

# HANDLING WITH CARE

A TOOLKIT FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF LGBTQ+ YOUTH



On Family Support



*It can't be subtle. It can't be silent. It has to be affirming your kid almost every step of the way.*



LGBTQ+ Youth



# WOULD YOU CARE FOR LGBTQ+ YOUTH?

We want our kids to be happy, healthy, and surrounded by people who care about them. As the caretaker of a young person you have tremendous influence, power, and responsibility. This is your family. Your child, who you love. You have the opportunity to show up for your young person and make their life safer and healthier.

By offering support, parents and caregivers can create a safe and affirming environment that promotes positive mental and emotional well-being for their queer and trans children. Your youth and family will be better situated towards resilience if you are committed to staying in their corner, and this toolkit is here to help.

This toolkit is for caregivers, parents, and adults who want to be a source of support in the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Gender Expansive (LGBTQ+) youth. To create this resource, we held interviews with LGBTQ+ youth and their parents and caregivers. We uplift the knowledge they had to offer from their own lived experiences.

Adults can get overwhelmed by vocabulary, often asking, “What are the right words to use?” It is up to us to stay curious, commit to learning (and learning, and learning again!), and encourage youth to lead the way. **Using affirming words is only one piece of the work to reduce harm against queer and trans young people.** Terms and definitions are a good place to start. But! Your youth will always be the best source of information about their own experience.



## SCAN ME!

Use this QR code to access a collection of notable definitions to get you started.



# A CASE FOR CARE

LGBTQ+ young people are experiencing extreme antagonism in their homes, schools, and communities across the country. And Vermont is not immune to this harm. Trans and queer young people experience violence and the constant threat of harm daily. Politicians, social media, and our society at large provide a continuous barrage of messages that target LGBTQ+ youth, telling them they're not valued, cared for, or allowed to exist.

Queer and trans youth are subjected to the harmful messages of transphobia and homophobia. Many of these young people also hold intersecting identities such as being Black, Indigenous, and/or a Person of Color (BIPOC) or having a disability that subject them to the damaging impacts of racism and ableism. Furthermore, all young people are subjected to adultism (prejudice against young people), which limits their ability to change the systems of harm that target them.

Minority Stress Perspective describes the impact of the increased burden of stress that a person can carry when they navigate systems that cause harm, live in communities where they experience discrimination or bias, and brace themselves for interpersonal experiences of harm and rejection (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016).

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*If parents can teach their kids to be comfortable with themselves it will help them deal with any kind of rejection they might feel later.*

**Poor health outcomes like increases in suicidal thoughts or depression are not inherent to LGBTQ+ or other marginalized identities, they are the result of persistent harmful messaging.**

But it doesn't have to be that way! Caregivers and parents who support LGBTQ+ youth contribute to their overall well-being, mental health, self-acceptance, and success in various aspects of life.

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LGBTQ+ Youth

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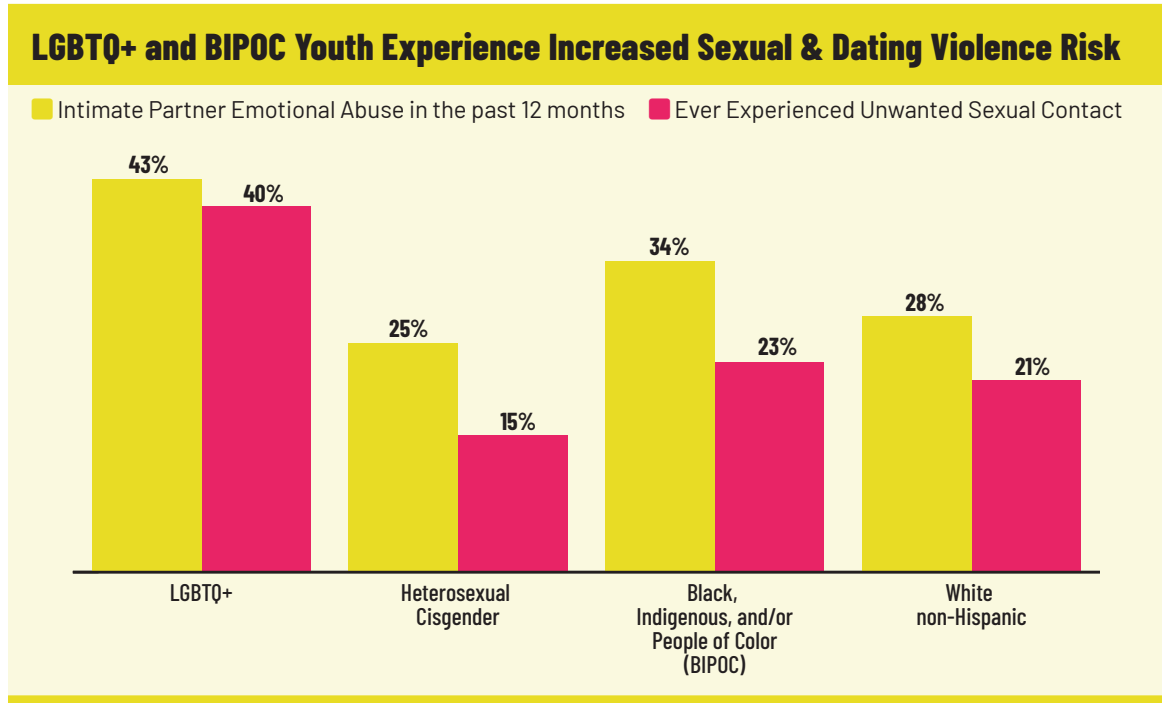
*There was a teacher at the school that was really good with the queer side of my identity but she wasn't as good with my Black identity... so she [my mother] helped me navigate how to put boundaries up with people... because a lot of the time it's kind of difficult to know who I can trust.*

LGBTQ+ Youth

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♡ Please note, the following paragraphs and graphs mention physical, emotional, and sexual violence.



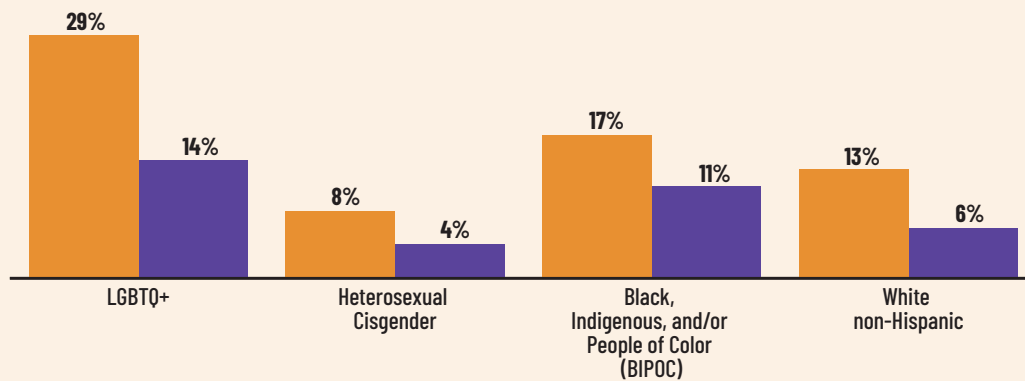
Source: 2021 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey

According to the 2021 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), which monitors the risk and resilience factors of young people, LGBTQ+ youth have been more exposed to unwanted sexual contact and intimate partner emotional abuse when compared to cisgender heterosexual young people. This danger is also increased for BIPOC youth when compared to their white, non-Hispanic peers, suggesting further vulnerability for a young person holding the intersecting identities of being a person of color and queer or trans.



## LGBTQ+ and BIPOC Youth Experienced Increased Suicide Risk

■ Suicide Plan in the past 12 months ■ Suicide Attempt in the past 12 months



Source: 2021 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey

LGBTQ+ young people are 3.5 times as likely to have made a suicide plan and to have attempted suicide during the past year as similarly aged cisgender heterosexual people. BIPOC youth are two times as likely to have attempted suicide and significantly more likely to have made a suicide plan during the past year when compared to their white, non-Hispanic peers. The risks associated with the stress of queer and trans antagonism, ableism, racism, and other marginalization speak to a grave reality for queer and trans young people, as well as the need for strategies to better these circumstances.

Parents, caregivers, family members, and trusted adults are richly positioned to provide robust support, resounding affirmation, and unequivocal acceptance to LGBTQ+ and all marginalized youth. Living into these strategies can be life-changing.





# PLACED IN YOUR CARE

Parents and caregivers may struggle with supporting the trans or queer youth in their lives. That makes sense! Given the significant challenges queer and trans youth face, it's reasonable to be concerned about your child's safety or feel that you will not be equipped to support them as a queer or trans-identified youth. These fears, personal discomfort, lack of accurate information, and other social pressures can cause parents and caregivers to hesitate to support LGBTQ+ youth. This is ultimately at the expense of the child's wellness, contributing to shame, or causing them to hide key parts of themselves.

When a young person comes out to you, it is an expression of trust and faith in you, and your relationship. This youth likely feels a level of safety and comfort to share their authentic self with you — that is a wonderful thing!

Creating environments where youth can thrive may feel overwhelming, especially when trying to make things better with youth from multiple historically underserved communities. **As a parent or caregiver, you can recognize and address your discomfort, fear, and/or lack of understanding and focus on uplifting those most vulnerable in your household and community.**

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*I was excited he was comfortable enough to be himself around me...*

*I was proud that he was comfortable enough to talk to me about this.*

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Parent of an LGBTQ+ Youth

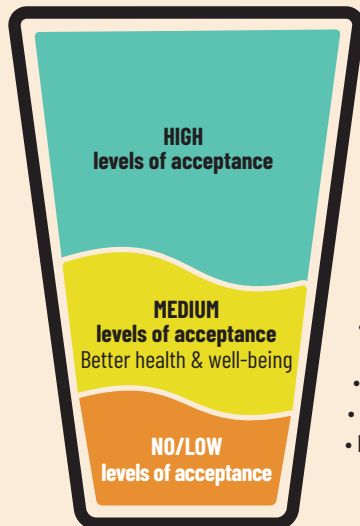
The day-to-day experience of our relationships with family is tied to culture and family norms. Your child and you are the experts on the unique circumstances of your family. You can work together to prevent harm by questioning the norms within your family and extended family that impact your child.

Caregivers and parents who show support and affirmation can help LGBTQ+ youth develop a positive self-image, fostering a sense of belonging, and empower them to embrace their authentic selves and build resilience against discrimination.



## FAMILY ACCEPTING BEHAVIORS

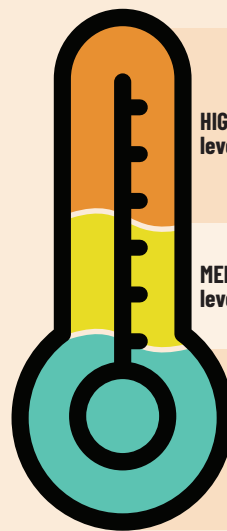
help protect against risk & promote well-being for LGBTQ young people



- HIGH levels of acceptance**
- Better overall health
  - Less likely to be depressed
  - 3x less likely to think about suicide
  - 3x less likely to attempt suicide
- MEDIUM levels of acceptance**  
Better health & well-being
- Less likely to have substance abuse problems
  - Higher self-esteem
  - More social support
  - Better family relationships

## FAMILY REJECTING BEHAVIORS

contribute to health risks for LGBTQ young people



**HIGH levels of rejection**

- 6x depression
- 5.5x suicidal thoughts
- 8x suicide attempts
- 3x illegal drug use
- 3x HIV/STD risk

**MEDIUM levels of rejection**

- 3x depression
- 2x suicidal thoughts
- 2x suicide attempts
- 1.5x illegal drug use

**LOW levels of rejection**

Better health outcomes

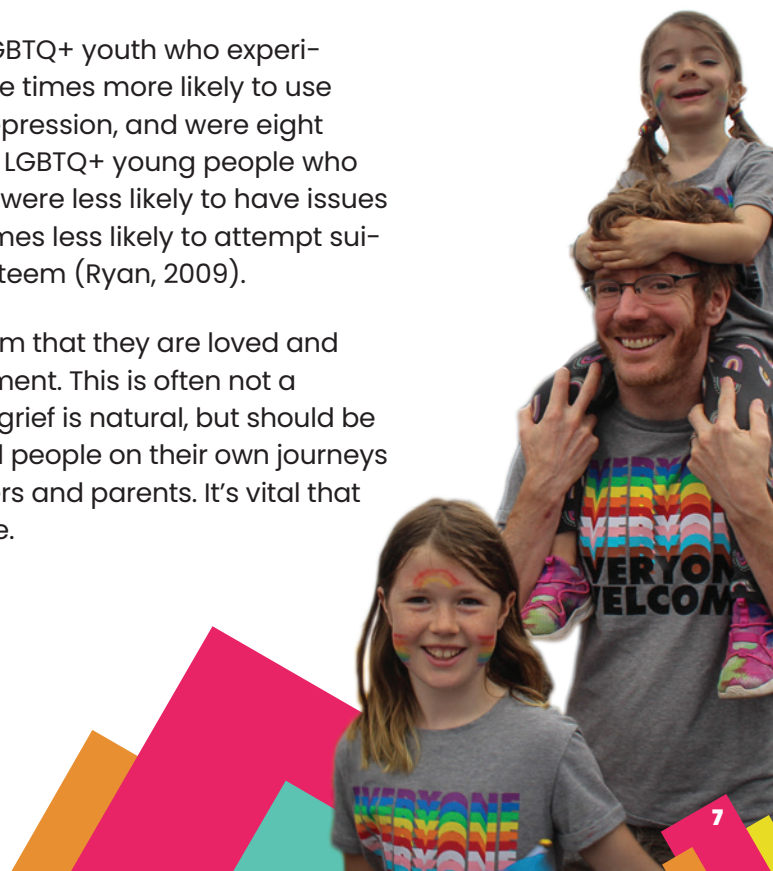
Source: Data sourced from the Family Acceptance Project.

Source: Data sourced from the Family Acceptance Project.

While supportive home environments can ultimately uplift trans or queer-identified youth, non-supportive home environments can increase the possibility of poor health outcomes, isolation, and risk of harm.

As research from the Family Acceptance Project shows, LGBTQ+ youth who experienced high levels of rejection from their families were three times more likely to use illegal substances, six times more likely to struggle with depression, and were eight times more likely to have attempted suicide. Alternatively, LGBTQ+ young people who experienced high levels of acceptance from their families were less likely to have issues with substance abuse, less likely to be depressed, three times less likely to attempt suicide and reported better overall health and higher self-esteem (Ryan, 2009).

Youth do best when their caregivers and parents show them that they are loved and accepted for who they are at every stage of their development. This is often not a simple process. Experiencing difficult feelings like loss and grief is natural, but should be held with other adults. Families are composed of individual people on their own journeys of growth. As children are developing, so are their caregivers and parents. It's vital that you continue to adapt as your child discovers who they are.





# A CULTURE OF CARE

You impact multiple levels of your young person's life to create a culture: within extended family relationships, neighborhoods, schools, and the many societal systems that govern the lives of young people. Parents and caregivers should work to increase affirming behaviors for themselves and others in the child's life, tending to each layer not just to shift behaviors, but to transform the culture for our children.

## Affirming Behaviours

- ♥ Encourage youth to express themselves authentically
- ♥ Communicate that love and support are unconditional
- ♥ Strengthen a child's self-esteem, decrease isolation, and lower risk for poor health outcomes

## Non-Affirming Behaviors

- ✗ Discourage youth from authentic expression
- ✗ Communicate that love and support are conditional
- ✗ Erode a child's self-esteem, increase isolation, and heighten risk for suicidality, depression, and substance use

Caregivers or parents should notice when you may be sending the message that your child's identity is not accepted. Youth might be asked to suppress their queer or trans identity to 'protect them' in the world or to 'keep the peace' with other family members. However, compelling youth to hide key aspects of themselves is a form of rejection, which youth internalize. Talking with your young person about what makes them feel seen and safe is a crucial first step, but youth should not be the sounding-board for any adult's emotional process about gender or sexuality.

The more we do to support our own process, the more we can show up for our children. At Outright, we say that self care IS community care. By caring for your struggle, you are serving your child and your community. By protecting your child from your internal struggle, you are protecting them from responsibility which is not theirs.

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*Whatever internal struggle you might be going through, seek help outside and [do] not involve your child in that struggle. They're struggling on their own.*

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Parent of LGBTQ+ Youth





# THE PRACTICE OF CARE

Providing affirming care does not happen overnight. It takes commitment. As you continue to practice, you will get better at identifying when you might hinder the ways your child wants to show up and connect to the world around them. You will make mistakes AND that is often where the most powerful learning happens.

Following are descriptions and examples of affirming behaviors as groundwork from which we invite you to envision the multitude of ways you could show up for the LGBTQ+ youth in your life.



## Communicating Affirmation and Safety

This looks like...

- ✓ Using correct name and pronouns
- ✓ Offering of affirmation and affection (verbal or physical, but ask for consent)
- ✓ Making your support visible



## Following the Youth's Lead

This looks like...

- ✓ Giving your child the space to explore their identity and express themselves authentically
- ✓ Empowering them to decide how they want to manage and engage with regards to their identity in friend groups, at school, with extended family, etc.
- ✓ Asking permission before taking action. "What would you like Aunt Susie to know before our visit?"

Youth are often left out of the decisions made about them. Defy this harmful norm by respecting your child's privacy and confidentiality. Avoid sharing their personal information or experiences without their consent.

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*For as long as I can remember my parents have raised me and my brothers as gender neutral: We could pick the clothes we want to wear... We don't care if it is from the boys section or the girls section...That kind of gave me the space and time to know who I was.*

LGBTQ+ Youth

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*I wish we had known and understood more about what it means to be a transgender youth... if we had had information back at that point, we might have been connected to the gender clinic sooner... We were completely accepting of our queer child, but we didn't understand what else it meant to support a trans youth.*

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Parent of Trans Youth to their youth



## Cultivating Caring Connections

This looks like...

- ✓ Seeking out age appropriate LGBTQ+/gender inclusive programs and spaces for youth to grow community and connection
- ✓ Allowing your child to have and spend time with LGBTQ+ friends
- ✓ Spending time with your child with their LGBTQ+ friends and attending LGBTQ+ inclusive functions for families
- ✓ Spending time with your youth enjoying age appropriate LGBTQ+/gender inclusive representation in books, tv, film, etc.

It can be difficult to find stories that reflect your youth's experience, especially if they have intersecting marginalized identities, but these resources can deepen understanding and broaden perspectives.



## Creating Affirming Networks

This looks like...

- ✓ Connecting with other parents of LGBTQ+ youth  
You and your child are not alone. There are others out there who could support you and could use your support.
- ✓ Acquiring gender affirming professional resources such as physicians and/or therapists
- ✓ Encouraging affirming behavior within your network, family, congregation, & friend group
- ✓ Dispelling misconceptions, assumptions, and inaccurate information in your networks
- ✓ Correcting family members when they use incorrect pronouns for your youth
- ✓ Only accepting respect and standing up for your child, disrupting harm while it's happening
- ✓ Standing up for your child's rights by challenging discrimination and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in your community, including supporting inclusive policies and legislation, attending pride events, or getting involved with LGBTQ+ organizations





## Growing Your Supportive Capacity

This looks like...

- ✓ Educating yourself by researching and staying curious about topics related to gender and sexuality
- ✓ Connecting with support groups, organizations, or professionals who specialize in LGBTQ+ issues that can provide guidance and resources to help you navigate any challenges you or your child may face
- ✓ Engaging in open, casual, and even lighthearted conversation about gender and sexuality with your youth

Encourage them to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with you. Support their journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance, reassuring them that you are there for them every step of the way.

- ✓ Asking questions: “Would you be willing to tell me more about that?” or “What is that like for you?” And asking for help when you need it
- ✓ Preparing yourself for not having all the answers and conclusions to discussions or events not always being satisfying
- ✓ Tending to your needs and self-care

Caregivers and parents should consider strategies for managing personal stress, finding respite, and seeking support in order to ensure their availability to effectively support their LGBTQ+ youth.



## Imagining a Happy Healthy Future With and For Your Child

This looks like...

- ✓ Asking questions about what your child wants: “What does your ideal future look like?” or “In a perfect world, what would you want to happen?”
- ✓ Working with your youth to seek out role models and positive representation that can support their vision of what thriving could look like for them
- ✓ Expressing affirmation: “I love you very much. I just want you to be happy, healthy, and to know that I support you.”





# NOW, TAKE CARE!

Helping your youth build a strong sense of self, celebrating their authenticity, and following their lead will have ripple effects in your child, your family, and your community for years to come. Your unconditional love and support is life-changing; these are both gifts and a call to action that only you can decide to take up. You're invited to use the page provided to reflect and identify what support you might need to create the affirming, celebratory safety-net that will help your child thrive exactly as they are.

## YOU'VE GOT FRIENDS AT OUTRIGHT VERMONT!

We support parents and caregivers with answers to your questions and connections with other families. Groups are FREE and facilitated by trained volunteers or staff who provide support, resources, and foster a welcoming environment and fun time.



### CONTINUING TO GROW IS KEY!

Use this QR code to access valuable resources and citations.





# REFLECTIONS ON CARE

1. What from this toolkit do you want to remember as you move forward?

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2. Where are you finding yourself stuck or feeling resistance?

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3. What do you need so that you can offer affirming care?

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4. What would you like your child to know? How would you like them to feel?

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5. The TO DO List: How can you envision yourself practicing affirming behaviors?

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6. How can you communicate affirmation and safety to your young person?

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7. How can you allow your youth to participate in decision making that directly affects them?

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8. How can you encourage caring connections and community for you and your child?

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9. How can you grow your supportive capacity?

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10. How can you invite yourself and your child to imagine their future filled with joy?

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*At this point, I don't feel grief; I feel joy that my child is thriving.*

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Parent of Trans Youth & Member of Outright Trans Parent Support Group





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**hope.  
equity.  
power!**  
**OUTRIGHT**  
VERMONT



**We are building a Vermont where all LGBTQ+ youth have  
hope, equity, and power!**

PO Box 5235, Burlington, Vermont 05402 | 802-865-9677 | [info@outrightvt.org](mailto:info@outrightvt.org)

[www.outrightvt.org](http://www.outrightvt.org)