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Creating Safe Spaces: Understanding and Supporting LGBTQ2S+ Families Through Acceptance and Advocacy to Help Them Move Towards Inclusion in Every Community

Families play a crucial role in helping us develop a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional well-being. Despite differences of opinion around personal beliefs, maintaining an open mind and unconditional love helps nurture positive and healthy relationships.

LGBTQ2S+ families, which include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirit individuals, face unique challenges in society – from discrimination and bullying to family rejection and difficulty accessing healthcare. When a family or family member rejects someone who identifies on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum, it can profoundly affect the well-being of everyone involved. Increased tension and stress may emerge, and some family members may feel it necessary to conceal their authentic selves as a protective response. But, when families are well-supported with education and resources, they can begin confidently navigating different needs within the family unit.

In this article, we'll examine these issues, explore some of the difficulties experienced by LGBTQ2S+ families, and learn about some supportive strategies that can offer helpful guidance on the path toward understanding, acceptance, and contentment.

Why is it helpful to view LGBTQ2S+ identity as a spectrum?

LGBTQ2S+ refers to a broad set of categories that encompass diversity in sexual orientation, gender identity, and personal expression. Someone could identify strongly with one label, while another might identify with multiple labels or even none. Viewing this part of our identities as a spectrum allows individuals to associate with what they feel most strongly defines them. It also allows for changes as a stronger sense of self develops from engaging with the community.

What are some of the unique challenges that families who have members who identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum face?

Bullying and discrimination can have a devastating effect on the mental health of those who identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum. There are various reasons why some people can be unaccepting. Many societies can have long-held beliefs about gender and sexuality that contribute to stigma. These norms can be deeply ingrained in cultures and within families. They often stem from misinformation or a lack of understanding about LGBTQ2S+ experiences and identities that leads to incidences of prejudice and stereotyping. Sometimes, people develop fear and discomfort and feel uncomfortable or threatened by concepts and identities they don't understand. It can be even more challenging when religious communities share beliefs through their teachings or interpretations condemning LGBTQ2S+ identities.

Bullying can include a variety of incidents, such as:

- Name-calling
- Spreading rumours
- Exclusion from social activities
- Making derogatory remarks about someone's gender or sexual orientation
- Verbal harassment
- Intimidation
- Threats
- Cyberbullying
- Targeting someone based on their LGBTQ2S+ identity
- Physical violence
- Sexual harassment
- Assault
- Hate crimes
- Sustained campaigns to harass or discriminate against someone based on their LGBTQ2S+ identity

Many incidents of bullying and discrimination are reported in educational settings¹. School administration may navigate situations within the scope of policies and regulations, occasionally involving law enforcement when necessary. However, far more often, incidents go unreported because of

fears of retaliation, a lack of support, or concerns about complaints not being taken seriously.

At home, some may not feel safe to live authentically, so parents or other family members may not be aware of someone's identity on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum.

Legislative changes create additional difficulty for families

Recent legislation changes that discriminate against LGBTQ2S+ individuals can enable actions of people who bully by reinforcing negative attitudes and beliefs. When laws or policies are discriminatory, it sends a message that implies that people who identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum are not valid or deserving of equal rights and protections. It can encourage individuals who hold prejudiced views to act on their beliefs, creating more hostile environments that make those who identify as LGBTQ2S+ feel more vulnerable and isolated.

Here are some examples of laws in Canada and the U.S. that have been passed in the last four years that have been criticized for discriminating against LGBTQ2S+ individuals and have had a tremendous effect on LGBTQ2S+ families:

- In Alberta, the Education Act (Bill 8) was passed in 2019. It removed protections for LGBTQ2S+ students, allies, and school staff, leading to concerns about increased discrimination and bullying in schools and a lack of privacy rights for students.²
- In Ontario, the 2015 Sex Education Curriculum in Ontario was replaced with the 1998 Sex Education Curriculum in 2018. The 1998 Curriculum does not include discussions on gender identity, consent, and LGBTQ2S+ issues. Critics argued that this decision undermined the safety and well-being of students.³
- In Florida, on the first day of Pride Month in 2021, the "Fairness in Women's Sports Act" became law. It banned transgender girls and women from participating in female sports teams at the high school and college levels. Critics argue that the law is discriminatory and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about gender identity.⁴

Globally, while some nations have made significant strides in advancing progressive stances on LGBTQ2S+ rights and equality, there are others where people may be in danger due to hostile and discriminatory laws, policies, and cultural attitudes that promote targeted violence. Overall, laws and lack of social acceptance feed into the challenges that families experience.

What are some unique challenges related to healthcare?

In both Canada and the United States, people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ face difficulty and discrimination in obtaining supportive healthcare.

- There may be a reluctance to disclose their identities and avoidance of seeking care because they face stigmatization and discrimination from healthcare providers. It can cause delays in receiving treatment.⁵
- They experience higher rates of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation “because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society.”⁶
- They can have limited access to gender-affirming healthcare services, leading to long wait times and barriers to accessing knowledgeable and affirming healthcare providers and necessary treatments.⁷

How does bullying and discrimination affect mental health?

Bullying and discrimination against LGBTQ2S+ individuals and their families can cause them to develop worrisome feelings of isolation and depression when they experience rejection or conflict. Prominent studies show the seriousness of the issue reflected in the crisis of mental health and homelessness that LGBTQ2S+ youth in both Canada and the U.S. are facing.

Mental Health

- 41% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth having seriously considered it.⁸
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for young people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ (Ages 10-24). They have 14 times the risk of suicide than straight, cisgender youth.⁹
- 1.5 to 2.5 times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than straight or gender-conforming counterparts.¹⁰

Homelessness

- 25-40% of homeless youth identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum, despite representing only 5-10% of the overall youth population.¹¹
- LGBTQ2S+ individuals are disproportionately represented among homeless populations compared to the general population due to factors such as family rejection and discrimination.¹²

How do rejection and conflict affect families where members identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum?

Rejection based on sexual orientation or gender identity can create hurt, feelings of betrayal and resentment, leading to conflict and tension within families and strained relationships. Individuals who experience rejection can feel isolated and alienated, often withdrawing from family gatherings. To avoid rejection or hostility, they can avoid communication because it is strained or difficult, which can profoundly affect everyone involved. The LGBTQ2S+ individual may feel sadness, shame and self-doubt, and family members could feel guilt, confusion, and regret over their actions. Over time, this can contribute to mental health issues for both LGBTQ2S+ individuals and their family members. The lasting effects on family dynamics and the well-being of everyone involved make it essential for families to seek support, education, and resources to help them work toward reconciliation.

What actions can families take to foster acceptance and demonstrate support for members who identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum?

Taking action to provide strong levels of support is an important step because it can reduce the risk of suicide by 93%¹³, or less than half the rate of those who felt low or moderate support.¹⁴ Affirming identities and supporting self-discovery can ensure that people feel they belong and are accepted.

Here are five things families can do:

1. Get educated – Read books and attend workshops or support groups that help develop better understanding of LGBTQ2S+ identities, experiences and issues.
2. Listen and validate feelings and identities – Create a safe and supportive space for authentic expression. Practice active listening without judgment and affirm their right to self-determination.
3. Respect boundaries -- Gender identity, sexual orientation, and personal expression must be respected. Imposing personal beliefs or expectations on people will not allow them to explore and define their identities on their own terms.

4. Seek support – Work with LGBTQ2S+ affirming therapists, support groups, and community leaders who can provide guidance, perspective and resources. Connect with other LGBTQ2S+ families to find support and understanding and gain perspective on how to navigate challenges.
5. Practice unconditional love – Love and acceptance should be irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity and focus instead on prioritizing well-being, happiness, and dignity. Families need to be aware of how intrusive personal beliefs and societal expectations will affect relationships.

Can people's viewpoints change over time?

When people are initially uncomfortable with an idea or concept, gaining more knowledge, exposure, and developing understanding can result in personal growth. Often, this comes from connecting with other LGBTQ2S+ individuals and communities, which can help them reassess and reconsider their beliefs, confront biases, challenge misconceptions, and develop greater empathy. A shift in thinking can lead to acceptance and openness towards people who identify as LGBTQ2S+.

What kinds of online resources can help LGBTQ2S+ families?

Here are some reputable online resources for families who have members who identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum:

- PFLAG CANADA and USA
<https://pflagcanada.ca/>
and <https://pflag.org>
- The Family Acceptance Project (FAP)
<https://familyproject.sfsu.edu>
- GLAAD
<https://glaad.org>
- The Trevor Project
<https://www.thetrevorproject.org>
- Egale Canada Human Rights Trust
<https://egale.ca>

How can I support a family member who is exploring their gender or sexual identity

Here is some advice on supporting a family member who comes out on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum.

Things to Do

- Listen with an open mind, without judgment or interruption.
- Allow them to share their feelings, experiences, and identity at their own pace.
- Accept their truth and respect their self-discovery.
- Use affirming language so that they know they have your love and unconditional support.
- Use inclusive language to demonstrate respect and validate their identity.
 - Use inclusive terms instead of gender-specific ones.
 - Respect and use the pronouns that they prefer.
- Learn to gain a better understanding of identities, experiences, and issues.
- Reach out to friends, other family members, or organizations.
- Participate in counselling to work through your feelings and experiences.
- Advocate for them by standing up for rights and well-being within your family and the community.
- Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practices at work and in school.

Things NOT to Do

- React with disbelief or denial.
- Question or invalidate their identity.
- Mislable or refuse to use their preferred pronouns.
- Show anger, rejection, or disappointment.
- Out someone without their consent. Avoid sharing information without the person's express permission because it's not your news to share.
- Pressure someone to conform to societal expectations and change their identity even if you feel fearful for them.
- Make assumptions or generalizations about their identity or experiences.

What approaches might counsellors or therapists use when working with families?

When working with families where some members identify on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum, therapists may try a variety of approaches. No single form of therapy is more effective than another. Each will consider the needs and preferences of family members and the therapist's training and expertise. Many can be offered to families as a group or individually.

- Family Systems Therapy helps family members learn how their behaviours and relationships affect each other. The goal is to improve communication and build support within the family.
- Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) focuses on helping individuals identify negative thought patterns and understand behaviours contributing to family conflict. The goal is to manage stress and develop coping mechanisms to improve relationships.
- Narrative Therapy encourages family members to use storytelling to identify problems, strengths, and weaknesses in themselves and their relationships. The goal is to create new narratives to help the family grow and move closer to acceptance.

- Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) supports family members in understanding the emotions, attachments and patterns that develop with relationships. The goal is to build empathy and connections.
- Compassionate Inquiry (CI) encourages deep listening and exploration of beliefs and emotions without judgment. The goal is to gain understanding and acceptance and help heal from traumatic experiences.

It's essential to recognize that many LGBTQ2S+ families will face challenges. Addressing them constructively will help cultivate acceptance and ensure family members feel supported. The approaches we've shared can help create more inclusive spaces in our society for all families.



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