

Executive Summary

This report has found that while many young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ were great supports to one another and sought out opportunities to celebrate their identity, they also faced difficulties in navigating communities that did not always accept them. While they have seen positive changes in recent years, LGBTQIA+ young people continue to face bullying, homophobia, and in some cases violence. Others spoke about lack of access to information and health care. All young people have a right to health, a right to education, a right to be respected and a right to be safe.

■ Background

Throughout the Advocate for Children and Young People's (ACYP) ongoing consultations with young people in NSW and through regular, quantitative research, ACYP recognised that LGBTQIA+ young people experience particular vulnerabilities and poorer outcomes across a variety of measures.

This report includes findings from a large-scale qualitative consultation focused on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ young people. It reflects their voices and their articulated needs. The report also compares outcomes for LGBTQIA+ young people to their non-LGBTQIA+ peers within the findings of ACYP's annual quantitative Strategic Plan Tracking Survey 2022.

ACYP consulted with 233 LGBTQIA+ identifying young people aged 12-24 years across 37 focus groups. Consultations were held both face-to-face and online across Sydney and rural and regional NSW.

Young people were asked a series of questions about their experiences in education and work and with health and mental health services; their 'coming out' experiences, whether they had experienced stigma, discrimination and violence and what advice they had for NSW Government to improve the lives of LGBTQIA+ young people.

The quantitative study involved n=1005 young people aged 10-24 across NSW. Of these, 185 identified as LGBTQIA+ and 820 did not. The study was conducted by SEC Newgate Research, which is a member of The Research Society and the Australian Polling Council.

■ Key findings

Experiences in the community

LGBTQIA+ young people raised some positive experiences in engaging with their local communities, including pride celebrations and physical displays of support; good support networks; and in some instances, affirmative ‘coming out’ experiences. When asked for a rating during consultations 78% reported feeling a connection to the LGBTQIA+ community.¹

- Young people enjoyed participating in pride marches and celebrations in their local communities. They reported being happy that many educational institutions, workplaces and local councils were recognising these events and exhibiting public displays of support in the form of posters, signs, flags and use of preferred pronouns. However, they expressed a desire for these events to be equally accessible across NSW and for public displays of support to be evident all year round, not just during certain times of the year, such as Pride Month.
- Due to shared experiences, other LGBTQIA+ friends were young people’s most common form of support. Other good support networks included non-LGBTQIA+ friends and allies, older LGBTQIA+ people, local pride groups and online communities. Notably, while some young people did report positive experiences with their parents and relatives, families were not frequently mentioned as a key source of support. This was also reflected in quantitative findings, which noted LGBTQIA+ young people were less likely to feel they could confide in a family member (45% vs 62% of non-LGBTQIA+ young people), however they were more likely to have a friend they could confide in (64% vs. 53% of non-LGBTQIA+ young people).

- Access to reliable information online was seen as a necessity for young people exploring their gender and sexual identities. Young people reported using a wide range of online sources including Google searches, TikTok, YouTube and Reddit. They recommended that NSW Health, develop a single website that could include and refer to trustworthy information about LGBTQIA+ concepts.

Despite some optimism, young people reported more negative than positive experiences associated with the way people responded to their identity. Most notably, they raised a lack of understanding and support from family, friends and peers; adverse reactions to ‘coming out’; discriminatory practices and legislation; negative media representations and, in some cases, violence.

- When asked during consultations to rate their feelings of safety and support as LGBTQIA+ young people, 45% reported not feeling safe or supported, while 24% said they felt somewhat or very safe and supported.²
- From the quantitative study, LGBTQIA+ young people were statistically less likely to report high quality relationships with their families (72% giving a positive rating compared to 83% for their non-LGBTQIA+ peers).

¹ Participants were asked to complete individual response questions throughout the consultations. Base: n=164, noting some participants chose not to respond.

² Consultation-based individual response question. Base: n=157, noting some participants chose not to respond.

- Experiences of homophobia and transphobia –both online and in person –were widespread among young people who participated in consultations, causing them to feel unsafe, impacting their mental health and in some cases resulting in young people concealing their identities as a protective mechanism. In extreme cases, young people reported having been physically and sexually assaulted.³
- Some young people spoke about the need to have a safety plan in place and recommended that young people should be able to access a safe space after hours in the event of crisis.
- The quantitative findings, which asked about experiences in the prior 12 months, found that around 4 in 10 LGBTQIA+ young people had experienced bullying or discrimination recently.
- Young people from diverse backgrounds reported facing additional challenges in both identifying as LGBTQIA+ and being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, Aboriginal, living in a rural or regional area or living with disability.
- While young people acknowledged that an increase in media representations of LGBTQIA+ people is useful for normalisation and acceptance, many reported that the nature of these representations often serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes of the community. In addition, the increase in LGBTQIA+ media during Pride Month was seen by some young people as tokenistic.
- Young people were frustrated and angered by current and proposed legislation that would make it more difficult for them to navigate legal and administrative processes, such as changing their name or gender marker.

³ When young people disclosed information about assault or abuse, ACYP staff contacted the participant after the discussion to ensure these had been appropriately reported. In all cases, reporting processes had already been underway.

Experiences of education

Connection to and support from LGBTQIA+ friends was by far the most positive school-related experience reported by young people. The solidarity and camaraderie in finding one another was a strong protective factor in mostly unsupportive school environments.

- Young people spoke about the benefits of LGBTQIA+ support groups in schools, as well as the support they felt from some teachers. They valued seeing LGBTQIA+ teachers at the school.
- Young people also appreciated seeing physical displays of support in schools, such as posters and stickers.

While young people reported feeling supported by some friends and teachers at school, many were faced with bullying and harassment by peers and some had experienced physical violence while at school. Young people said they felt these situations were made worse by a lack of teacher intervention.

- Experiences of bullying, homophobia, transphobia and harassment were prevalent across schools, causing some LGBTQIA+ young people to feel unsafe. It was not uncommon for young people to report having changed school as a result.
- In over 1 in 4 group discussions, young people reported having experienced some kind of physical violence at school, ranging from having food and other objects thrown at them to being kicked or beaten by their peers.
- Trans and gender diverse young people described an additional layer of bullying and harassment related to the misuse of their name and pronouns and their use of bathrooms not aligned with their gender identity.

- Most young people reported that most teachers did little if anything to address homophobic and transphobic bullying in their school. When efforts were made, some schools responded by asking the LGBTQIA+ students to change their behaviour (e.g. not to display a pride flag, or sit elsewhere in the playground) rather than by holding the wrong-doer accountable.
- In other cases, young people reported homophobic and transphobic comments made by teachers themselves.
- While 69% of LGBTQIA+ young people in the quantitative study said they felt safe at school (rating 7 or more out of 10), 31% gave a lower rating and within that, 9% a very negative rating (4 or less).
- Young people recommended mandatory LGBTQIA+ education for teachers to create safe and welcoming school environments.

Other difficulties encountered at school included a lack of LGBTQIA+ sex education, challenging school policies, and the fear or experience of being outed.

- Across all consultations, young people called for the need for greater education about LGBTQIA+ concepts, most notably in relation to sex education, but also incorporating concepts into other relevant subjects such as History. They discussed both including this in the syllabus and having external guests providing this education in schools. This was a key recommendation raised by many young people, which they felt would address both their education and information needs, as well as normalise LGBTQIA+ concepts, which would hopefully address the culture of bullying they experienced.

- In asking about where they sought information about sexual consent and respectful relationships, the quantitative study found that LGBTQIA+ young people were more likely than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers to rely on social media, their own experiences, TV shows and movies, search engines, online forums and support groups.
- Transgender, non-binary and gender diverse students expressed frustrations regarding practices at their schools which they viewed as non-inclusive. These included teachers not using their preferred names and pronouns – both in official documentation and conversationally; decisions related to sharing bathrooms and change rooms with their aligned gender identity; and, to a lesser extent, wearing the aspects of school uniforms they were most comfortable with.
- Students recommended they should have access to a gender-neutral bathroom and not be reliant on accessible bathrooms or staff facilities – particularly those that required a key.
- Young people also reported instances of schools ‘outing’ them to their parents. This most commonly occurred when students had requested to have their preferred names and pronouns used, which requires parental approval.

Experiences of tertiary education were more positive, though some young people still faced challenges in finding a place to fit in.

In the quantitative study, young people were asked about the extent to which they felt hopeful about the future.

While 61% of LGBTQIA+ young people gave very positive scores (7 or more out of 10), 16% gave very negative scores (4 or less) indicating a sense they were not hopeful. They were twice as likely to say they felt hopeless compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ peers.

- While 70% were hopeful about their ability to get the education they needed to achieve their goals, only 59% were hopeful about their ability to get a job in their field of interest. There was no significant difference between LGBTQIA+ young people and their peers on these two measures.

Experiences of work

While positive experiences in the workplace were more prevalent than negative, a number of young people reported that they were not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity at work due to fear of negative consequences.

- Positive work-related experiences included receiving support from managers and colleagues; name badges with preferred pronouns; and flags or posters in the workplace.
- Negative experiences in the work environment were also reported, such as colleagues and customers making dismissive comments about LGBTQIA+ people and, in some cases, overt harassment and threats.
- Trans and gender diverse young people faced additional work-related challenges including being required to use their deadname in formal documentation, being misgendered and in a few cases being asked to limit their self-expression at work.

Young people also reported a degree of tokenism in some workplaces, where they appeared to be celebrating diversity through hiring choices however this did not always translate to a supportive, inclusive environment.

Experiences of healthcare

LGBTQIA+ young people discussed a range of barriers to accessing healthcare, largely related to their concerns about confidentiality and privacy. When they were able to access care, they were sometimes met with practitioners who lacked understanding of LGBTQIA+ health care, negative attitudes, uncomfortable intake experiences and a lack of LGBTQIA+ specific support services. These issues were most notable for trans and gender diverse young people. Other young people were largely neutral about their experiences with healthcare providers – noting they had not discussed any concepts related to identifying as LGBTQIA+ with them.

- In the quantitative study, young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ were statistically less likely to report positive ratings for their physical and mental health compared with non-LGBTQIA+ young people.
- Regarding their physical health, just 50% gave a positive rating (7 or more out of 10) compared to 70% of non-LGBTQIA+ young people.
- Regarding their mental health, 43% of LGBTQIA+ young people gave a positive rating and 25% gave a negative rating (4 or less out of 10), this compares to 62% of non-LGBTQIA+ young people giving a positive rating and 15% giving a negative rating.
- During consultations, young people reported facing several barriers to accessing healthcare. These included their difficulty in navigating healthcare while maintaining privacy from their parents, concerns about confidentiality (particularly with school counsellors) and a discomfort in disclosing their gender identity or sexuality.

- In line with other young people ACYP has heard from, LGBTQIA+ young people reported facing long wait times for appointments and concerns about the cost of specialist services. However, these issues appear compounded for LGBTQIA+ young people who spoke about needing greater access to specialist care.
- Qualitative findings indicated that 56% of LGBTQIA+ young people had sought support from a mental health provider in the prior 12 months, compared to 27% of non-LGBTQIA+ young people.
- As a result of these barriers and the stigma of accessing healthcare related to their identity, LGBTQIA+ young people preferred to access online sources to obtain health-related information, despite their concerns about misinformation on the internet.

While some young people reported positive experiences with health practitioners, others recounted negative occurrences including clinicians being uninformed about LGBTQIA+ concepts and health care needs; being dismissive of their identity, names and pronouns; and making comments that young people perceived as discriminatory.

- Young people spoke about difficulty in finding a doctor or provider who was inclusive, and mentioned visiting multiple services before finding one that provided appropriate support.

Mental health was reported as a priority area to address for LGBTQIA+ young people. Young people highlighted the lack of crisis mental health support, particularly in regional areas.

- In relation to LGBTQIA+ specific support services, young people spoke positively about support obtained through Twenty10, ACON and The Gender Centre. Young people said it was important to have more health professionals that identify as LGBTQIA+ and that staff who do not identify should receive training in LGBTQIA+ concepts and issues.
- Trans and gender diverse young people highlighted the need for more gender specific support services as well as their frustration at not being able to obtain gender affirming treatment due to their age. ■