Creating Spaces to Support Transgender Youth

By Jenifer K. McGuire, Ph.D., M.P.H., and Meredith Conover-Williams, M.A.

In focus groups, youth described the value of community spaces specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.

"I came here to be more comfortable with my sexuality. When I realized that I was transgender I liked having the support of people to be able to come out to. I just feel more comfortable with my gender."

"I went to a gender conference this last year, and for me it was really cool to see that there's a whole bunch of transgender folks. I think most people think … there's maybe like one in the city. It was just really cool to see that there are a lot more transgender people."

"I like having a person to talk to. If you're born in a female body, people might not still see you as a male. So the center gives a place to talk to you about, you know, man stuff."

In this article we explore the opportunity to create spaces that specifically promote the well-being of transgender adolescents and young adults. While many of the approaches designed to improve social spaces for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth will also support transgender youth, policies and practices may not apply to, or actively include, these adolescents who face unique needs and opportunities. This article describes family, school, and community contexts linked to the well-being of transgender adolescents, and presents data from focus groups with transgender youth conducted at sexual minority youth community centers.

DEFINING GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation is the inclination of a person to be attracted to persons of a certain gender. The American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as "an enduring pattern of attraction, behavior, emotion, identity and social contacts" (APA, 2009, p. 74).

Gender identity stems from a person's sense of identification with masculine and feminine spectrums, and is typically defined as "the inner sense of maleness or femaleness," (Mosby's Medical Dictionary, 2009). Thus gender identity refers to how one views oneself. The term "transgender" is an umbrella term for individuals who identify with a gender that differs from the one assigned at birth. A transgender person may want to change from an assigned gender to the other gender (e.g. male to female), may express gender in a way that encompasses aspects of both masculinity and femininity (e.g. genderqueer), or may retain the assigned birth gender but have gender non-conforming characteristics. Some transgender people will take medical steps towards sex reassignment including the use of hormones and surgeries, and others will not. In this article, we use transgender in its most inclusive sense to incorporate a wide variety of gender expressions and identities.

Transgender people, like non-transgender people, have both a gender identity and a sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is based on the gender with which one identifies, and the gender of the people to whom one is attracted. Some individuals may experience a shift in their sexual orientation during the gender transition process.

WHAT ISSUES MIGHT TRANSGENDER YOUTH FACE?

Transgender youth experience many of the same issues as LGB youth, but may face more extreme reactions from families, peers and the community, and have some unique concerns. Gender non-conforming youth face even more victimization than LGB youth at school (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009), and are more likely than LGB youth to experience family violence, parental rejection (Grossman, D'Augelli, & Salter, 2006), eviction, and loss of financial support (Garofalo et al., 2006; Xavier, 2000). Some unique concerns include high rates of violent victimization and murder, unemployment, difficulty of accessing medical care, and housing instability and homelessness which can place youth at a higher risk for sex work or drug use (Garofalo et al., 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Transgender specific legal issues include name changes, marriage and parenting rights, issuance of corrected birth records, and discrimination (see http://www.transgenderlawcenter.org/). In 2010, legal rights of transgender persons vary considerably by state and even by city or county where there are no state laws. Some states require full recognition of a new gender as requested (for example, California and Massachusetts), while others allow work termination and housing eviction if a person is discovered to be transgender (for example, Idaho and Arizona). Violence against transgender persons (including high rates of homicide) has been well documented (Lombardi et al., 2001). Finally, because there are few spaces that provide support for gender identity issues, transgender youth may have few, if any, role models or opportunities to explore and learn about their gender identity.

WHAT PROMOTES POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT FOR TRANSGENDER YOUTH?

A Supportive Family

The Family Acceptance Project, which has been examining family relationships for LGBT youth for several years, has begun to identify influence of both damaging and effective parenting strategies especially relevant for transgender youth (Ryan et al., 2009). The ongoing research has been applied to transgender youth in a format accessible to families and practitioners (Brill & Pepper,

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2008). Supportive family environments can help to mitigate some of the needs of transgender youth through advocacy and assistance in medical, workplace, and housing needs (see Box 5.1).

A Supportive School
Several studies have documented that over 80% of transgender students report some form of harassment at school, in some cases at the hands of school personnel (Greytak et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 2010; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Strategies to support LGB students, such as teacher intervention in harassment, providing information about gender issues, and addressing sexual minority issues in the curriculum have been associated with safer environments for transgender students as well (McGuire et al., 2010; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Quinn, 2002). Even a single teacher providing support and advocacy has been associated with increased feelings of safety at school for transgender youth (McGuire et al., 2010). See Box 5.2 for features of a supportive school environment for transgender youth.

A Supportive Community Context
The few studies which document the community needs of transgender youth concur that the need for resources is significant, and community contexts may be an appropriate venue for providing support (Di Ceglie et al., 2002; Haynes, 2004; McGuire et al., 2007). Currently, because existing research literature regarding transgender adolescents is so limited, community centers that provide programs specifically for transgender-identified youth must develop programs

with little or no access to a research base for understanding the needs and resources such youth may have. The social and personal situation for transgender youth can be quite complex, including specific medical, safety, dating, occupational, and familial support and needs.

Organizations can rethink the processes and services offered in light of the unique concerns of transgender youth.

To begin to fill the gaps in the research specifically about the community-based needs of transgender youth, we conducted focus groups at LGBT youth centers during the time of their weekly transgender youth support groups. Four agencies recruited 3–16 persons each for 1.5 to 2 hour, audio-recorded groups. The University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program review committee approved the project. A total of 36 youth participated in the groups, ranging in age from 12–23. Of those, 61% were African American, 14% were white, 16% Latino, and 9% mixed ethnicity. Participants along the female to male (FTM) continuum made up 78% of the groups, with 22% reporting being male to female (MTF) in gender identity (McGuire et al., 2007).

In the focus groups, we asked youth to reflect on what sorts of needs transgender youth have, the ways that the sexual minority youth centers had supported them, and specific experiences within the community centers. Although there was considerable demographic diversity across the groups' participants, some primary themes emerged in all of the groups. Across the groups, there was consensus on the basic needs for many transgender youth, ways that community centers can support development, and feedback to improve programming for the future. See Table 5.1 for a summary of the major themes and issues raised in these focus groups. The information derived from these groups about

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Box 5.1

Family Reactions to Transgender Youth

SUPPORTIVE RESPONSES
- ✓ Negotiating parent differences
- ✓ Requiring respect from other family members
- ✓ Supporting the youth's gender expression
- ✓ Disregarding gender stereotypes
- ✓ Advocating for the child's safety
- ✓ Providing open communication
- ✓ Seeking community for the family
- ✓ Using chosen name
- ✓ Using preferred pronouns

HARMFUL RESPONSES
- ✓ Expulsion from home
- ✓ Physical and verbal abuse
- ✓ Exclusion
- ✓ Blocking access to resources
- ✓ Blaming youth for discrimination
- ✓ Ridicule
- ✓ Religious condemnation
- ✓ Denial
- ✓ Shame
- ✓ Secrecy
- ✓ Enforced conformity
- ✓ Rejection
- ✓ Ignore or dismiss gender identity
- ✓ Assumptions of defiance

Note: Findings based on the following studies are summarized in this table: Brill & Pepper, 2008; Grossman et al., 2005; Grossman, D'Augelli, & Salter, 2006; Koken, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009; Pusch, 2005.

Box 5.2

Features of a Supportive School for Transgender Youth

- ✓ An explicit policy that prohibits discrimination based on gender identity and expression
- ✓ Providing information about LGBT persons
- ✓ Including LGBT issues in the curriculum
- ✓ Having an LGBT club, often called a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)
- ✓ Adult intervention to stop harassment
- ✓ Availability of gender-neutral bathrooms
- ✓ Supportive adult relationships with transgender students
- ✓ Accommodation of gender identity in P.E./locker rooms
- ✓ Use of chosen name on school records
- ✓ Use of chosen pronoun by all school personnel and students
- ✓ Confidentiality of transgender status (if desired by the student)
- ✓ Education of teachers about gender identity

Note: Findings based on the following studies are summarized in this table: Greytak et al., 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 2010; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Quinn, 2002; Sausa, 2005.

Table 5.1

Identified Areas Where Community Centers Can Support Transgender Youth

THEMES	EXAMPLES OF NEEDS	RECOMMENDATIONS
BASIC NEEDS		
Medical needs	• Specialized treatment • Culturally appropriate care	• List of trained providers
Housing	• Transgender-friendly shelter • Long-term independent living	• Designated transgender shelter • Transitional living programs
Work	• Harassment at work • Marginalized jobs	• Outreach to employers • Job placement support • List of supportive employers
School	• Harassment at school • Dropping out	• Outreach to schools • School support for students
Bathrooms	• Harassment experiences in segregated bathrooms • Few gender neutral bathrooms	• Systems to report harassment • Anti-harassment campaign • Increase gender-neutral bathrooms
SELF AND SOCIETY		
Identity	• Developing gender identity • Relating to others in new role	• Education • Individual counseling • Support groups
Family	• Coming out to family • Sustaining family relationships • Family acceptance	• Support with family relationships • Services to families • Developing new support networks
Culture	• Cultural acceptance • Culture and gender roles	• Outreach to cultural groups • Explore relationship to culture
COMMUNITY CENTER FUNCTIONS		
Activities	• Annual events (conferences) • Weekly meetings • Social opportunities	• Outreach at annual events • Workshops: Resume, doctor visit • Individual counseling • Trans-focused social spaces
Center concerns	• Race and culture clashes • Staff gender awareness	• Address race in LGBT spaces • Staff training on transgender issues • Feedback to center via youth leaders

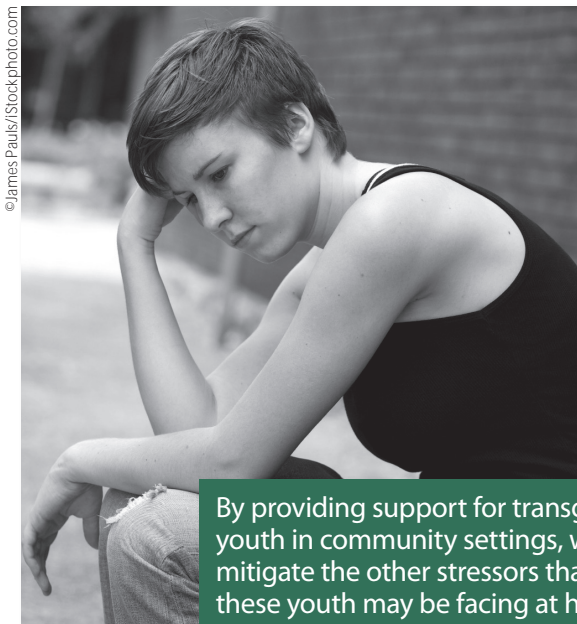**Note:** Adapted from McGuire et al., 2007.

how centers can support both instrumental (i.e. food and housing) needs as well socio-emotional and identity development needs can serve to support future programming efforts. Furthermore, some experiences across the centers made clear the need for additional staff training specifically about gender expression.

HOW CAN COMMUNITY CENTERS SUPPORT TRANSGENDER YOUTH?

Community centers and youth organizations are a natural place to provide services for transgender youth, especially those who may be estranged from their families or are not able to access adequate housing, work, and medical care. Centers focused specifically on sexual minority youth exist in many major cities, and often provide specific resources for transgender or gender questioning youth. For example, there is Lambert House in Seattle (http://www.lamberthouse.org/), District 202 in Minneapolis (http://www.dist202.org/), and Eon in Tucson (http://www.wingspan.org/WYP.php). Below we discuss opportunities to support the well-being of transgender youth within sexual minority youth community centers, followed by broader youth serving organizations.

In the focus groups described above, youth indicated the value of sexual minority community centers for connecting them to other resources such as housing assistance, medical care, and work opportunities. Centers supported youth in attempting to obtain acceptance from their families by providing supportive counseling from adults, or by hosting a support group specifically for parents of transgender youth. In several of the centers, participants described structures to help parents who may be confused or misunderstanding to be able to better support their children. Trans Youth Family Allies

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Community centers and youth organizations are a natural place to provide services for transgender youth.

By providing support for transgender youth in community settings, we can mitigate the other stressors that these youth may be facing at home or in school environments.

the specific needs of this group, and making clear the intention of the community organization to support all expressions of gender identity. For instance, organizations can rethink the processes and services offered in light of the unique concerns of transgender youth. Are youth required to identify a gender in order to receive services? Have staff members been trained about the use of preferred pronouns and the special needs transgender youth may have? Efforts to ensure that activities are inclusive of all gender expressions can make clear that transgender youth are welcome at events, and send a message that exclusionary or demeaning behavior will not be allowed. Finally, youth organizations can promote such things as single stall, gender-neutral bathrooms; structures that do not segregate youth into binary gender groups; and activities that encourage youth to consider masculinity and femininity as characteristics that all people possess to varying degrees.

SUMMARY

Transgender youth face unique challenges and opportunities as they move through the adolescent years. Social structures such as families, schools, and community organizations have the opportunity to support transgender youth by creating environments of acceptance, support for basic needs, and advocacy in the larger community. For youth serving professionals interested in creating more welcoming environments, there are a number of resources available through local sexual minority youth community centers, national transgender advocacy groups, and parent support networks. By providing support for transgender youth in community settings, we can mitigate the other stressors that these youth may be facing at home or in school environments. ❧

(http://www.imatyfa.org/) provides information and resources for transgender youth and parents worldwide, including blogs and discussions with other parents of transgender youth. Several cities have family groups including Cleveland, Tucson and Portland, OR. Finally, youth described the value of finding others like themselves and developing a sense of community within the local LGBT community centers. Participants described the center as a place where they came to understand who they were, and had an opportunity to explore their own gender expressions in a safe environment. They were able to gain insight about what it meant to pursue a gender transition.

Other sorts of community programs and centers can create safer spaces for transgender youth by implementing actions that support

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