

A review with LGBTQ+ young people led by the Association for Young People's Health

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Executive Summary

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) wanted to ensure that their ***Supporting LGBTQ+ Children and Young People (CYP) principles statement*** was informed by LGBTQ+ young people. The College commissioned the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) to undertake a short engagement project.

We spoke to approximately 15 young people via group discussions and interviews between March and May 2024. Their feedback highlighted positive aspects of the statement, highlighting the importance of 'mental health', 'non-discriminatory practice' and 'increasing awareness.' Several themes arose from their discussions highlighting ways in which the statement could be updated and refined to reflect the current landscape and their experiences. These included:

- **Treating LGBTQ+ young people as individuals with different health needs.**
- **The significance of confidentiality, discretion and privacy for LGBTQ+ young people.**
- **The importance to young people of being recognised and their preferred pronouns and names being used.**
- **The importance of not relating all health issues to young people's sexuality or gender.**
- **The need for safe advocacy and adult support for LGBTQ+ young people recognising the complex relationships that some LGBTQ+ young people can have with parents, carers and teachers.**

Young people also suggested recommendations related to the statement and broader aspects of care for LGBTQ+ young people including better parent/carers public information and education, training to increase knowledge on the topic amongst health professionals and sources of support for young people.

Introduction

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) are reviewing their ***Supporting LGBTQ+ CYP principles statement***. The college wanted to ensure that young people's voices were front and centre to the review and commissioned the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) to undertake a short engagement project.

The aim was to engage young people, who identify as LGBTQ+, in conversations about their current experiences with healthcare and then review the current statement, commenting on what is still relevant, what is not and what is missing. Young people's feedback would then be used to inform RCPCH in updating the statement.

This report sets out the context for the review, our methodology and key messages and recommendations from young people.

Context

RCPCH's statement of principles on supporting LGBTQ+ CYP aims to set out RCPCH's position on the rights of LGBTQ+ young people to be treated without discrimination or stigma, to support understanding of the needs of LGBTQ+ young people and to support health professionals in their role caring for LGBTQ+ young people.

Since the statement was published in 2020, RCPCH recognises how the political, social and health context has changed. This includes some anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in media and politics and a sense for some, of stalled progress on LGBTQ+ equality. Trans issues have been particularly divisive in national conversations, which is affecting gender questioning young people's access to support and participation in society. There are also concerns about widening health inequalities with trans young people facing long waiting lists for NHS services or delaying when they ask for help due to societal stigma. This year has seen the publication of the Cass Review in relation to health services for trans young people and government guidance about trans young people in schools. Both attracted significant media attention, which the young people we spoke to highlighted as having an impact on the lives of young people identifying as LGBTQ+.

Methodology

A simple method was created by AYPH to speak to young people in group sessions and individual interviews. Both interviews and group discussions followed a similar format, which we call a 'Break down, break up' workshop. This involves asking open questions to start, with no guiding document, followed by revealing the RCPCH Statement and having a more detailed discussion about the content.

Key questions that were asked were:

1. What do you think should be top priorities for improving the healthcare experience for LGBTQ+ children and young people?
2. What role do you think healthcare professionals could play in supporting LGBTQ+ young people to access healthcare safely and supportively?
3. What else do you think would improve young people's experience of health care who identify as LGBTQ+ ?

We recorded transcripts, used a digital tool to capture quotes and took notes of conversations and discussions. These have been systematically analysed to extract the main themes, drawing on a simplified grounded theory method, allowing ideas and concepts to appear directly from the data.

Who took part?

To recruit young people, we used our current network to reach out to a diverse range of groups across the UK. We then reached further afield, through extensive searching on the internet and social media channels. It is worth noting that, specific LGBTQ+ youth groups, do not always advertise themselves, due to fear of discrimination and so are not always easy to find. Given recent focus on trans young people we suspect that this may particularly be the case for these groups. We know that when approaching young people and asking them to share their experiences and thoughts in work like this, building trust and confidence with those undertaking the work takes time.

We did, however, find a wide range of groups and reached out to organisations from across the UK. Unfortunately, many of these organisations did not reply or were not able to hold a session within the period of the project. We made an active effort to reach out to trans specific youth groups, but to no avail.

We spoke to two groups of young people and interviewed two young people. 15 young people from England took part, all based in South England. Although the two groups we spoke to were London based, they engaged specific groups of LGBTQ+ young people and included young migrants from other

countries. The groups involved in this work were Skate Gals & Pals and the Mosaic Trust.

We did not overtly collect demographic data as too many demographic questions can lead to a hesitancy to engage. However, we collected anonymised data from the youth groups. Young people we spoke to used a variety of identifying pronouns and included young people who identified as 'trans', 'bi' and 'gay male'. The age range of young people we spoke to was 14 - 28. When meeting with existing groups we adapted to fit with their usual ways of working, which meant for example, that for the Mosaic group, it was an 'open door' group, with some people coming and going throughout.

What young people told us in the work

The original statement was reviewed by all young people as part of the conversations, with all young people recognising the importance of the 'roles & responsibilities' and the 'Key messages' in the original piece. Statements about 'mental health', 'non-discriminatory practice' and 'more awareness' were the most popular.

The following themes came out of the discussions with young people.

Treating young LGBTQ+ young people as individuals with different health needs

Young people we spoke to felt that they, as someone who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or other, were being treated the same as each other. Young people of all ages and identities, stressed that they wanted to be treated as individuals, with a focus on their specific needs, whether a 15-year-old bisexual identifying person, or a 19-year-old trans gender identifying person. All young people's lives are different, and they expressed that a more interpersonal approach would be appreciated.

"They talk ...about homophobia or talk about supporting LGBT people and feel like they're being lumped in. And already at that point they feel misunderstood." Young Person

The significance of confidentiality, discretion and privacy for LGBTQ+ YP

Young people we spoke to shared stories about being 'outed' to their parents by healthcare professionals and this causing difficult situations at home. Young people want to be part of that first conversation with professionals about why, when and how, and if at all, parents or guardians need to be involved in their healthcare.

"[Raising awareness] that conversations between medical professionals and young people are private and asking inclusive questions." Young Person

The importance to young people of being recognised and their pronouns and preferred names being used

All young people we spoke to agreed that, no matter what the biological make up of their bodies, they need to be accepted as how they choose to identify first and foremost. One young person referred to 'gender-affirming care' as 'life-saving care'. To be acknowledged, accepted in that moment with their preferred name and pronouns, is so important to them.

"Even if that's going in for a broken knee and having your pronouns used correctly is gender affirming care." Young Person

This reassures the young person they have done the right thing, by going to get help with any health issue in the first place, that they are seen, respected and accepted as an individual. This in turn also begins or enforces the foundations of trust between a young person and a health professional, which goes a long way to ensuring appropriate care or help is given.

“Yeah, respecting patients ... pronouns and names, able to explain what they may be asked for before appointments. Just being non-judgmental.” Young Person

The importance of not relating all young people’s health needs to their sexuality or gender

Several young people talked about conversations they’ve had with health professionals that seemed to be guided and led by their sexuality or gender identity.

“...women who have been diagnosed as BPD* their bisexuality has been named as part of the reason that they’ve received that diagnosis.” Young Person

*Borderline personality disorder (BDP)

Young people recognise, that of course, some health issues correlate to their lifestyle that ascertains to their sexuality or their gender physiology. However, there was a consensus that their sexuality or gender was raised at inappropriate or unnecessary times. Young people were happy to be offered support on issues that professionals think are important for their sexuality or gender-identity, but, as a separate conversation to the main health reason they need help with.

“[do] not stigmatise my sexuality ... address my concerns in an objective way. Give me sexual health advice based on my sexuality - inform me of safe practices - [a] properly addressed, gender-based GP visit.” Young Person

The need for safe advocacy and adult support for LGBTQ+ young people recognising the complex relationships that some LGBTQ+ young people can have with parents, carers and teachers.

Young people talked about how ‘adult’ support in some of their healthcare conversations can be greatly beneficial. However, sometimes parent or carer involvement can be complicated and young people we spoke to talked about having a more obvious service or professional that they could approach to advocate with them.

“The legal obligation to have a chaperone with an under 16-year-old person has been really debilitating for me when I went to hospital ... I had to stay with parents. Would be nice to have other options.” Young Person

Some young people also talked about the importance of their parents being involved, but at the right time and only if they are supportive. This would help the young person not feel overwhelmed or worried about forgetting anything discussed with the healthcare professional.

Recommendations

Young people suggested several recommendations which relate to the statement and broader aspects of care for LGBTQ+ young people.

1. Better parent/carer public information and education



There is still a lot of misunderstanding about LGBTQ+ young people. Young people told us that although they feel the importance of general acceptance is acknowledged, there is still a way to go, when thinking about all the different elements of what being a LGBTQ+ young person means. Further understanding of the individual and broader elements of the community and what it means to be lesbian, gay or bisexual and/or identifying as trans, would help young people feel more comfortable in asking for help.

“Because you do sometimes have parents who are just outright like, no, I just don't believe in it. You know, I don't want my kid to access any support in this area.” Young Person

Young people we spoke to said that better information and education would give them more confidence in speaking to a professional and/or their parents when they need help with a health issue.

2. Training for staff

Young people told us they expect healthcare professionals to be better and more formally trained to do their job, engaging and supporting their healthcare.



“ their courses don't really focus on the different like, genders or different, sexual orientations.” Young Person

In the themes, we referred to the importance of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ young people. Knowing whether a space is safe is often signaled by the LGBTQ+ and/or other flags and LGBTQ+ information in the space which was welcomed by young people.

“I always feel more comfortable in a medical setting when I see staff wearing LGBTQ+ rainbow lanyards, name badges or posters celebrating diversity in a waiting room.”

Young Person

However, young people told us they want this to mean that staff are also trained and have a basic level of understanding when it comes to individual LGBTQ+ issues.

“I've heard stories of young people accessing healthcare where somebody's wearing a rainbow lanyard, but then they've tried to talk to them about their gender identity and they've never heard of the term non-binary before” Young Person

3. Knowledge about sources of support for young people



Young people talked about knowledge of the subject area, and access to sources of support and resources.

They encouraged professionals to have humility and awareness of what they do and do not know in the subject area and be open about it.

“I think it'd be nice if they said that they don't know something and didn't try to give advice on something they clearly do not know about. Like to say, oh, you have this issue. I do not know how to deal with that issue. Here's someone else who can help you with it, but I, however, can help [with something else]. That never happens.” Young Person

Young people felt that honesty and acknowledgement from staff would mean that they would trust them more, with what they do offer and suggest.

Secondly, the young people we spoke to would like the staff to know who and where to signpost to them, when appropriate. Young people said that it is okay if they do not know everything, but having services or websites, with available resources that maybe do have answers would be hugely beneficial, especially if services were based in the local community.

Conclusion

In our conversations with LGBTQ+ young people we heard a wide range of views but there were some clear and central narratives running throughout. Gender-affirmation and recognition of young people as individuals was crucial for young people to trust and feel that they were being listened to and supported appropriately.

“Super important to give the opportunity for youth to explore their identity to guide them towards who they really are. Especially nowadays with [the] internet, practitioners need to stay update and ‘woke’.” Young Person

Although small scale, the work highlights the diversity of issues these young people face. We met with young people from a variety of different cultural and national backgrounds, who highlighted how their background impacts their experiences of identifying as LGBTQ+ in their community, and in conversations with health professionals for example a family doctor. It will always be important to recognise the local landscape and the intersectionality of issues affecting young people when we are focusing on care for LGBTQ+ young people.

“...that additional barriers, like sexism and race [exist] within the medical sector. So, I think I want someone to acknowledge that I’m at high risk, but I do not want it to be the main focus.” Young Person

LGBTQ+ young people we spoke to shared how they feel quite ‘up against it’ referring to current policies and political narratives. They talked about feeling a sense of negativity towards the LGBTQ+ community. When it comes to healthcare, young people who identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community want professionals, and everyone else for that matter, to treat them as the individuals they are. They want their health addressed appropriately and their gender identity and/or sexuality only to be brought into conversations, when relevant.

“...if we’re having a conversation, for example, about my knees, let’s keep it about my knees.” Young Person

For this to happen, professionals need to be trained and skilled in healthcare for these young people, taking into consideration all their intersectionality. Whilst training will support improved care for these young people, practitioners also need to recognise when they do not know things and be able to signpost or link to more specialised support when needed.

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About AYPH

The Association for Young People's Health works to understand and meet the particular health and wellbeing needs of 10-25 year olds.
For more information email info@ayph.org.uk

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Mosaic Trust and Skate Gals & Pals.

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