



Promoting the Academic & Social Success of LGBTQ+ Youth

The current climate in the U.S. in general is not supportive of LGBTQ+ people, and some of the greatest negative impact of our climate falls on the shoulders of LGBTQ+ youth. All children and adolescents deserve to be loved, cared for, and supported. They should see themselves reflected in the world around them. LGBTQ+ youth, however, face unprecedented pressures to be someone they are not, and as these

In April of 2009, less than two weeks apart, two 11-year-old boys (Carl Hoover Walker and Jaheem Herrera) died by suicide after being bullied based on anti-LGBTQ and racist bias. Elementary school children should never know pain this deep. They were not the first nor the last LGBTQ+ youth to needlessly lose their lives. Suicide prevention for LGBTQ+ youth must include systemic measures that seek to create a more inclusive climate. As trans teen, Leelah Alcorn, charged in her own suicide note, "My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number [...] and fix it. Fix society. Please." We are the ones who need to answer this charge.

pressures add up, their ability to succeed academically and socially declines dramatically. It is the responsibility of those of us who work with youth to do something about this reality. Kevin Jennings (2015), the founder of the Gay and Lesbian Educational Network (GLSEN) and CEO of Lambda Legal, asks all of us a very important question:

How do we change this? Nearly thirty years into this work, I can offer no magic bullet. [...] We need to keep doing the education (both in the classrooms and outside of them) desperately necessary to dispel the hateful myths that so many still hold about LGBT people. And we need to keep telling real stories about the consequences of the current state of affairs.

LGBTQ+ K-12 Student Outcomes based on a National Survey (GLSEN):

In general, K-12 schools do not have a climate that fosters the academic and social success of LGBTQ+ youth. In the 2019 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 16,713 LGBTQ+ students from across the U.S. reported on their experiences in school. The most alarming statistic is that 59.1% of LGB students and 42.5% of trans and nonbinary students feel unsafe at their school. Many hear slurs against the community daily from their fellow classmates and negative comments from teachers, more than half experience verbal harassment, and a quarter experience physical harassment. The impact of these experiences takes a toll on their mental health and their ability to succeed academically, resulting in higher rates of depression, missing or dropping out of school, not going to college or trade school, and lower GPAs and self-esteem.

Family Acceptance and LGBTQ+ Youth:

Whether or not families of origin accept their LGBTQ+ children and adolescents has an immense impact on their mental wellbeing and success. When families tell their children they are sinful for being LGBTQ+, remove them from positive supports for LGBTQ+ people, and keep them from resources that would normalize their experience, it sends them a message that all of who they are is unacceptable, unlovable. The Family Acceptance Project (2009) studied the impact of family acceptance or rejection and found the following when parents were highly rejecting of gay or trans teens. They were:

- 8x more likely to attempt suicide
- 6x more likely to report high levels of depression
- 3x more likely to use drugs
- 3x as likely to be at risk for HIV and STDs.



Conversion Therapy: Often families who see being LGBTQ+ as a problem for their children/adolescents will attempt to find a way to change the realities of who their children are. They may see this as an act of love, but children/adolescents will experience it as an act of rejection. One such way families seek to change this reality is to put their children through conversion therapy (also known as sexual orientation change efforts, reparative therapy, gender critical therapy, etc.). However, this can create many negative outcomes for youth including:

“Shame, guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, loss of faith, decreased self-esteem, increased self-hatred, social withdrawal, feeling dehumanized and untrue to self, depression, increased substance abuse, high risk sexual behaviors, and suicidality” (Cordero & Carlisle, 2019).

According to studies by the UCLA Williams Institute (2019), more than 700,000 LGBTQ people have been subjected to the horrors of conversion therapy, and an estimated 80,000 LGBTQ youth will experience this unprofessional conduct in coming years.

Highlight on Gender Neutral Bathrooms and Locker Rooms: Much of the conversation around bathroom and locker rooms when it comes to trans and nonbinary youth centers around the safety of their cisgender peers. However, the research doesn't support this concern, and in fact, it is the opposite. GLSEN (2017) found that 70% of trans teens avoid using the bathroom at school because of fear for their safety. Additionally, more than 60% were required to use a bathroom or locker room of their legal sex over that which they felt most comfortable using, despite the fact that this violates federal law under Title IX. Many of these students will avoid using the bathroom at all costs by holding their urine or restricting fluid intake. This puts them at risk for pain and dehydration. The recommendation for best practices is for all K-12 schools to provide a single stall gender-neutral restroom for any student to use.

What are GSAs and Why They are Important: The literature on LGBTQ+ youth consistently talks about the benefits of schools having a GSA (Gender/Sexuality Alliance—formerly Gay-Straight Alliance), a school club for LGBTQ+ students and their allies. Simply having such a club is usually a sign of more supportive school administrators and teachers, resulting in fewer of the negative experiences reported in the GLSEN School Climate Survey. A GSA also provides LGBTQ+ students with the opportunity to be in a safe space with other LGBTQ+ and supporting students, allowing them to be their authentic selves. With a knowledgeable advisor, LGBTQ+ students have access to reliable information about the LGBTQ+ community and the opportunity to see themselves as part of a community. GSAs also provide students with leadership roles and opportunities to advocate for themselves. The resulting sense of pride in their identities and a higher self-esteem give them the confidence to see a possible future and the need for an education.

LGBTQ+ Visibility and Curriculum: Visibility of the LGBTQ+ community is essential to destigmatizing and demystifying LGBTQ+ people and to recognizing the cultural contributions they make. While GSAs help with visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in schools, infusing the curriculum with LGBTQ+ content has an even greater impact. The purpose of a school is to educate, and what is being taught is seen as culturally important. Seeing oneself presented in a positive way in class material impacts not only self-esteem but also a revitalized interest in the importance of education. Seeing a culture not your own presented positively in novels, history books, health classes, story problems in math classes breaks down conscious and unconscious biases and prepares students to join a diverse work force as adults.

Laws supporting LGBTQ+ Youth in Schools: While there are many barriers for LGBTQ+ youth, there also are legal precedents that provide support. Some important examples are below:



- The Equal Protection Clause under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution has been used to support students who have been bullied based on anti-LGBTQ+ bias. This requires schools to protect all students equally from bullying.
- Title IX (preventing sex discrimination) has been used to support students from being discriminated against because of being LGBTQ+ in any school receiving federal funding.
- Constitutional rights to privacy have been used to protect students from being outed to parents and other school administrators and professionals without a student's consent.
- The First Amendment has been used to protect student's rights to express their gender and sexual orientation.
- The Equal Access Clause has allowed students to form GSAs because they should have equal access to form extracurricular clubs.

Best Practices Bullet Points/Takeaways

- Never out someone, never underestimate the risks of coming out, and support the person's own coming out timeline.
- Learn about gender neutral pronouns and support the use of them through personal effort and policymaking.
- Make sure your company/school has accessible gender neutral/all gender restrooms (and locker rooms where appropriate) and support policies that call for them.
- Make sure students know they have the right to form a GSA.
- Expand your own knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community through reading novels, books on LGBTQ+ history, and biographies/memoirs; and pass your knowledge on to others.
- Reflect on your own experiences of privilege in the world and become aware of where barriers exist in your day-to-day life for LGBTQ+ people.
- Never underestimate the power of love and putting a child's needs first.

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