Mental Health of Transgender Youth: The Role of Family, School, and Community in Promoting Resilience

December 2017

Community Context

Community groups and programs for trans youth, including after-school activities and church/interfaith youth groups, as well as LGBTQ community groups and programs, are important spaces for fostering support and alleviating the stress of family or school victimization. Programs like these give trans youth some relief from stress they may experience on a daily basis in other spheres of their life.

Learning about and having access to community groups and programs that support LGBTQ youth is a challenge, however. GLSEN's 2011 National School Climate Survey found that more than half of the youth in the survey did not have or were unaware of an LBGTQ youth group or program in their local community, and not all youth had the same access. As a result, youth in rural areas or with unreliable transportation, as well as youth who might feel uncomfortable attending or were not "out" to parents or peers were shown to have lower levels of participation in community groups and programs[14].

Community groups for trans youth provide:
- Experiences of solidarity, belongingness and mentorship
- Access to housing services
- Medical care
- Work opportunities
- Social support for dealing with schools and issues such as bathroom access
- Education and counseling about families, support networks, and connecting with cultural groups.

> Research has found that queer youth community programs provide essential functions for transgender youth, such as access to housing services, medical care, and work opportunities, as well as social support for dealing with schools, and systems to improve community bathroom access[15].

Suggested citation
Michaels, C., McGuire, J.K., Hoelscher, M.C., Lacey, V., Okrey-Anderson, S., Mahan, D. (2017). eReview Summary: Mental Health of Transgender Youth: The Role of Family, School, and Community in Promoting Resilience. University of Minnesota Extension.

References
(1) McGuire, J. K., Catalpa, J. M., Lacey, V., & Kuvalanka, K. A. (2016). Ambiguous Loss as a Framework for Interpreting Gender Transitions in Families. Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8(3), 373-385.
(2) Russell, S. T., & Fish, J. N. (2016). Mental health in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. Annual review of clinical psychology, 12, 465-487.
(3) Wahlig, J. L. (2014). Losing the child they thought they had: Therapeutic suggestions for an ambiguous loss perspective with parents of a transgender child. Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 11, 305–326.
(4) Brill, S., Pepper, R. (2008). The transgender child: A handbook for families and professionals. Simon and Schuster. San Francisco: CA.
(5) Ryan, C., Russell, S. T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R., & Sanchez, J. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 23(4), 205-213.
(6) Kuvalanka, K. A., Weiner, J. L., & Mahan, D. (2014). Child, family, and community transformations: Findings from interviews with mothers of transgender girls. Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 10(4), 354-379.
(7) De Vries, A. L., McGuire, J. K., Steensma, T. D., Wagenaar, E. C., Doreleijers, T. A., & Cohen-Kettenis, P. T. (2014). Young adult psychological outcome after puberty suppression and gender reassignment. Pediatrics, 134(4), 696-704.
(8) Olson, K. R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. Pediatrics, peds-2015.
(9) McGuire, J. K., Anderson, C. R., Toomey, R. B., & Russell, S. T. (2010). School climate for transgender youth: A mixed method investigation of student experiences and school responses. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 39(10), 1175-1188.
(10) Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A.; Giga, N. M., Villenas, C. & Danischewski, D. J. (2016). The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools. New York: GLSEN
(11) Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., & Boesen, M. J. (2013). Putting the "T" in "resource": The benefits of LGBT-related school resources for transgender youth. Journal of LGBT Youth, 10(1-2), 45-63.
(12) Kosciw, J. G., Palmer, N. A., Kull, R. M., & Greytak, E. A. (2013). The effect of negative school climate on academic outcomes for LGBT youth and the role of in-school supports. Journal of School Violence, 12(1), 45-63.
(13) Toomey, R. B., McGuire, J. K., & Russell, S. T. (2012). Heteronormativity, school climates, and perceived safety for gender nonconforming peers. Journal of adolescence, 35(1), 187-196.
(14) Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). New York: NY.
(15) McGuire, J. K., & Conover-Williams, M. (2010). Creating Spaces to Support Transgender Youth. Prevention Researcher, 17(4), 17-20.

The focus of this eReview Summary is on gender variance and transgender identities among children and adolescents. The full publication reviews the research about gender variance in development, related mental health issues, and family, school, and community contexts that can increase or decrease risks. The full publication also highlights two community authors who work with trans youth and describe the implications this research has for their work. Find the Children's Mental Health eReview at: http://z.umn.edu/ereviewtg.

Introduction

Research shows three important contexts that influence outcomes for transgender youth: home (and family), school, and community groups. Changes within these contexts could ensure safe and inclusive environments for trans youth that promote resilience. A review of language appears in the blue box - learning and using the language of gender shows transgender people that you see them, you care about them, and you believe them. For more information about trans-related terminology, visit the Extension CYFC Transgender Toolkit at http://z.umn.edu/tgtoolkit or the National Center for Transgender Equality at http://z.umn.edu/33ll.

Family Context

Families play a critical role in supporting and promoting resiliency for trans youth. Families also serve as a space where gender is taught and learned. Research illustrates both the harm of family rejection and the benefit of family acceptance for gender variant youth. Families can engage in accepting and rejecting behaviors at the same time by doing things such as: agreeing to allow a child to socially transition while also engaging in name-calling or other demeaning behaviors; acknowledging a youth as a family member but not acknowledging that youth's gender identity; kicking a youth out of the house but providing that youth with financial support; and allowing a youth to remain in the home but not providing emotional support[1,2,3,4,5].

When families can reframe their thinking about gender, it is easier to adapt to the presence of a trans child and find meaning in supporting that child.

Trans-related terminology

Gender Identity: the internal perceptions of an individual's gender and how they label themselves

Gender Expression: the external display of gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally measured on a scale of masculinity and femininity

Cisgender: describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth

Transgender or Trans: describes a person whose gender identity does not always align with the gender they were assigned at birth, including nonbinary and genderqueer people

Nonbinary/Genderqueer: describes any person whose gender identity cannot be classified as either man/male or woman/female

University of Minnesota Extension Children, Youth, and Family Consortium
www.extension.umn.edu/family/cyfc

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

Family Context

Family members can use many strategies to support trans youth. They can reframe their thinking about gender, which makes it easier to adapt to the presence of a trans child and find meaning in supporting that child in navigating complex social environments such as school and community spaces. Trans young adults who come from homes that supported them as youth have improved mental well-being[5]. This is shown by young adults' greater self-esteem, social support, and overall health when compared to young adults who reported no or low levels of family support.

> Socially transitioned transgender children who are supported in their gender identity have typical levels of depression and only slightly elevated anxiety levels compared to non-transgender peers.

Families can also support inclusive environments for trans youth by becoming experts on gender identity and advocates for transgender issues[6]. For example, one study found that Dutch youth who were supported by their families through medical transition as adolescents reported mental health symptoms that were similar to or better than the overall population[7]. The quality of life and psychological functioning of this cohort of young adults who received transition services as youth were very similar to the typical Dutch population. Also, this group of young people did not report any of the mental health and social concerns that frequently appear in reports from transgender youth in the United States who have had less access to support services[1,2,8]. Another recent study explains that socially transitioned transgender children who are supported in their gender identity have typical levels of depression and only slightly elevated anxiety levels compared to non-transgender peers[8].

Family Practice Highlight: Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)

The Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) began as a family support group in 2011 with 10 parents, one aunt, and a neighbor of one of the parents. In the past five years, TENI has grown to a database of various groups with over 200 families, a parent support group called TransParenCI, and a youth group called Transformers. TransParenCI organizes events throughout the year to bring both trans young people and their families together, including a residential weekend that informs families about services, schools, legislation and more, a series of workshops addressing psychotherapy, grief and loss for parents, healthcare pathways, legislation, changing documentation, art therapy, and sibling groups. See more at Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) at www.teni.ie.

Specific strategies TENI uses to help families support trans youth include:

- **Helping families create new narratives for trans youth and their families.** Narratives describe an individual's life or family members' lives prior to gender transition, and can empower the person to confidently speak about their past. For example, trans people have a past living in the gender they were assigned at birth - they were raised, nurtured and known in a previous gender, name, and pronoun. It may help trans youth to create their own language about their past; for example, they might say "previously, when I lived as a male."

- **Holding information sessions for trans youth and their families about navigating health services, medical interventions, psychosocial issues, changing documentation, and legal information.**

- **Holding support meetings for parents and siblings to acknowledge the change in their lives and the loss of their assumptions in a non-judgmental environment.** Ensure that facilitators are knowledgeable, qualified and skillful professionals, as parents and other family members are often experiencing high levels of anxiety during this period.

School Context

Growing research describes schools as a place of common harassment, victimization and invisibility for trans youth. Although statistics are improving, most U.S. studies find that about 80 percent of transgender students hear harassing comments regularly. Students also hear harassment from adults, and rarely experience support by an adult or peer stepping in[9,10]. Trans youth experience physical and psychological distress as a result of harassment in school, including reduced feelings of safety and fear of physical violence. Schools can and do change when inclusive strategies are put in place. Some specific strategies for improving school climate and providing a safer space for transgender youth include:

- teachers and staff intervening to stop harassment
- classes addressing LGBTQ issues in the curricula
- policies that include harassment based on gender identity and sexual orientation
- access to trusting school personnel
- the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club [9,10]

Schools with a climate that is perceived as safe by transgender youth — namely an environment with caring and accepting adults, anti-bullying and harassment policies, and education of school staff and students around transgender youth needs — are likely to foster positive psychological outcomes and promote academic achievement for trans students[11,12,13].

School Practice Highlight – Out for Equity, Saint Paul Public Schools How can schools help families of trans youth?

- **Adopt practices that support transgender youth.** Use inclusive rather than male-female language, use gender neutral pronouns, provide resources that include or support transgender people, and widely communicate support for gender differences. For example, welcome students broadly as "students" or "players" rather than "boys and girls".

- **Use gender-inclusive books.** See an extensive Children's Book Review on Extension CYFC's Transgender Toolkit at http://z.umn.edu/33lm.

- **Incorporate gender diversity in curricula.** Broaden notions of gender with curricula for all youth and embed across grade levels and subject areas, including language arts, social studies, science, health, and the arts.

- **Provide staff development training.** Few teachers and staff have received training related to gender beyond binary models, and very few are knowledgeable about research.

- **Rethink and redesign gender binary spaces.** Transgender youth express that spaces built around the gender binary model require choosing between the possibility of being physically harmed or being perceived as a threat, depending on the gender they present. There are other options. For example, efforts to create multi-stall all gender bathrooms have been led by students and are being established around the country (see St. Paul's Johnson High eliminating gender-specific restrooms at http://z.umn.edu/33ln).

- **Provide Individualized Supports for Transgender Youth.** Offering the option of culturally competent individualized support for trans youth promotes resiliency. The most acute time for this support is during a child's social gender transition. Gender transition is the process of becoming socially recognized as a gender different from what was previously assigned. Gender transition planning may include:
  - Coordinating the child's name and/or gender information in data systems
  - Planning for facilities use
  - Communicating with peers
  - Setting expectations for respect from peers and training staff
  - Connecting to support staff who can check-in on the child during and after gender transition

See resources from Gender Spectrum, which works to create a gender-inclusive world for all children and youth, at www.genderspectrum.org.