

# A Focus Guide for Parents, Families, and Communities

## Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQIA2S+ Youth

### Background

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago to develop a series of resource guides for professionals, families, communities, and technical assistance (TA) providers who regularly interact with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and/or Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) youth. All the guides in this series were developed with input from LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their parents, professionals and advocates, and people who have experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviors. This focus guide is intended specifically for parents, families, and communities. The other guides—including a comprehensive resource guide and three focus guides for schools, state agencies, and health and behavioral health care providers—can be accessed at <https://sprc.org/lgbtqia2s-youth-resources/>.

### Introduction

The number of individuals who are openly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and/or Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) is at an all-time high in the U.S., having doubled since 2012.<sup>1</sup> This increase may be driven by the younger population; one in five Gen Z adults (ages 18 to 26)

are openly LGBTQIA2S+ compared to 7.1% of adults 18 and above. This increase is expected to continue as today's adolescents reach adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

Even with greater openness around sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE)<sup>1</sup> in the U.S., LGBTQIA2S+ youth continue to face unique challenges that can contribute to poor mental health and increased risk of suicide.

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These challenges can include trauma; lack of acceptance from family, peers, or at school; discrimination; homophobia; transphobia; and violence.<sup>3,4</sup> Research shows that approximately 46% of LGBTQIA2S+ adolescents seriously considered suicide in 2022.<sup>4</sup> Efforts that help LGBTQIA2S+ youth feel more comfortable and safe in being their true selves are critical in supporting the well-being of this growing population.

Parents, families, and communities play an important role in supporting positive mental health and well-being among LGBTQIA2S+ youth. This focus guide is intended to be a brief, high-level resource to support parents, families, and communities in preventing suicide and supporting the mental well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ youth. It offers recommendations and strategies to create inclusive, affirming, and protective environments and includes information on where to find in-depth resources and trainings to support these efforts.



*“Having [support from] a parent is the most impactful thing in an LGBTQ child’s life. A mental health clinician can provide great resources, but if the kid has to go back home and is still in the fire every day, that is a problem... There has to be a family member or close friend who can give affirmation daily to the youth that it’s okay to be queer or trans or to use their preferred name.”*

**LGBTQIA2S+ young adult**

*Two-Spirit describes the presence of both male and female energy combined with the ability to connect with the spiritual world (ancestors, Creator, and higher power). In most Tribes, Two-Spirit people occupy a distinct, alternative gender status.<sup>2</sup> Not all Tribal communities agree that it is appropriate to include Two-Spirit in discussions of LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Please consult the communities you engage about their perspectives on this.*

## Strategies for parents, family members, and supportive others

Parents, family members, and supportive others play a pivotal role in the health and well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ youth. While parents and supportive others may hold their own beliefs about LGBTQIA2S+ identities, it is important that they support and affirm their child or loved one. Below are some steps for supporting an LGBTQIA2S+ child or loved one.

### Tips for supporting your LGBTQIA2S+ child:

- Engage in active listening and learn from LGBTQIA2S+ youth.
  - It’s okay if you don’t fully understand—be open, curious, and nonjudgmental. Let them explain to you how they feel and identify. Let your child or loved one be in the driver’s seat, while you are along for the ride.
  - If your child comes out to you and you don’t know how to respond, pause to consider your response.
  - Mistakes happen; it is best to sincerely apologize and then move on.
- Understand the important role you play in promoting positive mental health.
  - Coming out to one’s parents and loved ones can be a scary and emotional experience. Regardless of how a youth thinks you will react, it takes courage to come out as LGBTQIA2S+.



*“Something that would be really beneficial for parents is guidance like ‘before you reject your child, let’s do these steps, almost A, B, C...’ If your child just came out to you, pause, step out of the room, don’t be with your kid for that moment, because that first knee jerk reaction could be the most harmful.”*

### Advocate and professional



- By putting aside their own beliefs and preconceptions about LGBTQIA2S+ identities and focusing on being supportive, loving, and genuinely interested in the child’s development, parents and supportive others can contribute to positive mental health.
- It is understandable to have feelings of grief related to your child or loved one’s changing identity. While you manage your grief, make sure you center and celebrate your child or loved one’s new identity. Your reaction and support are of utmost importance to their mental and emotional well-being.
- There are many different identities that fall under the LGBTQIA2S+ umbrella, and it requires effort to learn about and fully understand the differences and distinct challenges each identity faces. There are resources that can help, such as PFLAG’s LGBTQIA2S+ [glossary](#) or NPR’s [guide](#) to gender identity terms. It is important to become familiar with these identities, as the way your child or loved one identifies may change over time. Again, the

best way to learn about someone’s identity is to ask the person to describe how they identify and what language makes them feel most comfortable.

- Seek support.
  - Connect with other parents and family members of LGBTQIA2S+ youth for support and to share experiences. Local, virtual, and identity-specific support groups for parents and supportive others can be found through [PFLAG Connects](#).
  - Reach out to health and mental health providers—go to the [LGBTQ+ Healthcare Directory](#) to find an LGBTQIA2S+-friendly provider in your area or use [this resource](#) to help find an affirming therapist.
- Stay involved with your child or loved one’s school.
  - Maintaining frequent contact with your child or loved one’s teachers and other school



*“How do you simultaneously grieve and support your young person? I don’t think that’s talked about enough. When I was born, my mom had, biologically, a whole bunch of dreams for me and, when I transitioned, those had to stop, and she had to work through it. I don’t think there’s a lot of resources for folks about how you can grieve and also center and celebrate your child.”*

**LGBTQIA2S+ youth**



## Resources

- ✓ [Tips for Parents of LGBTQ Youth](#)
- ✓ [Coming Out: A Guide for Parents](#)
- ✓ [Parenting a Gender-Diverse Child: Hard Questions Answered](#)
- ✓ [Podcast: Grief Is Not The Great Equalizer - Supporting Queer, Trans, & Justice Involved Youth With Lamya Broussard](#)
- ✓ [Tips for Raising an LGBTQ Foster or Adopted Child](#)
- ✓ [Nurturing Healthy, Safe Relationships for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers](#)
- ✓ [The Trevor Project: Behaviors of Supportive Parents and Caregivers for LGBTQ Youth](#)
- ✓ [The Trevor Project CARE Training](#)

professionals allows you to stay in the loop about how things are going at school and may allow for earlier detection of potential bullying.

- By staying involved, you can form relationships with the school. This can make it easier for you to advocate for a [Gender Sexuality Alliance \(GSA\)](#) or more inclusive sexuality education programs, as [this resource](#) from GLSEN recommends.

## Strategies for community members

Support from the community is important in creating healthy and affirming environments for LGBTQIA2S+ youth. Community support can come from after school programs, community-based organizations and events, faith-based organizations, local businesses, and neighbors in the community.

Engage in community-wide efforts that support LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their families and are protective against youth suicide.

Media coverage tends to focus on recent anti-LGBTQIA2S+ legislation and the fact that LGBTQIA2S+ youth are at increased risk for suicide and other negative outcomes. The [Resource Guide](#) provides more information on this topic and explains that hostile environments, not LGBTQIA2S+ identities, lead to increased risk.

Research has shown that the presence of supportive and affirming adults helps reduce mental health challenges among LGBTQIA2S+ youth to levels comparable to their heterosexual and cisgender peers<sup>5,6</sup> and that LGBTQIA2S+ youth with just one supportive adult in their lives are 40% less likely to report attempting suicide.<sup>5</sup> Below are some steps that community members can take to help create supportive and affirming environments for LGBTQIA2S+ youth.

## Tips for supporting LGBTQIA2S+ youth in your community:

- Actively ally and identify yourself as a source of support to LGBTQIA2S+ communities.
- Seek more information about how you can provide support through resources such as the [Family Acceptance Project](#), [TransFamilies](#), and [PFLAG](#).

## Community-Based Programs

- ✓ [ProjectQ](#) – Los Angeles, CA
- ✓ [Colors+ Youth Center](#) – Fairfield Park, OH
- ✓ [Youth Ambassadors](#) – statewide program in Alabama
- ✓ [Group Therapy Program](#) – Pittsburgh, PA
- ✓ [The Queer Youth Initiative](#) – Cleveland, OH
- ✓ [QUEERSPACE Collective](#) – Twin Cities, MN

## Housing Programs

- ✓ [Bryant's Bridge](#) – Knoxville, TN
- ✓ [The Attic](#) – Philadelphia, PA
- ✓ [Jessi's House](#) – Arkansas River Valley, AK



*"I'd like to see [a change from], 'I need to find the community' to the community being everywhere. You walk down the street, you see the rainbow flags and rainbow stickers in the windows, and you're just like, 'okay, there is community here.' It's not just these little, tiny pockets of community; it's everywhere."*

### Advocate and professional



- Know the [warning signs](#) for suicide and how to respond.
- Promote awareness of [hotlines and support resources](#) such as the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, TrevorLifeline, and TransLifeline.
- Identify and/or create safe, inclusive spaces in your community and connect LGBTQIA2S+ youth with local LGBTQIA2S+ organizations. See [Preventing Suicide: A Community Engagement Toolkit](#), or [Creating Safer Spaces for LGBTQ Youth Toolkit](#) for step-by-step guidance on how to initiate suicide prevention activities in your community.
- Faith-based organizations play a central role in many communities. Religious and spiritual leaders can access more information about how to support LGBTQIA2S+ youth from the resources in the Faith-Based Resources text box on this page.

## Faith-Based Resources

- ✓ [LGBTQ Family Acceptance: Faith Based Resources](#)
- ✓ [GLSEN: The Need for Allyship in LGBTQ Faith-Based Communities](#)
- ✓ [The Trevor Project: Navigating LGBTQ Identities and Religion](#)
- ✓ [The Human Rights Campaign: Faith Resources](#)

## Program Spotlight

### one-n-ten

Located in Phoenix, AZ, one-n-ten serves LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults through empowering and affirming programming and services. One-n-ten promotes positive self-expression and acceptance, develops future leaders, and encourages healthy choices.

Providing programs dedicated to housing support, life skills development, education, workforce readiness, health and wellness, leadership development, and community building, one-n-ten understands the many challenges that LGBTQIA2S+ youth may face and embraces a holistic approach to providing support.

To learn more about this program, visit their website [here](#).

## Special considerations for rural communities

LGBTQIA2S+ youth living in rural areas may face unique challenges that are important to consider when creating supportive and affirming environments. Rural residents can often experience limited access to care, long travel distances with limited transportation options, and economic

hardships, including limited job opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this, the frequently close-knit nature of rural communities, their often-homogenous populations, and the potential for heightened stigmatization of LGBTQIA2S+ identities may interact to create a unique sense of “otherness” among LGBTQIA2S+ youth. This feeling of otherness can have a significant impact on mental health and well-being.<sup>7</sup> LGBTQIA2S+ youth living in rural areas may be especially afraid to express their SOGIE due to discrimination from their family, school, and community, and they may fear for their safety.<sup>8-10</sup> It may also be harder for youth in rural environments to find supportive adults who can help ease their stress and anxiety. All of this can have a lasting impact on the health and mental well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ youth.<sup>8-10</sup>

For these reasons, it is of utmost importance for rural residents to make a community-wide effort to create supportive and affirming environments for LGBTQIA2S+ youth. Virtual communities can help expand networks of LGBTQIA2S+ peers. Parents and supportive others should help their loved ones seek out communities that are safe and supportive. Rural communities can take the following steps to support LGBTQIA2S+ youth.

### Tips for supporting rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth:

- Recognize the strength and resilience of LGBTQIA2S+ youth by embracing their identities.
- It is an act of courage to identify as LGBTQIA2S+ in an environment that is not always supportive of these identities, so telling the youth in your life that you are proud of them can go a long way.
- Make a concerted effort to improve school culture. Research has shown that many rural schools are not LGBTQIA2S+-friendly, which often means youth face higher levels of discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Your efforts can go a long way toward creating safe and supportive spaces at school, where LGBTQIA2S+ youth spend a considerable portion of their days.
- Advocate for, or create, a [Gender Sexuality Alliance \(GSA\)](#) at your school. These groups help foster acceptance, inclusivity, and positive mental health.

- Consider upstream approaches to mental health promotion and suicide prevention, including (1) the school-based [Sources of Strength](#) program that aims to improve school climate around mental health, and (2) suicide risk screening and brief interventions in primary care settings. These upstream approaches can help alleviate the burden on under resourced mental health systems that serve rural areas and will benefit both LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their heterosexual and cisgender peers.
- Be creative in establishing programs for LGBTQIA2S+ youth, as funding for these programs in rural areas is typically limited. See examples in the box below.

#### Programs for Youth in Rural Areas

- ✓ [Rural School and Community-based Programs Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth](#)
- ✓ [Rural Community Organizations Building Inclusive Environments for LGBTQ+ Residents](#)
- ✓ [Small-Town Pride Celebrations Supporting Social Connectedness & Well-being for LGBTQ+ Rural Residents](#)

## Special considerations for American Indian and Alaska Native communities

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth are four times more likely to die by suicide than youth in any other racial or ethnic group.<sup>11</sup> To most effectively address risk among AI/AN youth, it is important to consider the unique historical and cultural influences that affect this population when developing and implementing mental health promotion and suicide prevention programs.

Approximately 20% of AI/AN LGBTQIA2S+ youth are Two-Spirit; these youth face additional risks including an increased risk for suicide.<sup>12</sup> Two-Spirit—a subset of the AI/AN population and an identity that is held only by AI/AN people—describes the presence of both male and female energy combined with the ability to connect with the spiritual world (ancestors, Creator, and higher power). In most Tribes, Two-Spirit people occupy a distinct, alternative gender status.<sup>2</sup> However, not all Tribal communities agree that it is appropriate to include Two-Spirit in discussions of LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Please consult the communities you engage about their perspectives on this.

Although the term became more commonly used around 1990, Two-Spirit people have existed for centuries and have historically been highly esteemed and valued in most Tribes, serving as mediators, caretakers, leaders, protectors, and healers (both emotional and spiritual).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, forced assimilation and colonization disrupted these traditional roles and negatively impacted the way

Two-Spirit individuals were accepted and treated.<sup>13-15</sup>

Some Tribes and Tribal organizations are moving toward embracing and honoring their Two-Spirit relatives again, but many continue to internalize a colonized view and shun, shame, and exclude Two-Spirit people from ceremonies and events. As a result, many Two-Spirit individuals face discrimination, stigma, and misunderstanding, which may contribute to the increased risks they experience today.<sup>2, 12, 13</sup>

Today, the way American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) LGBTQIA2S+ individuals are viewed differs by Tribe. Some Tribes are highly supportive, accepting, and celebratory of these identities while others are not.<sup>14</sup> AI/AN youth, similar to other youth of color, may experience both racism and SOGIE discrimination. The recently released [Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report](#) sheds light on the horrors AI/AN youth faced in boarding schools, with 19 boarding schools accounting for over 500 American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian child deaths.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the devastating loss of life, there is lasting generational trauma that continues to impact these communities.



*"There need to be more 'coming in' ceremonies for Native 2SLGBTQIA+ children to reclaim who they are. There is still a fear of being maligned and disrespected. Instead, it should be considered holy and sacred and should be celebrated. We need to teach children their real history."*

**Advocate and professional**



### **Suicide Prevention Resources for AI/AN Communities**

- ✓ [To Live to See the Great Day that Dawns: Preventing Suicide by American Indian and Alaska Native Youth and Young Adults](#)
- ✓ [Aboriginal Youth: A Manual of Promising Suicide Prevention Strategies](#)
- ✓ [Ensuring the Seventh Generation: A Youth Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Tribal Child Welfare Programs](#)
- ✓ [Cultural Considerations in Adolescent Suicide Prevention and Psychosocial Treatment](#)
- ✓ [The Center for Indigenous Health Healing Spirits Program](#)



*“Cultural humility is very important. Listen to the people of the nation tell you what culture is. Throw the book away and listen.”*

**Advocate and professional**



It is important to create environments for AI/AN LGBTQIA2S+ youth that recognize and celebrate their identities and acknowledge the historically prominent role held by Two-Spirit individuals. Community members can take the following steps to support AI/AN LGBTQIA2A+ youth.

### **Tips for supporting American Indian and Alaska Native LGBTQIA2S+ youth:**

- If you are working to support AI/AN LGBTQIA2S+ youth in a non-AI/AN community, make sure to listen to the youth and encourage them to explain their culture to you. Let them guide these efforts to best meet their needs.
- When talking about suicide prevention with AI/AN communities, consider your use of language, as many nations do not have a word for suicide. Instead of talking about suicide, think about different ways of conceptualizing health and wellness, such as “life promotion” or “journey of hope.” Check out the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation’s recently released [Strengthening Our Connections to Promote Life: A Life Promotion Toolkit by Indigenous Youth](#), a toolkit featuring youth-led suicide and substance use prevention efforts.

- Educate your community on the meaning of Two-Spirit and how it fits into LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Advocate for inclusion of 2S in the umbrella term that is used to describe SOGIE.
- If you are part of a Tribal community, continue to remind your Tribe and other AI/AN communities of the prominent and respected role of Two-Spirit relatives. This can help build pride among LGBTQIA2S+ people and allow them to celebrate their identities.
- Familiarize yourself with AI/AN-specific LGBTQIA2S+ programs and resources such as the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board [Paths \(Re\)Membered Project](#) or the Native Justice Coalition’s [Two-Spirit Program](#).
- AI/AN youth in crisis should be encouraged to text “NATIVE” to 741-741 for the Crisis Text Line.
- Healthcare providers can learn more about serving Two-Spirit youth by familiarizing themselves with the Zero Suicide in Indian Country [toolkit](#) that details adaptations to the Zero Suicide model.
- Identify AI/AN LGBTQIA2S+ role models so that youth can see what it means to celebrate and thrive. If possible, connect youth with an AI/AN adult with whom they can relate on a cultural and spiritual level.
- Many AI/AN LGBTQIA2S+ youth live in rural areas, so consider upstream approaches to mental health promotion and suicide prevention in school, community, and primary care settings. Encourage AI/AN youth to join helping professions so there is more representation among this group.
- Parents and families can learn more about supporting Two-Spirit youth by viewing the [Two-Spirit Webinars](#) from SAMHSA’s Tribal Training and Technical Assistance Center, especially the webinar [Sharing Wisdom and Experiences: Parents of Indigenous Two-Spirit Youth](#).
- Identify funding sources for AI/AN projects and communities that can be used to support mental health and suicide prevention programs.



# Special considerations for youth of color

LGBTQIA2S+ identity development is influenced by many different factors, including culture, geography, race, and ethnicity. For youth of color, this process can be further complicated by experiences of racism as well as homophobia or transphobia. LGBTQIA2S+ youth of color often face multiple forms of discrimination, including societal racism as well as anti-LGBTQIA2S+ discrimination from their own racial or ethnic communities. Areas of opportunity for community members and professionals include challenging systemic racism in communal and professional spaces, building on a sense of racial and cultural pride, and promoting resilience among LGBTQIA2S+ youth of color.<sup>16</sup> Behavioral health providers should consider working with youth on reducing negative internal views of their gender identity development as well as integrating their LGBTQIA2S+ identity into their larger racial/ethnic identity.<sup>16</sup>

GLSEN's [Supporting LGBTQ Youth of Color](#) and GSA Network's [LGBTQ Youth of Color: Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) are valuable resources for learning more about how to better support and advocate for youth. The [It Gets Better Project](#) and [Human Rights Campaign](#) also feature lists of national and state

level resources specifically created for LGBTQIA2S+ youth of color.

## Conclusion

This focus guide was developed with the help and support of many individuals, including LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their parents. It serves as a starting point for the countless conversations that we can, and should, have as a society to better support, advocate for, and celebrate LGBTQIA2S+ youth. It is imperative that we come together in our communities to lead with love, compassion, and respect for one another rather than focusing on the things that make us different. We hope that this focus guide will be helpful to parents, families, supportive others, and community members as they seek to create and maintain supportive, loving, and affirming environments in which LGBTQIA2S+ youth can thrive. By implementing the strategies outlined here and learning from the program spotlight, adults and community members can take the next steps to assess and adapt their current practices to ensure they are meeting the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ youth. A multi-tiered approach will facilitate positive environments and outcomes for LGBTQIA2S+ youth. For more information about working with LGBTQIA2S+ youth, please access the accompanying Resource Guide at <https://sprc.org/lgbtqia2s-youth-resources/>.

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Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Produced in partnership with

**NORC** at the University of Chicago

