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Iowa Safe Schools Fall 2023 Legislative  
Update for Iowa's K-12 Schools:  
Suggestions and Resources for  
Supporting LGBTQ Students under SF  
496 and SF 482

schools

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## IX. Facilitating Conversations with Families

Family acceptance plays a pivotal role in the overall well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Research consistently underscores that a supportive and accepting family environment has a profoundly positive influence on students' mental health, self-esteem, educational attainment, resilience, and coping skills.

A common misconception is that family reactions to a student's gender identity are limited to being entirely positive or negative. In reality, data indicates a broad spectrum of reactions that offer opportunities for education, empathy, and increased acceptance. We know that families that initially reject their child's LGBTQ identity tend to become less rejecting over time. Access to accurate information is a critical factor in helping families and caregivers understand and support their LGBTQ children. Recent legislation makes this even more important to understand as a provider. Education and family resources will become even more critical in avoiding negative outcomes for LGBTQ youth, including suicide, displacement, and gender identity change efforts.

This is further supported by the National Association of School Psychologists:

“Immediate resistance to a child's gender expression is not necessarily a fixed position; many of the strongest advocates of their transgender children initially experienced varying degrees of denial, confusion, and resistance before moving towards acceptance and/or celebration of their gender-expansive child. Initial lack of support can be rooted in fear, misinformation, or grief stemming from a parents' perception that they have lost the child they thought they had. *School psychologists can play a critical role in moving a parent in the direction of acceptance* by listening to fears and concerns, while providing accurate information. Helping the parent to connect with others who might be facing similar life events can be paramount in the journey to acceptance.”

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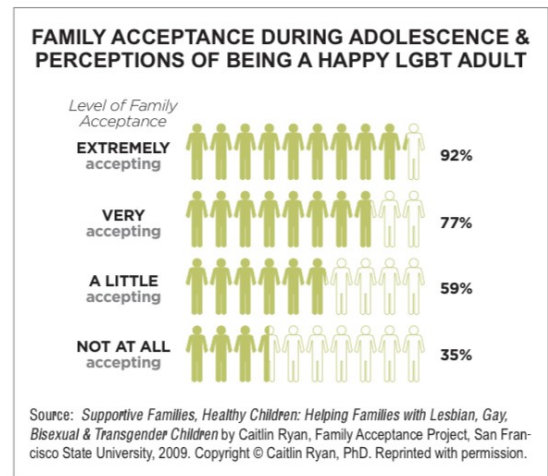
### Family Rejection & Health Risks:

The vast majority of families want what is best for their students. Helping caregivers understand the link between their actions and their child's well-being is crucial in fostering a supportive environment for the student.

LGBTQ young adults who reported high levels of family rejection during adolescence were:

- 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide
- 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression
- 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs
- 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse

When compared to peers from accepting families



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**Involving Student Voice:**Common Understanding:

To create the most potential for students' self-determination, it's crucial for students to understand their available options, as well as your legal and professional obligations. *Students should have the opportunity to retract or clarify their requests for accommodation after receiving clarification regarding the school district's legal obligations and how they will be impacted.*

***When a student experiences feelings of panic, confusion, or sense of being trapped, their vulnerability to suicide or extreme actions is heightened.***<sup>8</sup>

Discuss timing and make a plan:

While SF 496 does require notification of a student's parent or guardian if their student makes a request for an accommodation with the intention of affirming their gender identity, the law does not outline a specific timeline for parental notification if a student makes a request for accommodation. Students are the expert on when and how their family might be the most receptive to a conversation. Partnering with the student to create a plan of action can reduce instances of panic and incorporate student voice. It will be important to identify a student's existing places of support – these might include educators, friends, or support groups (including GSA).

Respect identity:

Parent/guardian consent is not legally required to honor a student's chosen name or pronouns. Ask students about the name and pronouns they'd like to use during any conversation with family and honor that.



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<sup>8</sup> Auerbach RP, Stewart JG, Johnson SL. Impulsivity and Suicidality in Adolescent Inpatients. J Abnorm Child Psychol. 2017 Jan;45(1):91-103. doi: 10.1007/s10802-016-0146-8. PMID: 27025937; PMCID: PMC5045310.

### Preparing for a conversation with a family:

With the understanding that a student's family is an extremely valuable partnership, research suggests taking a strengths-based perspective. The following assumptions about a family might be valuable in building this alliance:<sup>9</sup>

- ★ Assume that families love their children and want them to have a good life.
- ★ Assume that a family's hopes and dreams for their children are shaped by cultural and religious beliefs that may *seem* at odds with their student's gender identity/orientation.
- ★ Assume that a caregiver can build acceptance for their LGBTQ student without rejecting their family's heritage.
- ★ Meet families where they are – we'll cover how you might identify this in the next section.
- ★ Support families in their need to be heard and understood in a non-judgemental space.
- ★ Recognize that rejective caregivers typically report being motivated by care and concern for their child's ability to "fit in", have a "good life," and be accepted by others.
- ★ Recognize that building awareness of the consequences of family rejection is the most effective mechanism of change
- ★ Acknowledge that caregivers may experience a range of emotions, including: happy, sad, confused, joyful, relieved, angry, hesitant, disappointed, upset, indifferent, patient, cynical, anxious, helpless, surprised, etc.
- ★ While all emotions are valid, acknowledge that it can be harmful for family members to project any of the above feelings onto the child.
- ★ Recognize that caregiver's struggle to validate their gender-expansive children could signal a need for support and education.

### Establishing Common Language:

It's common for family members and caregivers to not be familiar with respectful language to discuss gender diversity and transgender identities. Be sure to actively ask family members about their familiarity with gender identity and about their cultural beliefs around gender. Some people's only exposure to discussions of LGBTQ+ identities has been disparaging or avoidant. Feelings of shame, inadequacy, or apprehension may be mitigated by both assuring families it's okay to not know and discussing appropriate language. The [glossary](#) at the beginning of this document is a good place to start, and can be downloaded on its own from the Iowa Safe Schools website.

### Cultural considerations:

For some families, rejection of their student's identity is rooted in a deeply-held religious belief or cultural values. Consistent with a strengths-based perspective, a person often draws on their cultural and religious background as wellsprings of love, empathy, and learning. Even if a student and/or caregiver decides to advocate for change within their community or attend a different congregation, it's important to recognize that the core of their culture doesn't need to change in order to embrace a loved one with an LGBTQ+ identity.

### What does support look like?

It's important for the family to be on the same page about what supporting their student looks like. A great first step is asking the student what they'd like from their family. The following suggestions are common responses for ways a family can demonstrate support for their child:

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<sup>9</sup> Family Acceptance Project: Intervention guidelines and strategies by Caitlin Ryan and Rafael Diaz. San Francisco: Family Acceptance Project, 2011.

**What support looks like:**

- Use the student's chosen name and pronouns
- Connecting your student with LGBTQ community and events
- Standing up for your student to other family members
- Remind your student that your love for them is not conditional
- Support your student's gender expression and the clothing or style that they feel most comfortable in

**What support does not look like:**

- Telling your student that being LGBTQ is "just a phase"
- Attempting to change a student's gender identity or expression
- Refusing or downplaying the importance of using your student's chosen name or pronouns
- Getting hung up on labels, your student's identity might change over time, and that's okay!

Parents and caregivers can use the Iowa Safe Schools 'Parent and Family Guidebook' to further explore supporting their LGBTQ+ child.

**Facilitator Resources:**

**PFLAG chapters:** <https://pflag.org/findachapter/>

**ESL Resources:** <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/publications>

**Spiritual Resources:** <https://lgbtqfamilyacceptance.org/faith-based-resources/>

