Promoting Positive Development of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

Research Brief
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Introduction

Research on child development shows that children's sexual identity generally develops during early adolescence. Generally, by age 10 or 11, youth are aware of their lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientation[5]. For transgender youth, however, the age at which they recognize that their gender identity does not match their biological sex has not been empirically established[23]. Research indicates that in the United States, approximately 5 to 10% of youth openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)[3]. These youth tend to "come out" on average at about 16 years old[20]; however, recent studies report that youth are coming out at younger ages than ever before[23]. In this brief, we will review the research on the **psychosocial outcomes** that are associated with identifying as an LGBT young person, and identify factors that place LGBT youth at greater risk or provide protection against these psychosocial outcomes. Implications and recommendations for future research and practice will also be discussed.

Research Findings

Psychosocial Outcomes

There are a number of **psychosocial outcomes** that have been tied to identification as an LGBT youth. For example, youth who identify as LGBT report higher rates of depression self-cutting behaviors when compared to their heterosexual peers[1,4,10,18]. Several studies indicate that rates of substance use (e.g., alcohol, marijuana) are also higher among LGBT youth compared to their heterosexual peers[2,11]. Another study, however, reports no significant differences in cigarette use among LGBT and non-LGBT young adults[17]. As evidenced by this body of literature, it is clear that most of the research examining LGBT youth tends to focus on the negative outcomes associated with identifying as an LGBT youth, rather than focusing on youths' strengths and resiliency. In addition, there is a lack of research on the types of resources and support services that youth believe are important to their healthy psychological development and wellbeing.

Keywords

Psychosocial outcomes are issues related to psychological or social wellbeing, such as mental health problems, social adjustment, and general wellbeing.

Risk factors are factors that place youth at a greater risk for psychosocial problems.

Protective factors are factors that help provide protection against psychosocial problems.

Risk and Protective Family-based Factors

Some research has investigated the family-based **risk and protective factors** that may affect the psychosocial outcomes of LGBT youth. Families play an integral role in the development of LBGT youth. In fact, when compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBT youth feel less supported by their parents during their transition to young adulthood[15].

For youth who identify as LGBT, fears of rejection are at the forefront of youth's mind, particularly when considering whether they should "come out" or disclose their LGBT identity to their family[5,21]. Family and peer acceptance and rejection after coming out is linked with a variety of outcomes for LGBT youth. For example, youth who perceive less family support also report more suicidal thoughts[10,14]. Other research notes that LGBT young adults who experience family rejection during adolescence are more likely to attempt suicide, report depression, use illegal drugs, and engage in unprotected sex than their peers that experience some or no rejection from their family[21].

Rather than focus on the negative role parents and families play in the development of LGBT youth, more research is needed that focuses on family support and resiliency. When parents are accepting of their LGBT youth's identity, it can have a positive effect on the young adult's self-esteem and overall health[22]. In addition, positive parent-child connectedness is associated with fewer reports of having unmet physical and mental health needs[25], and mothers' positive reaction to youth coming out are associated with reductions in substance use among LGBT youth[16]. Clearly, positive support is critical for the wellbeing of LGBT youth.

Risk and Protective School-based Factors

Schools can also serve as an important context for LGBT youth. One study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network surveyed LGBT youth from all 50 states and found that 61% of LGBT youth feel unsafe and about 85% have been verbally harassed at school[7]. This perceived discrimination and harassment in school is problematic, as it is associated with increases in thoughts about suicide among LGBT young men, and depressive symptoms among LGBT youth in general[1,12] . School victimization is also linked to decreases in self-esteem and life satisfaction and increases in depression, cutting behaviors, and suicide attempts[10,19].

Research shows that schools play a key role in creating a welcoming and safe environment for their students. For transgender youth, when schools take an active role in decreasing school harassment, these youth report greater connectedness to school personnel which increases feelings of school safety[13]. Similarly, other studies show that having supportive school staff and bullying policies increase feelings of connectedness to the school, and self-esteem among LGBT youth[6,8]. Other safety-promoting strategies might also serve as protective factors for youth. For example, when schools integrate LGBT issues into the school curriculum and have a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), LGBT youth perceive their school as being safer[24]. Overall, the research on school environments shows that a safe environment can serve as a protective factor for LGBT youth.

Future Directions for the Field

Parents and schools tend to be bombarded with negative messages related to adolescence. These negative portrayals of youth suggest that teens need to be "fixed". Rather than focusing on the adversities that youth may face, parents and schools need to work together and identify ways to support the positive youth development (PYD) among LGBT youth. The PYD model places a greater emphasis on building upon the strengths of youth and promoting healthy activities rather than over-emphasizing the reduction of risky and deviant behaviors[9]. There is also a need for more research that gives voice to LGBT youths' day-to-day experiences of being in school and identifies what LGBT youth would like to see in their schools. At the family-level, more empirical research is needed to examine parents' experiences and reactions of having a child who is LGBT. In addition, there is a need for more empirical literature that examines the range of experiences of extended family members during the coming out process and how they can support their LGBT family member during this time.

Implications

Implications of these research findings should be considered at several levels of context, including:

Family

- It is critical for family members to offer positive support for LGBT youth throughout adolescence.
- Parents and other family members of LGBT youth can seek out resources and programs to help them understand how best to support the LGBT youth in their lives.
- Family members should also be aware of the warning signs of psychosocial problems, such as depression and suicidal behaviors, so that they can offer help and support to the LGBT youth in their lives.

School

- Schools should make strides to ensure that they have supportive staff, anti-bullying and victimization policies, and curriculum that has LGBT issues interwoven, as these factors can have a positive effect on LGBT youth.
- Implementing an alliance that is accepting of all youth at the school is an important stride toward a welcoming environment.
- Offering training for school staff on how to create an inclusive school environment and the benefits of inclusion on the psychosocial wellbeing of all students could also help improve schools as a protective context for LGBT youth.

In Practice

There are several recommendations for programs and policies that derive from this review:
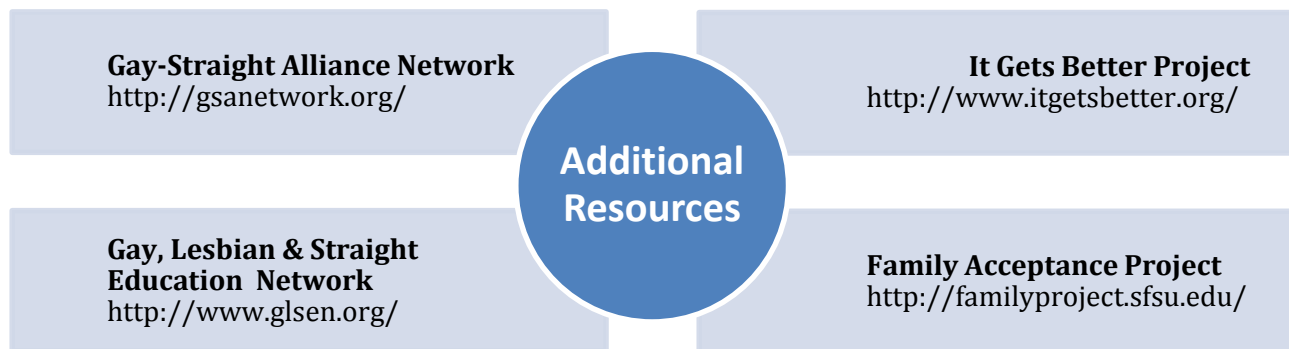
Policies

- Creating school-based policies that minimize victimization is imperative.
- Schools and programs should ensure that the school's non-discrimination policy includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

Programs

- Programs can create more evidence-based parent education programs that help families develop ways to support their LGBT youth.
- School-based prevention programs that address and reduce bullying that is targeted towards LGBT youth should be implemented.

Summary

Coming out can be a challenging time for youth. Based on the research in this area, some LGBT youth experience rejection by family and peer victimization at school, which can result in negative outcomes. However, rather than using a deficit model, we need to examine how LGBT thrive and what families and schools can do to support LGBT youth's positive development. By better understanding the experiences of LGBT youth and their family members, schools and communities can create more comprehensive programming that meets their specific needs and promotes the healthy development of LGBT youth and their families.

Gay-Straight Alliance Network
http://gsanetwork.org/

It Gets Better Project
http://www.itgetsbetter.org/

Additional Resources

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network
http://www.glsen.org/

Family Acceptance Project
http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/

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