



A PRACTITIONER'S RESOURCE GUIDE:
Helping Families
to Support Their
LGBT Children



Critical Role of Families in Reducing Risk & Promoting Well-Being

Before research was conducted that included LGBT adolescents, parents, foster parents, and other key family members, perceptions of how parents and families would react to their LGBT children were predominantly negative (Ryan, 2010). However, an in-depth study of LGBT adolescents and families found that family reactions to their LGBT children were much more varied and hopeful than had been previously assumed (Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013). This study found that:

- Family reactions to their LGBT adolescents range from highly rejecting to highly accepting. Thus, a proportion of families respond with acceptance, and more with ambivalence, to learning about their child's LGBT identity – and not with uniform rejection as had been previously assumed.

- Rejecting families become less rejecting over time, and access to accurate information is a critical factor in helping parents, families, and caregivers learn to support their LGBT children.

“My son is a gift. My role as a parent has been to give him space to unfold – just as he is – into a happy, caring young gay man. I’ve learned so much from him. He’s helped me grow as a parent and as a person.”

Hugo, father of 14-year old gay youth

- Parents and families want to help their LGBT children and to keep their families together, but many do not know how.
- Parents and caregivers who are perceived as rejecting their LGBT children and who engage in rejecting behaviors (e.g., trying to change their child’s sexual orientation and gender expression) are motivated by care and concern for their LGBT children – and by trying to help their LGBT child “fit in,” have a “good life,” and be accepted by others.

“When my daughter was little I spent so much time fussing over how she looked. I should have been concerned about how she felt. We didn’t know about transgender – but I know how sad and depressed she got right before middle school. The school helped us find a counselor and that’s when we found out how hopeless she felt. I wanted to make sure she wasn’t rejected by others, but instead, I was the one who was rejecting her. I’m so grateful I could change things before it was too late.”

Brianna, mother of 12-year old transgender youth

- Negative outcomes for many LGBT youth, including suicide, homelessness, and placement in foster care or juvenile justice facilities, can be prevented or reduced if parents, families, and caregivers can turn to a knowledgeable source for guidance, accurate information, and support.
- Many parents and families whose children end up out of home (e.g., homeless or in custodial care) want to reconnect and to have an ongoing relationship with their LGBT children despite assumptions by others that they do not want to have any involvement with their LGBT children’s lives.

relationship to risk & Well-Being

Research has also found that parents and caregivers play a critical role in their LGBT children’s health and well-being (e.g., Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010). In particular, families help protect against suicidal behaviors (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Ryan et al., 2010). Research with LGBT youth and families, foster families, and caregivers has identified more than 100 specific ways that parents and caregivers express acceptance and rejection of their LGBT children (Ryan, 2009; Ryan, 2010). This includes behaviors such as preventing LGBT youth from learning about their LGBT identity versus connecting them with a positive role model to show them options for the future (see Ryan, 2009). These family reactions were

FAMiLy rejection & HeALtH riSkS (Ryan et al., 2009)

LGBT young adults who reported high levels of family rejection during adolescence were:

- **8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide**
- **5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression**
- **3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and**
- **3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse –**

compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejection

FAMiLy AccePtAnce & WeLL-BeinG (Ryan et al., 2010)

Family acceptance helps:

then measured in a follow up study of LGBT young adults to assess the relationship of family acceptance and rejection during adolescence to health and mental health in young adulthood.

This research found what many providers have known intuitively for years: that LGBT young people whose parents and caregivers reject them report high levels of negative health problems (Ryan et al., 2009), and those whose parents support them show greater well-being, better general health, and significantly decreased risk for suicide, depression, and substance abuse (Ryan et al., 2010). Additional research from this project provides key information on school-based and faith-based experiences, including the relationship between condemnation, victimization, and support of LGBT adolescents and their health and well-being in young adulthood.

Increasing Family support

Working closely with many racially and ethnically diverse families, LGBT youth, and young adults in applying this research showed that families – even those who were very rejecting – could learn to modify rejecting behavior and

increase support for their LGBT children. This requires practitioners to provide education, guidance, and support in ways that resonate for them (Ryan, 2010). Several years of intervention and resource development work has led to the generation of a series of multicultural family education materials; research-based family intervention videos; assessment tools; and intervention strategies to help diverse families support their LGBT children (see Resources, p. 12).

Grounded in a strengths-based perspective, this family intervention framework (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013; Ryan & Diaz, 2011) views families and caregivers as potential allies in reducing risk, promoting well-being, and creating a healthy future for their LGBT children. This approach views the family's cultural values – including deeply-held beliefs – as strengths. Research findings are aligned with underlying values to help families understand that it is specific behaviors and communication patterns that contribute to both their LGBT child's risk and their well-being. In expanding their frame to proactively engage and work with families, practitioners may find the assumptions in Figure 1 useful to build an alliance and to help parents, foster parents, families, and caregivers to support their LGBT children.

Figure 1 FAMILY ACCEPtANCE Project – core AssuMPtions

(Ryan & Diaz, 2011)

- Assumes that families love their children and want them to have a good life. At the same time, we acknowledge that their hopes and dreams for their children's future are shaped by cultural and religious beliefs that may be at odds with their child or adolescent's sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.
- Meets families where they are. This includes starting at the family's level of knowledge, expectations, and beliefs about their child's sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.
- Uses a strengths framework to align our research findings, education and prevention messages, and family support approach with the parents' and caregivers' values about family, and the role of family in their culture and religious practice.
- Supports the need for families to be heard and understood. A critical aspect of our work is to provide a nonjudgmental space where parents and caregivers can tell their story and share their experiences and expressions of care and concern for their children's well-being that are rooted in culture, values, and specific beliefs such as faith traditions.

(continued)

Figure 1, continued
FAMILY ACCEPtANCE Project – core AssuMPTions
(Ryan & Diaz, 2011)

- Recognizes that parents and caregivers who are seen as rejecting their LGBT child are motivated by care and concern to help their child “fit in,” have a “good life,” and be accepted by others.
- Understands that family behaviors are not isolated incidents, but occur in a cultural context aimed at socializing their children and adolescents to adapt and be successful in a heteronormative (heterosexual) society. These family behaviors aim to protect their children from harm, including victimization due to their LGBT identity and gender expression.
- Uses FAP research findings to link family reactions to their child’s LGBT identity with health, mental health, and well-being. Beyond building a strong alliance between families and providers, family awareness of the consequences of their behavioral reactions is the most important mechanism of change.
- Understands that parents and families experience their lack of knowledge about LGBT issues as inadequacy that feels disempowering and shameful. Many families perceive their children’s LGBT identity as a loss, particularly as a loss of control over their children’s future. Providers should help families validate and address these feelings by affirming the importance of family support to build their child’s self-esteem, to promote their child’s well-being, and to buffer rejection and negative reactions from others.
- Recognizes that when rejecting and accepting behaviors co-exist, parents and caregivers experience ambivalence, and their struggle to validate their LGBT child results in decreased support and increased risk. Education and learning how their reactions affect their LGBT children can improve communication and help parents and caregivers respond in ways that help their LGBT child feel supported and loved rather than misunderstood or rejected.

From: *Family Acceptance Project: Intervention guidelines and strategies* by Caitlin Ryan and Rafael Diaz. San Francisco: Family Acceptance Project, 2011. Copyright © 2011 Caitlin Ryan, PhD. Reprinted with permission.