



THE CAREGIVER CONNECTION

A guide for providers working with caregivers of
LGBTQ+ youth survivors of teen dating violence.

INTRODUCTION

In this guide, we define caregivers as any adult who primarily cares for a youth's basic needs for safety, love and care, and self-actualization. Caregivers may or may not be legal guardians or biological family. There may be one primary caregiver, or multiple caregivers who fulfil many different roles.

LGBTQ+ youth experience disproportionately high rates of dating violence compared to their cisgender, heterosexual peers. According to the Youth Behavior Risk Survey (YBRS) from 2013-2023, LGBTQ+ high school students are significantly more likely than their cisgender and heterosexual peers to be forced to have sex (cisgender/heterosexual 6%: LGBTQ+ 17%) and to experience sexual violence overall, including unwanted kissing and touching (cisgender/heterosexual 8%: LGBTQ+ 20%).

Even in seeking help after experiencing TDV, there are still barriers to receiving care for LGBTQ+ youth survivors including institutional and interpersonal bias, forced outing policies, lack of LGBTQ+ affirming providers, and more.

When it comes to the caregivers of an LGBTQ+ youth survivor, they can either be a powerful source of support, care, and resources; or their rejection can intensely amplify the risk of re-victimization for their child. This guide is intended to provide tools, resources, and information on how providers can best work with caregivers of LGBTQ+ youth survivors of TDV to support them in becoming that powerful ally for their child.

We hope this will be a reference resource that can help service providers feel confident in working with caregivers in effective, trauma-informed, and LGBTQ+-responsive ways that uphold survivor safety.

In creating this desk guide, we are grounded in good faith and empathy for caregivers. Our guiding beliefs about caregivers were and are:

The vast majority of caregivers want the best for their child.

- We believe that caregivers do the best they can with the time, energy, resources, education, and support that they have.
- If a caregiver does not appear to support an LGBTQ+ youth's identity or expression, there may be many reasons behind that, besides outright anti-LGBTQ+ bias. Without genuine curiosity to get to the root of seemingly unsupportive actions, providers may never discover the true capacity of that caregiver's love for their LGBTQ+ child.

Many caregivers are survivors in their own right.

- Caregivers may have had their own traumatic experiences around domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. This may impact the way that caregivers identify and take precautions against potentially harmful behaviors for their child, and what support they are able to provide during and after TDV has occurred. This may look like:
 - Hypervigilance or "helicopter parenting"
 - Big emotional reactions to disclosures of TDV that appear to redirect attention and support away from the youth
 - Denial or belittling of TDV
 - Inability to be fully present or participate at all in discussions about the youth's experience with TDV

We can validate caregiver emotions without validating reactions.

- When a youth comes out to their caregiver, often that caregiver needs time and space to emotionally process this shift in how they see their child. This is a similar process that caregivers go through after learning that their child has experienced TDV. During these processes, particularly when they occur at the same time, internalized stigma and bias about LGBTQ+ people and survivors of DV/SA often come to the surface. As providers, we can validate and support parents through their emotions without validating their reactions.

WHEN CAREGIVERS EXPRESS ANTI-LGBTQ+ SENTIMENTS

Domestic violence service providers working with caregivers of LGBTQ+ youth survivors are in a unique position to talk caregivers through harmful beliefs and thought patterns, leverage shared values, and provide education that increases that caregiver's ability to best respond to the youth. Follow the steps of RAISE when responding to anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment:

R

REFLECT

Listen for the feeling that is being expressed at the core of the caregiver's statement and reflect that back to them.

A

ASK QUESTIONS

Utilize open-ended but direct questions to explore the roots of where the anti-LGBTQ+ belief originated.

I

IDENTIFY SHARED VALUES

Connect with the caregiver on shared values to ensure that they feel heard and understood. Root your responses in empathy and wanting the best for their child.

S

SHARE INFORMATION

Educate the caregiver on LGBTQ+ identity, trauma, domestic violence, and best practices. Explain how their response could impact their child as an LGBTQ+ youth survivor.

E

EMPOWER

Tell the caregiver that you believe in their ability to support their youth. Encourage them with affirmations, continued support, and further resources.

IF CAREGIVERS SAY...

PROVIDERS RESPOND WITH...

The youth's sexual orientation or gender identity is the result of sexual abuse or trauma.

"They must have been sexually abused when they were younger if they are feeling like this."

"She wouldn't be saying that she is attracted to women if she hadn't been hurt by men."

Reflect: "I hear that you are feeling a lot of concern about how the trauma is impacting your child's sense of self."

Ask Questions: "Do you think that all LGBTQ+ people are LGBTQ+ because of past trauma?"

Identify Shared Values: "It can be really overwhelming and scary for a caregiver to think about the potential effects of the trauma that your child has experienced. I'm glad you're talking to me about this."

Share Information: "Sexual orientation is a natural part of a person's identity. Suggesting that it comes from abuse can make a survivor feel like something is 'wrong' with them, which isn't the case."

IF CAREGIVERS SAY...

PROVIDERS RESPOND WITH...

Empower: “It’s important to separate two things: healing from trauma and understanding identity. Both matter, but one doesn’t cause the other. Do you want to talk about some resources we can explore for each part? Also, it sounds like this is hard on you as well. Maybe we can talk about what support you need right now as you are navigating this news.”

The youth is identifying as LGBTQ+ for attention.

Observe: “It sounds like you’re unsure whether this is something genuine or something influenced by others.”

“Everyone is saying that they are bisexual these days. She just wants attention and to feel cool, she’s not really bisexual.”

Ask questions: “What have you noticed that makes you feel this might be about attention?”

Identify shared values: “Most caregivers want their child to feel secure in who they are and not feel pressure to be something they’re not.”

Assist: “Exploring identity is a normal part of development. Even if a youth is still figuring things out, their feelings deserve to be taken seriously. Labeling it as just for attention can unintentionally make a child feel dismissed and misunderstood.”

Empower: “Showing openness and respect for your child’s understanding of themselves makes it more likely that your child will trust and open up to you. Having someone they know they can go to in order to talk through what they are going through is so important.”

Statements that intentionally or unintentionally misgender their child.

Reflect: “It sounds like there may be some uncertainty or discomfort around how your child is identifying.”

“He thinks that he is a girl.”

Ask Questions: “What concerns or questions are coming up for you?”

Identify Shared Values: “It sounds like you care a lot about your child and want to understand them.”

Share Information: “Using the name and pronouns your child asks you to use is a really important way to show support, even if you’re still adjusting. Research shows that when caregivers use affirming language, it has a very strong positive psychological impact on their child.”

IF CAREGIVERS SAY...

PROVIDERS RESPOND WITH...

Empower: “This is new, it’s okay to be learning. Many caregivers are figuring this out step by step. Working on changes, like practicing correct pronouns, can make a big difference in how supported your child feels.”

The child's gender expression was the reason for their sexual assault.

Reflect: “It sounds like you’re trying to make sense of a really difficult and painful situation.”

“She was acting like a tomboy, that’s why they sexually assaulted her.”

Ask Questions: “What concerns come up for you when you think about your child’s safety?”

Identify Shared Values: “It’s clear you care deeply about your child’s safety and want to protect them.”

Share Information: “Sexual assault is never caused by a survivor’s clothing or gender expression. Responsibility always lies with the person who chooses to harm them. Sometimes it can feel easier to look for a reason in the youth’s actions, but that places blame on them instead of the person who harmed them.”

Empower: “One of the most powerful things you can do for your child right now is remind them that they are not to blame. It’s okay to process your own feelings, too. Getting support for yourself can help you show up for your child in the way you want.”

Their own perceived shortcomings are to blame for “making” their child LGBTQ+.

Reflect: “I hear you carrying a lot of guilt and worry that not being around enough is what led to this.”

“I just feel like a bad parent. I wasn’t around enough for her as a mom, which is why she’s acting out like this.

Ask Questions: “Can you tell me more about what’s making you feel responsible for this?”

Identify Shared Values: “It is clear that you care deeply about your child and want to do right by them.”

Share Information: “Research shows that being LGBTQ+ is not ‘caused’ by any external action or influence, including anything a parent did or didn’t do.”

Empower: “Part of being a good mom is about how you show up for your child. It sounds like your child wants to share this part of themselves with you now. This is an opportunity to show them that you love and support them for who they are.”

IF CAREGIVERS SAY...

PROVIDERS RESPOND WITH...

They are experiencing grief around unmet expectations for their child.

Reflect: "It sounds like this has brought up a sense of loss or grief for you."

"It's hard for me to let go of the son I raised."

Ask Questions: "What hopes or expectations did you have that feel different now?"

Identify Shared Values: "Most caregivers have hopes and dreams for their children, so it makes sense this feels like an adjustment."

Share Information: "Many caregivers experience a sense of grief when expectations shift. But your child isn't gone. They're sharing more of who they truly are."

Empower: "Support for yourself, like talking with other caregivers or a therapist, can also help you move through this grief."

They want to silence the abuse that happened to the youth.

Reflect: "It sounds like this situation feels overwhelming or painful to keep revisiting."

"I just want to stop talking about it and move on."

Ask Questions: "Can you share what feels most difficult about continuing to talk about this?"

Identify Shared Values: "It's clear that you want your child to be okay and not keep reliving something painful."

Share Information: "Wanting to move on is very understandable. This can be incredibly hard to sit with. At the same time, healing from abuse requires space to process what happened. When a child feels like they can't talk about their experience, they may feel alone, confused, or like their feelings need to be hidden."

Empower: "You can say things like, 'We don't have to talk about it right now, but I'm always here if you want to.' By staying present even when it's hard, you're giving your child a strong foundation for healing."

IF CAREGIVERS SAY...

PROVIDERS RESPOND WITH...

Statements reflecting adultification- wherein a caregiver is treating a child as older, more mature, or more responsible than is developmentally appropriate or realistic. This most often affects girls of color, especially Black girls.

"She's too grown to be acting like that. She should have know better."

Being LGBTQ+ is specific to the younger generation or "new".

"This wasn't a thing in my generation"

Reflect: "It sounds like you're expecting your child to handle this with a high level of maturity or understanding."

Ask Questions: "What makes it feel like she should already know how to handle this? How do you usually respond when she need support or guidance?"

Identify Shared Values: "We both want your child to learn and develop in a healthy, supported way."

Share Information: "Children, regardless of how mature they may seem, are still developing and need support and guidance. Sometimes we see our children as older or more responsible than they actually are, which can lead to expectations that don't match their developmental stage. Our responses may make a child feel pressured to suppress their emotions and not ask for help."

Empower: "You have an opportunity to teach skills while also showing your child she doesn't have to handle everything on her own."

Reflect: "I hear you saying that this wasn't something you saw or heard about when you were growing up."

Ask Questions: "What do you remember about how topics like this were talked about when you were younger? How did you see that impact LGBTQ+ people?"

Identify Shared Values: "We both want your child to feel understood and supported while also making sense of your own experiences."

Share Information: "In the past, people often didn't have the language, safety, or acceptance to talk about their identities openly. What can look like something new is often people finally having the space to be more honest about who they are. Youth today have more access to information and support, and can make sense of who they are and share that openly in a way that past generations could not have."

Empower: "You can model learning by saying, "This is new for me, but I want to understand you". Your willingness to engage, even when it feels unfamiliar, can make a big impact on your child's sense of trust and connection."

IF CAREGIVERS SAY...

Using cultural or spiritual expectations to push the youth into doing something they are not comfortable with.

"My child was sexually assaulted years ago but is still so angry. I wish he would recognize that having forgiveness for the assaulter will bring him peace. I tell him to pray for the well-being of his assaulter so that God will reward his mercy, but he gets so upset. I just want him to give it to God so he can move on."

PROVIDERS RESPOND WITH...

Reflect: "It sounds like you are worried about the long-term emotional effects of your child's sexual assault."

Ask Questions: "When you say you want him to move on, what does that look like to you?"

Identify Shared Values: "We both want your child to be emotionally well and to identify and develop the tools and skills that can help him achieve that."

Share Information: "Surviving sexual assault is a deeply traumatic event, it changes the way you view and move through the world. For all survivors of sexual assault, being told to forgive and move on from the violence they experienced, can feel hurtful and belittling, especially if the person who harmed them faced no consequences. Instead, youth survivors may learn to suppress their feelings around those who share these sentiments, which can damage your relationship with your child."

Empower: "You can encourage your child to share his feelings freely and wait to see if he asks you what you think he should do. You have a great opportunity to model patience and acceptance."



CULTURE & SPIRITUALITY

Unfortunately, across many different cultures and spiritualities, dating violence, especially sexual assault, is treated as the result of a lack of morality rather than an exploitation of power. Confronting negative narratives rooted in a caregiver's culture or spirituality requires nuance, sensitivity, and judgement-free conversation.

Cultures and spiritualities have taught and enforced ideological systems that simultaneously have practices that feel very personal and intimate. It is never the provider's role to attempt to change, correct, or shame a caregiver for their culture or spirituality.

Recognize if you as a provider are emotionally activated by a caregiver bringing culture or religion into the conversation, and ground yourself in your professional obligation to support stability and support for the LGBTQ+ youth.

TITLE IX & MANDATORY REPORTING

Title IX and mandatory reporting are related, but not the same. Helping caregivers understand the differences, what their youth's rights are, and how to uphold their youth's autonomy and safety are key to supporting LGBTQ+ youth survivors.

Mandatory reporting laws require certain school employees to report known or suspected abuse to their school administration and child protective services.

Under Title IX, any school staff are required to report information about sexual harassment, dating violence, or sex/gender-based discrimination that they learn about to the school. The school, then, is legally obligated to respond.

Both mandatory reporting and Title IX reports can have an impact on LGBTQ+ youth survivors.

Negative effects include:

- Risk of outing to friends, family, or teachers.
- A loss of control over the process.
- Trust concerns about which adults are safe for the youth to talk to.

Positive effects include:

- New pathways to accountability and safety.
- Potential for school accommodations or resources that improve survivors' ability to fully attend school.

Surviving dating violence may impact an LGBTQ+ youth's education. This can look like: feeling unsafe at school, avoiding classes or school activities to avoid their abusive partner, trauma impacting their ability to concentrate, a decline in grades or performance due to the trauma, and more. It's important for service providers to educate parents on Title IX and what unique protections LGBTQ+ youth survivors may have.

Helping Caregivers Understand Title IX

Title IX is a federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding. This includes sexual harassment, sexual violence, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. It also includes discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. For a LGBTQ+ youth survivor of teen dating violence, they may have many issues coming up that may involve Title IX including:

- Stalking, cyber abuse, harassment, threats, or physical or sexual harm from a dating partner that either took place at the school or is impacting the survivor's ability to fully participate in school.
- A partner outing or threatening to out an LGBTQ+ youth survivor to their peers at school, teachers, or parents.
- Any anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination or harassment from peers or teachers that occurs on campus or interferes with their education.

CAREGIVER RESOURCES

This section of the guide is comprised of resources to share directly with caregivers of LGBTQ+ survivors of teen dating violence to supplement your work with them.

DIGITAL SAFETY PLANNING

LGBTQ+ youth, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming youth, rely on online spaces to feel connected to and understood by others (Trevor Project, 2025). LGBTQ+ youth frequent social media sites where they can socialize with others, namely, TikTok, Discord, Instagram, and Reddit. Many LGBTQ+ youth enter online relationships through these platforms where they may share personal information, their device's location, and intimate photos and videos with another person that they have never met in-person.

It is common for caregivers to attempt to restrict their child's internet access out of fear, however, LGBTQ+ youth also rely on these platforms to socialize when they feel they cannot relate to their peers or be their full selves at school. Therefore, removing an LGBTQ+ youth from their online spaces because they have the potential to be harmful or because they are deemed "not real" by the caregiver, can be devastating to the youth's emotional well-being as well as the relationship between the caregiver and child.

Instead, providers should be able to help caregivers become knowledgeable about the online spaces their child frequents and support safety planning. The resources below contain further information on digital abuse.

Resources:

- <https://vawnet.org/sc/technology-assisted-abuse>
- <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/technology-facilitated-abuse/>

BECOMING AN LGBTQ+ AFFIRMING CAREGIVER

Caregivers who are actively working through accepting their LGBTQ+ child's identity may need supplemental guidance on how to demonstrate affirming actions while processing their own internal growth. Family Acceptance Project, from San Francisco State University, published a practice brief on just this.

- [Helping Families Support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender \(LGBT\) Children- Family Acceptance Project](#)

SECONDARY TRAUMA IN CAREGIVERS

Providers should encourage caregivers of LGBTQ+ youth survivors of TDV to develop and practice self-care and coping strategies, just as they do for the youth themselves. Caregivers may downplay or suppress their own feelings about the violence that their child has experienced due to their own traumatic history with dating violence, their desire to keep focus on the child instead of themselves, and more. No matter the reason, caregivers may experience secondary trauma, emotional exhaustion, and/or compassion fatigue* as a result of supporting their LGBTQ+ child through their traumatic experience of surviving TDV. Because of this, it is crucial that caregivers take care of themselves so that they may continue to be a source of support for their child.

It is normal for caregivers to feel negative emotions, and even physical manifestations of these, in connection to supporting their LGBTQ+ child who has survived TDV. However, it is important for providers to be able to recognize when a caregiver is exhibiting signs of secondary trauma.

These signs include:

- **Obsessive thoughts** about the experience of their child and/or protecting their child from any further violence that disrupt their daily life, including imagining the violence or reliving the moment they found out about it.
- **Dreaming** about the violence or about their child being harmed frequently.
- **An increase in fear and anxiety** especially about situations that had previously caused no fear or anxiety, or significantly less.
- **Disruptions to normal appetite, sleep, and energy levels.**
- **Persistent loss of enjoyment** from things that once brought the caregiver joy such as hobbies, socializing, and physical intimacy.
- **Disorientation** and “brain fog”.
- **New physical symptoms** including shortness of breath, new aches and pains, digestive problems, muscle tension, and more.

If you observe these signs in a caregiver, make sure that the caregiver is also able to have space to discuss and process their feelings about their child’s experience and about their own experience regarding it. Helpful strategies to combat secondary trauma include:

- **Re-balance obligations.** Having intense stress at work or in other personal relationships concurrently can exacerbate the symptoms of secondary trauma. Encourage caregivers to reassess how much emotional and physical energy they have to spend and set boundaries to protect their wellbeing during this time.
- **Encourage physical activity.** Any physical movement that feels good to a caregiver should be nurtured- moving one’s body helps to process difficult emotions as well as releasing endorphins which can help counteract feelings of sadness and anxiety. This movement can be anything from chair yoga, to dancing, to boxing and everything in between!
- **Prioritize sleep.** Getting consistent full nights of sleep gives your brain the opportunity to process the events of the day and prevents symptoms of sleep deprivation that can

worsen secondary trauma.

- **Create a relaxation practice.** Spending consistent time relaxing mentally and physically will, over time, lessen the feelings of stress and strengthen a caregiver’s resiliency. This can include meditation, reading, coloring, taking a bath, gardening, or any other activity that the caregiver finds relaxing and grounding.
- **Stay connected to loved ones.** When experiencing the effects of secondary trauma, caregivers may self-isolate out of shame or exhaustion. It is important for caregivers to maintain connections to others who love and support them, outside of their child.
- **Seek professional care, if needed.** Additional support from a therapist or support group can help give the caregiver a private space away from what they associate with the care system in place to help their child for them to openly share their feelings and process.

*It is important to note that when caregivers experience these adverse effects, it is not a reflection of the quality of their caregiving, or an indicator of moral failing or a lack of resiliency. Secondary trauma, emotional exhaustion, and compassion fatigue can happen to caregivers, service providers in “helping” professions (e.g. therapists, first responders), or anyone who supports another person through their traumatic experience (e.g. a teacher who has been confided in by a student about their abuse at home), especially if these people are also dealing with high levels of stress in their personal and/or professional lives.

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This guide was created in collaboration with experts in the field across the United States. Thank you for sharing your time, wisdom, and vision with us to improve systems of care for LGBTQ+ youth survivors of teen dating violence.

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