

SUPPORTING LGBTQ STUDENTS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:

A Tipsheet for School Social Workers

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During the coronavirus pandemic, school social workers across the country continue to provide essential services to students. Social distancing requires a new set of strategies and provides new opportunities to support and affirm LGBTQ youth, especially when they live in unsupportive environments. This tip-sheet offers key considerations when working with LGBTQ students in virtual settings, and guidance to help mitigate some of the emerging challenges they face when social distancing practices are required.

“

What makes me
more comfortable
is if they have a
sticker or poster
that shows that they
are supportive of
LGBTQ people.

”

— LGBTQ STUDENT

1. Create an Affirming Virtual Meeting Space

Now more than ever, LGBTQ students need the support of their school social workers. According to HRC's 2018 LGBTQ Youth Report, 77% of LGBTQ youth reported that they felt down or depressed within the past week. The report also indicated that many LGBTQ students feel unsafe or uncomfortable discussing LGBTQ issues with school-based mental health providers.

- + **Create a visible safe space.** If you are using Zoom to meet with your students virtually, consider using an [HRC-branded Zoom background](#) to help indicate to students that you are LGBTQ-affirming. You can also search online for your favorite LGBTQ safe space sign to display in an area that is visible when you are speaking on screen.
- + **Ask or share pronouns to demonstrate LGBTQ inclusion.** If your meeting platform allows you to list your name, add your pronouns; for example, “Mrs. Garcia (pronouns: she/her).”
- + **Use gender-inclusive and non-heteronormative language,** which not only models inclusivity, but also sends a strong message to LGBTQ individuals that you support LGBTQ people. If students can easily assess that you are an ally, they will be more likely to trust you and to seek the support they need.

2. Anticipate Unique Challenges When Families Are Not Affirming

While some LGBTQ students find affirming support at school, many live with unsupportive families. According to HRC's 2018 LGBTQ youth report, 67% of LGBTQ students hear their families make negative comments about LGBTQ people. When LGBTQ students are unable to be their authentic selves, or when they are forced to live in unsupportive environments, the effects can be overwhelming. Family rejection is one factor that contributes to the fact that LGBTQ youth continue to be disproportionately represented among homeless youth in our nation, and their experiences of homelessness continue to

“
I’m not out to my
parents for safety
reasons. If they
found out I was gay
they would kick me
out or force me into
conversion therapy.”
”

— LGBTQ STUDENT

be characterized by violence, discrimination, poor health and unmet needs.

- + **Check in with the student.** If the student is not open about their LGBTQ identity at home, and if you can confirm that the virtual connection with the student is private (more on confidentiality and privacy in number three), consider asking how their family dynamic is impacting them while under coronavirus quarantine.
- + **Ask what self care practices they have tried and what, if anything, is helping to alleviate stress.** Brainstorm new strategies together and check in with them to see which ones are working best. Make sure they know that you see them, that you affirm their identity and that this time of social isolation is temporary.
- + **Provide LGBTQ-affirming counseling to students,** actively respond to reports of online bullying and discrimination and intentionally promote youth empowerment and leadership.
- + **Provide support and services to families** by connecting them with community resources and information. Even when parents are accepting, they may not understand how to reduce their child's risk and promote well-being or know what resources are available. Accepting and supportive behaviors by family members can significantly decrease several health risks among LGBTQ youth.
- + **Discuss with them and direct them to online, virtual resources and LGBTQ affirming community housing resources** listed below — including the lifesaving work of The Trevor Project, which offers confidential phone and online support for LGBTQ youth 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

3. Protect Confidentiality and Privacy

While some students are open about their LGBTQ identity at school, only 21% are out at home, according to HRC's 2018 LGBTQ Youth Report. Privacy and confidentiality are critically important for LGBTQ youth, especially for those who do not have supportive families. Extremely rejecting behaviors can have dire consequences: approximately 40% of the homeless youth population in the United States identifies as LGBTQ, most as a result of rejection by immediate family members.

- + **Consider new risks** when meeting virtually with an LGBTQ student — unsupportive family members, or those who are unaware of their child's LGBTQ identity could potentially listen in. For example, if a young trans boy is open with you about his trans identity but not with his parents/guardians, think through how to best protect his safety and privacy.
- + **Create an electronic form for meeting requests** that allows the student to include the name and pronouns they want you to use during virtual meetings. Their answers may depend on their ability to secure privacy during virtual sessions. Add a blurb about the confidentiality rights of students, and provide suggestions to improve privacy, such as using an earpiece or identifying a private area of the home during scheduled meetings. These strategies may improve the likelihood that LGBTQ students will get the support they need.

4. Promote Resilience and Equity

The impact of COVID-19 has shown more pronounced rates of unemployment and suicidality especially within the LGBTQ community, according to various researchers. When LGBTQ students are affirmed

and supported, it is easier for them to think beyond current challenges. Additionally, when students feel more connected to their education, their desire and ability to learn improves. As school social workers utilize common strategies to advocate for student success and promote resiliency, it is essential that school social workers engage in activities to promote equity and well-being for LGBTQ students, particularly given their risks and potential for resilience.

- + **Advocate for LGBTQ-inclusive curricula.** Research finds that when schools provide inclusive curricula in addition to safe spaces and LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying policies, LGBTQ youth report higher levels of safety and academic performance.
- + **School social workers must continue to take on leadership roles** in helping schools develop policies and practices that support LGBTQ youth.
- + **Encourage and facilitate LGBTQ-inclusive training** for staff, teachers and administrators to help increase sensitivity and inclusivity of LGBTQ students.
- + **Pay particular attention to intersectionality and issues that may impact youth with multiple marginalized social identities.**
- + **Be mindful of intersectionality and consider the needs of LGBTQ students of color.** For example, a GLSEN report found that Latinx LGBTQ students experienced harassment due to both being LGBTQ and their ethnic/racial identities and experienced the lowest levels of school belonging. Students of color should not be treated as a monolithic group, as each have their own unique challenges and strengths.

5. COVID-19 Creating Implications for Serious Mental Health Concerns

According to The Trevor Project, even prior to the pandemic, LGBTQ youth have been found to be at significantly increased risk for depression, anxiety, substance use and suicidality. These risks are even more pronounced among transgender and non-binary youth. Thus, LGBTQ youth may be particularly vulnerable to negative mental health impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Creating opportunities to decrease feelings of social isolation and sustain a sense of community during distance learning is vital.

- + **Facilitate a virtual LGBTQ support group or a virtual meeting time for Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) to stay connected by offering to be a staff advisor.**
- + **Provide therapeutic support to address anxiety, grief and loss, trauma, etc.** Utilizing trauma-informed cognitive behavioral interventions, strengths based approaches and empowerment strategies decreases the impact of various risk factors on one's mental health.
- + **Assess basic needs and connect to community resources** — the economic impact of COVID-19 may be creating barriers to access food, finances, housing instability, unemployment, etc.
- + **Use surveys and other research tools such as focus groups or participatory action research to assess the climate and needs of LGBTQ youth.** This information can provide critical insights into the needs and experiences of LGBTQ youth in your schools and inform interventions and policy issues, and provide information about key areas of need and success.



My fear keeps me from seeing a school counselor about things that make me anxious or upset. I don't know how they might react (to my LGBTQ identity), so I'd rather go online or talk to my other queer friends about it.



— LGBTQ STUDENT

6. Refer Students to Virtual Supports for LGBTQ Youth

Affirming school social workers are often a lifeline for students, but with school buildings closed, their offices are no longer just down the hall. Having a direct connection to supportive peers and those with shared identities is critically important to the overall well-being of LGBTQ youth. This is especially true during challenging times. With LGBTQ drop-in centers closed and LGBTQ student clubs (i.e. GSAs) no longer in session, some LGBTQ students have lost their only outlets to fully be themselves.

- + **Remind students that online platforms are not always the best place for LGBTQ youth** to find affirmation and are not always monitored to screen out hate speech or other forms of online bullying. According to GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey, nearly half of LGBTQ students reported experiencing some form of electronic harassment in the past year.
- + **Discuss online safety** with students and suggest LGBTQ-inclusive options. To help, HRC has compiled [a list of direct and online resources for LGBTQ youth](#) where they can find affirming support and safely connect with LGBTQ peers in virtual settings any time of day or night. There are even virtual supports for parents and families who are in need of support themselves, or who want to learn how they can better support their LGBTQ child. Sharing these culturally relevant resources with LGBTQ students can make a lasting impact, and perhaps even save a life.

7. Self-Awareness and Professional Accountability

A recent report published by GLSEN (2018) found that the majority of school social workers received little education or training related to competencies for working with LGBTQ students. Thus, school social workers must take responsibility for their own continued professional development and self-awareness. There are numerous resources listed at the end of this tipsheet and free monthly webinars for youth-serving professionals provided by the Human Rights Campaign [here](#). In addition, school social work is a human rights-based profession, and as such should approach practice from this lens. This means having an orientation towards cultural humility, intersectionality and awareness of your own privilege and social location, as well as building on strengths and resilience. Unlike cultural competence, a cultural humility approach focuses on the practitioner's critical awareness, addresses power imbalances and holds oneself and institutions accountable for addressing inequities and creating inclusive environments.

- + **Know yourself and critically challenge yourself and others.**
- + **Look beyond the micro into the structural and larger forces that impact LGBTQ youth.**
- + **Become familiar with and knowledgeable about common concerns of LGBTQ youth and their school experiences.** The social worker practicing from a lens of cultural humility takes responsibility for sharing this information with their school community.

Summary

Please keep in mind that LGBTQ students need to feel connected, affirmed and supported during this period of social isolation and uncertainty. For the many LGBTQ youth struggling for self-acceptance or acceptance at home, there is an added burden on their emotional well-being. As a school social worker, you have a critically important role to play in providing that one place, being that one person with whom they can be their true selves. You can help LGBTQ students practice self-care, find meaningful resources and connections online and in the community and ameliorate the tension and stress they may be experiencing while at home.

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Additional Resources for School Social Workers on LGBTQ Inclusion

These resources offer further insights into the work school social workers can do to ensure safety, inclusion, and well-being for LGBTQ students.

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- + Green, A.E., Price-Feeney, M. & Dorison, S.H. (2020) *Implications of COVID-19 for LGBTQ Youth Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*. New York, New York. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2020/04/03/implications-of-covid-19-for-lgbtq-youth-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention/>
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- + Zongrone, A. D., Truong, N. L., & Kosciw, J. G. (2020). *Erasure and Resilience: The Experiences of LGBTQ Students of Color*. <https://www.glsen.org/research/reports-and-briefs>