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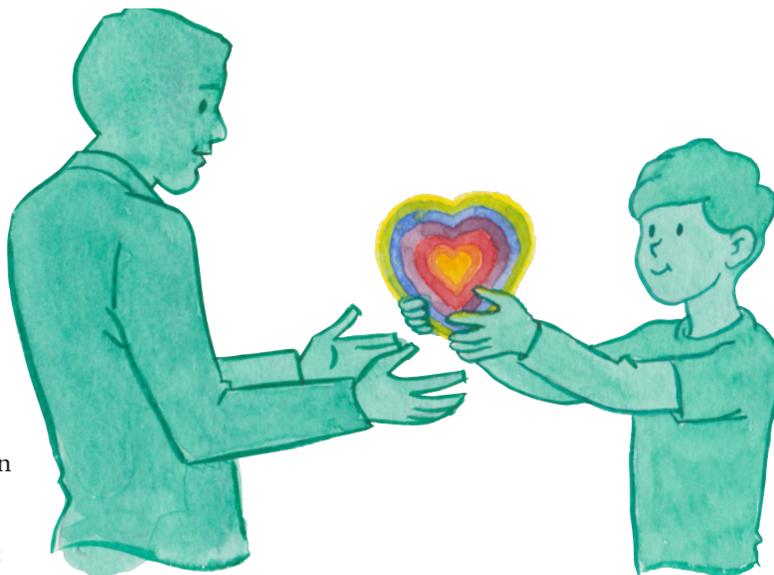
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# Celebrating LGBTQ Youth: The Role of Educators and Families

By Lindsay Greyerbiehl, Carrie Simmons, Colette Seguin Beighley, and Emily West, GVSU Faculty and Staff

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As educators we should agree that whether or not parents are able to come to terms with their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity, we can join with them on one thing: the desire to keep their child alive. Important research conducted by Dr. Caitlin Ryan, who founded the Family Acceptance Project (FAP) at San Francisco State University, named specific behaviors which lead lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth to an increased risk of attempted suicide. Conversely, the research detailed behaviors, which serve to “inoculate” LGBTQ youth from harm—behaviors which support and protect these vulnerable youth. While working with youth, we should see it as an obligation to understand the outcomes that these reactions can produce as well as know what we can do to help ensure young people have a chance to survive and be successful.

When youth who identify as LGBTQ share their sexual orientation or gender identity with an adult in their life, they can experience a spectrum of responses from extremely rejecting to celebratory. These responses can have a significant impact on the well-being and success of that young person. According to the FAP research, youth who experience extreme rejection are more than eight times as

likely to attempt suicide compared to LGBTQ youth who do not experience this kind of familial rejection (Ryan, 2009). Additionally, this research revealed that when LGBTQ youth are

moderately rejected, experiencing both positive and negative reactions from the same person, this response could be just as harmful to youth as physical violence. These “moderately rejecting behaviors” include blocking youth from LGBTQ friends, pressuring them to perform their gender in “normative” ways, or forcing youth to keep their identity a secret all of which increase that youth’s risk for engaging in harmful behavior (Ryan, 2009).

When adults respond with moderately rejecting behaviors, it is often under the assumption that this intervention will protect the youth. Adults may feel that, in order to keep the youth protected, they must help the youth fit into society’s norms and expectations (Ryan, 2009). These harmful moderately rejecting behaviors may manifest as adults trying to change the youth’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Also, if the LGBTQ youth recognizes that they may experience rejection when they self disclose to adults, the youth may choose not to discuss it at all. Both the rejection that is received when the youth does come

out as well as the harm that is done as a result of this youth not being able to share their authentic identity comes at the cost of the young person's self-esteem and self-worth (Ryan, 2009).

Research shows that the best outcomes are achieved when there is complete acceptance of an LGBTQ youth. If a youth chooses to come out to an adult about their sexual orientation or gender identity it should be received as a gift; the youth is sharing their authentic self with the adult. When adults offer complete acceptance upon coming out, the result is better overall physical and mental health for the youth. The Family Acceptance Project study highlights that the positive acknowledgment of a young person's LGBTQ identity resulted in higher self-esteem along with significant decreases in rates of depression, illegal drug use, and considering or attempting to complete suicide (Ryan, 2009).

Therefore, LGBTQ youth should be accepted and celebrated. A supportive environment is imperative to create that celebration of a youth's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. By moving to a place of celebration, youth are also more likely to have a positive outlook on their future (Ryan, 2009). The FAP found that 92% of youth believe they can be happy LGBTQ adults if they have an extremely accepting family versus only 35% who do not receive this kind of support. To ensure the most successful outcome for youth, families and teachers can collaborate with the common goal of supporting and celebrating a youth's LGBTQ identity (Perry, 2005). Additionally, supportive adults in schools can be the greatest source of resiliency for LGBTQ youth (McGarry, 2013).

Together families and teachers can engage in an array of behaviors to undergird development and protect the youth from harm. The first critical step in celebrating a LGBTQ youth is to express that you care about them. Then, thanking the youth for feeling comfortable enough to confide in you validates the courage it may have taken for them to come out. Beyond that, "what educators do and say as they teach has a great deal to do with LGBT inclusion as well as safe and respectful student learning" (McGarry, 2013 p. 31). Below are five suggestions based on *Build a Curricu-*

*lum for Everyone* by Robert McGarry for educators to make their classrooms a celebratory space.

- Make sure the analogies used when teaching don't express heterosexuality as a given instead of one possibility.
- Use students' preferred names and gender pronouns (although caution should be used when speaking to parents/caregivers so as not to "out" a student).
- Educate yourself about terminology and LGBTQ persons' lived experiences.
- Use inclusive language, such as significant other or partner.
- Consider and control the ways in which stereotypes are perpetuated and make a commitment to intervene when students or staff profligate stereotypes.

When educators and families have a common goal of supporting LGBTQ youth, the biggest impact they can have is to celebrate the youth's identity. Lack of celebration and moderate rejection can be just as harmful as reacting with physical violence according to the Family Acceptance Project. It is clear that having celebratory classrooms and families serves as an inoculation from harm and significantly increases LGBTQ youths' belief that they can achieve happiness in adulthood. Educators can help families to make this kind of support a reality for the LGBTQ youth by connecting parents to important resources like PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) at [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org) and the Family Acceptance Project at [familyproject.sfsu.edu](http://familyproject.sfsu.edu).

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