

WHAT DID WE DO?

The goal of this study was to understand parents' experiences with navigating systems of care and inform the development of culturally responsive resources for LGBTQ+ youth and families in Middle Tennessee. We conducted focus groups with parents to learn about their experiences. All parents had children and teens who had received mental health services and who also identified as LGBTQ+. Parents were asked questions about the stressors, supports, challenges, and opportunities they face in parenting their LGBTQ+ child in the current sociopolitical context. **Each focus group was co-led by an Oasis Center leader and a Vanderbilt researcher to ensure that the research was community-centered.**

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS STUDY?

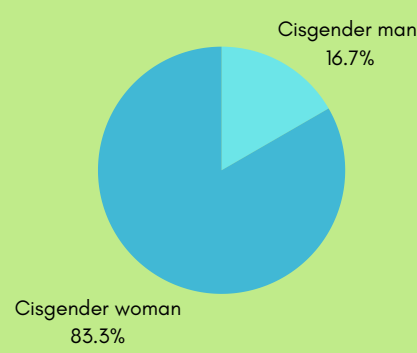
Twelve parents living in Tennessee completed a self-report questionnaire about their own and their child's demographic information, including age, sexual orientation, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Parent Demographic Information

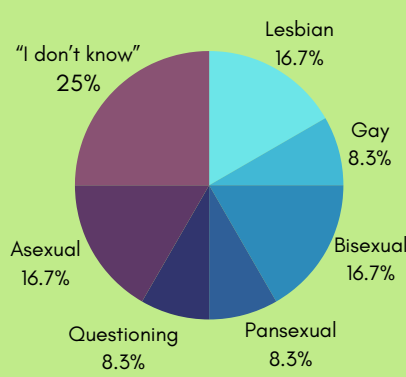
- Average **parent age**: 46 years old
- **Race**: White (91.7%), Multiracial (8.3%)
- **Ethnicity**: Hispanic origin (8.3%)

Child Demographic Information

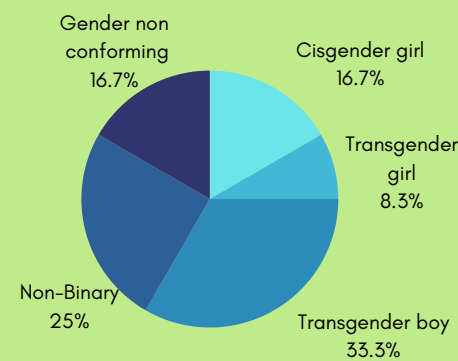
- Average **child age**: 15.25 years old
- **Race**: White (83.3%), Multiracial (8.3%), Black (8.3%)
- **Ethnicity**: Not Hispanic (91.7%), Puerto Rican (8.3%)



Parent Gender



Child Sexual Orientation



Child Gender

*Parents reported on their child's demographic information.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

There are a **lack of evidence-based, supportive resources for parents and caregivers of LGBTQ+ children and teens**. This is particularly important given the sociopolitical context in Middle Tennessee and surrounding areas. Project EnCORE aims to bridge this gap by taking the first steps towards developing evidence-based parent-focused culturally responsive resources that are tailored to the local context to support LGBTQ+ youth and families' mental health and wellness.

WHAT DID PARENTS DESCRIBE AS THE PRIMARY BARRIERS FACING THEM AND THEIR FAMILIES?

Parents of LGBTQ+ youth in the focus groups identified several **familial, cultural, healthcare, community, and socio-political barriers that impacted their ability to find support for their LGBTQ+ child and also impacted parents' own wellbeing**. Below, we summarize the barriers to support that parents described during the focus group interviews, which occurred in December 2022 and June 2023.

External stressors due to the socio-political context

- Losing access to resources and deciding whether (or when) to move states.
- Stress about the inability to control the community's reaction to their child's sexual or gender identity.

"But as a family, we need to know now, so that come March 3rd, [if] they sign [the ban on gender-affirming care] into law that our kids can't get what they're taking right now...we need to have a relationship [with healthcare providers] so we can go to another state. [Would we be able to] do it by telehealth or do we have to physically go there?" (Focus group 2)

Navigating a healthcare system that is largely inaccessible to LGBTQ+ youth and their families

- Trouble finding local providers with adequate clinical and cultural experience of caring for LGBTQ+ youth.
- Struggle of finding empathetic and experienced mental health providers who meet the unique needs of transgender youth.
- Financial barriers in mental healthcare access (e.g., limited health insurance coverage options).

"I learned that 'experience in LGBTQ health' just meant that they're [providers] not scared of LGBTQ people, but we needed someone well-versed in LGBTQ health."

"...He has not had a real support system, and so he's not had appropriate therapy, so he couldn't start hormones even if we wanted to right now, but just trying to navigate mental health." (Focus group 3)

Parenting is a continuous journey of unlearning and learning

- Unlearning past deeply ingrained beliefs as a result of one's upbringing and cultural experiences.
- Learning to use the correct terminology to affirm one's LGBTQ child.

"I'm coming from a Catholic upbringing background. I have been unlearning a lot throughout my life when it comes to attitudes around [LGBTQ people]." (Focus group 1)

Facing a lack of community and institutional support

- Navigating how to advocate for LGBTQ children in their school systems.
- Breaking ties with religious communities who are unsupportive.

"I hear [other parents of LGBTQ children] discussing is the loss of their church family. We have been forced to leave our church, and it's just been trying to find that home again is really hard." (Focus group 2)

Navigating challenging family dynamics

- Navigating difficult conversations with siblings and extended family.
- Deciding if family therapy is the right decision for their family unit.

"If you've got very conservative parents yourself...how to best help your child to come out to them? Or to best support them in that?" (Focus group 1)

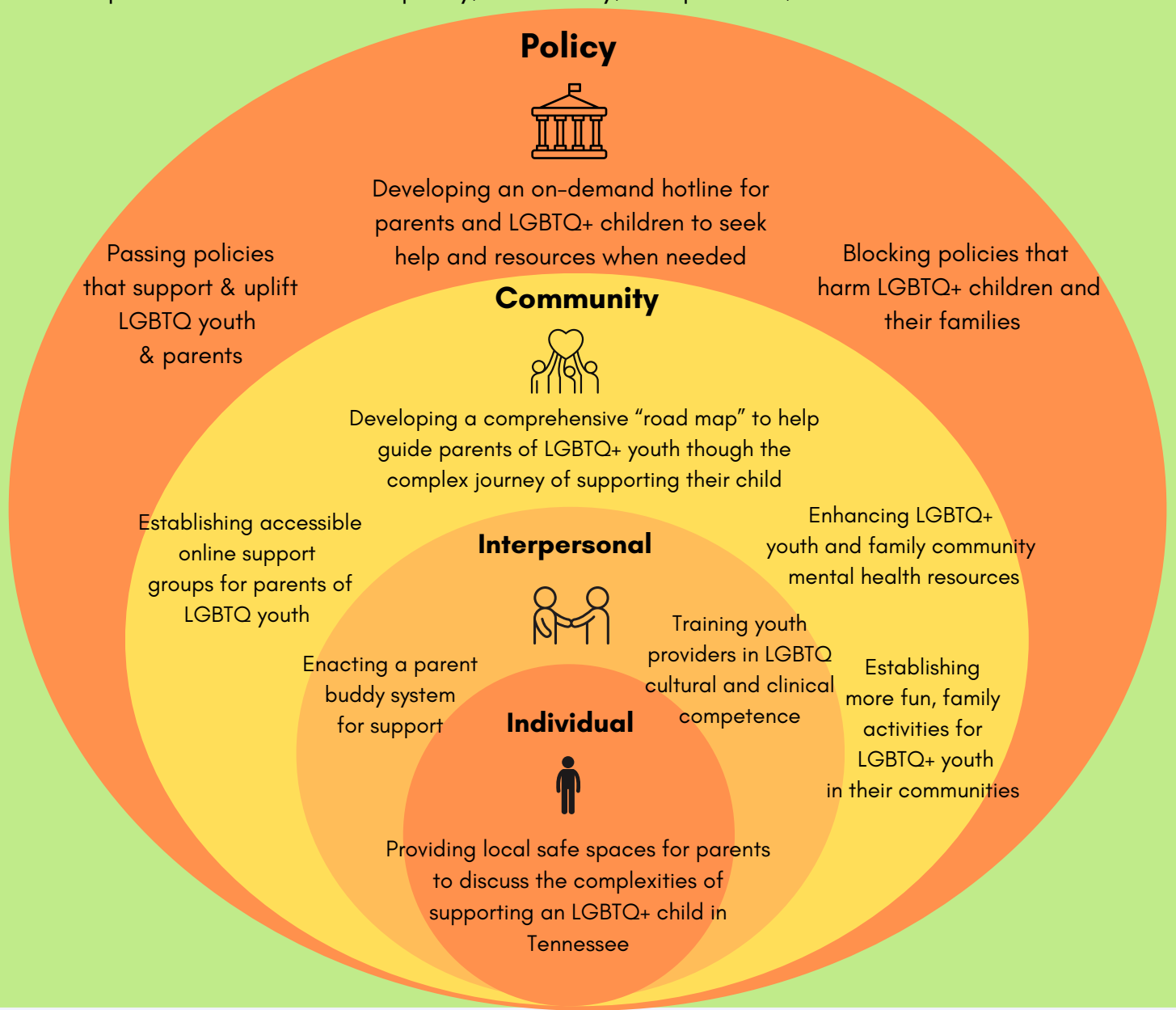
Unique challenges parenting LGBTQ youth with mental health needs

- Understanding additional challenges of parenting a child with mental health difficulties.
- Confusion about whether and when the child's emotions or behaviors are related to stressors associated with their LGBTQ+ identity and/or to mental health symptoms.

"With [child's name], there's been a lot of generalized social anxiety and depression and whatnot. For me, it's a little harder to tease out what stressors are coming specifically from [identity]." (Focus group 1)

WHAT DID PARENTS RECOMMEND WOULD SUPPORT THEM AND THEIR FAMILIES?

Parents offered their perspectives on what types of supports could be most helpful. We summarize parent feedback across policy, community, interpersonal, and individual levels.



ACTION STEPS

- 1) **Adapt existing parent-focused resources from the Oasis Center to build a supportive, evidence-based intervention for parents of LGBTQ+ youth.**
- 2) **Develop educational resources such as provider-focused trainings to ensure that practitioners can provide culturally affirming services to LGBTQ+ clients.**
- 3) **Collaborate with families and community organizations to develop additional resources.**
- 4) **Enhance the quality and accessibility to mental health resources for LGBTQ+ youth and families in Tennessee and the broader US South.**
- 5) **Build and leverage partnerships between LGBTQ+ organizations, mental health providers, and policymakers to promote affirming policies that uplift and support LGBTQ+ youth and families in Tennessee.**

COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND LGBTQ+ YOUTH



PFLAG

"national non-profit organization focused on helping family and friends accept their LGBT loved ones"



Oasis Center

"nationally-recognized organization on a mission to help young people in Middle Tennessee move into a happy, healthy, and productive adulthood"



LAUNCH PAD

"To create a network of temporary, safer, street-free sleeping shelters for unhoused young adults which are open and affirming to LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies."



Centerlink/Youthlink

"member-based association of LGBTQ centers and other LGBTQ organizations serving their local and regional communities."



Strong Family Alliance

"to save lives and preserve families by helping children come out and parents become informed supporters and allies."



MASHUP

"to increase the visibility of health inequities & social injustices that impact the well-being of LGBTQ people of color."



Nashville CARES

"provide targeted education, free and confidential HIV testing and a broad range of comprehensive services to individuals who are at-risk for or living with HIV."



Gender Spectrum

"We help families, organizations, and institutions increase their understanding of gender and consider the implications that evolving views have for each of us."