



SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19:

A Tip Sheet for Parents of Transgender and Gender Expansive Children and Adolescents



When schools are closed and in-person activities have ceased due to COVID-19, transgender and gender expansive children and adolescents may experience unique stressors. This resource lays out some of these stressors, and offers tips on how to mitigate these stressors during this unique era.

- + For transgender and gender expansive youth who do not feel affirmed or accepted by members of their immediate family or household, this period of being “stuck at home” can be particularly challenging. The stress of rejection can lead to a wide range of outcomes, such as not being able to focus on schoolwork, feeling isolated and hopeless, and—in worst case scenarios—these youth may face emotional or physical abuse in the home.
 - » **TIP:** Find ways to connect all family and household members. Consider a family activity centered around the shared experience of living in quarantine and/or in fear of the pandemic. Each family member can write (or draw) how this experience feels for them, and how they think it might feel for other family or household members. In doing so, youth and their families may find they have common ground on certain experiences, and this can open up healthy dialogues in the future.
 - » **TIP:** Encourage outdoor time, if safe and possible. An activity that gets youth and family members outside in nature may be helpful, especially if there

is an element of teamwork involved. For example, each member of the household could locate and take pictures of different letters formed naturally in the environment (e.g. a cloud in the shape of a Q), and use these to spell out a positive word of encouragement. You could even frame the photos when combined, to permanently memorialize the moment of togetherness and affirmation

- » **TIP:** Provide opportunities for your child or teen to lead a conversation or an activity in which they can raise the topic of gender identity or gender expression, be it reading a gender-themed book, watching a relevant movie or documentary, reading a poem or performing a song that reflects their gender experience.
- + Many transgender and gender expansive youth find schools to be safe havens, as a result of acceptance and affirmation from peers, teachers, school counselors and other adults. The absence of this environment can be challenging. Youth may miss these important connections, as for many youth, they serve as a source of positive emotional wellbeing, and have built the foundation for healthy self-esteem. These losses can be even more difficult if a youth's home environment is not consistently affirming.
 - » **TIP:** Find virtual ways to connect with teachers and peers. Different educational settings are using virtual tools to keep students connected.

Finding time to not only participate in the educational component of virtual school, but also the social component of affirming interactions, can significantly help students experience the benefits of those positive relationships. This might include an online GSA meeting, video calls with a supportive teacher or school counselor, or scheduled facetime calls with close friends.

- » **TIP:** Ask the young person if they are interested in doing a perspective-taking activity—youth might find that drawing or playing certain music will allow them to creatively express how they are feeling. Others might want to create a time capsule of memories for how they are feeling during this uncertain time, something they may be grateful to have in the future so they can look back and see

“**...the most important thing for a family to do right now is convey to their child that we are going to love you no matter what and we are going to get through this together.**”

+ Some trans and gender expansive youth may need to postpone their gender affirming medical care appointments, therapy visits, support groups, or even consultations for surgery. For youth who may have had a long-anticipated surgery date timed to take place with enough time to recover before college, this can be a time of uncertainty and stress.

- » **TIP:** Empathize with your youth, but do so without providing your own examples of the impact that COVID-19 has on you or others. Some youth have been waiting a long time to have their mental health and medical needs met, and the delays that the pandemic has caused may lead to significant disappointment in the youth. Providing them with a space to air their frustration is crucial. However, comparing their story to other stories of disappointment may lead the youth to feel dismissed or their problems minimized. It is best to provide an open ear that facilitates youth feeling comfortable heard when sharing their disappointment.
- » **TIP:** Maintain consistency with teletherapy appointments and telemedicine appointments, if they are offered by the professionals you already see. Ask those professionals if they have any tips that are specific to transgender and gender expansive youth.

how far they've come once their medical needs are met. However, make sure to never impose an activity—a polite suggestion can usually go a long way.

While this period is uniquely stressful for some youth, that is not always the case. This may also be an opportunity for some youth to experience positive moments that they do not experience at school, which can lead to experiences of self-acceptance and self-affirmation. Here are some tips to help foster these positive moments, even amidst a difficult global situation.

- + For those youth who are supported at home, but typically feel the challenges of rejection and bullying when in school, this extended period of time outside of the school setting can feel positive, and lower their levels of anxiety.
 - » **TIP:** Capture the moment! This is a great opportunity to spend time as a family and memorialize what is so special about the connections between you. As noted above, a shared activity or safe outdoor time may be the right time to connect with your young person and remember this experience.
 - » **TIP:** Find virtual [youth support systems](#) if you do not already have them. Gender Spectrum, PFLAG, Trevor Project, and other national and local organizations offer online support groups for transgender and gender expansive youth. These

connections can be important even beyond the COVID-19 experience, and may make the transition back to school somewhat easier.

- + For youth who have yet to come out as transgender or gender-expansive in their school settings, there may be less pressure right now to navigate a “double life,” or one where they can live authentically in one place and inauthentically in another.
 - » **TIP:** Encourage creative expression of this experience. Helping your youth realize the impact of being able to live authentically full-time may be a way to look at the upside of this stay-at-home situation. Whether that be through an art project, a home-made video diary, a recorded song, or even an essay, it can help capture the meaning of being true to oneself all of the time.
 - » **TIP:** Prepare for the return to school. It is important to keep in mind that this situation will not last forever. Youth will need to return to school, and for some of them, that thought might not be a pleasant one. Provide a space for them to open up about their current feelings and how that might affect their re-entry into their typical life.

- + In other situations, being together for an extended period of time may offer an opportunity for youth and families to gain greater perspective about each other and their lived experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic may be a way for families to bond together over a shared fear, one that gives them the chance to realize the importance of affirmation and acceptance when it comes to gender identity and expression.

- » **TIP:** Try activities that build connection. Families may want to find ways to meditate, play games, or exercise together while in such close quarters for extended periods of time. Find a new hobby that you as a family can all start together. This can help you all feel a common sense of purpose, and can act as a way of maintaining connectedness—both now and beyond the pandemic.

Additional Resources

- + [Supporting & Caring for Transgender Children](#)
- + [Navigating Transition-Related Care](#)
- + [Transgender Visibility, a Guide to Being You](#)



WATCH: Ellen Kahn, HRC's Sr. Director of Programs and Partnerships, talk with Dr. Scott Leibowitz, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, about LGBTQ Children's Mental Health.

HRC Foundation thanks Dr. Scott Leibowitz for helping to develop this resource. Dr. Leibowitz is a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Leibowitz is also an internationally recognized expert on caring for transgender and gender diverse children and adolescents. Nationwide Children's Hospital is a 2019 Leader in LGBTQ Healthcare Equality in the Human Rights Campaign's Healthcare Equality Index, the national benchmarking tool of policies and practices dedicated to the equitable treatment and inclusion of LGBTQ patients, visitors and employees at healthcare facilities.