces many negative mental health consequences.

Compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ youth are:
2-4x more likely to engage in substance use (Day et al., 2017; Marshal et al., 2008).
3-5x more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Ream, 2019, Hottes et al., 2016)

There is Good News Though!

You cannot control everything that happens in the world, but you have the power to create a safe and accepting home for your child. Parental acceptance and support are significant protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth (Ryan et al., 2010).

Compared to youth from non-accepting families, youth from families that show acceptance and support of their child's LGBTQ+ identity are:

- 8x less likely to attempt suicide
- 3x less likely to engage in substance use
- 3x less likely to contract HIV
- 2x less likely to have depression (Ryan et al. 2010).

Furthermore, youth from accepting families have lower rates of depression, higher self-esteem, increased general health, more social support, and decreased risky sexual behavior compared to youth from non-accepting families (Ryan et al. 2010).

LGBTQ+ youth feel supported when you...

- welcome your child's LGBTQ friends into your home and to gatherings (Ryan et al., 2010)
- openly welcome talk with your child's about their LGBTQ+ identity (Ryan et al., 2010)
- require other family members to respect your child's LGBTQ+ identity (Ryan et al., 2010)
- are affirming of their child's gender expression (Ryan et al., 2010)
- believe that they can have a happy future (Ryan et al., 2010)
- connect them with LGBTQ+ role models and supports (Ryan et al., 2010)
- make an effort to use your child's correct pronouns and chosen name (Weinhardt et al., 2019)
- ask how you can support your child (Weinhardt et al., 2019)

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Supporting Trans, Non-binary, or Gender Expansive Youth

Use your child's chosen name or pronouns. A study found that using a youth's chosen name as opposed to the name given to them at birth is linked to:

- 71% reduction in depression
- 34% reduction of suicidal ideation
- 65% reduction in suicidal behaviors. (Russel et al., 2018)

Using a new name and pronouns can feel difficult; you may feel a sense of sadness or grief. However, know that this change will support their health and wellness and sends a message to your child that you have their back.

Gender Affirming Medical Care

The idea of medical interventions to affirm your child's gender identity may feel like a scary step, and you may think that your child is "too young" to make such a significant decision. However, several studies indicate that gender-affirming medical care help supports mental wellness. Given the politicized nature of information on this topic, we will dig into some of the data:

- One longitudinal study (n=55) of trans youth found that gender-affirming medical interventions reduced distress and supported positive mental health outcomes (De Vries et al., 2014).
- Another study (n=148) showed increased body satisfaction and reduced depression and anxiety one year after gender-affirming treatment (Kuper et al., 2019).
- A study found that gender-affirming hormone treatment with trans youth (n=47) significantly reduced suicidality levels and increased well-being, including perceptions of happiness and hope for their future (Allen et al., 2019).

Youth gender clinics are built to support families. They are typically staffed with social workers, host support groups for youth and families, and encourage your child to consult with mental health providers to ensure each step is carefully considered before making a permanent decision. If you feel overwhelmed – you're not alone – many parents have also walked this path before you.

Remember, making an appointment to learn more does not commit you to any medical treatment; it simply allows you to ask questions to make the most informed decision. Note that gender clinics often have a six-month + waiting list until youth can be seen for an initial consult.

Parents: Worries and Fears

If your child has shared their LGBTQ+ identity with you, congrats. You have created a space where your child felt safe enough to share with you, which is a protective factor (Fish, 2015). However, adjusting to this news may not feel easy.

Many parents report feeling:

- Grief, guilt, and sadness (Goodrich, 2009; Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011)
- A sense of loss, including a loss of an anticipated future (Cavallo & Bradley, 2018; Goodrich, 2009; Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011; Saltzburg, 2004).
- Fear for their child's safety and worries of victimization (Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011).
- Looping internalized homophobic messages and reconciling these messages with the child they love (Saltzburg, 2004).
- Guilt and shame about having negative emotions (Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011).

If you feel some or all these things, you are not alone. There are many homophobic and transphobic messages in our society, and it can take time to shake them loose. You can feel scared and hesitant and support your child all at the same time.

Some parents feel that they must force their children to conform to society's norms to be happy and thrive (Ryan et al., 2010). **However, the data is unequivocal; attempting to force your child to fit into a cis-hetero norm is harmful and places them at much greater risk of substance use, suicide, depression, and anxiety (Ryan et al., 2010).**

Is This Just a Phase?

Kids are commonly dismissed when they test the waters with their parent's acceptance.

Kids hear:

"You're too young to know if you are gay/trans."

"You're confused."

"Is this because your friend _____ is gay/trans?"

"It's probably just a phase/trend."

However, statements like these tell your child that you are not okay with their gender or sexuality, which means that your child misses out on your protective support, leaving them more vulnerable to adverse outcomes.

Language Matters

Some of the language around gender and sexuality may feel familiar and some may feel foreign. Check out the Human Rights Campaign glossary of terms:

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

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Parents Need Support Too!

Parents need their own resources for strength and support to show up for their kids. Many parents report that connecting with other parents reduced feelings of isolation and helped improve their feelings of acceptance (Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011).

Parent Resource: Gender Spectrum

Gender Spectrum: Education resources for gender-expansive individual and their families. Gender Spectrum offers support groups for youth, parents, and grandparents, including specialized groups for Spanish speakers, parents of color, and grandparents.

<https://genderspectrum.org/>

Parent Resource: PFLAG

Peer support groups for parents and families of LGBTQ+ individuals

<https://www.pflagseattle.org/>

Seattle Children's Hospital Gender Clinic

Seattle Children's Hospital Gender Clinic: provides gender-affirming medical care for trans and non-binary youth and support groups for families.

<https://www.seattlechildrens.org/clinics/gender-clinic/>

Parent Resource: One-On-One Counseling

Connecting with a counselor one-on-one can give you a safe place to process your reactions to this life transition and acquire resources to help support you and your child. Parenting is a hard job – you don't have to do it all alone!

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