



SUPPORTING LGBTQ STUDENTS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS QUARANTINE:

A Tip-Sheet for School Counselors



During the coronavirus quarantine, school counselors across the country continue to provide essential services to students. Social distancing requires a new set of strategies and provides new opportunities to support and affirm LGBTQ youth, especially when they live in unsupportive environments. This tip-sheet offers key considerations when working with LGBTQ students in virtual settings, and guidance to help mitigate some of the emerging challenges they face when social distancing practices are required.



What makes me more comfortable is if they have a sticker or poster that shows that they are supportive of LGBTQ people.



1. Create an Affirming Virtual Meeting Space

Now more than ever, LGBTQ students need the support of their school counselors. According to HRC's 2018 LGBTQ Youth Report, only **27%** of LGBTQ youth say they are comfortable talking to their school counselor about questions related to their LGBTQ identity.

- + **Create a visible safe space.** If you are using Zoom to meet with your students virtually, consider using an [HRC branded Zoom background](#) to help indicate to students that you are LGBTQ-affirming, or you can search online for your favorite LGBTQ safe space sign to display in an area that is visible when you are speaking on screen.
- + **Ask or share pronouns** to demonstrate LGBTQ inclusion. If your meeting platform allows you to list your name, add your pronouns; for example, "Mrs. Garcia (pronouns: she/her)".
- + **Use gender-inclusive and non-heteronormative language**, which not only models inclusivity, but also sends a strong message to LGBTQ individuals that you support LGBTQ people. If students can easily assess that you are an ally, they will be more likely to trust you and to seek the support they need.

2. Anticipate Unique Challenges When Families are not Affirming

While some LGBTQ students find affirming support at school, many live with unsupportive families. According to HRC's 2018 LGBTQ youth report, **67%** of LGBTQ students hear their families make negative comments about LGBTQ people. When LGBTQ students are unable to be their authentic selves, or when they are forced to live in unsupportive environments, the effects can be overwhelming.

- + **Check-in with the student.** If the student is not open about their LGBTQ identity at home, and if you can confirm that the virtual connection with the student is private (more on confidentiality and privacy on number 3 below), consider asking how their family dynamic is impacting them while under coronavirus quarantine.



I'm not out to my parents for safety reasons. If they found out I was gay, they would kick me out or force me into conversion therapy.



I don't feel comfortable letting a non-LGBTQ person know my identity.



- + **Ask what self-care practices they have tried and what, if anything, is helping to alleviate stress.** Brainstorm new strategies together and check in with them to see which ones are working best. Make sure they know that you see them, that you affirm their identity and that this time of social isolation is temporary.
- + **Discuss with them and direct them to online and virtual resources** listed below including the lifesaving work of The Trevor Project, which offers confidential phone and online support for LGBTQ youth 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

3. Protect Confidentiality and Privacy

While some students are open about their LGBTQ identity at school, only **21%** are out at home, according to HRC's 2018 LGBTQ Youth Report. Privacy and confidentiality are critically important for LGBTQ youth, especially for those who do not have supportive families. Extremely rejecting behaviors can have dire consequences: approximately **40%** of the homeless youth population in the United States identify as LGBTQ, most as a result of rejection by immediate family members.

- + **Consider new risks** when meeting virtually with an LGBTQ student — unsupportive family members, or those who are unaware of their child's LGBTQ identity could potentially listen in. For example, if a young trans boy is open with you about his trans status but not with his parents/guardians, think through how to best protect his safety and privacy.
- + **Create an electronic form for meeting requests** that allows the student to include the name and pronouns they want you to use during virtual meetings. Their answers may depend on their ability to secure privacy during virtual sessions. Add a blurb about the confidentiality rights of students, and provide suggestions to improve privacy, such as using an earpiece, or identifying a private area of the home during scheduled meetings. These strategies may improve the likelihood that LGBTQ students will get the support they need.

4. Promote Resilience

When LGBTQ students are affirmed and supported it is easier for them to think beyond current challenges. Additionally, when students feel more connected to their education, their desire and ability to learn improves. As school counselors utilize common strategies to advocate for student success and promote resiliency, it may be helpful to add LGBTQ-inclusive college and career readiness practices to their toolbox. Many LGBTQ students have experienced or witnessed multiple forms of anti-LGBTQ discrimination, and in the current environment may feel more worried than ever about their ability to thrive and succeed as an out LGBTQ young adult. Encourage your LGBTQ students to explore the myriad of online resources that can raise the hopes of students and encourage goal setting and planning for their future.

- + **Discuss [scholarships specifically for LGBTQ students](#), [locating LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities](#) and even [identifying campuses that provide gender-inclusive housing](#) and offer [trans-inclusive healthcare](#).**
- + **Review current or future employers that provide [LGBTQ-inclusive workplaces](#)**, and work with them to plan and set goals for success.



My fear keeps me from seeing a school counselor about things that make me anxious or upset. I don't know how they might react [to my LGBTQ identity], so I'd rather go online or talk to my other queer friends about it.



5. Refer Students to Virtual Supports for LGBTQ Youth

Affirming school counselors are often the lifeline for students, but with school buildings closed, their offices are no longer just down the hall. Having a direct connection to supportive peers and those with shared identities is critically important to the overall well-being of LGBTQ youth. This is especially true during challenging times. With LGBTQ drop-in centers closed and LGBTQ student clubs (i.e. GSAs) no longer in session, some LGBTQ students have lost their only outlets to fully be themselves.

- + **Remind students that online platforms are not always the best place for LGBTQ youth to find affirmation** and are not always monitored to screen out hate speech or other forms of online bullying. According to GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey, nearly half of LGBTQ students reported experiencing some form of electronic harassment in the past year.
- + **Discuss online safety** with students and suggest LGBTQ-inclusive options. To help, HRC has compiled [a list of direct and online resources for LGBTQ youth](#) where they can find affirming support and safely connect with LGBTQ peers in virtual settings any time of day or night. There are even virtual supports for parents and families who are in need of support themselves or who want to learn how they can better support their LGBTQ child. Sharing these culturally relevant resources with LGBTQ students can make a lasting impact, and perhaps even save a life.

Summary

Please keep in mind that LGBTQ students need to feel connected, affirmed, and supported during this period of social isolation and uncertainty. For the many LGBTQ youth struggling for self-acceptance or acceptance at home, there is an added burden on their emotional well-being. As a school counselor, you have a critically important role to play in providing that one place, being that one person with whom they can be their true selves. You can help LGBTQ students practice self-care, find meaningful resources and connections online, and ameliorate the tension and stress they may be experiencing while at home.

Author: Dr. Vincent "Vinnie" Pompei, Director, HRC's Youth Well-Being Program

Additional Resources for School Counselors on LGBTQ Inclusion

These resources offer further insights into the work school counselors can do to ensure safety, inclusion, and well-being for LGBTQ students.

- + ASCA Position Statement: [The School Counselor and LGBTQ Youth](#)
- + ASCA Position Statement: [The School Counselor / Gender-nonconfirming Youth](#)
- + ASCA: [COVID Related Resources for School Counselors](#)
- + HRC Foundation's Report: [2018 LGBTQ Youth Report](#)