

# Being There for Nonbinary Youth

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## START A NEW LEARNING PLAN

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Illustration by Valeria Petrone

When Eli Sommer came across the term “transgender” in a Tumblr post in high school, everything clicked. “Oh,” he thought. “That’s me.” Attending a Georgia high school, struggling with anxiety and depression, Eli tried to communicate with his parents who were forcing gender conformity and insisting he was a girl. It wasn’t until his psychologist, who is himself transgender, recommended *The Transgender Child* as a resource that his parents realized what Eli needed to thrive.

The family met with his homeroom teacher, who quickly became an ally, even advising the LGBT club Eli established called GLOW (Gay, Lesbian Or Whatever). “He’s cisgender, he’s straight,” Eli recalls, “but he’s passionate about advocating and making sure all of the kids in our club succeed in school and aren’t held back because of how they identify.”

Eli also found an advocate in his school principal, who located a gender-neutral restroom for him to use at school. “I would not have thought that my principal would have been helpful because he drives a big red truck with a gun rack on it,” recounts Eli. “But when all of the transgender stuff came to the table, he was like, ‘I don’t really understand, but Eli’s a good kid and we’ll get him what he’s entitled to.’”

Although it was not without obstacles, the relative ease of Eli’s transition is rare. The 2013 GLSEN National School Climate Survey found that, compared to their LGB peers, transgender and gender-nonconforming students face the most hostile school climates. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, in 2015, 75 percent of transgender youth felt unsafe at school, and those who did not drop out altogether were more likely to miss school due to a safety concern, have significantly lower GPAs, and were less likely to plan for future education.

The good news is educators are learning more about how to support nonbinary youth at school. One of the most important lessons? The needs of transgender youth remain distinct from those of their LGB peers—and they extend beyond pronoun usage and bathroom access.

## “When Kids Like Me Grow Up ...”

Experts cite mentorship as instrumental for trans students’ success, but formal mentors are scarce. Jenn Burleton, executive director of TransActive Gender Center in Portland, Oregon, sought to establish a trans-to-

trans mentoring program but failed to locate enough transgender adults for similarly identified youth.

“Right now what these kids do not have is enough of a sense that: ‘When kids like me grow up, there’s an adult version of me doing what everybody else does and getting through the day. They’re there for me to see and know that there’s a place for me to walk when I get older,’” Burleton says. “Not letting kids see that can give them a subliminal sense that there is a dead end to their identity or that hiding is the only way to be.”

Kiera Hansen, a genderqueer-identified social worker in Portland, Oregon, is attempting to fill this void. Hansen—who prefers the pronoun *they*—helps run an afterschool drop-in program where almost everyone identifies as trans or gender-nonconforming. While funding sources have diminished, their team has pooled resources throughout the city to create a tight-knit group. Outside of the group, Hansen has accompanied mentees to school when they need support, meeting with teachers to ensure access to the right bathrooms, use of the right pronouns, and to address any other issues students might face.

Hansen cites modeling vulnerability as a key to successful mentoring. “I’m surviving a lot of things on a regular basis, just as the youth are,” they recount. “I am genuinely honest with them. We’re transparent about the hurdles and barriers we go through in life and in the program. We do not make everything look perfect and well-put-together. We want them to have the tools to interact with the systems that are often working against them and their voices.”

One of the members of their drop-in group, Cameron, is about to graduate from high school and attributes part of that success to the group. “I have a really bad attendance problem with school,” he confides, recounting frequent bullying, including being compared to a wild animal in sociology class. “Having this group to look forward to every week has been one of the motivations that brings me back to school.”

## Gender Identity Competency

When working toward success at school for transgender students, it is paramount for youth to identify an adult with whom they feel safe. Johanna Eager, director of the Human Rights Campaign’s Welcoming Schools program, coaches educators around gender identity competency. She trains schools to help transitioning students identify a knowledgeable staff member who may or may not be trans but to whom students feel safe going during the day. “Any trans student needs to know who their safe person is,” she says. “You are vulnerable if you are the only one.”

Eager says there is no formula to positive mentorship. Some mentors are passionate and informed based on experience. Some are naturally kind and caring, with no formal training. “I’ve seen educators who don’t have much knowledge tend to the social emotional health for a trans child, and I have seen folks who are trans or LGBTQ be supportive with their knowledge. It can be either and it always has been.”

Above all, quality mentors *trust* that transgender youth know who they are and what they need. As one father reflected about parenting his transgender son, “There were never any conscious decisions. It was always intuitive, following him. It’s about letting him lead and supporting wherever he is. That line is always moving.”

Transgender youth are looking, first and foremost, for adults to respect their chosen names and pronouns. Making this effort validates young people’s core identity and solidifies their safety. Without it, a trusted

relationship cannot be built. As Cameron says, “People using your pronouns and correct name without fail is wonderful. When people do it with no question, you can tell they see you the way you want to be seen.”

Earning the trust and respect of transgender students requires educators to uncover any internalized transphobia and recognize personal biases. Some allies find it takes time to mentally de-align gender and genitalia. Still, adults cannot show up for youth without honestly accepting their feelings and beliefs. If they skip this crucial step, youth will notice. This is the case for Todd, who is genderqueer and can read their teachers’ facial expressions as measurements of acceptance and safety.

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Once educators recognize their own behaviors and microaggressions, they’re better equipped to identify microaggressions, bullying and harassment when they happen in schools. Even if it appears minor, these behaviors need to be interrupted in the moment. Too often transgender students expect no assistance from teachers; being ostracized becomes the norm. As one trans middle school student—who is now homeschooled—attests, “As long as it doesn’t escalate to a screaming match, they think everything looks fine.”

Furthermore, the interruption does not have to be impeccable. Eager recommends, “Just say something. You may screw it up, it may not feel comfortable, it may not be perfect. But saying something is better than saying nothing, and you need to say it because everyone is watching to see if they are going to be safe.”

If necessary, distinguish between the personal and the professional. Lead author of the resource guide *Schools In Transition*, Asaf Orr, stands behind educators who are “on board” regardless of their personal beliefs. “In their private lives these educators may not be supportive of gender exploration,” Orr notes. “But when they get to school, they know it’s critical to be 100 percent supportive of a kid’s own gender exploration, and they ensure the space for them to do that.”

Educators can support their trans students by including nonbinary identities in the curriculum. As Cameron asserts, “With every sex ed class we have that’s not inclusive, and every English class where there’s no inclusive literature, there’s another trans kid that feels so alone.”

Recognizing nonbinary gender identities depicted within student work is also important, as youth are likely to reflect themselves most accurately. One agender-identified seventh-grader, Jace, remembers feeling safe after a teacher commented on their agender character drawing, saying they “looked cool.”

Finally, do not assume. Nontransidentified adults, says Cameron, “are never going to be able to fully understand what any trans person is going through. Adults need not question the way a person feels about themselves, because they do not know. They are never going to feel the same way. And we have to figure ourselves out.”

Transgender youth know what they need to feel safe. Strong mentors ask them.

## TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO FAMILY PUSH BACK

Caitlin Ryan directs the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University. The project aims to learn how caregivers' reactions contribute to the health and development of LGBT youth. It also trains schools and child welfare, juvenile justice and other social service agencies in working with LGBT youth and families. Find out more at [familyproject.sfsu.edu](http://familyproject.sfsu.edu).

### **Meet families where they are.**

Avoid finger wagging or saying, "You have to do this" or "This is the way it is." Start from the assumption that each family cares deeply for their gender nonconforming child. Help them understand how their responses affect not only their child, but everyone in their family.

### **Use an evidence-based approach.**

Parents may want to know, "What's going on?" or "Are you trying to indoctrinate my child?" Point to research when available. Most families do not have accurate information about child and adolescent development related to gender identity, but they do want to understand how to help their children. If they are open to it, ask families what kinds of guidance and materials they trust and need, and then help make the connection.

### **Give them space.**

This is a disarming strategy. If you are in a public setting with someone who is disruptive, you could say, "Look, I'm happy to talk with you after this is over, but this is a public forum and everybody's here to learn. I understand that you have real concerns about this. Why don't you listen to what I have to say and then we can talk about it afterwards?"

### **Examine attitudes and biases.**

Many educators who work with LGBT youth hold biases toward rejecting parents. Begin to understand the motives and aspirations that drive families, especially where religion is a variable. Deconstruct your own preconceptions, acknowledge that you are bringing them to the interaction, and ask the other adults in the conversation to do the same. This creates the optimal opportunity for educators, administrators and families to hear each other.

### **Let them tell their stories.**

Few parents have the chance to tell their story to a neutral third party. This is something all families need. Families of LGBT youth rarely get to do it.

### **Help create peer support.**

Many families want to be around other families that share their cultural background, religious beliefs, language, heritage and experiences. While not all families will feel safe talking in an open group, having the support may make the difference in their acceptance of an LGBT youth.

### **Focus on the whole system.**

Family systems are an incredibly powerful resource for their children in terms of prevention and well-being. If you focus on only one person or “part of the system,” you only get one part of the story.

### **Remember that every family is different.**

Some families can move faster than others. Some can change their behavior overnight; other families, from all kinds of backgrounds, may start with rejection and ambivalence and become more supportive over time.

[Click here for important takeaways and additional resources.](#)

Toolkit

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