

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

When kids come out: How parents and schools tip the balance

The response families, teachers and friends give to LGBTQ+ youth follows them throughout their lives. The consequences couldn't be higher.

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Content Warning: A warning to our listeners, this podcast contains discussions about suicide and violence. Please take care of yourself and take advantage of the resources we note at the end of our episode if you need them.

Robin Chenoweth: There is no scarcity of impediments facing LGBTQ kids.

(Audio of news coverage)

Announcer: *A heated meeting for parents, all over bathrooms...*

Speaker 1: *I'm concerned for the safety of my daughter*

Speaker 2: *It will affirm to all the trans and gender non-conforming students that they matter*

Speaker 3: *Identities don't play sports, bodies do...the physiologically weaker sex will lose the ability to compete.*

Speaker 4: *Equity based curriculums around race, gender and sexualities open the door for conversations that help to prevent, address and mitigate microaggressions*

Speaker 5: *School Board, I quit. I quit your policies, I quit your trainings and I quit being a cog in a machine that tells me to push highly politicized agendas that on our most vulnerable constituents.*

Robin Chenoweth: Bills from Oklahoma to Ohio would ban trans student athletes from competing; dictate pupils' choices on which bathrooms they can use; limit the books they can read in class or check out in the school library. A vocal minority insists that discussions about gay and trans issues should be off limits in schools — at a time when mental health experts say kids need them most. Because here's what we know about gay and trans youth. Those who openly identify as LGBTQ make up about 10% of the 13- to 24-year-old population. In Ohio high schools, 72% of gay and trans students were verbally harassed in 2020, and between 10-11% were assaulted because of their sexual orientation or identities. The most sobering statistic? LGBTQ youth are four times more likely than their peers to attempt suicide. In the United States, a queer or trans youth

attempts to end their life every 45 seconds. Professor Colette Dollarhide, who has trained hundreds of school counselors at Ohio State over 15 years, says this:

Colette Dollarhide: Young people who are sexually non-traditional, either in terms of sexual identity in terms of sexual orientation, those young people are at tremendous risk for suicidal ideation and are victims of hate crimes in far greater proportion than any other group.

Robin Chenoweth: All of which should hit very close to home when your child — or your student — is the one who comes to you saying, “I’m gay” or “I’m nonbinary.” In that moment, how do you respond? Because given the hostile social and political environment toward LGBTQ young people, that response — especially from parents — will follow them for rest of their lives. Don’t believe it? Keeping listening, to what queer and trans high school students said about parents during a research study by Professor Mollie Blackburn. Their response might surprise you as much as it did her. This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. I’m Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Kyle Bucklew is our student intern. When Professor Mollie Blackburn began working with teachers to combat homophobia through literature, she and fellow researchers came upon a roadblock.

Mollie Blackburn: Some of the teachers in that teacher inquiry group, which was called the Pink Tigers, would say, we can’t read queer inclusive literature in our classrooms

Robin Chenoweth: That was in 2004. Those sentiments have only intensified. As school board meetings flare over curriculum choices, just over half of teachers recently polled by Education Week believe they should teach LGBTQ topics. A primary reason: They fear pushback from parents and worry they’ll get it “wrong.” But whatever you believe, there is value gained from knowing what happens when teachers do teach those themes in schools. That’s what happened in 2015, when Blackburn was given an extraordinary opportunity.

Mollie Blackburn: There was a school in town that had really actively started working to include and make a positive space for LGBTQ youth. And I started imagining the possibility of being able to teach an LGBTQ literature class in that school. And that was something I don’t think when I started my academic work, it’s not something I imagined possible.

Robin Chenoweth: Being a researcher, she offered to teach the literature class for free if she could collect qualitative data. The school agreed, obtained parental permissions and Blackburn set up her first of three classes. At first, mostly white students signed up. Over time, the class became more diverse. The books Blackburn offered weren’t sexual in nature. They simply included LGBTQ characters trying to find acceptance. And during the class discussions, something telling happened.

Mollie Blackburn: As a teacher, I think, I learned a lot about kind of being quiet and listening and making space for students to talk about what they needed to talk about.

Robin Chenoweth: The book discussions could be intense, such as those about a graphic novel whose protagonist comes out to her parents.

Mollie Blackburn: When the father kind of doesn't let the daughter talk about being gay, he cuts her off at multiple times. That was a time when, I mean, kids were furious with him. Like, what does he want? What does he expect? Just the passion toward the parents was, I just hadn't predicted it.

Robin Chenoweth: But Blackburn also discovered in those discussion circles great tenderness toward family members.

Mollie Blackburn: I was interested by how much they talked about family and religion. And you know, when I look back about that shouldn't be a big surprise to me. But it wasn't what I planned for.

Robin Chenoweth: Family. And religion.

Mollie Blackburn: That is what they wanted to talk about. And they talked about it was such love and compassion toward people who had in some ways made their lives really much more difficult.

Robin Chenoweth: Really? That surprises me.

Mollie Blackburn: Yeah, it surprised me, too. The amount of work that they would do to try to understand their family members, particularly their parents, was, I mean, just stunning.

Robin Chenoweth: One student kept referring back to her own experience of coming out to her family, deepening her understanding of her mother by reflecting on the book passages she read about a trans teen.

Mollie Blackburn: She had heard her mother say, 'You have to understand that when you were born, I imagined a certain future for you. And I have to give that future up in order to imagine the future that you're, you know, pursuing.' And she was like, 'And so I love you, but it but it's a shift for me. It's hard for me.' I don't know what she said to her mom, but, but in our class, she was very kind of receptive to that argument. Not everyone was, but she was. And it helped her to understand the moms in the book. Like it seemed to be this back and forth, where the kid could understand her mom better and then could understand the characters better and understand her mom better and then understand the characters better.

Robin Chenoweth: The passages she was reading helped heal the schism that coming out created between her and her mom. That's what Blackburn calls deeply ethical

movement. Not ethical in the puritanical sense, but the notion of shifting one's understanding to encompass another person, even when that person had hurt them. Parents can make ethical movement, too.

Robin Chenoweth: If these observations don't already make it obvious: LGBTQ kids crave acceptance, especially from their parents. Though their conversations at home might have sounded very different, in the open and inclusive classroom setting, these youth disclosed their truest longing.

Mollie Blackburn: They would identify characters and stories where the parents had really done right by their kid. And they would say, 'This is my favorite part of the book.' Even if it wasn't like an integral part of the storyline, but that was their favorite part of the book.

Robin Chenoweth: Providing those encounters to kids who are facing rejection elsewhere opens a door to belonging, a critical lifeline for some LGBTQ youth. Fifty years ago, educators talked for the first time about representation of Black characters in children's literature so that children of color can see themselves as viable members of their communities. Blackburn's scholarship seeks to do the same for queer and trans kids. Her book on the study is set to publish in September. Blackburn's observations on LGBTQ youth and families perfectly align with what mental health and counseling experts know about belonging and acceptance.

Ashley Hicks: Human connection, authentic relationship and acceptance: It's ~~kind of~~ an innate human need that we all have.

Robin Chenoweth: Clinical Associate Professor Ashley Hicks directs the Couple and Family Therapy Clinic at Ohio State University.

Ashely Hicks: We think about this early on. Infants need the connection with their primary caregiver to learn about the world, about themselves, to learn that the world is a safe place that they can trust. We don't lose that as we get older. And oftentimes, as we get older, and we're figuring out who we are, and what this world is about, not having a safe place, or supportive place, can cause a significant distress. Our brain experiences emotional pain in the same way that it experienced physical pain. And so, rejection, although it's an emotional experience, our brain is telling us that we are in the physical pain and turmoil. And that really weighs on us, when we're thinking about young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, nonbinary, queer, that when they don't have someone who is supporting them, or accepting of them, or they feel like they have to hide who they are, that causes a significant amount of stress that can lead to depression, anxiety, suicidality.

Robin Chenoweth: Colette Dollarhide has counseled students and families on what it means to come out. The encounters go well about half the time.

Colette Dollarhide: We're born with, with an innate sense of how we want to function in the world. And that sense of how we function is deeply rooted and is integral to how we see ourselves as human beings. These identities are things that are present in a person's life, in their psyche, from birth. So, this is not something that people get, and suddenly wake up one morning and go, "Oh, I think that I'm actually male in a female body." They are aware all their lives — that something is different about the way that they view the world. They're aware that they're out of step with their colleagues, with their siblings, with their friends, at school. And these feelings of difference come to a crisis point at various points in their lives. One of the really profound opportunities to reflect on this issue is Star House — that Dr. Natasha Slezak founded and, and worked so hard to support

Robin Chenoweth: Star House is a drop-in center in Columbus which served nearly 900 homeless youth, ages 14 to 24, in 2020.

Colette Dollarhide: Star House is primarily peopled with homeless young people whose parents have not been able to accept their sexual identities. There are other reasons but primarily, there are a tremendous number of young people who, because of their sexual identity are no longer welcome in their parents' home. That is such a tragedy, that we are willing to throw away young people because they don't fit the ideas of the prevailing society about what a young person should be. That, to me, is tragic. That's just unutterably tragic.

Robin Chenoweth: Associate Professor Kisha Radliff studies bullying in schools and helps train school psychologists, who along with school counselors can be among the first adults LGBTQ youth turn to, especially if they fear their parents' response.

Kisha Radliff: When we look at our homeless population, a lot of times it's LGBTQ youth who have been kicked out of the house because of who they are. Having children myself, I can't fathom it. I can understand if families haven't thought about that at all, and then it's a shock and they have a very poor reaction. If they're able to sit with it and, and understand who their child is, and recognize their child and love them and support them and think — that can make a huge difference for their child.

Robin Chenoweth: But even for children facing milder rejection, consequences are significant.

Kisha Radliff: When you think about it, this is their home, their space. And if they're not welcome, validated, seen for who they are — that's really hard. Where do you go? And then if school isn't a safe space.... So families can think about the bigger picture. Do I truly love my child, no matter who they are, and for who they are as they are? I think that's really critical.

Robin Chenoweth: Something else to consider: All the media coverage and ramped up rhetoric at school board meetings can come back on LGBTQ students inside schools.

Not only are kids feeling rejection at home. After years of finding more acceptance among their peers, they now are increasingly coming under attack in some schools.

(News sound clips)

Speaker 1: *What did you think was going to happen when you push porn into the classroom and into the libraries and let boys into the bathrooms.*

Speaker 2: *The idea that my daughters need to be protected from transgender athletes competing or from using the same bathroom is based in misogyny and antiquated ideas from the last century.*

Speaker 3: *I'm a teacher but I serve God first and I will not affirm that a biological boy can be a girl and vice versa because it's against my religion, it's lying to a child, it's abuse to a child and it's sinning against our God.*

Speaker 4: *Thirty states are now considering bills that ban sexually confused boys from competing in girls' sports.*

Robin: The whole feeling of being targeted, I don't know if kids are paying attention to what's in the news right now. Maybe you have to be looking for it, but it's really right here in Ohio, too. That's making headlines. Do you think that might cause more bullying?

Kisha Radliff: Certainly, I think that can contribute to bullying. Because if the adults are saying this is something that's not appropriate or something unwelcome, that message trickles down to children. We've seen that in other areas and other political issues that have come up, where that comes into the schools and the message kids repeat the things that they're hearing at home. So certainly, and we've seen the increase in bullying over the last few years, as well amongst LGBTQ students as targets.

Robin Chenoweth: Now more than ever, LGBTQ youth need support. And the best place for that to start, is at home. Back to our original question, we asked Dr. Dollarhide, a counselor expert: When a kid comes out, what should you say? Let's start with a few things not to say.

Robin Chenoweth: A parent might say, 'Oh, I knew it all along.'

Colette Dollarhide: That's an interesting comment. Frequently, parents do have an innate understanding that, that their student holds identities that are sexually non-traditional. Especially if it said in a loving context, those words can help a student understand that that it is innate, it is it isn't something shameful or horrible. If it's said in a negative way, however, it's a pity because what that does is it discounts the child's entire relationship with that parent. That somehow, I knew you were always sub, or inadequate, or not what I wanted.

Robin Chenoweth: How about this one? This is just a phase.

Colette Dollarhide: That is also problematic. Sexual identity is not something that people outgrow. It is not something that people change over time. It is an integral part of who that human being is. And so to discount it and make it sound like, "Oh, you'll outgrow this. This is immaturity." That is, unfortunately, a very damaging way to react to a young person. It's up to the adult to be able to listen and to be able to ask questions, in order to understand what the motivation for the statement, where that's coming from, rather than just attributing it to "Oh, you're immature." "Oh, you'll grow out of it." Because that discounts then that young person's identity.

Robin Chenoweth: I know that sometimes parents find themselves religiously opposed to the news that their kids are giving them. So how about, God doesn't want you to be gay?

Colette Dollarhide: I've always understood God in a very different way. That God does not make imperfect people. That we are all perfect in God's eyes. And so, that last one, it breaks my heart. If a parent is unable to appreciate and love that child, that young person, for exactly who they are, all that they are, then that to me is, is a flawed parent. I'm sorry, that to me is a flawed parent. If that is the religious perspective that a parent holds, then that is very sad. Because that would suggest that's a toxic relationship between that parent and that child. If I'm not okay, who I am to someone that says they love me, then they can't love me. That isn't love, in my opinion, in a clinical context, in all my years of working with young people, in all my years of training counselors, I would recommend that someone who is in a toxic relationship be very thoughtful and very intentional about when and how they engage that person. Because that person is not holding my benefit foremost in their love.

Colette Dollarhide: If on the other hand, the message is, you're okay, just the way you are. You're perfect, just the way you are. You are loved, just the way you are. You are respected. You are valued. Then young people are going to be more likely to be free to express who they are, whether that is in terms of traditional gender identities, or non-traditional gender identities.

Robin Chenoweth: Especially in today's politically charged climate, schools must stand as allies for LGBTQ students, experts say. And they must get better at it. A 2019 National School Climate Survey by GLSEN showed that only 7% of students identifying as LGBTQ attend schools with a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy specific to sexual orientation and gender expression. Only 7% attended schools with guidelines that support transgender and nonbinary students. In those schools that did, LGBTQ students had more positive experiences, missed school less and were less often victims of harassment and violence. Kisha Radliff.

Kisha Radliff: When you're not represented, it's like you don't exist. And so it communicates a message of your experience and your voice is not important, and so

we're not representing it. Also, the message that there's something wrong with it, which is why we can't talk about it in schools. It can be very harmful and lead to internalizing issues. So, feelings of anxiety, like I'm not welcome here. Something we talk about, with school psychologists, is, when we have our resources in our office, who's represented in those resources? So, the books that we have, the posters we have, things that we talk about: How are we demonstrating that this is a safe space for LGBTQ youth? Staff can have stickers or posters, things that identify that they are an ally, or that their office or classroom is a safe space for LGBTQ youth. I think that's really important. You can certainly say it. But if you have that signal, and someone sees that they know that is a place I can go where it will be safe.

Robin Chenoweth: Genders and Sexualities Alliances — once known as Gay Straight Alliances — have been shown in multiple studies to reduce suicide risk and violence against queer students.

Kisha Radliff: These are great organizations that help to build community amongst our LGBTQ youth in schools. And I think it's great when staff are involved so that students know individuals who are safe people to talk to and supports that they have within their schools.

Robin Chenoweth: Colette Dollarhide talks about training school counselors to advocate for each student's "unique diversity constellation."

Colette Dollarhide: It's so important that the adults who surround our young people are understanding of LGBTQ plus issues, and are able to understand that all of this is fluid. All of this is incredibly personal. It is a challenge for young people to feel comfortable to talk to talk to someone about it, and especially to talk to adults who are in positions of authority, or adults who are in positions of judgment. Teachers, counselors, parents certainly, can send affirming messages and understanding messages about a variety of different ways that people encounter truth in their lives, and give young people the opportunity to talk about these questions. So that that pain and those that those internalized messages of inadequacy are not the source for suicidal activity.

Colette Dollarhide: My granddaughter has come out as bisexual and she did this with a cake and said, you know, this is my Coming Out Day. And we had a party. We celebrated with her. I would encourage anyone who has someone come out to them, that they express delight, that the person trusts them enough to be honest with them about who they are. And that in that conversation, they are able to say, you matter to me exactly as you are, all that you are, all that you'll ever be, all that you've ever been. That you are important and that this is a wonderful statement of your trust of me.

Robin Chenoweth: The research, the counseling, all the interactions that LGBTQ kids have had over the years prove it: There is power in the response to kids coming out as LGBTQ. The question is, will it be power that embraces them, loves them, hopes for them? Or will it be power that pushes them away?

For resources on how to become an ally, or to speak to a counselor, visit the Trevor Project website, at thetrevorproject.org. Also, the OSU Couple and Family Therapy Clinic will offer virtual, 6-week, LGBTQ family support groups beginning Feb. 3. Email CFTclinic@osu.edu or call 614-292-3671.

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