

Supporting Gifted LGBTQ+ Students

Introduction

Like other gifted youth, students with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and/or gender expressions may have strengths in one or more areas of giftedness (i.e., intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, academic). They are present across genders, cultural and ethnic groups, income levels, geographical locations, religions, and abilities/disabilities. However, unlike most other groups of gifted students, they may not only feel different from other youth because of their giftedness, but also may feel isolated due to sexual identity, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) recommends that all educators ensure that all gifted youth with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and/or gender expressions are able to develop and express their personal identities in a school climate that is free from discrimination, harassment, and violence, and that is safe, accepting, and respectful of all people. NAGC has an organizational policy of nondiscrimination, supporting respectful and equitable treatment of LGBTQ+ gifted youth (Policy 2.7) and recommends that educators demonstrate compassionate understanding of these students and support them in maximizing their potential.

The acronym *LGBTQ+* (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex) is intended to be inclusive of students of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and/or gender expressions, and the term *youth* is inclusive of all children, adolescents, and young adults. It is important to recognize that there is diversity of experiences, both among LGBTQ+ students and within groups of LGBTQ+ students across their homes, schools, and communities. These students, like other minoritized groups of gifted students, require educators' awareness, understanding, and protection.

In many local contexts, people have experienced improved rights and protections; however, it is essential that gifted LGBTQ+ and allies are aware of the varying landscape of LGBTQ+ rights and protections across nations. Although public opinion has shifted in favor of LGBTQ+ rights and legal protections have generally increased, individuals must remain cautious and vigilant, as the situation can change quickly, and not all states within the United States and not all nations worldwide afford the same degree of protection for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Research Overview

Being LGBTQ+, along with related challenges of being gifted, can affect the social and emotional development of adolescents (Peterson & Rischar, 2000; Wikoff et al., 2021). Gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents may experience social difficulties at school (Lo et al., 2021), be targets of bullying and harassment (Dunne et al., 2025), struggle with rigid gender norms (Kerr & Multon, 2015), have difficulty coming to terms

with their identity (Tuite et al., 2021), and hold divergent interests from their peers (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014). Social fears can have a significant effect on identity development for gifted LGBTQ+ young people, in particular fear of rejection on coming out, alienation, prejudice, and harassment (Tuite et al., 2021). Gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents face a double challenge regarding disclosure of their identity, in terms of both their giftedness and their sexual and/or gender identity (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Kerr & Huffman, 2018). These internal and external challenges can lead to increased mental health risks for gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents, including depression (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014) and increased risk of suicidal thoughts and ideation (Sedillo, 2015), which can impact their academic achievement and participation in gifted programming and talent development opportunities. Those who are additionally isolated (e.g., gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents who are also part of a minority group [Sedillo, 2018b; Sewell, 2019], or who have a disability [Friedrichs, 2024]), may be at greater risk of mental health issues.

Given the challenges facing this population, it is crucial that educators and school counselors have the knowledge and understanding to serve this group of students (Friedrichs, 2012). With appropriate support structures, environments that affirm and champion their identities, and key advocates, gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents can thrive, not only academically, but also socially in their educational setting. The presence of these key items has been shown to decrease mental health risks and increase overall positive development (Dunne et al., 2025).

Research-Based Best Practices

A positive environment for gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents can be created by educator allies and LGBTQ+ staff members, who create inclusive classrooms through physical signifiers (such as LGBTQ+ posters or rainbow flags; Sedillo, 2018a), who use inclusive language and curricula (Dunne & Treat, 2022), and who condemn all instances of anti-LGBTQ+ language. Inclusive environments provide gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents with a profound sense of safety, comfort, and support for positive identity development (Dunne et al., 2025). Experts recommend the following practices to support all LGBTQ+ children within schools and other educational settings:

- Challenge anti-LGBTQ+ language consistently, ensuring students know the reason behind why the language is hurtful and not just that it is "bad."
- Ensure that anti-bullying policies and codes of behavior include clear definitions of anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment (e.g., repeatedly referring to students by incorrect or former pronouns/names after being informed and corrected will be deemed bullying).
- Support students who report bullying and harassment with active listening and validation.

- Include LGBTQ+ representations in curricula and avoid limiting this to a single class or period of observance (e.g., Pride Month).
- Use inclusive language and curricula. Sometimes this can be as small as using a gender-neutral pronoun in a math problem or including well-known LGBTQ+ figures in a history and politics lesson. Teachers can also support gifted LGBTQ+ students to undertake projects that are relevant and meaningful to their experiences.
- Provide professional learning to educators on how to support LGBTQ+ students in their classrooms and schools.
- Create opportunities for gifted LGBTQ+ students to meet other students through clubs and groups. Teachers can also connect students with local youth advocacy groups. Many groups also offer online support for those not in the immediate area.
- Use visual cues where possible to show support, such as rainbow flags, posters for LGBTQ+ organizations, or badges of allyship.
- Provide sensitivity and support to students who are not yet out. Teachers do this by building an inclusive classroom, which includes zero tolerance for anti-LGBTQ language or harassment, and by using the tips above to make sure students know they are an ally.

Conclusion

Supportive staff members can have a significant impact on students' perceptions of safety, not only for LGBTQ+ students, but for students in the entire school community. NAGC recommends that educators ensure that gifted LGBTQ+ youth are affirmed in their identity and given opportunities to develop and express themselves in a school climate that is free from discrimination and promotes acceptance and respect for all.

Resources

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