

# The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education



## LGBTQ2S+

Celebrating differences  
Moving forward

**PART ONE OF A THREE-PART SERIES**

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

### How are the kids doing?

Three-part series focuses on challenges faced by LGBTQ2S+ youth, girls and boys



Lisa Everitt  
Editor  
The Learning Team

When I was a student at a Catholic high school in the 1980s, I was surprised when some of my fellow students reacted vehemently toward anything other than heterosexual relationships. At that time, open discussions about gender and sexual minorities were hardly the norm, but I had a very brave teacher who helped us to consider, within the context of a religion class, the topic of homosexuality, the term used at the time to refer to gender and sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and two-spirit—LGBTQ2S+).

Although my experience within my own family was one of acceptance that being LGBTQ2S+ was a natural part of the human experience, that class discussion showed me that, for many others, challenging the traditional view of gender and sexual orientation evoked highly personal emotions. Many of my classmates were strongly opposed to anyone who was LGBTQ2S+; it was a difference that they just could not comprehend, much less accept.

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As time progressed and I entered my teaching career, the discourse in society began to change. LGBTQ2S+ community members were coming out of the closet, their rights were being fought for, and legal structures were being challenged and amended to protect their rights. I taught many students who were members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and I noted how hard it was on them to be different from their peers. I wished better for them and celebrated as I saw discussion of LGBTQ2S+ issues occurring increasingly out in the open, supported by powerful voices contributing to the public discourse.

Now, sexual and gender minority issues are discussed more openly, and many people recognize that LGBTQ2S+ youth need to be supported within safe and inclusive environments. In Alberta, this includes having the right to form gay-straight or queer-straight alliances (GSAs/QSAs) to which any student can belong.

As the first instalment in a three-part series examining the overall well-being of our students, this issue of *The Learning Team* explores the challenges that LGBTQ2S+ youth face, and how GSAs/QSAs provide support and belonging for young people.

Our spring issue will be the next instalment in the series, and it will focus on topics that are specific to girls. Following that, our summer issue will explore the state of our boys.

Each instalment of this series will bring insight to parents and teachers—partners in the educational process—by addressing a single overarching question: how do we support the well-being of youth in today's world?

Lisa Everitt is an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers' Association.



## A gay-straight alliance is for anyone seeking to belong

Alisa Anderson

As a Grade 9 student walking into my first gay-straight alliance meeting, I was petrified. I had absolutely no idea what to expect. Would people be nice? Was anyone even going to be there? Was I forgetting anything? What if I didn't know what to say?

I found the classroom and went inside, where there were staff and students setting up a group of desks. We all went around and introduced ourselves and then we talked—about the summer and what the club had done the previous year and how they wanted to continue what they had been doing. A few people gave suggestions, we answered some questions and just like that, the first meeting was over, and it hadn't been nearly as scary as I'd feared. I had found a group of students that wanted to help each other and a group of staff that wanted to learn and support us.

My school, Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School in Red Deer, was the first Alberta high school to have a gay-straight alliance, or GSA. Through the years, the club has grown and evolved into a space where students come to participate and where people come to learn, teach, grow, seek support and initiate change.

Our club has gone by many names through the years, but right now we are a QSA, otherwise known as a queer-straight alliance. We average 10–20 people at our weekly meetings, and anyone at the school is welcome, Grades 9–12.

Our QSA has had many different meeting rooms throughout the years, but we always try to arrange ourselves in a circle. Having discussions and sharing ideas work best when we can all see each other, on an equal footing. At the beginning of our meetings, before we introduce ourselves with our pronouns, there are people drawing or painting, finishing homework, or catching up with friends. There are people listening to music, reading books, sharing ideas—just being people.

Our QSA participates in and organizes many activities throughout the school year that benefit not only the students who attend QSA but also the school community as a whole. We participate in fundraisers and student-led activities in collaboration with other local clubs, and we recently designed and decorated one of the school bulletin boards to promote awareness and inform the student body. On our school website we have a list of resources and hotlines for anyone to access. The QSA helped facilitate the introduction of gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms to the school, which was a much celebrated step toward inclusion.

In 2018, the QSA participated in a roundtable discussion with former minister of education David Eggen, which was a wonderful experience and an opportunity for us to share our voices and ideas. Our QSA also attends the

annual Alberta GSA conference, a day that provides insight and furthers our knowledge about the community.

One of our larger in-school initiatives is a question box located in our library to answer questions that students or staff have about topics relating to the QSA. At our weekly meetings we take the anonymously submitted questions and answer them, posting the responses in the library. Sometimes the questions centre around terminology, with people encountering words or identities that they don't know or don't understand, but often the questions ask for advice.

One question we answered came from someone asking for advice in dealing with coming out to potentially unaccepting people or environments. As difficult as it may be, the first step we tell people is to always make sure they are safe. If coming out could put you in a potentially dangerous or harmful situation, it is always best to wait until you are no longer dependent on the people you are coming out to and have a plan and support system in place should they react poorly. It can be extremely frustrating to be forced to hide a part of yourself because of your circumstances, but your safety should always come first. In the meantime, it is important to remember that

*“Everyone welcome, no judgment, a space for all”*

*- Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School QSA motto*

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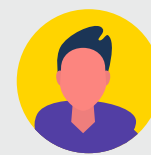






## Insights from Salisbury

The following items were submitted by Alexis and Jaxon, members of the gay-straight alliance (GSA) at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park and Dylan Chevalier, founder of Sexual & Gender Acceptance Edmonton (SAGA).



### Dylan

When Dylan (he/him) was president of his GSA, the group organized events, such as Trans day of Remembrance, and put up posters to help educate students and teachers about different identities and sexualities.

It is not always guaranteed that when a student leaves the school that they are going into a safe environment. Students won't attend GSAs if they know there's a chance of being outed.



### Alexis

When Alexis (she/her) was questioning her sexuality last year, she didn't know where she could go for help. It was difficult for her to know who she

could approach to talk about it, or to predict who would be supportive and understanding. But then Alexis found out about Salisbury's GSA, and she decided to attend a meeting. It was exactly what she needed. She's attended every GSA meeting since then, and now counts her fellow GSA members as some of her closest friends.

"I'm proud to know that my school has a safe space for students who are struggling," Alexis says. "What's great is that it's open to everyone, no matter how you identify or what problems you're facing."

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### Jaxon

Jaxon (he/him) always felt different. He moved around a lot and never found a stable place where he truly felt at home. But in Grade 8, he met a new group of friends who were different, just like he was. He began questioning how he saw himself as a person. Soon enough, Jaxon's teacher introduced him to the GSA, and his whole perspective began to change. By Grade 10, he had moved to Salisbury Composite High, and the local GSA welcomed him just as the last had.

"I felt like I had finally found a place where I could safely ask questions and work through my identity," Jaxon says. "It gave me the confidence to come out as transgender and change my name and preferred pronouns."

With the help of the GSA and school counsellor, Jaxon was able to tell staff at the school about this change and secure acceptance throughout the school. Jaxon is not fully accepted at home yet, so being able to be himself at school makes a world of a difference.

## What can parents do?

*"Your kids require you most of all to love them for who they are, not to spend your whole time trying to correct them."*

— Bill Ayers

Lisa Everitt  
Editor, *The Learning Team*

Parenting is hard. This is true for every parent. However, what supports are there for parents if they suspect, or if their child has disclosed, that they are a member of a sexual or minority group? The research on this question is scant, but there is an emerging body of work examining the experiences of parents raising LGBTQ2S+ youth.

In their review of the available literature, Hill and Menvielle (2009), point out that much of the research during the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and even the 2000s sought to advise parents about how to prevent children from being anything other than heterosexual and cisgendered. This dominant discourse has allowed mythologies about LGBTQ2S+ to persist, and one of the most damaging mythologies is that being LGBTQ2S+ is a choice.

The research now is very clear. Sexual orientation and gender identification emerge at a very early age for children, and when parents reject their child's identity or try to suppress it, even if they believe it will ultimately be a protective measure for their child, the effects can be very destructive for the family and for the child.

So what can parents do?

"Families can support their child's LGBT identity even when they are uncomfortable or they think that being gay or transgender is wrong" (Ryan 2009, 7).

By obtaining information, education and peer support, parents can express their concerns and learn strategies for helping their child. This includes strategies for advocating for their children at school and talking with teachers about their child's needs. Parents' acceptance and support of LGBTQ2S+ children help reduce the young person's risk of serious health problems (Ryan 2009, 7).

### References

- Hill, D. B., and Menvielle, E. 2009. "You have to give them a place where they feel protected and safe and loved": The views of parents who have gender variant children and adolescents." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6, 2-3: 243-71. DOI: 10.1080/19361650903013527
- Ryan, C. 2009. *Helping Families Support their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children*. Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.

### Resources

The following organizations are among many that work to help and support parents and LGBTQ2S+ children in their journey.

- Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre
- Alberta GSA Network
- Centre for Sexuality
- Edmonton 2 Spirit Society
- The Rainbow Pages
- Pflag Canada
- Access Alliance
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Family Acceptance Project

### FOR CONSIDERATION

Adolescent youth who have been rejected by their families for being LGB are over 8 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.

Ryan, C., Huebner, D., Diaz, R. M. and Sanchez, J. 2009. "Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults." *Pediatrics* 123, 1: 346-52.

The Learning Team

*The Learning Team* is published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Editorial offices are located at 11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 2R1. Telephone: 780-447-9438 in Edmonton or 1-800-232-7208 toll free in Alberta. Fax: 780-455-6481. We welcome your comments and opinions.

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