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What does the scholarly research say about the link between family acceptance and LGBT youth wellbeing?

Overview: We identified 42 peer-reviewed studies that met our criteria for adding to knowledge about the links between family support and the health and wellbeing of LGBT youth. Of those, 25 found that accepting behavior by parents toward their children's sexual orientation or gender identity is linked to the health and wellbeing of LGBT youth. Another 17 studies found that family support in general (i.e. not necessarily in response to children's sexual orientation or gender identity) is linked to the health and wellbeing of LGBT youth. The upshot is that families that engage in rejecting behavior raise the risk of significant harms for their LGBT children. Many studies used convenience samples of several dozen to several hundred subjects, but some studies used population samples and some sampling pools reached nearly 2000. Taken together, the studies on family support show that—whatever their values—families can take specific steps to protect their children against the heightened risks facing LGBT youth. This research review consists of ten findings and links to the supporting scholarship on which they are based. For more information, visit the Family Acceptance Project, a leader in research on family acceptance and LGBT youth.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. LGBT youth face heightened risks of numerous mental and physical health dangers including depression, suicidality, substance abuse, psychological distress, low self-esteem, HIV/AIDS infection, and others.
2. Research shows that rejecting behaviors by parents can increase these risks, including contributing to far higher levels of suicidal behavior and depression.
3. Family, long thought of as playing a neutral or negative role in LGBT youth wellbeing, can play a key protective role against these physical and mental health risks. Several studies confirmed the importance of sexuality-specific acceptance (over generalized support), and of parental support over peer support.

4. Among the behaviors most likely to protect against these health risks, according to research by the Family Acceptance Project, are affirming children's sexual orientation and gender expression, talking with children about their LGBT identity, defending them when experiencing peer victimization, connecting them to an LGBT role model, and welcoming their LGBT peers into the home. Research suggests that the number and quality of accepting behaviors matters to youth wellbeing.
5. Most families with ambivalent or negative views about sexual minorities still love their children, and believe they are helping them to fit in and thrive by rejecting their sexual orientation and/or gender identities; yet such families have been shown to successfully modify their behavior when they learn how harmful rejecting behavior can be to their children's mental and physical health.
6. Disclosure (coming out) to family is an important part of LGBT youth's healthy development, and in the long-term can reduce the stress associated with worrying about future rejection; however, research shows that the short-term effects of disclosure can include added stress resulting from social isolation and family conflict, particularly if parents react in rejecting ways.
7. Research shows that LGBT youth are coming out at younger ages than in the past, which can mean longer periods of time when they are in the home and "out," and hence a greater chance of both family-related stress and the possibility of positive interventions. Family acceptance awareness must often now begin with children, not adolescents.
8. Both LGB and transgender (as well as heterosexual) youth may exhibit gender-nonconforming behavior, which in turn may trigger rejecting behavior by parents whether or not their children have "come out" to them. Research suggests that parents, practitioners and providers should be aware of the possibility that such reactions can cause profound harm to LGBT youth.
9. Family background, including race, class, ethnicity, religion, national and regional origin and other factors, can play a role in shaping how parents and youth respond to LGBT identity. Practitioners and policymakers should be aware of the complex and diverse ways in which different populations may view family, sexuality identity and gender expression.
10. More research is needed on the specific factors that best predict rejecting family behaviors, the factors that contribute to positive family climates, and intervention approaches with records of evidence-based success; however, a great deal is already known about the information and support that families and LGBT youth need, and parents, practitioners and policymakers should act on this knowledge if they wish to minimize the health risks for the LGBT population.

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