

LGBTQ+ Students: Family Reactions and School Support

American youth, on average, spend more time in school than any other non-home setting. Schools play a major role in providing or failing to provide support for students who are experiencing problems (Adelman & Taylor, 2017,2020). LGBTQ+ students are among those to whom schools are paying increasing attention.

LGBTQ+ individuals (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) experience socially-based stress from encountering discrimination, concealment or disclosure of their identities, expectations of rejection, and internalized homonegativity (Meyer, 2003). Sociocultural ideologies that emphasize heterosexism and gender conformity may fuel stigmatizing and oppressive environments. Furthermore, these environments are also known to reinforce expectations for rejection, which may cause one to conceal their identity to avoid further negative remarks, potentially resulting in more psychological distress (Kelleher, 2009).

About Family Rejection

Family support is a critical facet of child and adolescent development. Unfortunately, a youngster identifying as a sexual minority often experiences family reactions as an additional source of stress rather than support, and this can lead to physical and social-emotional problems. In contrast, LGBTQ+ youth who lack family support but who have high support from others tend to display a degree of resilience to stressors (McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2016).

Family reactions may include efforts to change, deny, minimize, discourage, or prevent LGBTQ+ identity (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008; McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2016; Resnick et al., 1997). Family rejection is the leading reason for homelessness and placement in foster care among LGBTQ+ youth and is associated with such health risk behaviors as suicide, depression, drug use, and unprotected sexual intercourse (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). High parental rejection is also associated with identity affirmation struggles (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013). All this may play a role in creating an internal dilemma between the youngster's desires and beliefs, potentially fueling internalized homonegativity.

The disclosure of sexual orientation or identity is commonly known as coming-out (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009). Internalized homonegativity, which is the internalization of negative societal messages about one's gender or sexual orientation, is typically experienced early in the coming-out process when heteronormative assumptions prevail (Berg, Munthe-Kaas, & Ross, 2016).

Parent-child relationship often are disrupted when parents learn that a child identifies as a sexual minority (Tharinger, 2000). A third of children and early adolescents experience acceptance, another third experience rejection; others do not disclose until later (Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2012). Some who identify as a sexual minority may feel rejected even without an explicit disclosure (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006).

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The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,
Email: smhp@ucla.edu Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Research suggests that parents generally become more accepting of their youngster's sexual identity over time (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks & Sinclair, 2010). Family acceptance and support of one's identity is associated with positive health outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, social support, general health) and protection against negative health outcomes (e.g., depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts). A critical exception is sexual risk behavior (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). It should be noted that family acceptance and rejection can co-occur, especially for families initially learning about their youngster's sexual identity (Ryan et al., 2010).

About the School's Role in Supporting LGBTQ+ Students

Despite family-based stressors, a majority of sexual minority youth demonstrate resilience and are motivated to seek support beyond family members (Parra, Bell, Benibgui, Helm, & Hastings, 2017; Zimmerman, Darnell, Rhew, Lee, & Kaysen, 2015). Schools have a prominent role to play in providing such supports.

Facilitating Positive Peer Relationships and Support

Peer social support has been found to protect against the adverse effects associated with family rejection and also the victimization often experienced because of identifying as a sexual minority (Parra et al., 2017). With this in mind, many schools have promoted Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

GSAs are student-led groups that are open to all students regardless of sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2007). GSAs typically aim to provide LGBTQ+ students and their allies support to educate the larger student community about and advocate for LGBTQ+ concerns. GSAs are meant to provide LGBTQ+ youngsters with the sense of belonging they may not have gotten in other parts of their lives.

GSA members report their involvement produced a range of positive outcomes (e.g., personal growth, empowerment, development of relationships). GSAs may cultivate individual and collective empowerment through discussions on pertinent topics (e.g., coming-out), connecting with supportive faculty or mentors, and awareness of healthy coping strategies (Garcia-Alonso, 2004; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Lapointe, 2015; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010).

Aside from individual benefits, GSAs may also help enhance a school's climate. For example, a correlational study reported that members and nonmembers of GSAs indicated similar feelings of safety and less fear, less likelihood of skipping school because of fear, and both had better academic achievement than students in schools without GSAs (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Moreover, reports indicate that students in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear derogatory remarks related to sexual orientation or to report feeling physically unsafe because of their sexual orientation or gender expression (GLSEN, 2007).

87% of American teens indicate that they met their close friends at school
Anderson & Jiang (2018)

School Personnel and Curriculum

School personnel can play an important role in providing supports for LGBTQ+ students related to safety at school, healthy development, and much more (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). For example, they can prevent vulnerable students from experiencing a variety of school-related problems (e.g., help students relate positively with each other, provide academic supports); they can be role models in challenging homophobia and sociocultural biases (e.g., calling out discriminatory acts; adopting gender-neutral/inclusive language).

In terms of school curriculum, the inclusion of topics related to LGBTQ+ and other underrepresented groups is seen as another facet of enhancing equity of opportunity throughout a society. With respect to school climate, inclusive curricula aim at increasing supportive student exchanges and decreasing bullying, victimization, and other negative peer interactions (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008).

School support for students in need also includes referrals for personalized supports (e.g., to address physical and mental health concerns, social service assistance, etc.).

According to the National School Climate Survey, 62% of LGBTQ+ students reported that their school has a GSA, almost all LGBTQ+ students (98%) could identify at least one supportive school staff member, but 67% of LGBTQ+ students were never taught about any LGBTQ+-related topics in any of their classes (Kosciw, Clark, Truong & Zongrone, 2020). In fact, several states (Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi) currently have "no promo homo" laws that ban the representation of LGBTQ+-related topics and issues in their school curriculums (GLSEN, 2018). The presence of these laws may prevent other supportive actions such as the establishment of GSAs or provision of training for school personnel on LGBTQ+ topics and may increase prejudice or discrimination within the school environment (GLSEN, 2018).

Concluding Comments

Clearly, family rejection is harmful. Clearly, schools can be a supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students. Clearly, the needs of such students overlap those of other groups of students (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, immigrants, students with disabilities, those with emotional problems, those who are bullied).

To effectively meet their mission, schools must address the needs of all students who are experiencing facets of their life that interfere with equity of opportunity to succeed at school. Efforts such as GSAs and inclusionary curricula have been identified as positive steps in enhancing positive outcomes at school. However, it is important to recognize that the well-being of countless students depends on schools having a comprehensive system of student/learning supports that meets the needs of all. Such a system is especially vital given the increasing number of learning, behavior, and emotional problems confronting educators after the COVID-19 pandemic.

As schools move on to address the many barriers to learning and teaching, the reality is that existing approaches are fragmented and marginalized in school improvement policy. To be more effective, schools must start a process for transforming student/learning supports in ways that substantially and substantively address a broad range of barriers to learning and teaching.

Resources Used in Preparing This Resource

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For more, see our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

For example, see *LGBTQ+* - http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qp3017_02.htm

This Quick Find has links to resources such as:

- > *About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture*
- > *Bullying and LGBT Students*
- > *Body Image in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youngsters*
- > *Students Who are Undocumented and Identify as Queer*
- > *Transgender Students and Schools*

Also see:

- > *Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom Resources*
https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/GLSEN_LGBTQ_Inclusive_Curriculum_Resource_2019_0.pdf
- > *Helping Families Support Their LGBTQ Children*
<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/A-Practitioner-s-Resource-Guide-Helping-Families-to-Support-Their-LGBT-Children/PEP14-LGBTKIDS>
- > *Policy Recommendations to Support LGBTQ Students*
<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/GLSEN-Respect-For-All-Policy-Resource.pdf>