Addressing Inequities in Education:
Considerations for LGBTQ+ Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19

Schools play a critical role in meeting the needs of children, youth, and families in times of crisis. During this pandemic, schools must plan for a new academic year in which many students will experience enduring trauma, food and housing insecurity, limited access to community resources, and uncertainty about future disruptions. Historically, schools have been settings of adversity for LGBTQ+ young people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). During this pandemic, they face potentially amplified discrimination and barriers to education and healthcare access. Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ youth thrive when schools and families affirm and support them. We highlight adversities and strengths experienced by LGBTQ+ students in schools, the unique impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ youth, and identify school policies and practices to support them. Schools will need to uphold protective policies, safeguard students' LGBTQ+ identities, provide professional development and trauma-informed services, and connect LGBTQ+ students with school and community resources.

LGBTQ+ youth experience sources of adversity and strength in school and family settings, which have bearing on their well-being and academic needs.[1,2] The adversities LGBTQ+ youth face could be exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.[3,4] Still, schools can foster resilience among LGBTQ+ youth and meet their unique needs.

LGBTQ+ Youth Who Face Harassment At School and Online Experience Negative Outcomes[2,5-7]

LGBTQ+ students experience greater harassment than heterosexual and cisgender students, in school and online.[1,8,9] They often do not report victimization, fearing that adults will be unresponsive.[1,10] Yet, it is tied to elevated physical and mental health concerns.[2,5-7] With remote instruction and physical distancing, LGBTQ+ youth use online spaces for schooling, socializing, and support.[11,12] Online spaces have potential to promote their health through social-emotional support,[13,14] but may also bring discrimination and harassment.[15]

Many LGBTQ+ Youth Experience Inequities Tied to Other Marginalized Identities

LGBTQ+ youth who experience multiple forms of marginalization (e.g., racism, xenophobia, income inequality) may face compounded barriers to healthcare and school access during the pandemic.[1,16-19] Communities of color are disproportionately affected by COVID-19[20] and face systemic discrimination and disparities (e.g., less accessible healthcare).[21,22] Also, LGBTQ+ youth represent approximately 25% of youth experiencing unstable housing (e.g., living in a shelter or motel),[23] making efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., physical distancing) and accessing online education difficult.

Gender-Affirming Healthcare Contributes to Better Health and Well-Being[24,25]

Prioritized medical services for COVID-19 have postponed gender-affirming medical care (e.g., puberty suppressants) for transgender and gender diverse youth,[26] which can cause distress. Transgender and non-binary students also may have less access to school health professionals (e.g., school nurses, counselors) during this period. These professionals can help meet their social-emotional support needs.[27,28] Gender affirmation in medical care and in schooling (e.g., using correct gender pronouns, supporting name changes on student records) remain important.

LGBTQ+ Youth Can Experience Heightened Risk of Family Rejection

> **During periods of stay-at-home guidance, some LGBTQ+ youth have "re-closeted" and report distress due to fears of safety at home.**

A number of LGBTQ+ youth report rejection or harassment from caregivers and siblings.[29,30] Thus, some LGBTQ+ youth do not disclose their identities to family members.[31,32] During periods of stay-at-home guidance, some LGBTQ+ youth have "re-closeted" (i.e., avoided discussing or expressing their identities) and report distress due to fears of safety at home.[4,33]

LGBTQ+ individuals are also at elevated risk for child abuse and domestic violence,[34,35] and may be unable to report them through traditional channels, like schools, during the pandemic.

Schools Often Provide Resources for LGBTQ+ Students and Their Families

LGBTQ+ supportive clubs are in 37% of U.S. secondary schools;[36] their presence and students' involvement in them is associated with better mental health.[37,38] Also, 96.6% of LGBTQ+ students can identify an LGBTQ+-affirming adult at school; 61.0% can identify six or more.[1] Students in schools with LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula and enumerated anti-bullying policies protecting LGBTQ+ students report greater safety and well-being.[1,39-41] COVID-19 has forced schools to limit activities and resources otherwise provided for students. Support for such resources will be important when schools reopen.

Policy and Practice Implications

Schools can address the implications of the pandemic for LGBTQ+ youth by implementing inclusive policies and developmentally-informed practices and partnering with LGBTQ+-affirming organizations.

Uphold protective school policies and practices:

- Establish guidelines for respectful, affirming in-person and online interactions among students and school personnel; review school mission statements for inclusivity; infuse LGBTQ+ inclusive materials in course content.[42-44]

- Review and update anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies and reporting procedures; update policies as needed to cover changing circumstances (e.g., applicability to remote instruction; processes for receiving, reviewing, and responding to student reports).

- Adopt enumerated policies protecting groups facing greater harassment, such as LGBTQ+ students.[45]

Safeguard the confidentiality of LGBTQ+ students' identities:

- Share ways for students to protect their privacy and safety online and on social media.[46,47]

- Ask LGBTQ+ students about their desired support. When contacting caregivers, safeguard students' LGBTQ+ identities when they are not "out" or fear rejection; ask students how and when to use their name and gender pronouns with others.[48]

Provide professional development and trauma-informed services:

- Offer continuing education for school personnel on LGBTQ+ students' current concerns, effective support strategies, and implementing inclusive policies.[42,49,50]

- Communicate regularly with students; offer referrals to LGBTQ+-affirming agencies or health professionals for students with mental and physical health needs.

- Provide students with coping techniques and daily routines, such as check-ins and mindfulness exercises.[51]

Connect LGBTQ+ students with school and community resources:

- Encourage formation of LGBTQ+-affirming school clubs; offer them support and resources to connect students during periods of disruption.

- Identify school personnel trusted by LGBTQ+ youth who can maintain contact with them. Identify preferred, reliable, and secure communication methods with students.

- Provide LGBTQ+ students with access to school health professionals to address traumatic grief and loss.

- Direct students and families to community or online groups providing LGBTQ+ support and resources and confirm that school servers do not block access to relevant LGBTQ+-affirming websites. There are a number of reputable resources, some useful evidence-informed resources include GLSEN,[52] TrevorSpace,[53] and the Family Acceptance Project.[54]

Full references are available at srcd.org/statements-evidence.

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