

# Supporting LGBTQIA+ Youth

LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Asexual. The + encompasses all additional identities not represented by these letters. These youth who have at least one accepting adult in their life were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year. As a caregiver, you may feel surprised when a youth tells you that they are LGBTQIA+ referred to as 'coming out' and feel uncertain about what to say.

Following, you'll find some tools to support LGBTQIA+ youth in your home. The most important thing to remember is:

**If a youth comes out to you, how you respond makes all the difference.**

## **Caregiver behaviors that are helpful and increase youth's self-esteem, create stronger social support, stronger family relationships and better health:**

- Thank them and let them know you're glad they told you. 'Coming out' is a significant event.
- Lead with love, even if you don't fully understand.
- Ask if, and how, you can help.
- Tell them that you will be there for them – even if you don't fully understand.
- Require others to treat the youth in your home with respect.
- Welcome your LGBTQIA+ youth's LGBTQIA+ friends to your home.
- Research and share LGBTQIA+ stories (check out the following book lists [Diverse Families](#) and [LGBTQIA+ History Books for Kids](#)) and role models such as Jazz Jennings, Harvey Milk, Marsha P. Johnson, Megan Rapinoe, and many others.
- Find welcoming [places](#) for your LGBTQIA+ youth. Please reach out to your certifier or caseworker if you need further help finding resources.
- Find current, affirming information to educate yourself about your youth's sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. A great source of information is the [Human Rights Campaign](#). Reach out to your certifier or the youth's caseworker if you have further questions or need help finding additional resources.
- Participate in family support groups and activities for families with LGBTQIA+ youth.

While we know there are certain caregiver behaviors that are helpful for the LGBTQIA+ youth in your home, there are also behaviors that can be harmful. The more caregivers engage in some of these behaviors, the higher their LGBTQIA+ youth's risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and illegal drug use.

## **Caregiver behaviors that are harmful and increase youth's risk for serious health and mental health problems:**

- Expressing that being LGBTQIA+ is just a phase.
- Encouraging your youth to act differently (e.g., tone it down, act more masculine/feminine).
- Avoiding conversations about your youth's identity, their LGBTQIA+ friends, or dating.
- Expressing, or allowing others to express, anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments in front of your youth.
- Discouraging participation in LGBTQIA+ inclusive spaces.
- Not using the name or pronoun that matches your youth's gender identity.
- Telling the youth in your home that God will punish them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Not letting the youth in your home wear clothes or hairstyles that express their gender identity. Please see the [Foster Children's Bill of Rights](#) which highlights these and other rights of youth in ODHS care.
- Making the youth in your home leave or threatening to make them leave because they are LGBTQIA+.
- Having different rules in the home for the youth who identifies as LGBTQIA+.

## **Family rejection is still common for many of our LGBTQIA+ youth:**

- 78% of LGBTQIA+ youth who have not disclosed their LGBTQIA+ identity to their parents hear their families make negative comments about LGBTQIA+ people.\*
- 67% of LGBTQIA+ youth reported that someone attempted to convince them to change their sexual orientation or gender identity.\*
- 48% of LGBTQIA+ youth who have shared their LGBTQIA+ identity with their parents say that their families make them feel bad for being LGBTQIA+.\*

## **Things to remember:**

- Every coming out experience is unique.
- There's no "right way" to come out.
- How youth approach these conversations may depend on their age, cultural background, where they live, their access to support and resources, etc.
- Coming out is not a one-time experience and something individuals do throughout their lives. While coming out has tremendous power, there should be no expectation that a person come out.
- Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.



Your initial responses can have profound – and lasting – effects on someone, especially if you’re among the first few people they’ve told. Think before you speak.

- **Know that you’re trusted.** You’ve done something right.
- **Say thank you.** What just happened was big.
- **Mind your body language.** It can say as much as your words do.
- **Find out how you can help.** “Is there any way I can support you?”
- **Respect their wishes.** This isn’t time to suggest their next steps. It is also not your information to share with others.
- **Remember that they’re the same person.** This is just one new piece of information that you learned about them.

We appreciate that people who seek to provide care for children and young adults who are in foster care come with the best of intentions and bring their own beliefs, experiences and ideals into their parenting. As a certified caregiver we want any child who is in your care to be respected, affirmed and supported for who they are. There are some specific Certification Standards and rights of children in care connected to providing safety, health and well-being. Our Certification Standards note that caregivers are not to use derogatory remarks about a youth or their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Caregivers are also expected to respect, accept and support a youth’s sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. For more information about how to support LGBTQIA+ youth, see the “Supporting LGBTQ Youth” section of our [ODHS Foster Parent Resource](#) page, or reach out to your certifier.