

Excerpts from "A Practitioner's Resource Guide:
Helping Families to Support Their LGBT Children"
from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services
Administration)

Increasing Family Support: How to Help Right Now

Given the early ages of coming out and the critical need for family education and guidance, the dearth of targeted services to help diverse families support their LGBT children is a significant barrier to addressing the prevention, care, and support needs of LGBT children and adolescents. Until such services are widely available, practitioners and agencies can take several basic steps to respond to these needs in the following ways (Ryan & Diaz, 2011):

- Provide training on engaging and supporting families with LGBT children for all practitioners and agencies that work with children, youth, and families (see Resources, p. 12).
- Include LGBT young people and families when describing populations served in agency literature, brochures, outreach activities, and websites to ensure that LGBT youth and families know that your agency welcomes them and will provide services for them.
- Include information on the importance of family support and on the relationship between family acceptance and rejection and health risks and well-being for LGBT youth in all parent and caregiver education resources, activities, and programs.
- Ask adolescent patients and clients about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Ask about family reactions to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, including specific behaviors that parents, families, and caregivers use to respond to their child's sexual orientation and gender expression.
- Provide education, support, and counseling to parents, families, foster parents, and caregivers who are engaging in rejecting behaviors. This includes using educational materials to help them understand the impact of their behaviors on their LGBT child (see Resources below), and providing coaching, counseling, peer support, and family therapy.
- Include families and caregivers of LGBT children and youth on advisory groups for child, youth, and family service programs and agencies.
- Do outreach to invite and include families and caregivers of LGBT children and youth and their LGBT children in recreational, social, and community activities and events offered by practitioners, programs, and agencies that serve children, youth, and families.
- Include LGBT books, brochures, and posters in agency waiting rooms, offices, and care facilities. Many LGBT youth and those who may be questioning their identity look for "safe zone" or rainbow stickers to indicate that a provider will be open and respectful in providing support and addressing needs related to their LGBT identity.

Family Rejection & Health Risks ***(Ryan et al., 2009)***

LGBT young adults who reported high 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

Family Acceptance & Well-being ***(Ryan et al., 2010)***

Family acceptance helps:

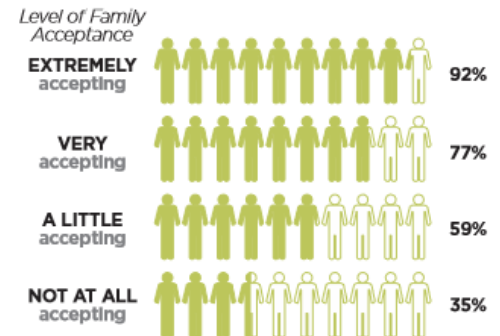
- protect against depression, suicidal behavior, and substance abuse
- promote self-esteem, social support, and overall health

Family Acceptance Project – Core Assumptions

(Ryan & Diaz, 2011)

- Assumes that families love their children and want them to have a good life. At the same time, we acknowledge that their hopes and dreams for their children's future are shaped by cultural and religious beliefs that may be at odds with their child or adolescent's sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.
- Meets families where they are. This includes starting at the family's level of knowledge, expectations, and beliefs about their child's sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.
- Uses a strengths framework to align our research findings, education and prevention messages, and family support approach with the parents' and caregivers' values about family, and the role of family in their culture and religious practice.
- Supports the need for families to be heard and understood. A critical aspect of our work is to provide a nonjudgmental space where parents and caregivers can tell their story and share their experiences and expressions of care and concern for their children's well-being that are rooted in culture, values, and specific beliefs such as faith traditions. Recognizes that parents and caregivers who are seen as rejecting their LGBT child are motivated by care and concern to help their child "fit in," have a "good life," and be accepted by others.
- Understands that family behaviors are not isolated incidents, but occur in a cultural context aimed at socializing their children and adolescents to adapt and be successful in a hetero-normative (heterosexual) society. These family behaviors aim to protect their children from harm, including victimization due to their LGBT identity and gender expression.
- Uses FAP research findings to link family reactions to their child's LGBT identity with health, mental health, and wellbeing. Beyond building a strong alliance between families and providers, family awareness of the consequences of their behavioral reactions is the most important mechanism of change.
- Understands that parents and families experience their lack of knowledge about LGBT issues as inadequacy that feels disempowering and shameful. Many families perceive their children's LGBT identity as a loss, particularly as a loss of control over their children's future. Providers should help families validate and address these feelings by affirming the importance of family support to build their child's self-esteem, to promote their child's well-being, and to buffer rejection and negative reactions from others.
- Recognizes that when rejecting and accepting behaviors co-exist, parents and caregivers experience ambivalence, and their struggle to validate their LGBT child results in decreased support and increased risk. Education and learning how their reactions affect their LGBT children can improve communication and help parents and caregivers respond in ways that help their LGBT child feel supported and loved rather than misunderstood or rejected.

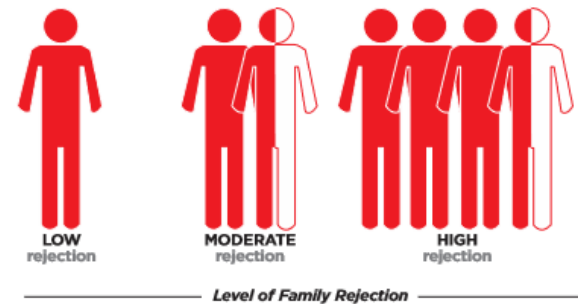
FAMILY ACCEPTANCE DURING ADOLESCENCE & PERCEPTIONS OF BEING A HAPPY LGBT ADULT



Source: *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children* by Caitlin Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University, 2009. Copyright © Caitlin Ryan, PhD. Reprinted with permission.

Family Rejection & Risk for HIV

RISK FOR HIV INFECTION AMONG LGBT YOUNG ADULTS REJECTED BY FAMILIES IN ADOLESCENCE
Ages 21-25



Source: *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children* by Caitlin Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University, 2009. Copyright © Caitlin Ryan, PhD. Reprinted with permission.

Family Rejection & Risk for Suicide

LIFETIME SUICIDE ATTEMPTS BY LGBT YOUNG ADULTS REJECTED BY FAMILIES IN ADOLESCENCE
Ages 21-25



Source: *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children* by Caitlin Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University, 2009. Copyright © Caitlin Ryan, PhD. Reprinted with permission.

Helping Families Decrease Risk & Increase Well-Being for Their LGBT Children

Families respond to their LGBT children based on what they know, what they hear from their family, clergy, close friends, and information sources, including providers who may also have misinformation about sexual orientation and gender identity, especially in childhood and adolescence. As a result, parents and families who believe that homosexuality and gender non-conformity are wrong or are harmful for their LGBT children may respond in a variety of ways to try to prevent their children from becoming gay or transgender.

This may include: preventing their child from having an LGBT friend, learning about their LGBT identity, or participating in a support group for LGBT youth (such as a Gay Straight Alliance or school diversity club), or excluding their child from family events and activities. Families and caregivers who respond in these ways do so without understanding that these reactions are experienced as rejection by their LGBT children and that they are significantly related to attempted suicide and other serious health concerns for LGBT young people (e.g., Ryan, 2009). Parents and families who engage in these behaviors are typically motivated by helping their children and protecting them from harm. In this case, families are trying to prevent their children from adopting what they perceive as a “lifestyle” or “choice” that they believe will hurt them.

FAP has developed research-based multicultural education resources to teach providers how to talk about these issues with families, to educate families on sexual orientation and gender identity, and to show them ways to help and support their LGBT children. Several key approaches can help families learn to support their LGBT children, across a wide range of practice settings and service systems (Ryan & Diaz, 2011). These include the following:

- Engage, approach, and connect with families and caregivers by meeting them “where they are,” and view each family as an ally.
- Let parents and caregivers tell their story. Parents and caregivers also need to express their anxieties and fears about how others might treat or hurt their LGBT child. This step is critical to building an alliance and to understanding their perspective.
- Give families respectful language to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Educate families on how family rejecting behaviors affect their LGBT child. This approach has found that helping parents and families understand the serious health risks related to family rejection lays the groundwork to focus on reducing their LGBT child's risk, to provide support and to accept their LGBT child.
- Educate families on how supportive and accepting behaviors affect their LGBT child. More than 50 family accepting behaviors were identified that are related to better overall health, higher self-esteem and significantly lower levels of depression, suicidal behavior, and substance abuse (Ryan et al., 2010). These include a range of behaviors such as supporting their child's gender expression, welcoming their child's LGBT friends to family events and activities, and helping their congregation become more welcoming of LGBT people (for information on key behaviors, see Ryan, 2009).
- Families that don't accept their children's sexual orientation and gender identity can still support their LGBT children and decrease rejecting behaviors to protect them from harm. Parents and caregivers who believe that homosexuality or gender non-conformity are wrong can still support their gay or transgender child by modifying or changing rejecting behaviors that increase their LGBT child's risk, without accepting an identity they think is wrong.
- A little change makes a difference in decreasing family rejecting behaviors and in increasing support for their LGBT children.