

Creating a Culture of Belonging for LGBTQ Loved Ones

Meghan Decker, author of *Tender Leaves of Hope*

Suggestions for families

According to the Family Acceptance Project¹, LGBTQ children that come from a highly-rejecting home are:

- More than 8 times as likely to attempt suicide
- Nearly 6 times as likely to report high levels of depression
- More than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs, and
- More than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases

--compared with LGBTQ youth who are not at all or only slightly rejected by their parents or caregivers because of their identity.

What does a highly-rejecting home look like? These are some behaviors that increase a child's risk for health and mental health problems:

- Hitting, slapping, or physically hurting a child
- Verbal harassment or name-calling because of a child's LGBTQ identity
- Excluding LGBTQ youth from family gatherings
- Blocking access to LGBTQ friends, events, and resources
- Blaming the child when they have negative experiences because of their LGBTQ identity
- Pressuring a child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine
- Telling a child God will punish them because they are gay, bisexual, or transgender
- Telling a child you are ashamed of them or that how they look or act will shame the family
- Preventing or not allowing a child to talk about their LGBTQ identity

These behaviors, even if intended to protect the child, isolate them and make them feel alone, unwanted, and unloved.

What, then, are behaviors that help a child to feel belonging and reduce their risk for mental and physical health problems?

- Talk with and listen respectfully to your child about their LGBTQ identity
- Express affection when your child tells you or you learn that your child is gay or transgender
- Support your child even if it feels uncomfortable
- Advocate for your child when they are mistreated
- Require that other family members respect your LGBTQ child
- Tell your child you love them unconditionally
- Welcome your child's LGBTQ friends into your home
- Support your child's gender expression

¹ The LDS version of the Family Acceptance Project is available at <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/family-education-booklet-lds> The regular version is found at <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/family-education-booklet>

- Talk with religious leaders about supporting LGBTQ people and welcoming them to religious services and activities. (God is not in rejection. He gathers, He creates unity, He nurtures belonging. We are becoming more like Him when we also nurture belonging.)
- Openly discuss your child's LGBTQ identity with your child and others
- Believe your LGBTQ child can have a happy future

Responses from LGBTQ women about what helps them feel they belong

I asked LGBTQ friends what helps them feel they belong. Here are some of their responses:

- All of the interactions I have that make me feel I belong are one-on-one. Friends in my congregation make me feel part of the group, that they still want me there. That helps buffer some of the messages from leaders that don't make me feel that.
- There are so many LGBTQ in our congregation that they don't know about. Make space so they aren't afraid to be seen.
- If tell you I am LGBTQ and share my story, please reach out to me again and include me after that conversation. It's been painful when this has not happened.
- I feel like I belong when someone truly knows me and still leans in.
- I feel like I belong when my contributions are valued.
- I feel belonging when I feel seen, understood and loved. It needs to be all three of those things. I also feel belonging when I am greeted warmly, with familiarity. When my strengths and skills are known and I am called upon to contribute. Shared humor is a great way to feel belonging.
- I feel a sense of belonging when others genuinely and sincerely ask me questions in an effort to learn and understand, and not seeking to undermine, preach or condescend to me.
- It helps when people put aside their fear and judgment and see me as a child of God.
- Belonging means you miss them when they're gone.
- Brene' Brown says people are hard to hate up close
- I appreciate efforts to make spaces and create support.
- I think the quickest way to create belonging for ourselves is to offer belonging (both to yourself and others). I've found that as I love, accept, and value myself, I am able to receive and appreciate the love others have to offer in the way they are able to offer it at any given time.
- One friend's list of intentional actions:
 - When someone thinks about how a talk, comment, or lesson might have affected me and then asks me how it was for me
 - When people include me in their social gatherings
 - When people appreciate the insights that I bring to the table
 - When people smile at me and tell me it's good to see me
 - When someone hugs me
 - When someone notices if I'm not there
 - When someone sees and points out my strengths
 - When someone wants my advice or input
 - When someone says they're praying for me
 - When people text me just because they thought of me without me having to reach out to them first

What is the key take-away for creating belonging spaces, wherever we are? It is one-on-one interactions that matter most. We can each make a difference.