

A CAREGIVER'S GUIDE

TO UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING YOUR LGBTQ+ YOUNG PERSON

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This booklet includes information and resources for parents and caregivers of young people who identify as LGBTQ+. The information and resources here can help you have important conversations, understand the experience of your young person, and learn more about how to support your young person.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



This booklet was created in partnership between the Massachusetts Youth Diversion Program (MYDP), the Department of Youth Services (DYS), and the Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL).

If you notice something missing or out of date in this resource guide, please let us know by emailing info@ppal.net.

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QUICK TIPS FOR POSITIVE PARENTING WHEN DISCUSSING YOUR CHILD'S IDENTITY

1

Be a safe adult for your child

Your child may be scared or nervous to have this discussion with you (or with anyone). This is a unique chance to offer your child comfort, as well as support and affirmation. Be as present as you can be.

2

Take a deep breath

Many parents or caregivers feel nervous or emotional when having unfamiliar conversations with their child. Take a deep breath and remember to regulate your own emotions so you can be a supportive parent for your child right now.

3

Listen to your child

Trust that they know themselves best. You might not have all the right words or answers and may even have many questions of your own. Be patient and supportive to explore alongside them with gentle curiosity.

4

Start with love

Affirmation is important. Many studies show that even if family members make mistakes, their LGBTQ+ children have better outcomes if their parents have patience and try to learn.

5

Be gentle with yourself, too

Practice self-compassion. Parenting is hard. You can still be loving while learning this new information.

6

Learn the basics

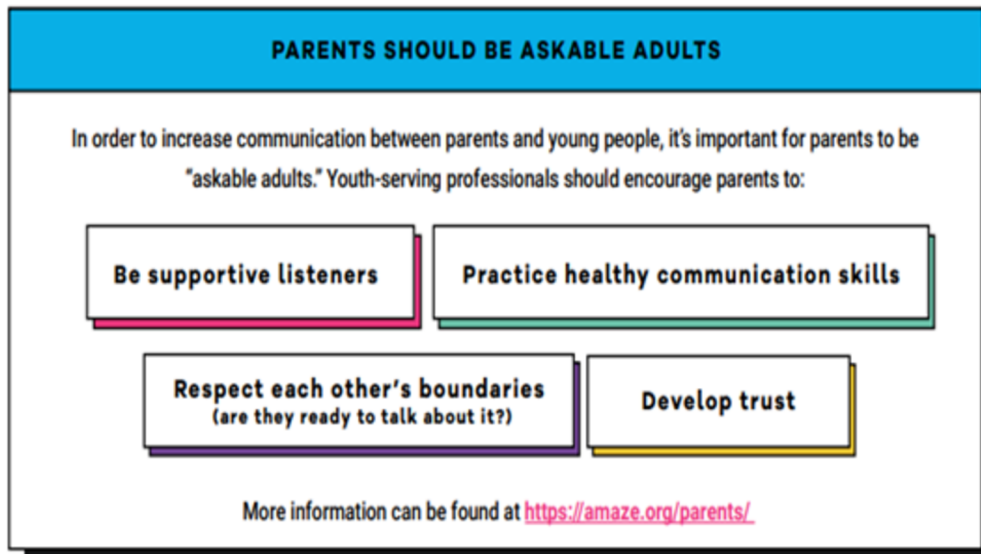
You will gain skills and confidence in time. This booklet is a great place to start. With practice and an open heart, you can continue to be a parent or caregiver who loves and supports their child while keeping them safe. Many families have been where you are now. You are not alone!



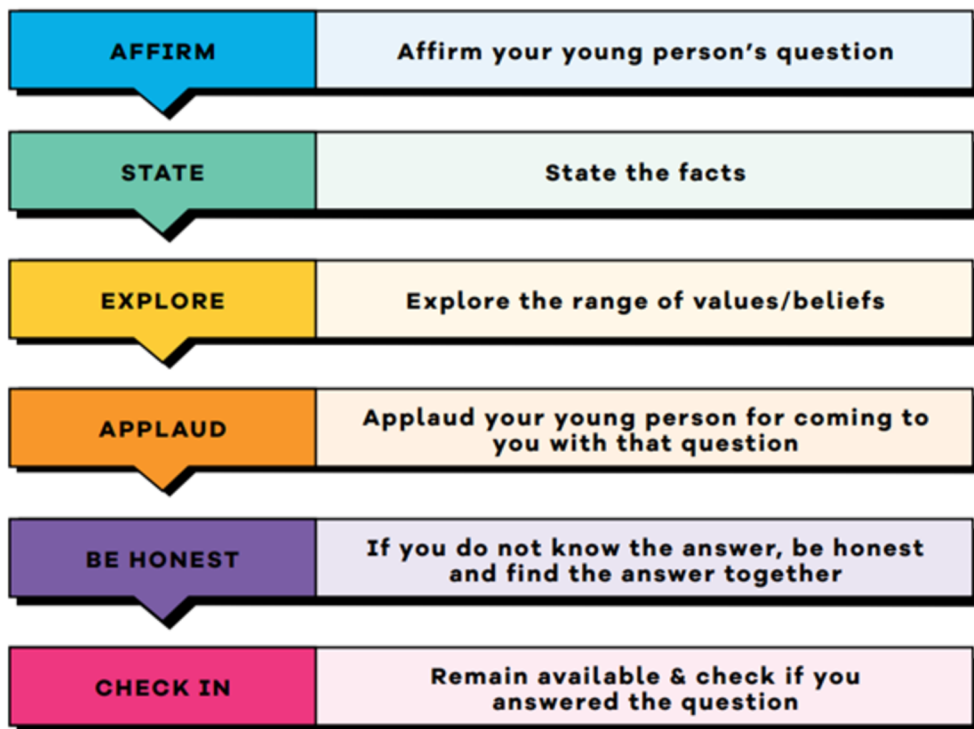
PART 1: UNDERSTANDING

HOW TO BE A SAFE PARENTAL SUPPORT

It can be challenging for parents or caregivers to discuss topics such as gender identity or sexual orientation with their children. Here are some tips on how to approach communication with your child around sensitive topics.



***Parent* refers to the adult primary caregiver(s) of an adolescent's basic needs*

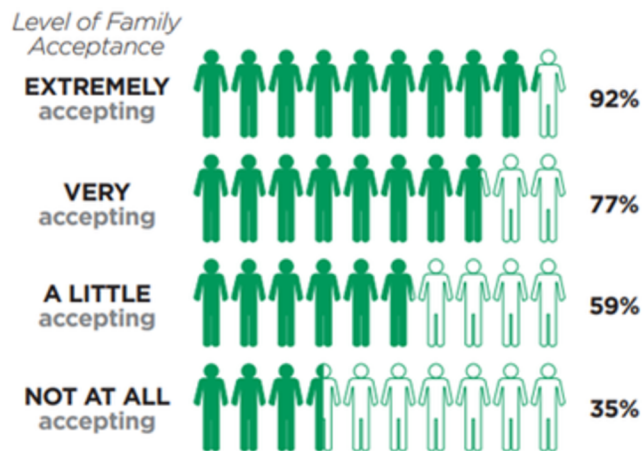


1

WHY ACCEPTANCE MATTERS

Family acceptance is vitally important to the happiness and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. Seeking to understand and accept your child can have a huge positive impact on their future.

Youth Believe They Can Be A Happy LGBT Adult



Ryan, Family Acceptance Project, 2009

2

UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER

It is important to distinguish between sexual orientation and gender in understanding a young person's identity. An individual's sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.

A person's **sex assigned at birth** is the sex an individual is assigned at birth by the doctor.

A person's **gender identity** refers to an individual's inherent sense of self as male, female, both, or neither. Someone's gender identity can be the same as or different from their sex assigned at birth.

A person's **gender expression** is how they present themselves to the world through clothing, accessories, behavior, mannerisms and other outward expressions.

Sexual orientation describes a person's attraction to other people.

Examples of words that describe:

Sex Assigned at Birth when a baby is born	Gender is a set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that societies assign to individuals based on their assigned sex.	Gender Identity a person's own understanding of their gender	Gender Expression how a person communicates or acts out gender	Sexual Orientation describes a person's attraction to others
female, male, intersex	man, woman, nonbinary, cis, transgender, agender, bigender	man, woman, nonbinary, cis, transgender, agender, bigender	feminine, masculine, androgynous, nonconforming	straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual
Example: Stephen was assigned male at birth. He identifies as a man (he is a cis man). Stephen dresses more feminine. He is bisexual.				
Example: Dylan was intersex at birth. She identifies as nonbinary and likes to dress more masculine. She is a lesbian (attracted to women).				
Example: Halina was assigned male at birth. She identifies as a woman (she is a transgender woman). Halina dresses feminine, and she is straight (attracted to men).				

COMMONLY USED TERMS

Common understanding of terminology and language is an important starting point for meaningful supportive dialogue. Here are some commonly used terms that may help you to understand your child's identity. The best practice is to use whatever language your child chooses for themselves. [3].

BISEXUAL

An adjective used to describe a person who has the potential to be physically, romantically, and/or emotionally attracted to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree.

GAY

An adjective used to describe a person whose physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people). Avoid identifying gay people as "homosexuals" an outdated term considered derogatory and offensive.

GENDER IDENTITY

This is how someone perceives themselves. It reflects an individual's understanding of their own gender. Be aware: The terms sexual orientation and gender identity are often confused, but they are different and not interchangeable. Anyone of any gender identity can be sexually attracted to any type of person.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING

A term used to describe people whose gender expression differs from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Please note that many cisgender people have gender expressions that are gender non-conforming. Simply having a non-conforming gender expression does not make someone trans or nonbinary. Nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming.

LESBIAN

A woman whose physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay or as gay women.

LGBTQ

Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. In settings offering support for youth, the Q can also stand for questioning. LGBTQ+ is also used, with the + added in recognition of all non-straight, non-cisgender identities.

[3] Adapted from GLAAD's Glossary of Terms:
<https://glaad.org/reference/terms/>

NONBINARY

Nonbinary is an adjective used by people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the binary gender categories of man and woman.

Nonbinary is an umbrella term that encompasses many different ways to understand one's gender.

QUEER

An adjective used by some people, particularly younger people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual (e.g., queer person, queer woman). Typically, for those who identify as queer, the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual are perceived to be too limiting and/or fraught with cultural connotations they feel do not apply to them. However, it is not a term everyone uses and can still be hurtful.



SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The scientifically accurate term for a person's enduring physical, romantic and/ or emotional attraction to another person. Sexual orientations can include heterosexual (straight), lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, and other orientations.

Avoid the offensive term "sexual preference," which is used to inaccurately suggest that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is voluntary and "curable." People need not have had specific (or any) sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation.

TRANSGENDER

An adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. People who are transgender may also use other terms, in addition to transgender, to describe their gender more specifically.

Conversely, a cisgender person is person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.



Gender Pronouns

Please note that these are not the only pronouns. There are an infinite number of pronouns as new ones emerge in our language. Always ask someone for their pronouns.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She is speaking. I listened to her. The backpack is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He is speaking. I listened to him. The backpack is his.
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They are speaking. I listened to them. The backpack is theirs.
Ze	Hir/Zir	Hirs/Zirs	Hirself/Zirself	Ze is speaking. I listened to hir. The backpack is zirs.

transstudent.tumblr.com
facebook.com/transstudent
twitter.com/transstudent

Design by Landyn Pan

For more information,
go to transstudent.org/graphics

TSER
Trans Student Educational Resources

Personal or gender pronouns are used as a substitute for a person's name. While we associate pronouns with gender, it is important to remember that a pronoun does not tell you what someone's gender identity or sexual orientation is.

Your child may ask to be called by pronouns other than what you used to refer to them previously. It can take time to relearn someone's pronouns. The best way to learn is to practice!

The English language does not have a unique gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun. Singular use of the pronoun *they* has been officially recognized as grammatically correct.

PART 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges than their peers. Annual surveys in the United States help us understand what concerns LGBTQ+ youth have and if they are getting the support they need.

The Trevor Project surveyed 18,000 young people nationally and found that 39% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously thought about attempting suicide in the past year — including 46% of transgender and nonbinary young people. LGBTQ+ youth of color reported higher rates than White peers. They also found that half of LGBTQ+ youth were not able to get the help they needed to deal with stress, anxiety, depression, or other mental health needs – and that half of those young people did not get the care they needed because they did not have a trusted adult to ask for help.

This means that affirming parents, caregivers, and supportive adults can be important protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, the report finds that when LGBTQ+ youth live in affirming communities, their risk for suicide drops by 50%. The HRC's report writes, "Family support can be one of the strongest assets and sources of confidence and resilience LGBTQ+ youth have," and that "Coming out" to one's parents and close family members can be an important and self-affirming developmental milestone in one's sexual orientation/gender identity journey.



Two of these surveys are The Trevor Project's National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)'s LGBTQ+ Youth Report.

[2] (Nath 2024)

[3] (Nath 2024)

PART 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

The choice to come out to one's parents and family is often driven by the pre-existing strength of their relationships, with LGBTQ+ youth more likely to disclose identity to their parents, and to do so earlier, when they already feel loved, supported, and cared for. Being met with parental and familial acceptance and affirmation after disclosing one's identity can further have a substantial impact on youth health and well-being, including increased self-esteem, and lower risk of depression and suicidality.



LGBTQ+ young people face a lot of challenges when it comes to experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health needs. Accepting and affirming families and communities are one of the strongest protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth, and there are resources and organizations to help each of us improve our support for LGBTQ+ youth.

[1] (Shoshana K. Goldberg 2023)

Two of these surveys are The Trevor Project's National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)'s LGBTQ+ Youth Report.

[2] (Nath 2024)

[3] (Nath 2024)

LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN MASSACHUSETTS

While 20% of LGBTQ+ youth in Massachusetts report experiencing harassment or discrimination, 90% of LGBTQ+ youth in Massachusetts report living in an overall accepting community.[1]



HERE ARE FIVE ACTIONS PARENTS OR CAREGIVERS CAN TAKE TO SHOW THEIR SUPPORT AND ACCEPTANCE OF YOUR LGBTQ+ CHILD:

Trust that my child knows themselves best

Stand up for my child

Don't support politicians who advocate for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation

Look up things about LGBTQ+ identities on your own to better understand

Respect your child's chosen pronouns

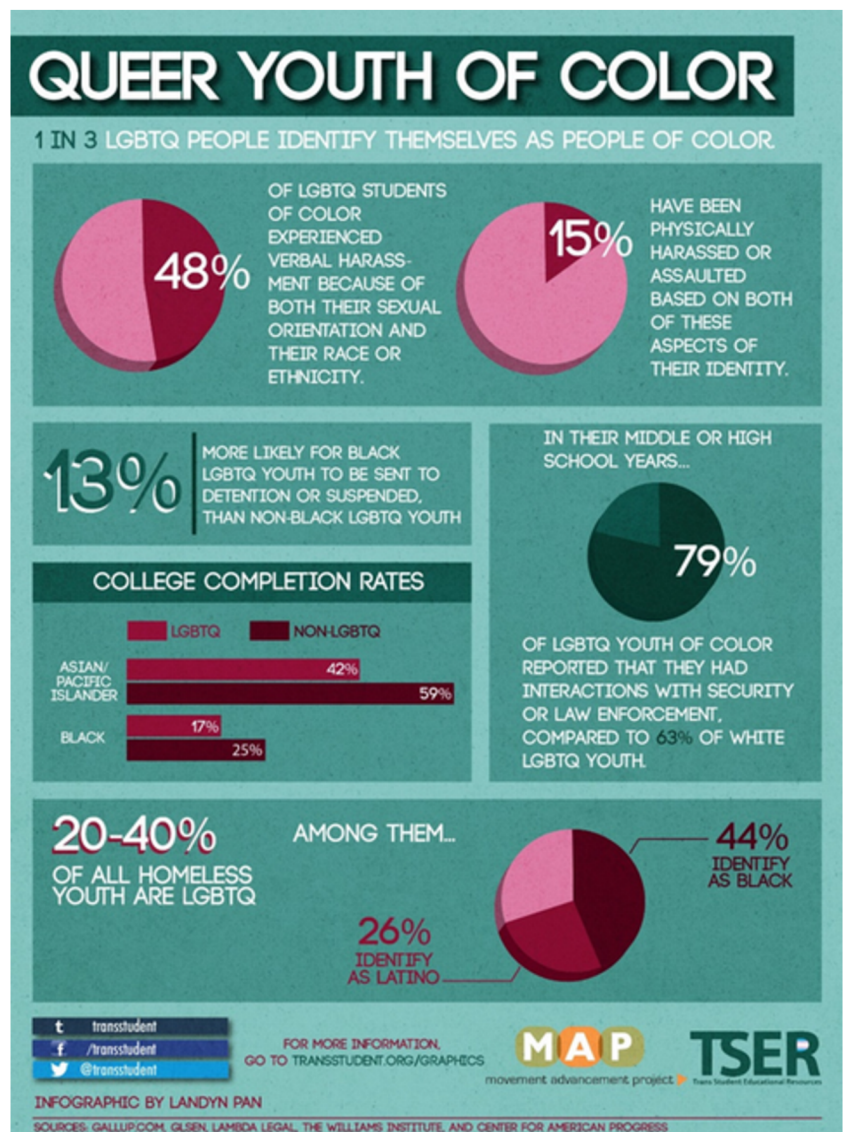
[1] (Nath 2024)

[2] (Massachusetts Coalition for Juvenile Justice Reform 2021)

LGBTQ+ YOUTH OF COLOR

LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color each experience specific challenges. The combined pressure of being both LGBTQ+ and a

youth of color can present additional stress and mental health challenges. For example, Native and indigenous LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of anxiety and depression, as well as attempted suicide compared to their peers of color and White peers. BIPOC LGBTQ+ youth are also at an increased risk of experiencing dating violence. According to the MA Commission on LGBTQ Youth's 2026 report, "QTBIPOC often lack sufficient access to programs that are both LGBTQ affirming, multilingual and anti-racist".

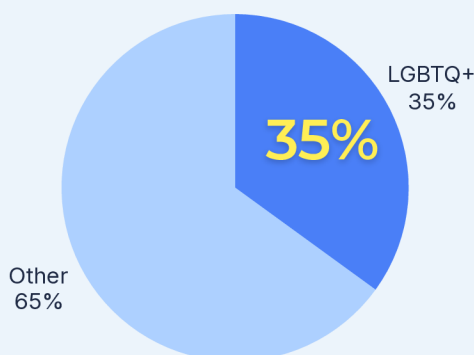


LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN STATE SYSTEMS

6-7%

In Massachusetts, it is estimated that 6-7% of young people involved with the Department of Youth Services are LGBTQ+.[1]

Female identifying young people make up more than one-third of all LGBTQ+ youth in DYS and are more likely to be youth of color. LGBTQ+ youth are 5.6 times more likely to have a history of sexual abuse and 3.3 times more likely to have a history of physical abuse compared to their straight counterparts, indicating a clear need to understand their experiences and histories for effective interventions at all stages of the juvenile justice system.[2]



Nationally, it is estimated that approximately up to 35% of young people in foster care identify as LGBTQ+.[3] Rejection of a young person's identity by their family is one explanation for why LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system.[4] Family rejection "has significant negative impacts that create lifelong elevated risks"[5] for LGBTQ+ youth. Family acceptance and affirmation is the strongest protective factor for LGBTQ+ youth.

[1] Mass DYS data FY2020-2025

[2] (Massachusetts Coalition for Juvenile Justice Reform 2021)

[3] (Hussey 2021)

[4] Massachusetts Coalition for Juvenile Justice 2021 Fact Sheet

[5] (Citizens for Juvenile Justice and GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders 2021)

PART 3: ACCEPTANCE AND AFFIRMATION

FAMILY ACCEPTANCE

The Family Acceptance Project is a research group based in California that studies the effects of family rejection and family acceptance of LGBTQ+ children and youth. Their family information booklet opens with a story from a grandmother:

“You have to start with the family. Now we know how harmful it is for gay kids not to be accepted, not to be loved, and to be victimized. The more we talk about it, and the more people embrace their gay children and form families where they are accepted and loved—and not discriminated—they will thrive, the kids will thrive.” LEONORA, MOTHER OF A LESBIAN DAUGHTER, WITH 2 GRANDCHILDREN[1]

The Family Acceptance Project’s work is essential to understanding how parents and caregivers can be champions for their LGBTQ+ children, and how that love and support reduces suicidality, while increasing their child’s vision for a happy future.

Any time a family is able to reduce shame or rejection, and increase acceptance – even a little bit – their LGBTQ+ child becomes more likely to live a longer, happier life, and go on to have their own children.

[1] (Ryan 2009)

**So, your child
has just told
you they are
LGBTQIA+...**

**Now
What?**



1

Show your child they are safe

- Thank them for sharing
- Tell them you love them
- Listen to their story with an open mind
- Celebrate their truth and identity in a special way, like going out for dinner or for ice cream

2

Consider your own bias

- Observe your thoughts without judgement
- Think about your own upbringing and experiences and how they may have shaped your feelings
- Want to examine your bias more?
Take an implicit bias test:
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

3

Be gentle with yourself and also with your child

- Your child's identity is not a decision or a result of something they did— it's just who they are
- This may be big news that takes time to process. Be patient with yourself and others as you all work to understand
- Don't share your child's news with others without their permission— it's their news to tell
- If anyone fails to respond with love or understanding, it's okay to apologize, try to repair, and learn

4

Be receptive to learning new things

- Educating yourself about LGBTQIA+ issues can help erase uncertainty and fear about the situation
- Find inspiration and encouragement from your child's unique life experience
- Learn more about the spectrum of gender and sexuality: [TrevorProject.org](https://www.trevorproject.org) and [FamilyAcceptanceProject.org](https://www.familyacceptanceproject.org) are two well respected resources

5

Find support in your local community

- Hearing from other families who have similar stories may help you gain more understanding about the LGBTQIA+ experience.
- Search for LGBTQIA+ groups in your area
- Consider getting involved in PRIDE groups through your child's school or local library



**Office of
Mental Health**

How to Be An Affirming Adult

Being an affirming adult goes beyond mere tolerance of LGBTQIA+ students and the expression of their gender or sexuality. Research has shown that school-based supports, such as affirming staff, inclusive school policies, curricular resources inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people, and GSAs, lead to drastically better outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students.

Pronouns

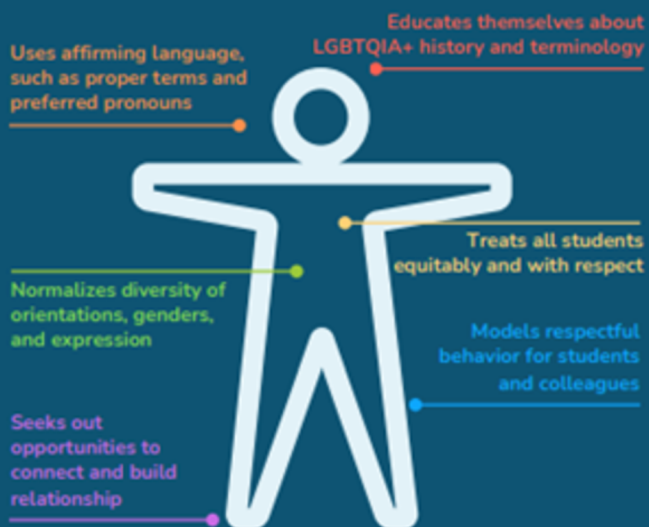
A pronoun is a word used to refer to a person in the third person. Some pronouns, such as he/him or she/her, are gendered, while others, such as they/them or ze/zir, are gender neutral.

Using a person's chosen name and pronouns is a key element of affirming someone's identity. The experience of being routinely misgendered can be hurtful.

Inclusion can be created by making space for people to share their chosen pronouns. Try introducing yourself with your pronouns or asking what pronouns someone uses when meeting.

Consider adding your personal pronouns to your email signatures and class syllabus. Doing so is a very visible way to be an ally.

Anatomy of an Affirming Adult



Inclusive Terminology

Instead of that:

Try this:

Sexual Preference

Sexual Orientation

A transgendered

Trans woman or
Trans male

Sex Change Surgery

Gender Affirmation
Surgery

Homosexual or homo

Gay, Lesbian,
or Bisexual

As you begin learning and using more affirming etiquette, remember it's normal to make mistakes. Practice your new skills frequently, and apologize in the moment when you make a mistake.

Additional Resources

- [Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Supporting LGBTQ Youth](#)
- [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\): TEAMS](#)
- [GLSEN: The 2019 National School Climate Survey](#)
- [CDC: Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey \(ABES 2021\)](#)
- [LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary](#)
- [Project Youth Affirm](#)
- [My Pronouns](#)
- [Pronouns and Misgendering: Resource Supporting Transgender and Gender Nonconforming \(GNC\) Educators and Students](#)
- [The Trevor Project: National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2021](#)

PART 4: RESOURCES

These are some great resources for parents or caregivers. You can click on the image or view it at the provided URL.



MaeBright specializes in LGBTQ+ people, identities, and communities, and also offers trainings and free consultations.

<https://www.maebright.com/>



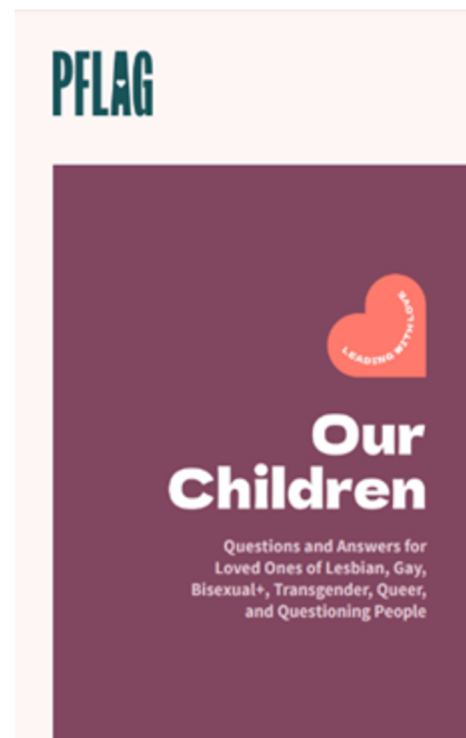
Video: So Your Child Just Came Out, What Should You Do? From the Strong Family Alliance
www.youtube.com



PPAL hosts a virtual Parents Raising LGBTQ+ Children support meeting. Free, confidential.
www.ppal.net



Family Acceptance Project's Youth & Family Resources
www.lgbtqfamilyacceptance.org



Guide: Our Children by PFLAG
www.pflag.org/resources/our-children

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