

Transitional Age Youth and LGBTQ+ Identity

Adolescent development is a time for young people to establish and discover their personhoods and identities as individuals. Ideally, each young person has a safe and supportive environment to pursue interests, explore possibilities, try new experiences, and expand into the world as a whole and unique individuals. Even the most supported young people may feel the stress of these choices and may find themselves in conflicts with adults, peers, and environments in their lives. These stresses are resolvable, reasonable, and part of a growth and learning process. When a young person has an embedded sense that they are loved, loveable, and worthy of acceptance, stress from this developmental process is likely manageable and natural. With love, support, and acceptance, young people experience the freedom to emerge and develop as a whole individual as they enter their young adulthood.

When a young person's emerging identity is juxtaposed to a deeply unaccepting and rejecting environment and culture, the natural stress can become wholly unreasonable, extreme, and dangerous. In environments where this juxtaposition is experienced within a young person's closest family members and connections, the stress and risks are even more amplified.

Young people with emerging LGBTQ+ identities are more likely to experience rejecting or unaccepting environments and thus are at a higher exposure for extreme stress and risk. Culturally prevalent homophobic and transphobic attitudes are prevalent, historical, and often embedded in doctrine and actively contested in policy and law. These attitudes provide a general backdrop of rejection and unacceptance. These attitudes can and may be dramatically heightened in family and peer settings. The risks and challenges faced by youth of color with emerging LGBTQ+ identities are compounded as prevalent, historical, and active racism overlay unaccepting and rejecting attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities and individuals.

The Department's efforts are designed to provide and advocate for a healthy developmental climate for all adolescents. For young people with emerging LGBTQ+ identities, the effort must specifically address the elevated risks and challenges.

Higher levels of risk for LGBTQ+ youth and the burden of rejection:

According to the 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, "The mental health disparities between LGBTQ+ youth and non-LGBTQ+ youth continue to be an alarming trend. Today's LGBTQ+ youth face a variety of stressors — harassment, family and peer rejection, bullying from their peers, isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging — that have a major impact on their overall well-being. Studies have shown that, compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers, LGBTQ+ youth report much higher rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use, and lower self-esteem. "

In 2020 the Trevor Project, a leading national advocacy organization, published The National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health 2020. Representing the experiences of over 40,000 LGBTQ+ youth ages 13-24 years old across the United States, the survey is one of the largest of LGBTQ+ youth mental health ever conducted (Trevor Project, 2020).

Key findings of the report are illustrated:

- 40% of LGBTQ+ respondents seriously considered attempting suicide in the past twelve months, with more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth having seriously considered suicide.

- 68% of LGBTQ+ youth reported symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder in the past two weeks, including more than 3 in 4 transgender and nonbinary youth.
- 48% of LGBTQ+ youth reported engaging in self-harm in the past twelve months, including over 60% of transgender and nonbinary youth.
- 46% of LGBTQ+ youth report they wanted psychological or emotional counseling from a mental health professional but were unable to receive it in the past 12 months.
- 10% of LGBTQ+ youth reported undergoing conversion therapy, with 78% reporting it occurred when they were under age 18.
- 29% of LGBTQ+ youth have experienced homelessness, been kicked out, or run away.
- 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ youth reported that they had been physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their LGBTQ+ identity.
- 61% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported being prevented or discouraged from using a bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity.
- 86% of LGBTQ+ youth said that recent politics have negatively impacted their well-being.
- Transgender and nonbinary youth who reported having pronouns respected by all or most people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected.

From a public health perspective, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) cites data from the 2015 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in their statistics of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth (data from this study did not incorporate experiences from transgender for gender queer or questioning youth). The YRBS illustrate an increased exposure to violence including a 10% higher likelihood of being threatened with a weapon, a 28 to 34 % increase in electronic and "on school grounds" bullying, and an 18 to 23% increase in sexual assault and dating violence. Additionally, the survey found LBG youth 140% more likely to record a school absence over a 30-day period (CDC, 2021 - Citing YRBS 2015 Survey).

Echoing outcomes outlined in the Trevor Project survey, the CDC states "A complex combination of factors can impact youth health outcomes. LGB youth are at greater risk for depression, suicide, substance use, and sexual behaviors that can place them at increased risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Nearly one-third (29%) of LGBQ+ youth had attempted suicide at least once in the prior year compared to 6% of heterosexual youth. In 2014, young gay and bisexual men accounted for 8 out of 10 HIV diagnoses among youth " (CDC, 2021)

Compounding Risks for LGBTQI+ Youth in Care of Child Welfare Systems

The level of jeopardy is raised for LGBTQ+ youth as exemplified in Highlights from Annie E. Cassey Foundation, 2016, LGBTQ+ in Child Welfare, A Systematic Review of the Literature:

- "According to the Lambda Legal/Child Welfare League of America Joint Initiative (2012), family disapproval and rejection often force LGBTQ+ youth into foster care and homelessness, making them more likely to be part of the child welfare system."

- "Many LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system are there because of rejection from their biological families as a result of making their sexual orientation known. Others, when they come out, are in the child welfare system because their foster families returned them to care."
- "This rejection places these LGBTQ+ youth at a greater risk for negative life outcomes, including increased chances of health and mental health challenges, lower self-esteem, illegal drug abuse, HIV and STDs and depression and suicide (Child Welfare League of America, 2012)."
- "LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to have negative experiences in the child welfare system as they are less likely to achieve permanency (Mallon, 2011); more likely to have multiple placements (Mallon, Aledort & Ferrera, 2002); more likely to be sexually abused (Shpiegel & Simmel, 2016; Mitchell, Panzarello, Gryniewicz, & Galupo, 2015) and to face discrimination, including harassment and violence in group placements (Mallon, 2001)."
- "Among the most common negative outcomes were homelessness, sexually risky behavior, substance use and abuse, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and disproportionate representation in the juvenile justice system. Mitchell et al. (2015) stated that when compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ+ youth have more incidences of anxiety, depression, anger and even posttraumatic stress disorder related to abuse. They also may experience decreased opportunities for post-placement services and resources due to placement instability"

Expanding upon these details, The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's publication, "CARING FOR LGBTQ+CHILDREN & YOUTH" features the following analysis specifically from the Child Welfare perspective of Safety, Permanency and Well-being:

"SAFETY

- Many LGBTQ+ youth face neglect or abuse from their families of origin because of their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression. One study found that more than 30% of LGBTQ+ youth reported suffering physical violence at the hands of a family member after coming out.
- As a result of lack of acceptance and abuse in the home and at school, a disproportionate number of youth living on the streets are LGBTQ+. The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services estimates that between 20 and 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ+.

PERMANENCY

- Many LGBTQ+ youth (26%) are forced to leave their families of origin as a result of conflicts with their parents regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- 78% of LGBTQ+ youth were removed or ran away from their foster placements as a result of hostility toward their sexual orientation or gender identity.

WELL-BEING

- LGBTQ+ young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs and 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejection.
- 33.2% of transgender youth have attempted suicide.

- Research suggests that LGBTQ+ youth in foster care need a range of physical and mental health services as well as educational supports and services, but that they confront barriers in accessing these services because of their sexual orientation or gender identity."

Confounding Risks for LGBTQ+ youth of color:

"LGBTQ+ youth of color often experience additional stress and adverse effects to their health and wellbeing as a result of bias around their intersecting identities. In addition to homophobia or transphobia, LGBTQ+ youth of color may encounter racism and discrimination on a daily basis and in various forms that can further complicate their ability to express, explore and/or manage their LGBTQ+ identities. For LGBTQ+ youth of color, the challenges in finding LGBTQ+ counselors of color or programs that relate directly to their experiences with LGBTQ+ and race-based discrimination often lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging." (the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report)

As spotlighted in the Trevor reports 2019 National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health, "The proportion of LGBTQ+ youth reporting a suicide attempt in the past year was higher among youth of color (21%) than White non-Hispanic youth (18%)" These proportions varied depending race/ethnicity. "LGBTQ+ youth indicating two or more race/ethnicities had 25% increased odds, and Hispanic/Latinx LGBTQ+ youth had 20% increased odds of a past year suicide attempt compared to White-non Hispanic LGBTQ+ youth. Across all racial and ethnic identities, youth who identified as transgender and/or non-binary were at highest risk for attempting suicide."

The UCLA, Williams Institute of Law 2019 publication, LGBTQ+ Youth of Color Impacted by the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems, focuses on the overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ youth of color in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system. Findings from the study illustrate the complexity of causality and identifies a number of additional challenges.

"Structural racism and LGBTQ+ stigma likely increase risk of system-involvement for LGBTQ+ youth of color through a variety of mechanisms, including:

- historic and contemporary policies (e.g., forced cultural assimilation of American Indian children, policies that promote racial segregation and concentrated poverty)
- prejudice towards racial/ethnic minority youth that "adultifies" youth of color and views them as threatening versus as children who are deserving of protection and care
- family rejection and conflict
- differential school-based discipline targeting LGBTQ+ youth of color and discrimination against them, particularly within K-12 educational settings
- growing up in "low opportunity" neighborhoods as youth of color
- disproportionate targeting by police as LGBTQ+ youth of color
- homelessness and poverty, that are a consequence of the mechanisms described above, coupled with lack of access to jobs, that lead to survival crimes
- a lack of adequate access to competent community-based resources, including mental health, health, and social services prepared to support LGBTQ+ youth of color in managing stigma-related stress and overcoming structural disadvantage"

Coming "Out" and Managing Identity

Facing real risk and the burden of rejection, LGBTQ+ youth face complicated choices in managing their identity which, in and of itself, is a challenge many no LGBTQ+ youth do not have to face. "Many lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, don't "come out" as adolescents, but wait until adulthood because of fear of rejection and extreme negative reactions." (AECF, 2016)

The 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation indicates that, "Most LGBTQ+ youth are aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity by the start of adolescence. While "coming out" to their parents and close family members is an important and self-affirming developmental milestone, it is often fraught with worry. Many LGBTQ+ youth report coming out, being outed or being found out by their family as extremely stressful. Moreover, more than three quarters of youth in our sample rate coming out as LGBTQ+ to their parents as extremely stressful. For too many LGBTQ+ youth, the real and perceived fear of rejection is compounded by the negative comments they hear about the LGBTQ+ community from their parents or family members. These negative attitudes and beliefs may make them reluctant to come out or disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to their families."

LGBTQ+ youth are out at varying levels. Many LGBTQ+ youth continue to manage to whom and in what contexts they are out regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity. These young people therefore must constantly evaluate and decide in which environments and scenarios they are safe to selectively share information about their LGBTQ+ identity (HRCF, 2018).

Supportive, Accepting, and Empowering Environments

Ultimately, supporting the healthy development of adolescents with emerging LGBTQ+ identities involves surrounding them with support and acceptance. Professionals in Child Welfare supporting LGBTQ+ Adolescents must examine their own biases and attitudes. They must become educated on the risks associated for these young people as well as what support looks like, sounds like, and feels like. They must be capable of enacting acceptance and empowerment. Knowledge of the legal rights of LGBTQ+ young people is imperative. Professionals must also be able to evaluate the competency of the other support providers to ensure that partnerships and networks of support hold a similar accepting and empowering attitude.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's publication, "CARING FOR LGBTQ+ CHILDREN & YOUTH" features the following recommended steps for Child welfare professionals in supporting young people with emerging LGBTQ+ identities:

- Acknowledge that foster children and youth in your care may be LGBTQ+.
- Examine your beliefs and attitudes that might impact your ability to support LGBTQ+ children and youth in your care
- Understand that being LGBTQ+ isn't a "choice" or something a young person can change.
- Educate yourself on LGBTQ+ issues.
- Know that your acceptance or rejection affects the health and well-being of the LGBTQ+ youth in your care.
- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of LGBTQ+ youth.
- Apply the same standards to LGBTQ+ youth that you apply to others for age-appropriate adolescent romantic behavior.
- Know the dangers and risks for LGBTQ+ youth.

- Be an advocate for LGBTQ+ children and youth.
- Acknowledge that there's more to an individual than sexual orientation and gender identity and expression
- Take advantage of community resources for you and your LGBTQ+ foster child or youth.
- Know what it means to be "transgender" and use the term appropriately.
- Educate yourself on gender dysphoria.
- Allow transgender youth to express their gender identity.
- Make room assignments and housing decisions based on the well-being of individual youth.
- Use young people's preferred names and pronouns.
- Avoid assumptions about transgender young people's sexual orientation

Additionally, having general knowledge regarding what broader system strategies support youth can impact professionals in the Departments ability to assess strengths and vulnerabilities in an LGBTQ+ Adolescent's world.

Starting at Home:

In general terms, "Parents and families play an essential role in promoting adolescent health and well-being. Studies have shown the positive health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth whose families are supportive and accepting, including greater self-esteem and resilience, and a lower risk of negative health outcomes such as depression, distress, hopelessness and substance use." (HRCF, 2018)

Concerning LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system, according to The Annie E Cassey, 2016 Literature review, "McCormick, Schmidt and Terrazas (2015) spoke to the importance of acceptance from the foster family too, citing that in accepting families foster parents served as advocates and activists against maltreatment and made efforts to achieve friendships with affirming and other LGBTQ+ youth. Accepting foster families were reported by youth as making them feel empowered and liberated. A primary recommendation to ensure family acceptance was for social service professionals to support families through the process of accepting their child or young person after he/she identifies as LGBTQ+. Another prevalent suggestion presented in the literature was to find supportive family members or fictive kin who would provide a safe and welcoming home for the young person, which might include foster or adoptive parents who also identified as LGBTQ+."

Affirming, Supportive and Competent Counseling Services:

(From: 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation)

Importantly, youth who had received counseling reported better mental health outcomes. Access to culturally competent, LGBTQ+-affirming mental health providers, both within schools and in the broader health care system, is essential to the well-being of LGBTQ+ teens.

Concerning Schools:

(From: 2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation)

Because youth spend the majority of their time in school, their experiences in the classroom, in the halls, at lunch and during extracurricular activities can have a critical impact on their overall health and well-being. For some LGBTQ+ youth, schools offer safe, supportive and affirming spaces that enable them to realize their full potential.

There is wide variation on the extent to which school administrators and other key leaders enforce and implement LGBTQ+-inclusive policies. Schools must be intentional about creating a welcoming, safe environment for LGBTQ+ students. First steps can include providing professional development opportunities, LGBTQ+-inclusive anti-bias programs and ongoing monitoring of policy compliance.

LGBTQ+ youth who attend schools with Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender/Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) or other LGBTQ+ student clubs have found that these formal systems of support can mitigate negative experiences, reduce risky behaviors and lower distress. Further, the presence of a GSA or other LGBTQ+ student club has been found to have a positive impact on the perceptions LGBTQ+ youth have of their school experiences: they help students identify teachers and staff who are affirming and supportive and promote LGBTQ+ advocacy among students.

Challenges for Youth of Color:

To address these disparities, programs are needed that address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth of color, including anti-racism and LGBTQ+ specific programs. Youth-serving professionals also require training that addresses the multiple and intersecting identities of LGBTQ+ youth and specifically of LGBTQ+ youth of color.

For Trans Youth:

Transgender and gender-expansive youth face many serious challenges in the school system. In addition to more overt forms of discrimination such as verbal and physical harassment, they also commonly report being barred from using locker rooms or bathroom facilities that match their gender identity and not being addressed by the appropriate pronouns or their chosen names. These negative school experiences have damaging implications for transgender and gender-expansive youth, and further contribute to hostile learning environments where they feel unsafe and unprotected.

General Support:

(2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation)

The Role of the Adult:

Every adult can play a role in changing the landscape for LGBTQ+ youth, sometimes simply through small actions that help to reinforce inclusive, supportive and loving environments in homes and communities. However, it is also imperative that we address discrimination, bias and institutional obstacles that threaten the potential of LGBTQ+ youth to thrive and achieve their full potential.

Parents and Family Members:

- Learn the facts and be informed about issues that impact LGBTQ+ youth
- Be aware of the LGBTQ+ inclusion policies that impact LGBTQ+ youth — in your state, city and local school district
- Advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculums, programming and clubs
- Watch for signs of bullying
- Get involved with local LGBTQ+ organizations
- Make your home a safe and affirming space for LGBTQ+ youth — whether or not you have openly LGBTQ+ children

School Administrators and Teachers:

- Establish clear and inclusive policies to support LGBTQ+ youth
- Provide annual LGBTQ+-inclusive training for all school staff
- Be intentional about creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth
- Be a visible advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion and equality
- Provide educational resources for teachers, parents and students

Mental Health and Medical Professionals:

- Be open to discussing sexual orientation and gender identity
- Seek additional training to increase proficiency in LGBTQ+ issues
- Be an advocate for LGBTQ+ youth at all levels of health care
- Provide educational resources for teachers, parents and students

Policy Makers and Advocacy Leaders

- Enact LGBTQ+ non-discrimination laws at the national, state and local level
- Advocate for LGBTQ+-inclusive anti-bullying laws and policies in schools
- Support prohibitions on outdated and harmful practices such as conversion therapy
- Promote protections in areas where LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented, including youth homelessness services, foster care and the juvenile justice system

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