

Twice *other*: Gifted-LGBTQ+ youth and social/emotional challenges

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Students across the K-12+ grade-span deal with tremendous pressures to fit in with their peers, pressures that create internal and external struggles and inform their development. While they work on crafting their individual identities, they typically also have a need to feel as though they belong to a group. Young people who stand out as different from their classmates are often subjected to teasing and abuse, because they are seen as different, atypical, nonconforming—*other*.

This article presents some data that adults in these kids' lives may not be aware of, as well as some strategies that caring adults may employ to support the development of social and emotional factors.

Twice *other*

Being both gifted and LGBTQ+ creates what I refer to as a “twice othered” status for these students.

Some forms of difference are more or less acceptable than others. Gifted kids may experience teasing at school for being smart, and it can create social and emotional challenges for them. When gifted students also exhibit nonconforming sexualities and/or gender identities, they can be viewed as not only different, but potentially threatening. The treatment they endure, which ranges from teasing to physical violence, can have a severely negative impact on a broad spectrum of life issues. It can make establishing a sense of belonging—something most of us desire to at least some extent—elusive.

Review of statistics for LGBTQ+ student experiences

A recent survey of LGBTQ+ students, conducted by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), revealed the following about their experiences at school:

- Over 59% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 42.5% because of their gender expression, and 37.4% because of their gender.
- Many LGBTQ students avoided gender-segregated spaces in school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable: 45.2% avoided bathrooms and 43.7% avoided locker rooms.
- Most reported avoiding school functions (77.6%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Almost ALL LGBTQ students (98.8%) heard “gay” used in a negative way at school; 75.6% heard these remarks frequently or often, and 91.8% reported feeling distress because of this language.

- Most LGBTQ students (59.1%) reported personally experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school, ranging from bathrooms to pronouns, and from classroom curriculum requests to sports and other extra-curricular activities.
- LGBTQ students experienced lower GPAs than students not frequently harassed (averages of 3.03 for LGB and 2.98 for trans/nonbinary, vs. 3.34 for straight and cisgender students).
- These students are nearly twice as likely not to plan for post-secondary education (9.9 % for LGB and 11.1% for trans/nonbinary vs 5.8% for straight and cisgender students).
- They are nearly twice as likely to have been disciplined at school (47% vs. 26.7%).
- LGBTQ students experienced lower self-esteem and sense of belonging at school and higher depression levels.

Complexities compounded

- Overexcitabilities may intensify the struggles gifted-LGBTQ+ experience and can complicate their coping strategies.
- Students who don't feel safe at school typically have poor attendance and grades. The potential GPA impact from dealing with these challenges can have life-long effects, as college is often the first chance gifted students have to find true peers.
- Caring adults may need to be on the lookout for overachieving/overcompensating behaviors, such as involvement in every possible school activity—and excelling at all of them—to deflect attention from parts of themselves some might find problematic.

As these kids try to live their authentic lives, they have to balance their need to be honest about who they are against the real possibility that doing so may make them unsafe. They may miss out on some of the social/emotional elements of school and youth that are foundational to building a fulfilling adulthood. The following section offers ideas for caring adults to employ in helping gifted-LGBTQ youth on their social/emotional developmental journeys.

Strategies to support social and emotional needs of gifted-LGBTQ+ youth

Parents and other adults in caregiving roles are in key positions to advocate for the gifted-LGBTQ kids in their lives. Whether or not you have fully integrated the idea of a gifted child in your care being LGBTQ+, it is incumbent upon you and all involved adults to offer unconditional support to that young person.

Ways in which you can help include:

- Doing research to understand different gender and sexual identities, just as you researched giftedness, to enhance your understanding of the child and to demonstrate your commitment to supporting them in developing their authentic self
- Networking with other families of gifted and/or LGBTQ+ kids, to provide your child with opportunities for socializing with others like them
- Supporting your kid's artistic (music, dance, theatre, visual arts, writing, etc.) interests, which can lead not only to rich creative satisfaction, but also to significant friendships with other young people who share their artistic interests
- Pursuing professional help if your child shows signs of depression or of inflicting self-harm
- Advocating for equitable treatment at school, including the use of requested pronouns and inclusive language, policies prohibiting use of the word *gay* as a pejorative, commitments to safety, and inclusion of diverse representation in curriculum and events

Gifted-LGBTQ+ kids who know that the important adults in their lives have their backs are more likely to succeed in building healthy social and emotional characteristics. For example, suicide rates for trans and nonbinary youth are **cut in half** when the adults in their lives use the requested pronouns consistently. This is a support strategy that doesn't cost anything and can have a profound impact.

Obviously, this is a topic that could be discussed at much greater length. I encourage you to explore the resources below, especially my website and the NAGC Diversity toolbox, which offer further articles, statistics, and strategies.

Resources

"Executive Summary," *GLSEN 2019 School Climate Survey*. (2020) <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>

Friedrichs, T., Manzella, T., & Seney, R. (2017). *Needs and approaches for educators and parents of gifted gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students*. Washington, DC: NAGC.

G Squared Youth Advocate (my website). <http://gsquaredyouthadvocate.com/>

National Association for Gifted Children. (2017). *Gifted LGBTQ Students Diversity toolbox*. <https://nagc.org/page/Diversity-Toolbox>

The Trevor Project. (2020). *National survey on LGBTQ youth mental health 2020*.

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020>

Teresa Ryan Manzella, M.A. is a founding member of the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) LGBTQ Network. She has authored numerous articles, book chapters, and online resources on gifted-LGBTQ topics, published by NAGC, Prufrock Press, and other gifted organizations. Her most recent work is as lead author of the "Transgender and Nonbinary Youth" chapter in *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Gifted Education*, released in June 2021 by Prufrock. She serves on the MN Department of Education Committee on Gifted and Talented Education and the MCGT Connections Committee. She has been invited, by organizations across the U.S., to present on strategies to address the complex challenges facing gifted-LGBTQ youth.