How to Support LGBTQ Youth

From harassment and bullying at school to rejection by their families, LGBTQ youth struggle in their daily lives in a number of ways. One of the factors that puts LGBTQ youth at the highest risk of suicide and addiction is experiencing rejection by their families. If you are in a position to support LGBTQ youth, it is important that you do so, so that they feel as though they have an ally and an advocate to turn to for help and understanding. We share some of the best ways for supporting LGBTQ youth here, to help build a network of support for them.

Get Educated

LGBTQ youth need to know that their loved ones understand their sexual orientation or gender identification. Families who are informed and who use the correct terminology show respect for their LGBTQ youth and are better equipped to communicate with them. Education also helps families to move beyond the stereotypes and myths and begin to understand what having an LGBTQ youth really means.

There are a few ways for friends and family of LGBTQ youth to get more educated about sexual orientation and gender identification. First, they can talk to the youth and understand their feelings, challenges, hopes, and fears, just as they would with a
heterosexual youth. Friends and family of LGBTQ youth also can get online and connect to authoritative resources to learn more about sexual orientation and gender identification. They also can connect with the youth’s school and local agencies to learn about support groups, programs, and other resources in the area to help the family understand how to support their LGBTQ loved one.

Avoid the Most Common Mistakes

Showing LGBTQ youth that they are accepted and loved is critical for their well-being and physical and emotional health. While family members and friends may have the best of intentions, some of their actions may harm LGBTQ youth rather than help them. For that reason, it’s important to be aware of some of the most common mistakes that family members make, according to youth.gov:

- Don’t block access to LGBTQ friends, events, and resources. Attempting to do so shows LGBTQ youth that you do not accept their lifestyle. Some friends and family members attempt to block access in an effort to help LGBTQ youth fit in with heterosexual classmates and peers, but it is a mistake that should be avoided.
- Don’t blame LGBTQ youth when they face bullying, harassment, or discrimination due to their LGBTQ status. Their sexuality and gender identification has nothing to do with fault, and it is not an excuse for others to treat them poorly or abuse them in any way.
- Don’t pressure LGBTQ youth to be more or less like one gender or the other. Their sexual orientation and gender identification is who they are, and they need to be able to express themselves in healthy, positive ways.
- Don’t pressure LGBTQ youth to keep their sexual orientation or gender identification a secret. Doing so indicates that you are ashamed of their identity and leads them to believe that you reject who they are.

Know the Warning Signs of Addiction and Depression

LGBTQ teens face an especially high risk of addiction; studies show that LGBTQ youth are three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to become addicted to drugs. The gay and transgender community has a higher risk of addiction because they face enormous amounts of stress in dealing with overcoming the stigma attached with their sexual orientation or gender identity and the discrimination that occurs as a result of it. LGBTQ youth, especially those who are transgender, may be rejected by their families, leading them to become homeless and turn to dealing drugs for income: there is an 8% increase for those who are rejected by their family to sell drugs versus those who have accepting families.

Family members and loved ones need to now the signs of teenage addiction in order to help LGBTQ youth who may be using get the help that they need. Signs of teenage addiction include changes in appetite or sleep patterns, deteriorating physical appearance,
withdrawal from social activities or hobbies, secretive spending habits, sudden change in friends, irrational and unpredictable behaviors, and an avoidance of responsibility.

LGBTQ youth also are at a higher risk of developing depression than their heterosexual peers. Bullying, physical abuse, verbal harassment, rejection by peers or family members, and more put LGBTQ youth at an increased risk for depression; in fact, LGBTQ victimization is a leading culprit for depression in LGBTQ youth. That’s also why LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk of attempting suicide, and completing suicide attempts, than their heterosexual peers.

Family members and friends should be aware of the signs of teenage depression to help their LGBTQ loved ones get help before they self-harm. Signs of teenage depression include excessive sadness or hopelessness, irritability and anger or hostility, withdrawal from friends and family, loss of interest in activities, and changes in eating and sleeping habits.

Being an LGBTQ youth is difficult. Friends and family members of LGBTQ youth need to do all that they can to show them that they accept them, love them, and want to help them cope with their sexual orientation or gender identity. By becoming educated, avoiding some common mistakes, and being aware of signs of addiction and depression, friends and family can support the LGBTQ youth in their lives.

**Steve Johnson** co-created [PublicHealthLibrary.org](http://PublicHealthLibrary.org) with a fellow pre-med student. The availability of accurate health facts, advice, and general answers is something Steve wants for all people, not just those in the health and medical field. He continues to spread trustworthy information and resources through the website, but also enjoys tennis and adding to his record collection in his spare time.

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