

LGBTQ+ Youth and Schools

Over the past few decades, acceptance for and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community has grown tremendously but there is still much work to be done. LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly children, still experience high levels of discrimination and stress especially in the school setting where they spend most of their time. LGBTQ+ youth face higher levels of stress, rejection and bullying than their heterosexual peers. High levels of childhood stress can impact life-long mental, emotional and physical health issues in addition to academic performance. This issue is compounded for youths who also experience other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) like physical or emotional trauma, poverty and homelessness. Disproportionately high rates of LGBTQ+ youth contemplate and carry out suicide compared to their heterosexual peers. Clearly, providing support to this vulnerable population should be a priority.

According to the [Growing Up LGBT in America](#) report from Human Rights Campaign, LGBT youth are much more likely than their peers to experience verbal harassment, exclusion, and physical attack at school. In addition to harassment in schools, many LGBTQ+ students experience family and peer rejection, bullying, and isolation. [Studies have shown](#) that compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ+ youth report much higher rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use, and lower self-esteem.

According to [the 2020 Trevor Project's inaugural National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health](#), more than half of transgender and non-binary youth have seriously considered suicide. Transgender and gender-expansive youth face additional serious challenges in schools. They may not feel safe using restroom facilities that match their gender identity and they may not feel safe asking peers or teachers to use their correct pronouns. LGBTQ+ students of color face compounded stress as they experience racism in addition to their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ+ students who are not native English speakers face compounded stress as well.

Mental health care should be a priority for LGBTQ+ youth. Although [counseling proves extremely helpful](#), many LGBTQ+ students do not feel safe asking for this help and many are not aware of how to access such resources in their communities. Locating welcoming, LGBTQ+ trained mental health professionals can be a challenge in many areas. Transportation, cost and fear of being 'outed' to family members or peers are other valid concerns faced by this population.

All children in our state are entitled to a high-quality, equitable, and safe education. Bias, discrimination and institutional barriers prevent LGBTQ+ youth from accessing crucial educational resources and opportunities. Because kids in grades K-12 spend the majority of their time in school, it is imperative they experience their school environments as safe, affirming and inclusive. Parents, educators and other adults who serve children have a key responsibility to create safe affirming spaces so that students can thrive, be successful, experience a high level of well-being and mature into their full potential. We owe it to our children, ourselves and our future.

LGBTQ+ Youth by the Numbers

Sources: Trevor Report [National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2021](#)

- 42% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth.
- 12% of white youth attempted suicide compared to 31% of Native/Indigenous youth, 21% of Black youth, 21% of multiracial youth, 18% of Latinx youth, and 12% of Asian/Pacific Islander youth.
- 94% of LGBTQ youth reported that recent politics negatively impacted their mental health.

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- More than 80% of LGBTQ youth stated that COVID-19 made their living situation more stressful — and only 1 in 3 LGBTQ youth found their home to be LGBTQ-affirming.
- 70% of LGBTQ youth stated that their mental health was "poor" most of the time or always during COVID-19.
- 48% of LGBTQ youth reported they wanted counseling from a mental health professional but were unable to receive it in the past year.
- 30% of LGBTQ youth experienced food insecurity in the past month, including half of all Native/Indigenous LGBTQ youth.
- Transgender and nonbinary youth who reported having pronouns respected by all of the people they lived with attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected by anyone with whom they lived.
- Transgender and nonbinary youth who were able to change their name and/or gender marker on legal documents, such as driver's licenses and birth certificates, reported lower rates of attempting suicide.
- LGBTQ youth who had access to spaces that affirmed their sexual orientation and gender identity reported lower rates of attempting suicide.
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- Only 26 percent [say they always feel safe in their school classrooms](#) — and just five percent say all of their teachers and school staff are supportive of LGBTQ+ people.
- Only [12 percent of LGBTQ+ youth received information](#) about safe sex that was relevant to them as an LGBTQ+ person.

It should be noted that having unaccepting homes/families can significantly impact LGBTQ+ student outcomes. Much of the negative data listed above can be alleviated when families are supportive.

What can schools and educators do?

As with other adverse childhood events, parents, caregivers, and educators can offer vital support to LGBTQ+ students who are experiencing bullying, rejection or other forms of stress. The greatest source of resilience for LGBTQ+ students experiencing stress is the presence of a supportive adult. A teacher may indeed be the only source of support some of these students have, especially those who are rejected at home, in their communities and by their peers. Educators can quite literally serve as a lifeline for LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to providing individual support, teachers can help create a safe, welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment.

A [recent survey by GLSEN](#) found that 59.1% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 42.5% because of their gender expression, and 37.4% because of their gender. A hostile school environment negatively impacts LGBTQ+ students' academic success and mental health. LGBTQ+ students who experience victimization and/or discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes. Conversely, LGBTQ+ students who feel supported report better mental health, school experiences and higher academic achievement.

The following steps can help schools become equitable environments for everyone and ensure that all students and school staff feel respected regardless of sexual orientation. 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-

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being. The majority of LGBTQ+ youth still experience negative and even hostile school environments.

To create a safe community at school, individual educators can implement the following steps:

Provide safe spaces for students including setting clear guidelines for classroom behavior. Children in public schools are part of a diverse community. Households headed by same-sex couples are reported in virtually every U.S. county according to the U.S. Census. Teachers and schools can help create environments that respect the diversity present within a community. Respect is fostered by teaching kindness and empathy within the classroom and school community. In class, teachers can refer to “your grown-ups” instead of Mom and Dad or even parents as not everyone lives with their parents and/or has a Mom or Dad. Teachers can create classrooms by establishing clear and inclusive policies that support LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ children feel more secure in environments where they know they are safe.

Establish Safe classroom spaces and policies.

- [Establish zero-tolerance bullying policies](#) and make sure to give all students respect and treat them with kindness. Bullying is one of the largest contributors to stress, anxiety and depression for LGBTQ+ youth. Research has shown a strong correlation between anti-LGBT messages and actions, and a young person’s mental health.
- Treat anti-LGBTQ+ language just like any other type of harassment or bullying. According to www.welcomingschools.org, Anti-LGBTQ+ and gender-related put-downs are among [the most common slurs in school](#) environments, and addressing these slurs is essential for the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of all students.
- Have signs in the classroom that mark it as a safe space. To order a safe space kit for your classroom, visit <https://www.glsen.org/safespace>.
- Respect students’ privacy.
- Model inclusive pronouns.
- Be out as an ally.
- Use missteps as teachable moments. If you hear negative language being used, take the time to point it out.
- Give students the opportunity to understand LGBTQ+ individuals instead of learning about them through negative myths and stereotypes.
- Teach students about sexual diversity in [age-appropriate terms](#).
- More ideas on creating safe classroom spaces, please visit welcomingschools.org.

Join an educator network. To receive support and find ideas for teaching respect and inclusivity, educators can join support networks like [GLSEN](#).

Use representative texts, lesson plans. When children see representations of themselves or their families in the curriculum they are studying and in the media they encounter, they feel more accepted and their experiences are normalized. Educators have a pivotal role in preparing students to live and work in a diverse world in which they are likely to encounter people from varied backgrounds. For curriculum ideas visit [here](#).

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Be a visible advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion and equality. Teachers are role models for many of their students. Use the opportunity to model inclusive, respectful attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Allow students to understand what respect looks like.

Talk about LGBTQ+ role models in class. Teach students about how LGBTQ+ people have made incredible contributions to this world. Help them understand that often, in the past people felt compelled to hide their identities to stay safe. For a list of resources on LGBTQ+ icons visit www.lgbthistorymonth.com.

Recognize the unique challenges that transgender and gender-non-conforming youth experience. Transgender children face even more stress and strain than their peers, even within the LGBTQ+ community. Educators should ask students what their correct pronouns and correct names are early in the school year. Make sure to use the appropriate pronouns and make sure other students comply as well. When you have a substitute, make sure the roster includes students' preferred names. For a comprehensive list of do's and don'ts please refer to [this fact sheet](#).

Address questions and concerns of other educators and administration. Many [teachers are concerned](#) with what they are "allowed" to discuss in the classroom regarding LGBTQ+ issues. While it is true that some states require guardian consent when school curricula address sexuality, when educators discuss family diversity, they are not talking about sexuality; they are talking about differences regarding family and personal identities.

Educate students about suicide risks and prevention. Studies show LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk for suicide. Educators can provide [referrals](#) and educate students about [warning signs and risk factors](#). Provide students with 24/7 suicide hotline numbers that can be accessed from anywhere.

School districts and state leaders can contribute to a safe school environment for LGBTQ+ students when they:

Provide nationally recommended levels of mental health staff. LGBTQ+ students often benefit from counseling support related to issues surrounding their sexual orientation. LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience anxiety and depression and mental health support can help mitigate the effects of bullying and exclusion from peers. Currently, school mental health staff are overburdened from inappropriate ratios of staff to students stemming from inadequate funding levels. Make sure legislative leaders understand the critical need for adequate funding of mental health staff in schools.

Provide [LGBTQ+ inclusive training](#) for school staff. Training for staff helps improve school climate, decreases bias-based bullying in school, helps transgender and non-binary students to thrive, and helps create classrooms that welcome all families.

Provide LGBTQ+ inclusive training specific to school mental health care staff. Age restrictions, an inability to pay for treatment, and transportation problems prevent many teenagers from being able to reach out to mental health service providers. Young adults struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity, in particular, need the support mental health professionals provide, but might fear that their search for help may reveal their LGBTQ+

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status. Mental health staff that are [trained in LGBTQ++](#) issues and located within a school would provide critical, accessible care.

Educate staff on the additional stressors experienced by LGBTQ+ students of color and English language learners. Students who belong to more than one marginalized group experience compounded stress. Alert staff to these challenges.

Develop an [LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum](#).—Schools and administrators can work with local organizations like Equality NC and Safe Schools NC to implement some great resources into curricula. Trained staff at these organizations can answer questions and concerns about dealing with these topics in class.

Educate staff and students about rights for LGBTQ+ students. LGBTQ+ students face discrimination and harassment at school all too often. Many school officials and staff know little about how the law requires them to protect LGBTQ+ students. Refer staff to the [ACLU](#) and [Equality NC](#).

Resources

2018 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, Human Rights Campaign <https://www.hrc.org/resources/2018-LGBTQ+-youth-report>.

About Suicide, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention <https://afsp.org/>

Birkett, M., Newcomb, M.E., & Mustanski, B. (2014). Does it Get Better? A Longitudinal Analysis of Psychological Distress and Victimization in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56 (3), 280-285.

[Do's and Don'ts for Working with Transgender Students](#). Safe Schools NC.

Durham Crisis Response Center, www.durhamcrisisresponse.org

Equality NC's Youth Policy, Equality North Carolina, <https://equalityncfoundation.org/our-youth>

Gender Spectrum, www.genderspectrum.org

Get Help, It Gets Better Project, <https://itgetsbetter.org/get-help/#/united-states/>

GLSEN, [The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools](#)

GLSEN, The 2019 National School Climate Survey, <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>

How Classroom Educators Can Create Safe(r) Spaces. Safe Schools NC. 2018.

https://docs.wixstatic.com/uq/d/2b269b_afa3bf08d066405a941668c99bcbdb42.pdf

[How to Improve Mental Health Care for LGBT Youth](#), American Progress,

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/reports/2010/12/09/8787/how-to-improve-mental-health-care-for-lgbt-youth/>

Inclusion and Respect: GLSEN Resources for Educators, GLSEN, <https://www.glsen.org/>

Know Your Rights! A Guide for LGBT High School Students, ACLU, <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/know-your-rights-guide-lgbt-high-school-students>

Lesson Plans for Elementary, Middle and High School Teachers, Safe Schools Coalition, <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-lessonplans.html>

Lesson Plans. <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/lesson-plans-home>

LGBT Center of Raleigh, www.lgbtceterofraleigh.com

LGBTQ+ Center of Durham, www.LGBTQ+centerofdurham.org

LGBT History Month, [lgbthistorymonth.com, https://lgbthistorymonth.com/resources](http://lgbthistorymonth.com/resources)

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LGBT National Health Center www.glbthotline.org

LGBT Training Curricula for Behavioral Health and Primary Care Practitioners, SAMHSA,

<https://www.samhsa.gov/behavioral-health-equity/lgbt/curricula>

Professional Training for Your School, Welcoming Schools,

<http://www.welcomingschools.org/training/request-a-training/>

Respect, Resilience and LGBT Students, ASCD, [http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx)

[leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx)

Safe Schools NC Resources, Safe Schools NC, <https://www.safeschoolsnc.org/resources.html>

The Trevor Project-Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ+ students, The Trevor Project,

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

The Trevor Project, National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health, 2019,

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Trevor-Project-National-Survey-Results-2019.pdf>

The Trevor Project's 2020 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020/>

The Trevor Project's National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2021,

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/?section=Introduction>

LGBT History Month, lgbthistorymonth.com, <https://lgbthistorymonth.com/resources>

LGBT National Health Center www.glbthotline.org

LGBT Training Curricula for Behavioral Health and Primary Care Practitioners, SAMHSA,

<https://www.samhsa.gov/behavioral-health-equity/lgbt/curricula>

Professional Training for Your School, Welcoming Schools,

<http://www.welcomingschools.org/training/request-a-training/>

Respect, Resilience and LGBT Students, ASCD, [http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx)

[leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Respect,-Resilience,-and-LGBT-Students.aspx)

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The Trevor Project, National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, 2019,

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Trevor-Project-National-Survey-Results-2019.pdf>

Last updated June 3, 2021