



Transgender Youth: How Family Involvement Supports Mental Health

January 17, 2019

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Agenda

1. Mental health concerns among transgender youth and family support as a protective factor
2. Impact of having a transgender youth on the larger family system
3. Examples from families of struggles and successes in supporting transgender youth
4. Implications for mental health practice with transgender youth



Acknowledgments

- ▶ NIH/NICHD grant: K99HD082340 (Katz-Wise, PI)
- ▶ Aerosmith Grant
- ▶ LEAH project, MCHB HRSA grant T71-MC00009
- ▶ Division of Adolescent/Young Adult Medicine (Boston Children's Hospital)
- ▶ SOGIE Working Group
- ▶ K99/R00 mentorship team
- ▶ Collaborators
- ▶ Research staff
- ▶ Study participants



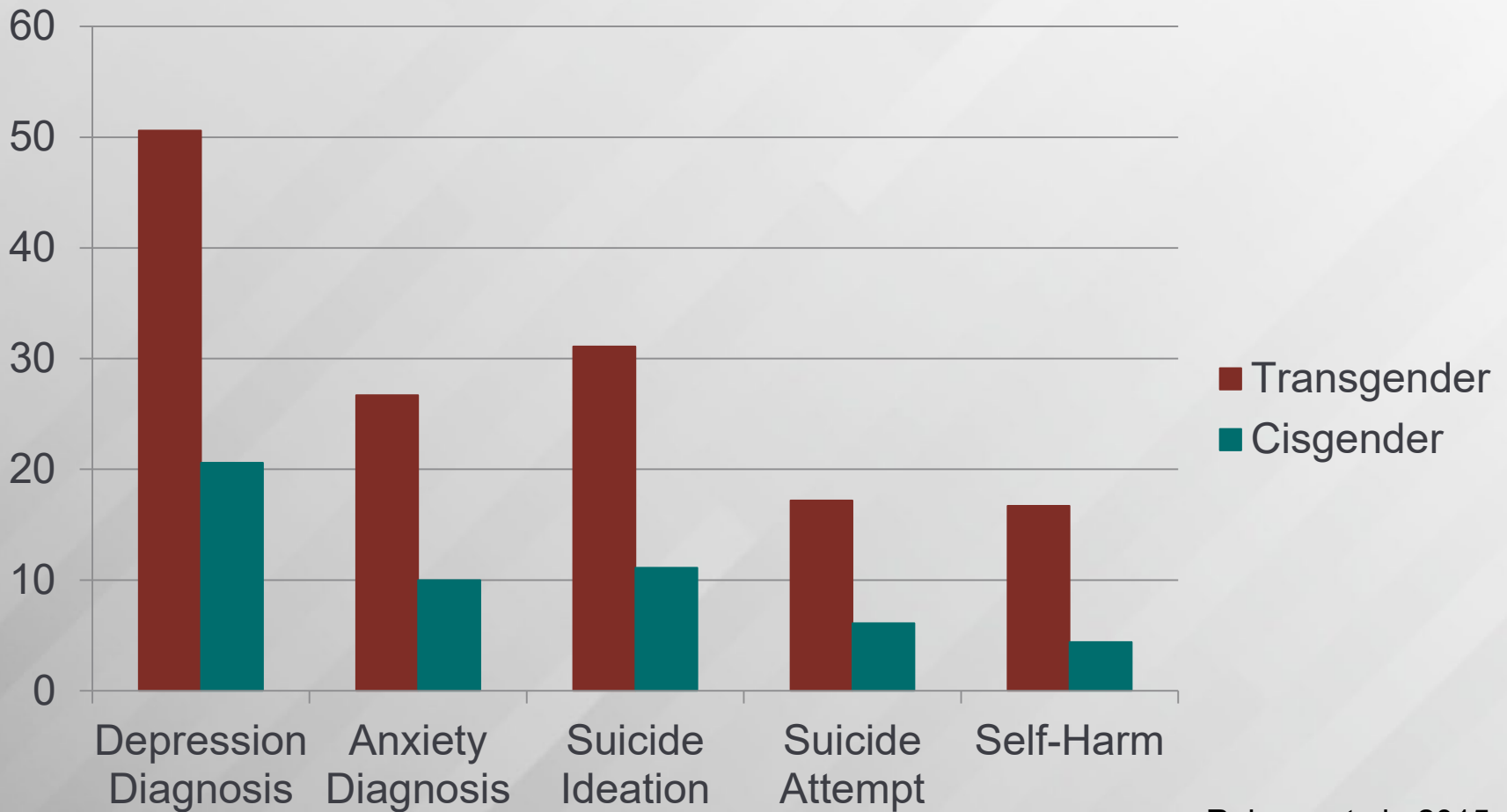
Mental health concerns among transgender youth and family support as a protective factor

Mental Health Concerns Among Transgender Youth

- ▶ Compared to cisgender youth, transgender youth have higher rates of mental health concerns and risk behaviors
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Suicidality (ideation and attempt)
 - Self-harm
 - Use of inpatient and outpatient mental health services
 - Substance use
 - Risky sexual behaviors

Eisenberg et al., 2017; Reisner et al., 2015

Mental Health Concerns Among Transgender vs. Cisgender Youth at an Urban Community Health Center



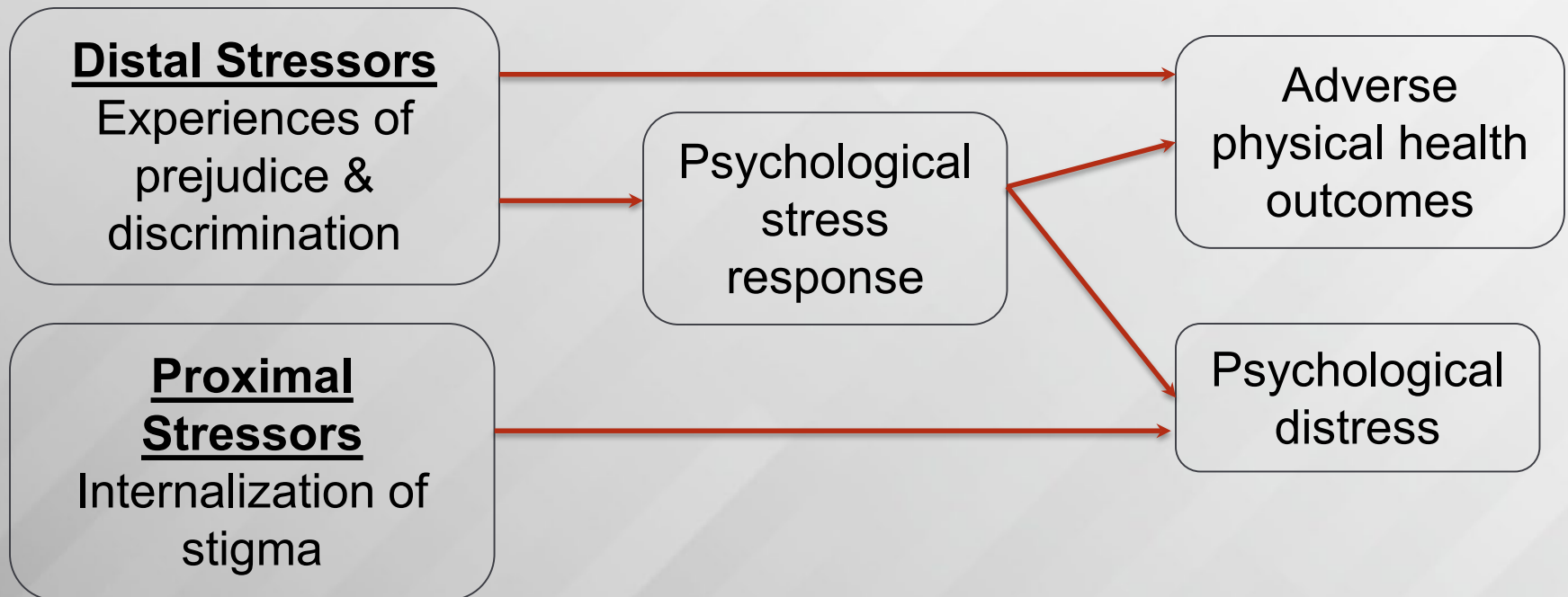
Reisner et al., 2015

Explaining Mental Health Concerns Among Transgender Youth

- ▶ Mental health concerns and risk behaviors among transgender youth attributed to:
 - Gender minority stress
 - Lack of family support and connectedness

Eisenberg et al., 2017; Reisner et al., 2015; Saewyc et al., 2017;
Wilson et al., 2016

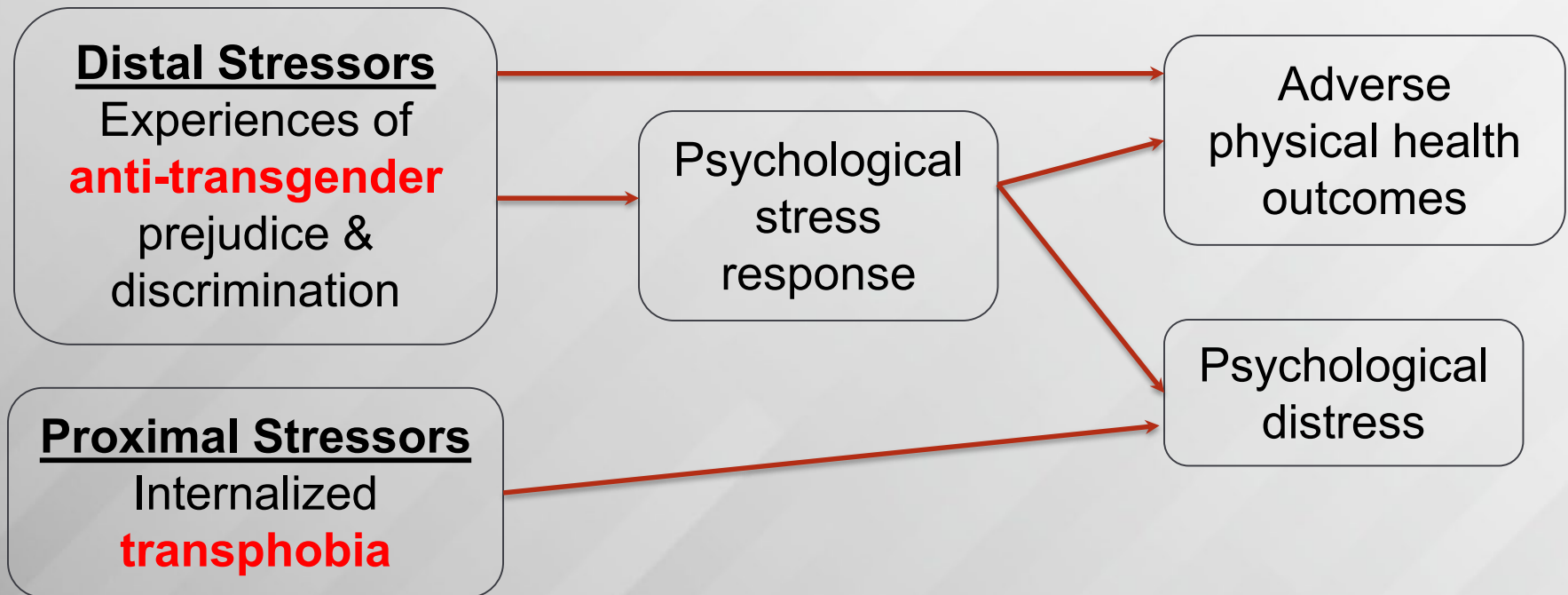
Minority Stress Theory



Adapted from Hatzenbuehler (2009); Meyer (1995, 2003)

(Gender) Minority Stress Theory

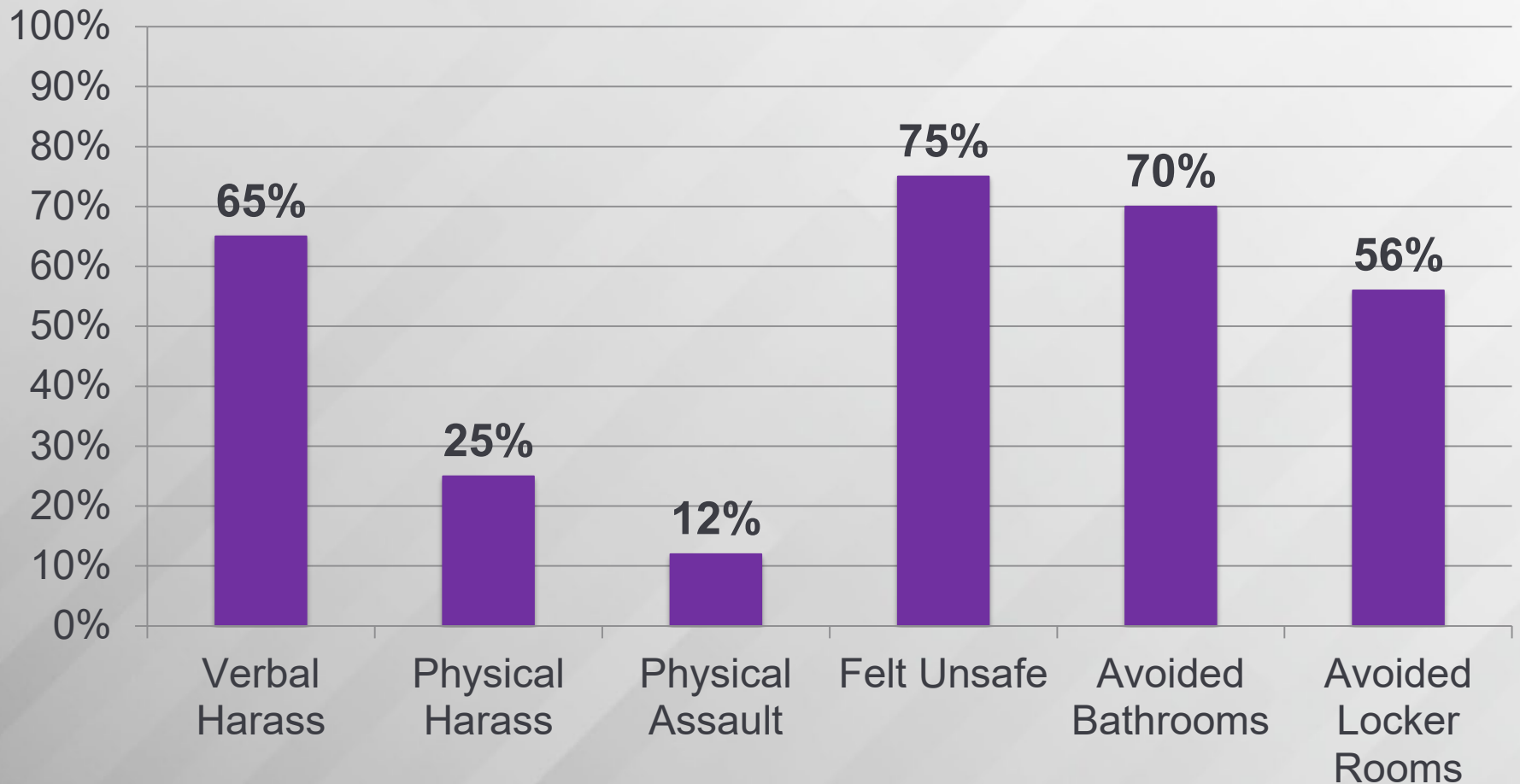
(Also racism, classism, homophobia, biphobia)



(Also internalized racism,
classism, homophobia, biphobia)

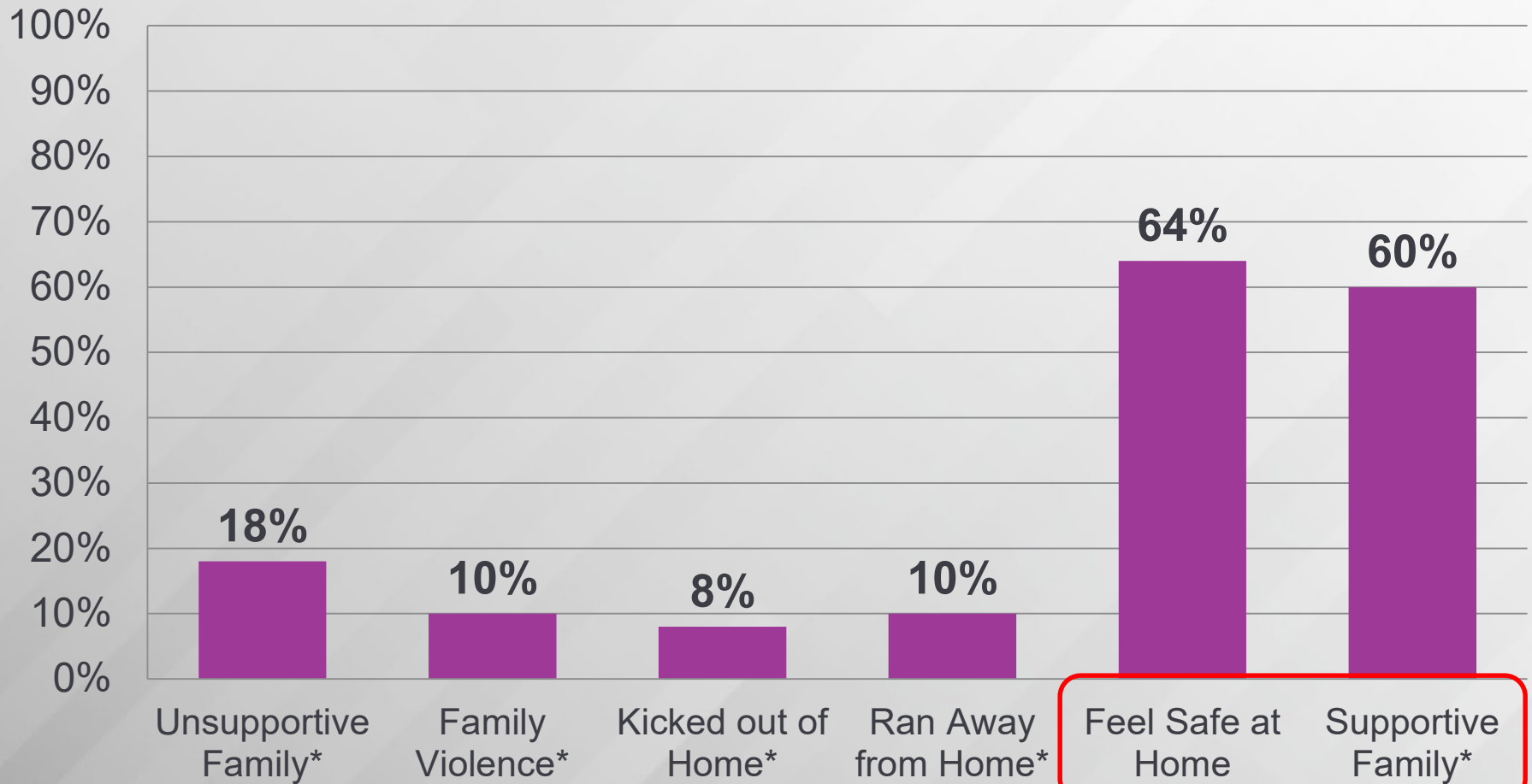
Adapted from Hatzenbuehler (2009);
Hendricks & Testa (2012); Meyer (1995, 2003)

Transgender Youth Discrimination in School (Past Year)



GLSEN 2015 National School Climate Survey

Trans Experiences with Family



*2015 U.S. Trans Survey (adults); 2017 Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey (youth)



Protective Role of Family

- ▶ Socially transitioned transgender children supported in their gender identities have normative levels of depression
- ▶ Parental support associated with higher life satisfaction, lower perceived burden of being transgender, fewer depressive symptoms, less suicidality among transgender adolescents
- ▶ Transgender youth with higher levels of family support and connectedness report better health

Katz-Wise et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2016;
Saewyc et al., 2017; Simons et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015



Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project (TTFN)

A photograph of a forest landscape during autumn. The trees are in various shades of green, yellow, and red, with rolling hills in the background under a hazy sky.

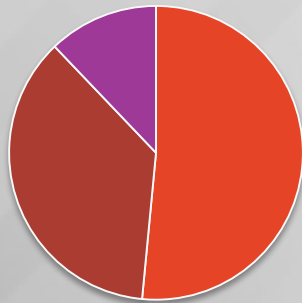
SHARE YOUR STORY

*in the Trans Teen and Family
Narratives Project*

Sample

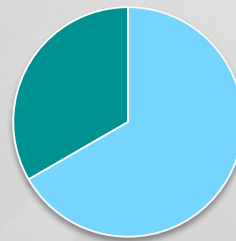
- ▶ 33 families (96 family members)

**Transgender Youth
age 13-17 years
(n = 33)**



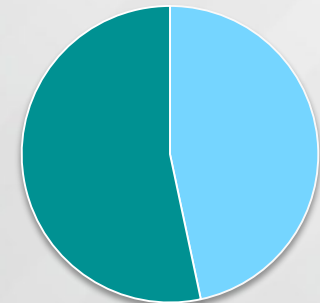
■ Trans boys ■ Trans girls
■ Non-binary

**Cisgender
Caregivers
age 37-69 years
(n = 48)**



■ Women ■ Men

**Cisgender Siblings
age 14-24 years
(n = 15)**

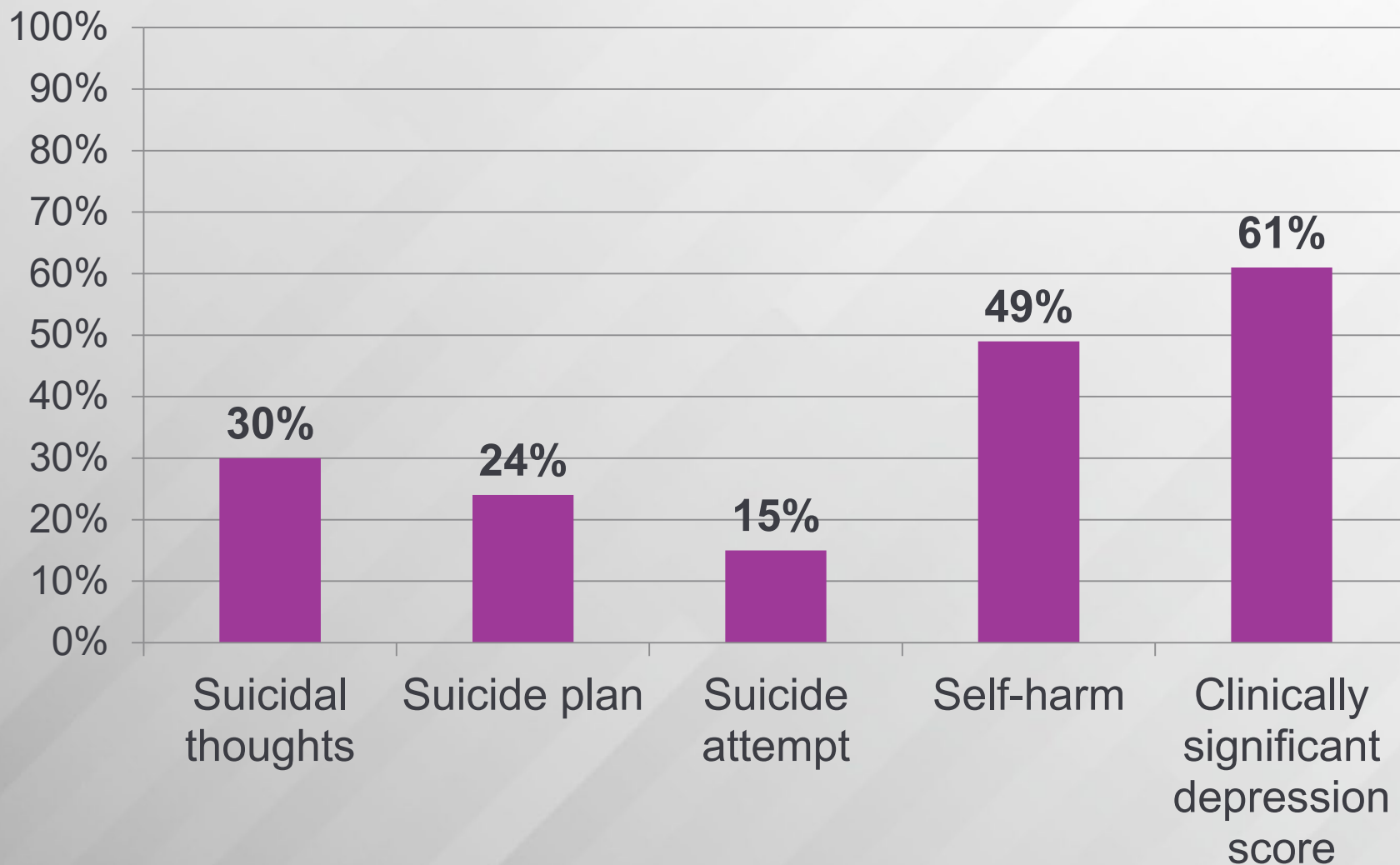


■ Girls ■ Boys

TTFN

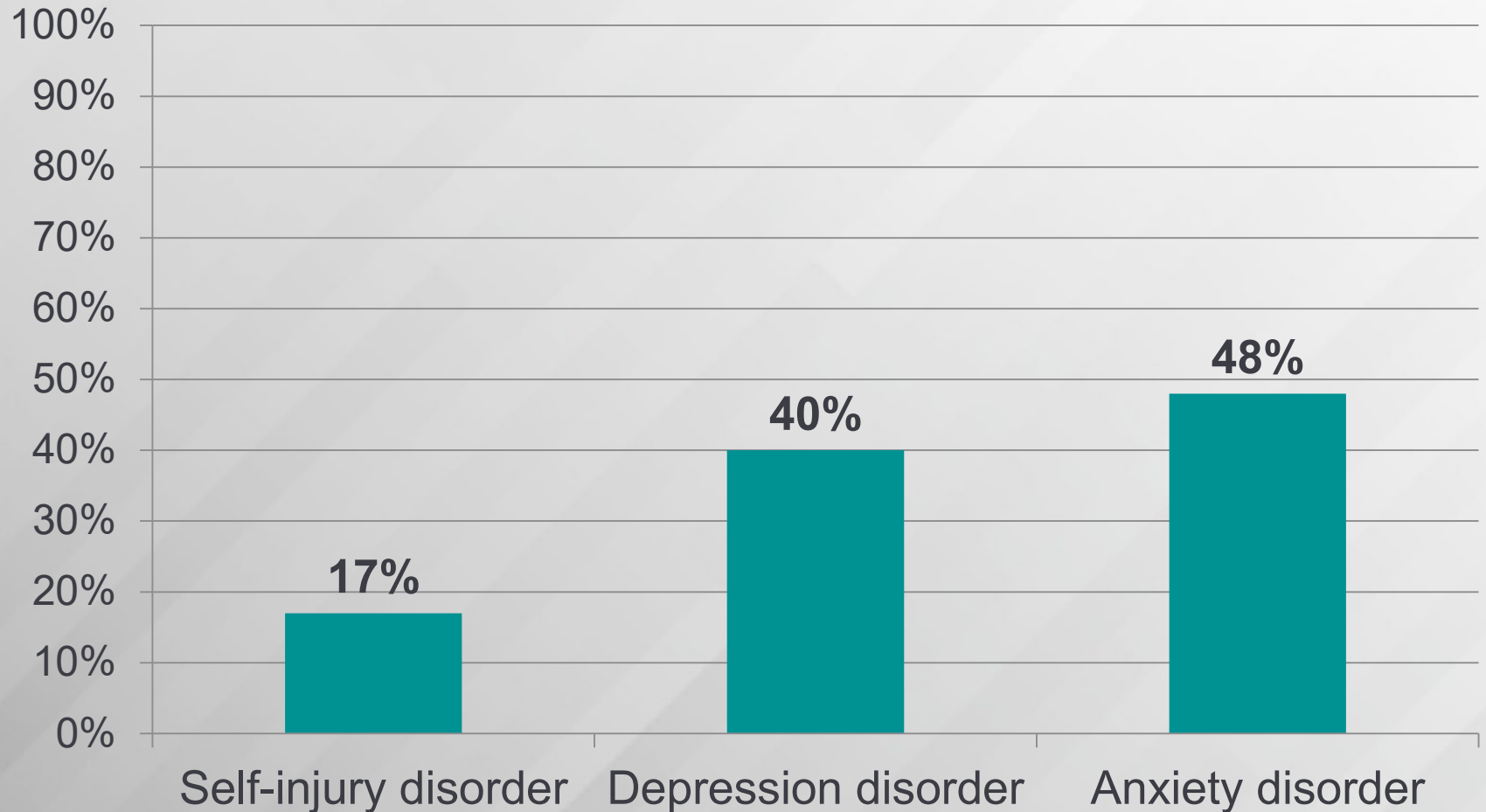
- ▶ Study design
 - Involved community in each step of the research process
 - Qualitative interviews and surveys with each family member every 6 months across 2 years
- ▶ Research questions
 - What is the mental health of transgender youth in a community-based sample of families?
 - How is family functioning associated with transgender youths' mental health?

Transgender Youths' Mental Health (Youth Report)



Katz-Wise et al., 2018, Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project

Transgender Youths' Mental Diagnoses (Caregiver Report)



Katz-Wise et al., 2018, Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project



Family Functioning and Transgender Youths' Mental Health

- ▶ Transgender youth who reported better family communication had:
 - Lower depressive and anxious symptoms
 - Higher self-esteem and resiliency
- ▶ Transgender youth who reported higher family satisfaction had:
 - Less self-harm
 - Lower depressive and anxious symptoms
 - Higher self-esteem

Katz-Wise et al., 2018, Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project

Family Functioning and Trans Youths' Mental Health

- ▶ Caregivers' and siblings' reports of family functioning were not significantly related to trans youths' mental health

Katz-Wise et al., 2018, Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project

TTFN Take Away Points

- ▶ Transgender youth in this sample have alarming rates of mental health concerns, even though families are supportive enough to participate in research together
- ▶ Better family functioning (from transgender youths' perspective only) was associated with better mental health outcomes among transgender youth

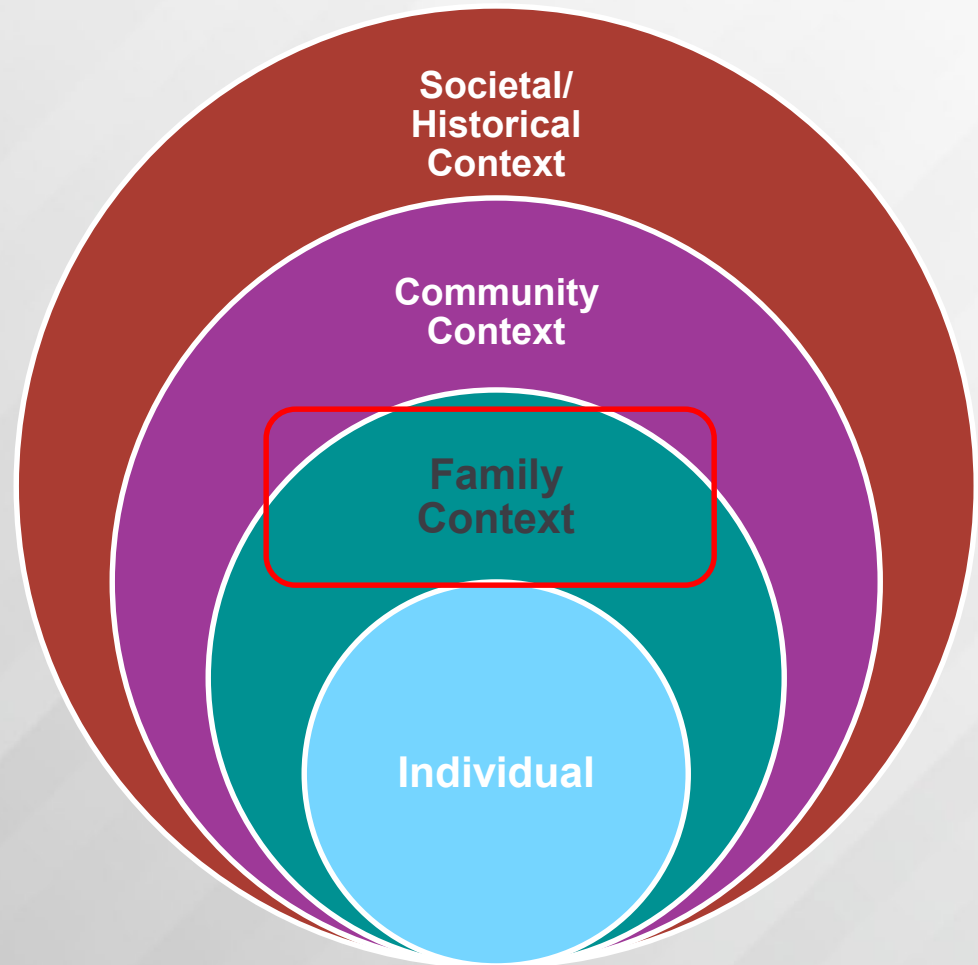
Katz-Wise et al., 2018, Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project



Impact of having a transgender youth on the larger family system

Family Systems Theory

- ▶ Family members are interdependent
- ▶ Individual experiences must be considered within functioning of family system
- ▶ Transition for one family member challenges entire family system



Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985

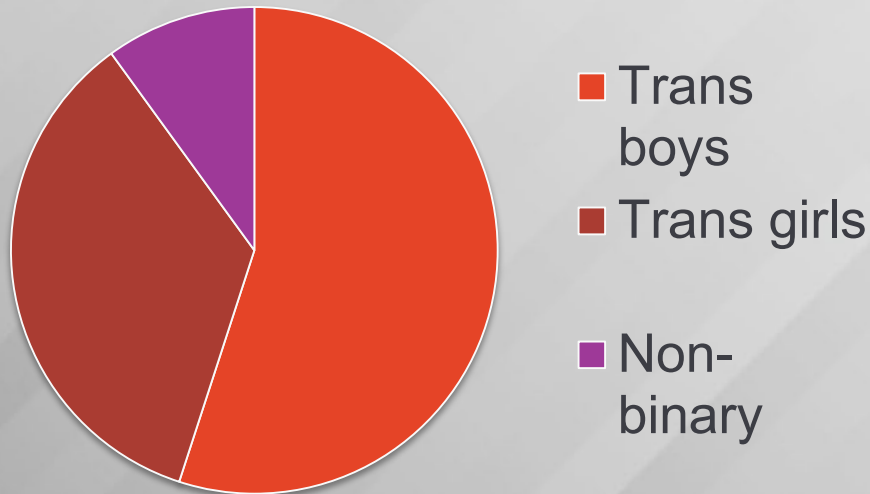


Trans Youth Family Study (TYFS)

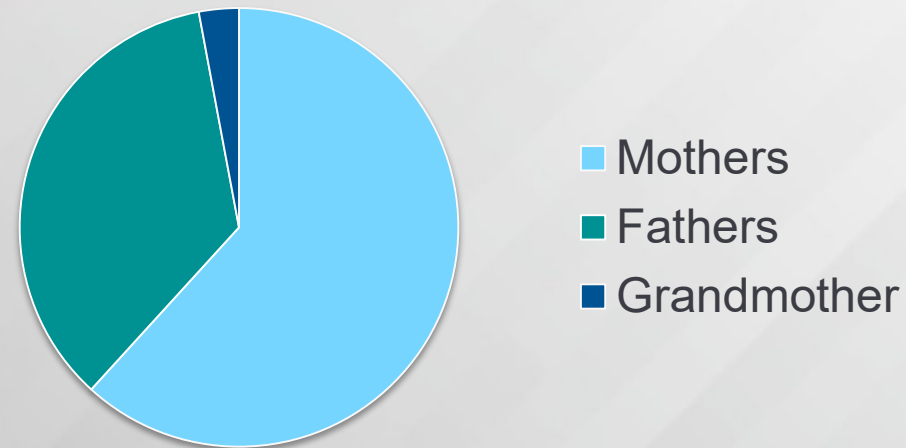
Sample

- ▶ 20 families (54 family members)

Transgender Youth
age 7-18 years
(n = 20)



Cisgender Caregivers
age 34-63 years
(n = 34)



TYFS

- ▶ Study design
 - Qualitative interviews and surveys conducted with each family member twice across 6 months
- ▶ Research question
 - How do trans youth and caregivers describe their relationships within the family?

Themes Related to Relationships

Youth-Caregiver

- Closeness
- Movement to acceptance
- Conflict

Caregiver-Caregiver

- Proactivity between caregivers
- Discordance in parenting
- Support

Contextual Factors

- School
- Extended family

Bhattacharya et al., under review

Themes Related to Relationships

Youth-Caregiver

- Closeness
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Bhattacharya et al., under review



Youth-Caregiver: Closeness

“[With] my mom, I think it’s gotten us a little closer, because we have deeper conversations and we talk more. But with my dad, it’s like there is a mini-elephant in the room. Not like a huge one but just a little one.”

Trans boy, age 15 years



Youth-Caregiver: Movement to Acceptance

“I think any parent would have to say there is some level of disappointment. I think you develop expectations of ‘this is what I want to do with my child’ and, again, there are stereotypical girl things, there are stereotypical boy things and wanting to share those with your child...You have to find different things that you can share together. So there is an adjustment period there and, probably, a continuing adjustment.”

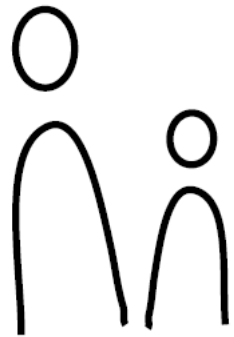
Father of a girlish boy, age 8 years



Youth-Caregiver: Conflict

“[P]eople would ask me, oh, are you on testosterone? And I’d have to explain to them, no, my dad doesn’t accept [my gender identity].”

Trans boy, age 18 years



Youth-Caregiver

Reflections on Youth-Caregiver Themes




Themes Related to Relationships

Caregiver-Caregiver

- Proactivity between caregivers
- Discordance in parenting
- Support

Bhattacharya et al., under review



Caregiver-Caregiver Relationships: Proactivity Between Caregivers

“I'm still more proactive...I'm the one who did the name change, went to court...[I] took him for his social security card. So, none of that would be done had it been left to my husband but, again, to me, that's just kind of the man-woman thing. I don't know, I just take charge.”

Mother of a trans boy, age 16 years



Caregiver-Caregiver Relationships: Discordance in Parenting

“[A]t the time, my husband and I had very different ideas on how to raise a child like this...It was one opinion against another opinion. As easy as that. That became very troublesome for many different reasons...We weren't giving each other support because we didn't believe what the other one thought we should do, and so we were at constant odds [about] how to even address a child like this.”

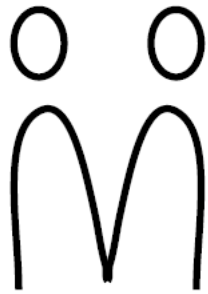
Mother of a gender-fluid boy, age 9 years



Caregiver-Caregiver Relationships: Support

“We would be going to see my family, and I would be freaking out. I’d get real stressed out and worried, like, ‘What is this gonna be like? How is this gonna go?’ And that’s where [my husband] would come and support me, and help me through it, and try to see my way through it.”

Mother of a trans girl, age 8 years



Caregiver-Caregiver

Reflections on Caregiver- Caregiver Themes



Themes Related to Relationships

Contextual Factors

- School
- Extended family
- Religion

Bhattacharya et al., under review



Contextual Factors: School

“They were really, really supportive. And I think, you know, that helped a lot, even in the first month or two. They just set the tone, I think.”

Father of a trans boy, age 18 years

“We offered a lot of professionals to come to the school, and offered things to other parents, if they were curious. We offered things to the teachers, and our school was just absolutely not supportive in that.”

Mother of a trans girl, age 11 years



Contextual Factors: Extended Family

“My dad...said, ‘I just don’t understand, at what point are you going to make him play with gender-appropriate toys?’ So, I just lost it. And I just said, ‘This is who he is, this is what he likes to play with, and I’m not going to tell him that it’s wrong.’...My husband said to me, ‘I’ve never heard you yell at anyone like that! I’ve never seen you have a fight.’ It was the biggest fight of my life.”

Mother of a girlish boy, age 8 years



Contextual Factors: Religion

“The kids that go to them, they kind of practice...radical acceptance, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re different, that’s the best thing ever!’”

Trans boy, age 17 years



Contextual Factors

Reflections on Contextual Factors Themes



TYFS Take Away Points

- ▶ Family relationships are complex with differing levels of closeness and conflict
- ▶ Contextual factors from outside the family affect relationships within the family
- ▶ Themes highlight importance of healthy relationships among family members for trans youths' well-being



Examples from families of struggles and successes in supporting transgender youth

As soon as a Parent finds they are expecting they wonder and are often asked ‘Boy or Girl?’





Support for the Entire Family

- ▶ Understand what Parents maybe experiencing
- ▶ A lot of their resistance in supporting their child comes from fear
- ▶ Explaining what the transition process may look like can help elevate these fears
- ▶ Parents may need some education around the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation
- ▶ Parents and other family members need a place they can go for support
- ▶ When parents/families feel they are supported they are better able to support their child.



Communication is Key

- ▶ Parents and families should be encouraged to maintain open lines of communication with each other
- ▶ Parents and Youth need to be on the same page in order for transition to move forward smoothly
- ▶ Parents need to understand it is not “a phase” or “the latest trend” when their child comes out as a teen or later



Stuck In Transition

- ▶ Providers should be aware if a family is supportive but there is no progress in the transition the family may be stuck
- ▶ Parents and families need to be encouraged to get help to process through their child's transition



Language

- ▶ Learning a new name and pronouns is difficult but is a key part in supporting trans/non binary youths mental health
- ▶ Practice makes perfect
- ▶ If you make a mistake own it, correct it, apologize and move on



Moving Forward

- ▶ Though every journey is different the fact we love our children is number 1
- ▶ Parents that support their child through transition will see positive outcomes
- ▶ Getting support for the entire family is a great benefit to the youth
- ▶ Encourage parents/families to continue to share their experience



Implications for mental health practice with transgender youth

Implications for Practice

- ▶ Family systems approach is necessary for caring for transgender youth
 - All family members should be involved in transgender youth's care
 - Support transgender youth by supporting the whole family
 - Support families by educating them about transgender youth and the process of transitioning

Implications for Practice

- ▶ Although the whole family should be involved
 - Transgender youths' own perception of family functioning is most relevant for their mental health and should be prioritized
 - Remember that transgender youth are the experts about their own experience

Resources for Providers

- ▶ **Gender Identity and Pronoun Use Guide** (Boston Children's Hospital, 2017): <https://notes.childrenshospital.org/clinicians-guide-gender-identity-pronoun-use/>
- ▶ **Practice Guidelines for Transgender & Gender Nonconforming People** (APA, 2015): <http://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf>
- ▶ **Gender Spectrum:** <https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources/>
 - Resources for parents, teens, and community members regarding a variety of topics, including education, legal issues, and faith communities.
- ▶ **Family Acceptance Project:** <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>
 - Training and consultation on evidence-based family model of wellness, prevention and care to strengthen families and promote positive development and healthy futures for LGBT children and youth.

Resources for Transgender Youth & Families

- ▶ **Gender Spectrum:** <https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources/>
 - Resources for parents, teens, and community members regarding a variety of topics, including education, legal issues, and faith communities.
- ▶ **GLSEN:** <https://www.glsen.org/>
 - provides educators and families with support, training, advocacy tools, and research to create safe and affirming schools for all
- ▶ **PFLAG:** www.pflag.org
 - National organization for education, advocacy and support for families and friends of LGBT persons. Chapters available in all states – check website for local chapters and educational materials for families.

Resources for Transgender Youth & Families

- ▶ **Stand with Trans:** <http://standwithtrans.org>
 - College Resources: <http://standwithtrans.org/college-resources/>
 - Ally Moms: <http://standwithtrans.org/ally-moms/>
 - Surgery Prep and FAQ's: <http://standwithtrans.org/surgery-prep-and-faqs/>
- ▶ **TransParent USA:** <http://transparentusa.org/>
 - Provides connection, support and resources to families with transgender children, including help with starting local chapters of support groups.
- ▶ **National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE):** <http://www.transequality.org/>
 - Policy advocates who also provide resources for changing ID documents and administer the Transgender Legal Services Network.

Q&A

Thank you!

For more information please contact:
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HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
TEACHING HOSPITAL

Upcoming CTAC Events

Arrest to Reentry: Implications for the Social Worker Practitioner

January 30th at 2 PM

<https://calendar.ctacny.org/event/?id=698>

Conversations with Dr. Tony – Dr. Michael Lindsey

February 6th at 12 PM

<https://calendar.ctacny.org/event/?id=711>