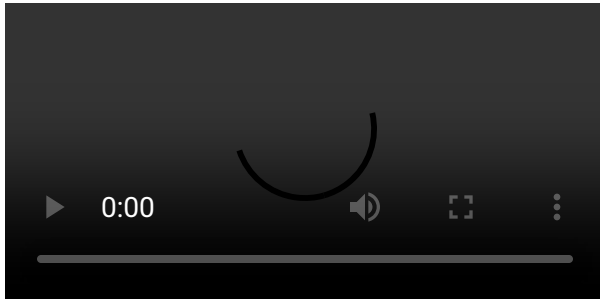


Mental Health Challenges of LGBTQ+ Kids

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If you have a child who's LGBTQ+ you may worry about whether they're getting the support they need to be safe and healthy. You may be aware that LGBTQ+ kids are at higher risk than other kids for developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and *substance abuse*. They also have higher rates of contemplating, attempting, and dying by suicide.

That's why it's important to understand what factors make an LGBTQ+ young person more or less likely to develop a mental health problem, including considering or attempting suicide.

Being LGBTQ+ doesn't cause mental health problems — and is not caused *by* mental health problems. Rather, these kids' increased risk of developing mental health problems stems from exposure to factors like rejection, bullying, discrimination, and violence. While

acceptance of LGBTQ+ kids has increased over the last few decades, the current political backlash has caused many of them to feel less secure.

In a [2024 Trevor Project poll](#) of 18,000 LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13 and 24 years old, 90 percent said their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics — and 53 percent said it was impacted a lot.

Sixty-six percent reported feeling recent symptoms of anxiety, and 53 percent reported symptoms of depression. Thirty-nine percent said they had seriously considered suicide in the past year. More than one in 10 (12 percent) said they attempted suicide.

What can be done?

The more we know about what helps — and harms — LGBTQ+ kids, the better we can support them. Here, we look at both the risk factors — things that increase the likelihood that an LGBTQ+ kid will develop serious mental health problems — and the protective factors, or things that reduce that risk. If a child has a lot of risk factors and hardly any protective factors, they are particularly vulnerable. On the other hand, if they have a fair number of risk factors but a lot of protective factors, they may be less vulnerable.

Key risk factors for LGBTQ+ youth

The stress of being LGBTQ+ is a risk factor that's near-universal. "These youth's identities carry stressors with them related to being in a marginalized and misunderstood group," says Emma Woodward, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. She notes the distress that comes with feeling the need to conceal their identities, the fear that they will be harassed or discriminated against, and the feelings of self-doubt that can result from being treated as if who they are is something to be ashamed of.

Additionally, LGBTQ+ kids often have stressful or even traumatic experiences that can impact their mental health, including:

- Being [bullied](#) or actively discriminated against. "Bullying, discrimination, and social exclusion are hugely important risk factors for these kids," says Dr. Woodward. According to the Trevor poll, 60 percent of LGBTQ+ youth reported that they have experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once in their lifetime.
- Little or no family support. One of the biggest health and safety risk factors for queer youth is lack of familial support and acceptance.
- Lack of support by teachers and school administration.
- Lack of access to mental health care. (The Trevor poll found that 50 percent of respondents said they wanted but were unable to get mental health services.)

- Physical harm. The Trevor poll found that 23 percent of LGBTQ youth reported having been physically threatened or harmed due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Being threatened with conversion therapy. Therapy designed to make a queer or trans person “go back to normal” has been consistently associated with negative mental health outcomes and greater risk for suicide.
- Being misgendered (addressed using the wrong pronouns) or not being called by their chosen name.

Key protective factors

While their struggles can be significant, with support and acceptance, LGBTQ+ kids can thrive. Most experts agree that the most important protective factor for LGBTQ+ kids is a high degree of support from family or caregivers. The Trevor Project poll bears that out: Having support from their family reduced the percentage of youth who considered or attempted suicide in the past year by almost half.

Other important protective factors include:

- Access to health and mental health care.
- Being able to wear the clothes they need to express their identity or change their appearance to match their identity.
- Having a supportive adult in their life. This can be a parent, teacher, family friend, coach, guidance counselor — anyone who can provide kindness and support when kids need it most. “Just having an adult who is understanding and supportive and will listen to a child can be really helpful,” says Dr. Woodward.
- Being allowed to use their chosen names and pronouns at home, school, and work. [One study](#) showed that this significantly reduced depression and suicidal thinking in LGBTQ+ youth.
- Having strong LGBTQ+ role models. Positive representations of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media — on streaming platforms, in films, music, sports, and even advertising — are becoming more and more common.
- Attending a school with supportive policies, such as allowing LGBTQ+ kids to use the bathroom of their choice or a zero-tolerance policy regarding bullying.
- Having a doctor who is an ally.
- Exposure to happy, thriving LGBTQ+ adults.

How parents can help

Here are a few ways that parents and families can reduce risk factors and increase protective factors:

- Make your home a safe space. “Having home be a place that they can be themselves without judgment or rejection or consequences makes a big difference,” says Dr. Woodward.
- Advocate for your child in their school. “Parents can help kids advocate for and get the services and accommodations they need,” Dr. Woodward says. “And, if their teen is having negative experiences in school, parents can play a role as well.”
- Get your child connected to health care (both physical health and mental health) that affirms their sexual orientation and gender identity. For many LGBTQ+ kids, working with a supportive mental health professional is an important way to process challenges and learn coping skills. You can [learn more here](#) about finding affordable mental health care in your area.
- Have a talk about social media — what’s safe and what’s not.

Parenting can be hard at times and being the parent of an LGBTQ+ kid can be harder for a lot of reasons. But even if it takes you a long time to accept who they are, you can support them from the moment they come out to you. And that support can be the difference between having a kid who thrives or one who struggles with ongoing mental health issues.

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A look at risk factors and protective factors

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