Getting Through The Holidays

A Youth Well-Being Guide

As many LGBTQ+ young people prepare to spend more time with immediate and extended family during the holidays, it is important to take time to prepare with protective strategies. In many cases, not all family members are trusted adults or supportive of LGBTQ+ people, and spending time with them this season may feel extremely challenging. In the United States, a recent Gallup poll found that almost 25% of Gen Z young people are part of the queer community. This means that there are likely LGBTQ+ young people in every family across the U.S. With rising political tensions and heightened scrutiny of queer and trans youth, it is especially important this season to be mentally prepared to face uncomfortable or unsafe family situations. Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools is sharing five helpful practices to support LGBTQ+ young people navigate the holiday season.

Setting Healthy Boundaries

Your circumstances are as unique as the identities you hold. No one but you has a full understanding of the factors you'll be navigating over the holidays. Some young people may find themselves in situations where one parent is LGBTQ-affirming while another refuses to respect their identity. Others may be visiting extended family from across the country who have a wide variety of feelings and behaviors related to the LGBTQ+ community. Unfortunately, many young people are forced to return to, or spend increased time in, environments where they must hide who they are in order to survive.

Wherever you find yourself this holiday season, it is important to set personal boundaries that prioritize your mental health and safety. Thinking through these boundaries ahead of time can help you feel more in control of your emotions and give you greater agency in avoiding harm.

Examples of healthy boundaries for the upcoming holiday season include:

- *I am open to having conversations in the future, but I will not discuss my coming-out story or explain my identity to family members who are intentionally harming me or who have harmed me in the past without repair.*
- *I will attend large events and meals with my family, but I will spend most unstructured time in places where I feel safe with people who support me.*
- *I will not have personal conversations with family members who post hate speech on social media or intentionally speak against LGBTQ+ people.*
- *I need to know that conversation topics like gender identity and politics impacting my health care will be avoided in conversation in order for me to participate.*
- *I will not remain in a room or conversation that is causing me harm.*
- *If my boundaries aren't respected, I will leave the family gathering.*

After reflecting on your boundaries, you may realize that the best decision for your mental health is to avoid a family gathering altogether. It can be challenging and emotionally complex to skip traditions or events you have participated in your entire life. However, you are not obligated to sacrifice your health and safety for others. It is not a personal failing if you decide it isn't possible to safely attend a family event. You get to decide what works for you, and you always have the right to adjust your boundaries at any time.

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Practicing Language Ahead of Time

If it's safe for you to do so, be proactive about communicating the language you need others to use when your family talks to or about you. It can be difficult at family gatherings to distinguish between inadvertent mistakes and intentionally hostile microaggressions from people you care about. Inviting family members to practice your language can be a positive way to ensure they have the information needed to treat you correctly.

This may look like sending articles or definitions ahead of time so you don't have to repeatedly explain yourself. It may also involve asking people to practice your name and pronouns if they have struggled in the past or if your language has changed since you were last together. Many family members truly want to do better but haven't put in the work to figure out how.

Making a Plan with Your Family Allies

This likely isn't your first family gathering! Think about how things have gone in the past—have there been concerning situations that caused you harm? Are there particular people or topics that have led to negative interactions? Use this information to proactively consider how your family allies can be supportive. If you have created boundaries ahead of time, make a plan with affirming family members for how they can help you navigate situations where those boundaries are tested. Ask them to take the lead in responding to conversations or remarks that impact your safety. Talk through scenarios in which you might need breaks or a chance to vent frustrations privately. Be specific about what you need so the people who love you can show up effectively.

Arriving Prepared

For young people with very little control over their circumstances, it can feel really helpless to be stuck in non-affirming spaces. As much as possible, come prepared with items you can use in family spaces while maintaining your dignity and mental health. Make sure you have books and music, podcasts, or audiobooks you can listen to with headphones. Bring crafts and activities to enjoy with younger family members. Start a puzzle or another extended project that can offer a consistent respite from larger group conversations. Pack comfortable clothing, blankets, and items that encourage creativity, like journals or coloring books. Bring anything you need to help you feel grounded and supported.

Debrief with Queer Chosen Family

Plan a time after your holiday gathering to connect with your chosen LGBTQ+ family and community! You are not alone in navigating family challenges, and other queer people are experiencing their own struggles over the holidays. Share what you went through together—tell your outrageous dinner-table stories, laugh about the silliness of the gender roles and stereotypes you had to navigate, and love each other fully for your power and bravery. Take a moment to release everything that was outside your control and celebrate the lives you are living authentically with each other.

If you're struggling, know that support is out there—don't hesitate to reach out to a trusted mental health hotline or resource.

The Trevor Project: 24/7 crisis counseling & resources
- Trevor Lifeline: Chat with a crisis counselor at 1-866-488-7386
- Trevor Chat: 24/7 crisis counseling via online chat feature
- TrevorText: Chat with a crisis counselor by texting START to 678-678

LGBT National Help Center: LGBTQ+ crisis support and resources
- Youth Talkline (Under 25): 1-800-246-7743
- Support Chat: 1-on-1 online peer chat

Rainbow Youth Project: Crisis line specifically for LGBTQ youth: 317-643-4888

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