

LGBTQ+ young people are at higher risk for childhood adversity



What are adverse childhood experiences?

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years) including experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Aspects of a child's environment that undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding can also be ACEs.

What is the burden of ACEs among people who identify as LGBTQ+?

People who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to experience many different types of ACEs, including child abuse, neglect, and other household challenges, compared to people who identify as heterosexual and whose gender matches sex at birth.⁷⁻⁹

Young people who identify as LGBTQ+, or who have same-sex sexual contacts, are also more likely to experience other childhood adversities such as:

- Bullying¹⁰⁻¹²
- Sexual violence¹⁰⁻¹²
- Teen dating violence¹⁰⁻¹²
- Witnessing violence in their community^{10,13}
- Unstable housing or homelessness^{10,12,14}
- Food insecurity¹⁵

ACEs can change the way children's brains and bodies develop and function,¹ contributing to increased risk of poor mental health, substance use, suicidal behaviors, chronic diseases, and other poor health and well-being outcomes into adulthood.^{2,3} Research shows that experiencing discrimination, including discrimination due to identifying or being perceived as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning), is an ACE.^{1,4,5}

What do we know about ACEs and sexual or gender discrimination?

Interpersonal, or individual, discrimination is defined as being treated with less courtesy or respect than other people, receiving poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores, or being threatened or harassed.⁶



The science is clear that interpersonal discrimination is an ACE. It can cause trauma and impact health across the lifespan.^{4,5}

Young people may experience interpersonal discrimination due to their actual or perceived sexual or gender identity, and other identities they hold that are socially marginalized (such as race, ethnicity, religion, disability, or other identities). Examples of LGBTQ+ discrimination include experiencing homophobic or transphobic bullying and parental rejection due to identity.

- Interpersonal discrimination is often the result of and reinforces structural forms of discrimination, which refer to policies and systems that limit opportunities, resources, and well-being.⁶
- Preventing interpersonal discrimination in childhood, and among the adults they become, is a critical component of a public health approach to improve health.

New CDC data collected among U.S. teens from six states in 2021 indicate that **26.1% of high school students** have experienced interpersonal discrimination due to their sexual identity.



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How can we prevent ACEs?

Positive experiences in childhood wire the brain to thrive and can help to counterbalance the effects of adverse experiences.¹⁶ Preventing ACEs and promoting positive childhood experiences (PCEs) can improve health and well-being for all children, including those who identify as LGBTQ+. Making sure that PCEs are common and widespread is critical to improve health. No single sector can achieve this alone. We must work together to build the foundation for child well-being.

Examples of PCEs can include:¹⁷

- Having nurturing relationships with parents, friends, and other adults
- Living in safe and supportive neighborhoods
- Feelings of belongingness at school or in the community
- Ability to engage in after-school activities, including cultural or other traditions



CDC has resources to help support policymakers, public health professionals, communities, schools, and families to prevent ACEs and promote PCEs including:

- An [evidence-based resource for action](#) with policies, programs, and practices to prevent ACEs
- Resources to support positive parenting practices among [parents of young children](#) and [teens](#), as well as [among young people who identify as LGBTQ+](#)
- Resources on [healthy dating relationships](#), including for [young people who identify as LGBTQ+](#)
- Resources to [support schools](#) in creating environments that [are inclusive to LGBTQ+ students](#). One approach to support LGBTQ+ students in schools is through creation of [Gender and Sexuality Alliances](#)
- A [self-assessment tool](#) to help school staff understand and address the health and academic needs of LGBTQ+ students
- [What Works in Schools](#) is an approach to school-based health that has been shown to improve health behaviors and experiences, including for LGBTQ+ students