

A Parent's Guide to Supporting Your Child's Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation



PrairieCare
A Division of Newport Healthcare



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Being a parent or caregiver is a journey.

Just like your child, who's discovering the world for the first time, you're having new experiences—with the added responsibility that comes with parenthood.

That's why, when your child begins exploring aspects of their gender or sexual identity, you can feel a bit confused, especially if it looks different from what it was like for you at their age.

For example, if your loved one comes out as being attracted to the same sex or expresses their gender differently, your mind may flood with worries and questions:

- *What does this mean?*
- *How will their friends and classmates treat them?*
- *Will they have a harder time in life because of it?*

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These questions come from a place of concern for your child's safety and how they might be impacted now that they may be perceived as "different." They indicate your desire for your child to be happy, safe, and able to flourish in life.



While you can't control everything your child encounters in the world, you can be their home base—a source of protection from the harder things they may encounter along the way.

This guide provides some basic tools to start your journey of understanding, encouraging, and supporting your child, teen, or young adult as they explore parts of their authentic self.

“ As emerging studies highlight the pivotal role of family acceptance and support in better mental health outcomes, you, as a parent, can become a safe space for your child. ”



Why Support and Acceptance Matter

➤ Why Support and Acceptance Matter

Your role as a parent is crucial. Research consistently shows that the support and acceptance of parental figures (parents, stepparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc.) are significant factors in better mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.

The Trevor Project, a leading organization for suicide prevention among LGBTQ+ youth, publishes a national survey that illustrates just how vital parental support can be. Here are a few takeaways from the survey and from a study by the Family Acceptance Project:

- 88 percent of LGBTQ+ young people say the best way people can show support, and acceptance is “trusting that I know who I am.”
- LGBTQ+ young people who reported living in very accepting communities attempted suicide at less than half the rate of those who reported living in very unaccepting communities.
- Only 4 percent of LGBTQ+ youth consider their parents or caretakers as someone they would consider role models or someone they would look up to.
- LGBTQ+ youth who experience family rejection are eight times more likely to attempt suicide, compared to those who are accepted by their families.

The Positive Impact of Parental Support

Research shows that LGBTQ+ kids who received affirming support by their parents and caregivers are more likely to have:

- Higher self-esteem
- Fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Less substance use
- Reduced suicidal risk



It's essential to understand that mental health challenges do not emerge because of a child's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Rather, LGBTQ+ youth face a higher risk of anxiety, depression, and trauma due to experiencing mistreatment and stigma in society, and sometimes from a lack of acceptance from family or friends as well. And for youth with multiple marginalized identities, such as a Black individual who identifies as nonbinary, the risk can be much higher.


Remember, your support is key to your child's quality of life, but you don't have to do it alone. A network of supportive individuals exists in your community, including school or college counselors, community support groups for parents and kids, and gender/sexuality alliances.

Your ability and willingness to create a welcoming space that affirms your child's exploration of their identity is powerful—and can even be life saving.

In the next section, we provide guidance on creating an affirming space that empowers youth and celebrates who they are.



How to Support and Empower Your Child by Creating an **Affirming Space**



An affirming space can be a place, an individual, or a family; it is an environment in which an LGBTQ+ child, teen, or young adult feels they can truly be who they are, without fear of discrimination or prejudice. Having a home, workplace, or school that is affirming reduces suicide risk for LGBTQ+ young people, according to Trevor Project research.

Here are some ways parents can help their children feel seen, heard, and supported.

> Love them unconditionally.

The best way for parents to support their LGBTQ+ teen or young adult child is to show them, through both words and actions, that you love and accept them, and you will always be there for them—even if you are still working to understand what this new information means.

Celebrate their strengths, appreciate their uniqueness and self-expression, and let them know you will be walking beside them on their path.

> Listen with empathy.

Working to understand and support your child's journey in exploring their gender identity and/or sexual orientation doesn't mean not talking about it with them. A study by the Family Acceptance Project found that talking with youth respectfully about their LGBTQ+ identity, and openly discussing LGBTQ+ issues with them, was associated with more than 40 percent lower odds of attempting suicide among cisgender LGBTQ+ youth.

Ask your kids about their experience, listen actively with empathy, and validate how they feel. It's okay to let them know that there are areas where you might not have all the answers, but you are willing to learn alongside them.

> Welcome their friends and community.

Navigating your teen or young adult child's friendships and romantic relationships as a parent can be tricky, regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation. But it's important to work toward letting go of judgment or negativity, even if their new romantic interest or friend group isn't what you imagined for them.

That said, there are issues that transcend sexuality or gender identity and are important for all parents to offer support on. Don't hesitate to speak up if you feel your child isn't being treated respectfully or is in a toxic or abusive relationship, regardless of who the other person is.



➤ Become an ally.

One of the most powerful ways you can support your child is to become an ally. That doesn't mean you need to go to the Pride Parade every year or have a Pride flag on your lawn. It can be a simple act of recognizing when harm may be being done to LGBTQ+ youth, and showing up to help prevent that.

In the Family Acceptance Project study, standing up for youth when they were being mistreated due to their LGBTQ+ identity was associated with significantly lower odds of attempting suicide. By taking on this role, you send a powerful message to your child that you are committed to their well-being and happiness, as well as that of those other children and people in the greater LGBTQ+ community.

“ Becoming an ally means actively supporting and advocating for your child’s well-being in all aspects of their life, including the aspects of their identity. ”

Here are some ways to become an ally:

- Get to know the issues facing your child
- Be brave and speak up when you hear negativity or discrimination against them or others
- Do your best to openly embrace your child's authentic self among family and friend groups
- Work with educators to ensure your child's school is providing a safe, inclusive environment
- Keep an open mind and heart along the journey

Remember, the journey of becoming an ally is ongoing, and can present new challenges along the way. As long as you continue to learn, grow, and remain open to feedback, you'll gain trust and respect from your child and from their friends in the greater LGBTQ+ community.



➤ Use the right pronouns.

If your child is using new pronouns or a new chosen name, it may not feel natural at first to use these. However, doing so is proven to support their well-being.

Trevor Project research shows that trans and nonbinary youth whose pronouns are respected by the people they live with were half as likely to attempt suicide as those whose pronouns were not respected.

If you make a mistake with pronouns (known as misgendering) or call them by their old name, use this as an opportunity to show up and let your child know you are trying. Just correct yourself, offer a quick apology, and let them know you will try to do better next time.

➤ Support your child to access mental healthcare if they need it.

As we have explained, LGBTQ+ youth are vulnerable to anxiety and depression, and have a higher likelihood of contemplating and attempting suicide due to the stigma they may face.

If your child needs mental health support, look for a therapist or psychiatric provider, outpatient program, or more intensive treatment program that provides culturally competent LGBTQ+ mental health services. If you're not sure where to start, call us at **952-826-8475** and our team will guide you in finding the right therapist and treatment program for your loved one.


Being an advocate and safe space for your child means giving yourself support and compassion, too. In the next section, we'll look at how parents can navigate the journey with greater ease and more resources.

84%

of LGBTQ+ teens and young adults want mental healthcare, but only half of those are able to access it.



How Parents Can Embrace the Journey



Parenting an LGBTQ+ child can be emotional and challenging, and also beautiful and rewarding. Like any journey worth taking, there will be ups and downs.

But as a parent, you have a unique opportunity to get to know your child in a new light, to grow and nurture your relationship, and to be a source of strength through difficult times.

Here's how to start.

Do your research.

The more you know about a topic, the less scary and overwhelming it will feel. You'll begin to learn more about what your child will experience as they start to explore their gender or sexuality, and how best to support them.

Making the effort to research will help you understand their experience, and will show your child that you've made a commitment to education and advocacy.

There are numerous LGBTQ+ organizations and educational websites. Organizations like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) offer comprehensive resources.

Here are some other helpful organizations for parents:

- [The Family Acceptance Project](#): a research, intervention, education, and policy initiative to prevent health and mental health risks and to promote well-being for LGBTQ+ children and youth
- [The Trevor Project](#): the leading suicide prevention and crisis intervention nonprofit organization for LGBTQ+ young people.
- [Strong Family Alliance](#): an organization dedicated to saving lives and preserving families by helping children come out and parents become informed supporters and allies.



Here are some recommended podcasts and books:

Podcasts

- [Just Breathe: Parenting Your LGBTQ Teen](#)
- [The Queer Family Podcast](#)
- [The Proud Parent Club](#)

Books

- *Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, or Questioning Son or Daughter*, by Kevin Jennings
- *Unconditional: A Guide to Loving and Supporting Your LGBTQ Child*, by Telaina Eriksen (Author), Eric Rosswood (Foreword)
- *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*, by Jeannie Gainsburg

If you feel overwhelmed, don't worry. Go at your own pace, make notes, and ask questions. This is a marathon, not a sprint!



➤ Find a community among parents.

As a parent of an LGBTQ+ child, you may feel isolated at times. You may have thoughts or questions that are not appropriate to share with your children. Connecting with other parents gives you a safe space to share your experience, ask questions, and learn from those who've forged the path before you.

Here are some places to connect online and in person:

- **Local organizations and chapters:** Local LGBTQ+ organizations, including PFLAG chapters, host meetings and events tailored to parents.
- **Online forums:** Platforms like Facebook and specialized LGBTQ+ parent forums can connect you with a supportive community.
- **Local events:** Attending LGBTQ+ awareness events or performances, such as musicals or art shows, can help you meet other parents and allies while supporting local talent.

Taking that first step may feel scary, but it will be worth it. These new connections can lead to lasting relationships and help you build a greater understanding of the LGBTQ+ community.

➤ Practice patience and compassion—with your child and yourself.

The journey of understanding and supporting your child's exploration of their identity does not have to be a perfect one. There will be moments of growth and learning—and like anything in life, moments when you're going to get it wrong.

The important thing is that each time this happens, you make an effort to restore your child's sense of safety and trust. Acknowledge the mistake, validate how they feel about it, and vow to do better next time.

Each step forward, no matter how small, helps you become a stronger ally and supportive parent. By remaining open, adaptable, and willing to admit to and correct your mistakes, you can navigate this journey, alongside your child, with resilience and love.



Signs That Your Child May Need More Support

As we've explained in this guide, LGBTQ+ children and young adults are at a higher risk of mental health challenges because they often face rejection, bullying, discrimination, and physical violence. If you notice any of the following signs in your child, they may need additional support from a mental health professional.

- Decline in grades
- Excessive worry or fear
- Frequent crying
- Low energy and motivation
- Extreme behavior changes (defiance, emotional outbursts, sadness, withdrawal)

PrairieCare's Gender-Responsive Support

With locations across Minnesota, PrairieCare provides a safe, affirming space for people of all ages to heal and feel empowered in their mental health. As a division of Newport Healthcare, we partner with The Trevor Project to provide specialized training to our staff around gender-affirming care.

With a full continuum of care, PrairieCare offers:

- Individual and group therapy using proven, evidence-based modalities
- Trauma-informed approaches to provide a safe environment that respects the unique history of patients
- Family therapy as needed to improve communication and trust so young people feel safe turning to parents and caretakers for support
- Gender-responsive care according to gender identity, including appropriate identification of patients in programming and in medical reporting
- Specialized programs that support patients at various life stages and acuity

**Contact us today for a no-cost mental health screening:
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