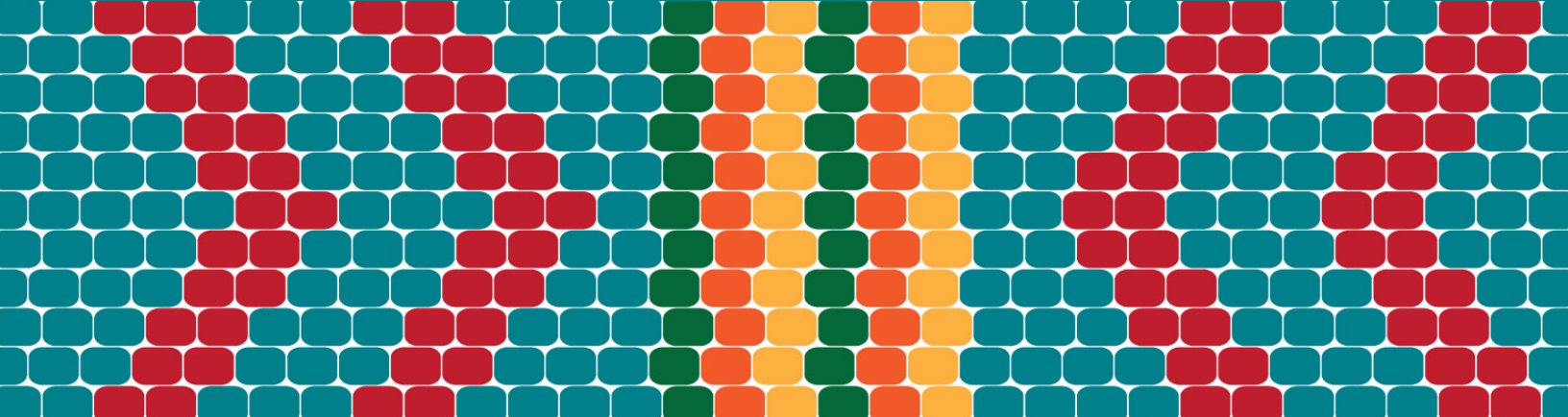


*Section 3:*  
**FAMILIES &  
RELATIVES**





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## FAMILIES AND RELATIVES

It is normal for you as a parent or relative to feel overwhelmed by your child's journey. For many families this journey involves a lot of questions. You may feel lost, confused, and out of place. You may have a strong desire for support. The information presented here hopes to help you understand your child's journey. It also hopes to provide you with comfort and support along this journey. You have a unique role as a caregiver and have the wonderful ability to positively influence your child's journey.

*"What kind of ancestor did my ancestors envision me to be? What kind of ancestor do I want to be? What kind of ancestor do I want or envision future generations to be?"*

**Dr. Karina Walters**

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

***Your child needs you now more than ever.***

This document is not meant to replace the support that you may find in your local health clinics and among community members. This Toolkit can be shared with your support figures, tribal council, and elders to increase education and spread awareness.

In some scenarios, support may not be available, or reaching out to others may not be the best safety decision for you and your child. In those cases, we hope that the information in this section and in the remainder of the Toolkit will provide you with tools to support your child on your own if necessary.



**Reminder: All URLs and references for resources in this Toolkit can be found on page 17.**

## CELEBRATING YOUR CHILD

Family support should move beyond just acceptance towards *celebration!* This is a critical time in your child's life and your support is important. **Your child needs you now more than ever.** Your celebration will also help create a community that is safe for your child and future children to come. Your celebration is good medicine.

### How can you celebrate your child?

Aim to bring back traditional ways of respect and ceremony and recognize that transgender and Two-Spirit ancestors were celebrated. Remembering this love and acceptance and sharing it with current generations can help bring back the supportive environment of your ancestors.

### Family support and acceptance are essential to the health and happiness of LGBTQ2S children!

Transgender youth with family support have better outcomes compared to transgender youth without family support.

LGBTQ2S youth with family support:

- Have similar levels of anxiety and depression as cisgender siblings and peers (S. L. Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016)
- Are more likely to have positive adult health outcomes such as self-esteem, social support, and better general health (S. Katz-Wise, Ehrensaft, Veters, Forcier, & Austin, 2018)
- Are less likely to experience depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Wilkerson, Schick, Romijnders, Bauldry, & Butame, 2016)
- Have improved self-esteem and coping ability (Wilkerson et al., 2016)

Transgender children who have socially transitioned (live as their chosen sex) also have levels of depression and anxiety similar to their cisgender peers. (K. R. Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016)

*"For me, once I realized that my family was responding to me and interacting with me with respect and acceptance, and once I realized that this respect and acceptance was a legacy of our traditional Native past, I was empowered to present my whole self to the world and reassume the responsibilities of being a Two-Spirited person."*

**Michael Red Earth**  
Two-Spirit activist

## COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS:



**Why didn't my child tell me sooner?**

Since gender identity is often established by 2-3 years old, many children may identify with a gender different from their sex at birth from a young age. They may not realize the mismatch or have discomfort from the mismatch because they are so young. As a child gets older, they may start to experience discomfort with who they feel they are on the outside versus who they know they are on the inside. These feelings often escalate around puberty when the body starts changing and the child further realizes their feelings will not resolve.

**Youth may struggle with the "right way" to tell their parents and relatives because these individuals tend to be the most important in their lives.** Some youth may be worried about not being accepted, understood, supported, or loved. Others may not have the words to explain how they are feeling or to express their identity. This may be because of their developmental standpoint or because of a lack of exposure to the language and concepts used to describe gender and gender identity.

In many cases it may be easiest for youth to first share their gender identity with friends to help them practice and gain confidence telling people. Friends may be more likely to accept them, and the "stakes are lower" since there is less fear of outright rejection and creating familial worry. In this journey, youth may learn more about themselves and their identity, and how they want to present themselves, which may make telling relatives later on easier (for the youth and relatives receiving the information).

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Many parents and relatives struggle with the fact that they never realized signs of their child being transgender. This is common since youth have often spent years trying to better understand their own identity and learning to deal with the discomfort they feel with their bodies. They may hide their identity not only from their family and relatives, but also from themselves. This makes it even more difficult for others to recognize signs.

Even if there were signs during childhood, you as a caregiver may not have been aware of what to look out for so may not have paid attention to any signals that were present. It is also common for families to characterize some of their child's behaviors/expression as a



**Why didn't we notice—did we do something wrong?**

temporary phase (such as changing their hair or wearing different types of clothes) rather than part of the child's gender exploration or journey.

If you currently have a young child who is discussing gender identity or showing signs of exploration, Planned Parenthood has some helpful [resources](#) focused on preschool aged children.

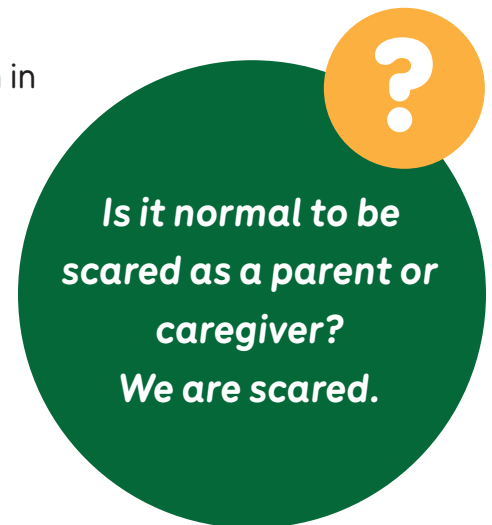
At the end of the day it is most important to focus on the present and future, and to think about how you can best support child moving forward. Celebrating them as they are now will help them love themselves and lead happier lives. Also remember that your child is sharing this with you now because they trust you. ***They need you now more than ever.***

Fear can be a common initial reaction to learning a child or youth in your life is transgender or Two-Spirit.

- You may fear for your child's safety and want to protect them from harassment.
- You may fear that their identity will cause them to experience physical harm—from others, or from themselves.
- You may fear that your child has a mental illness.
- You may fear your family members and relatives will judge your child.

While these and many other fears are valid, it is important to remember that ***your child needs you and your support now more than ever.*** Native ancestors have honored transgender and Two-Spirit individuals as sacred, and moving forward we all must do the same. Your support will help increase your child's self-confidence, self-acceptance, and comfort level sharing sensitive information with you. All of these can help your child remain safe.

Your concerns about mental illness may be a result of societal ideas concerning transgender or more broadly LBG individuals. Gender expansive expressions are not signs of mental illness. ***This idea is typically a result of a colonized view of gender, and is contrary to Native beliefs that celebrate & honor transgender and Two-Spirit relatives.***





Lastly, it is natural to be concerned about the opinions of your extended family and community. However, **this journey is about your child**, not your relatives and their opinions. You can educate your relatives about gender identity and expression and remind them of historical esteem for transgender and Two-Spirit individuals. This can also help you work towards building a network of allies in your community.

**I have heard of something called the grieving process. What is that?**



*"Often family members experience transition as a living death, wherein the trans-identified person is perceived as somehow present and absent, the same and different, at once."*

Many parents go through a period of grieving after they discover that their child identifies as transgender or Two-Spirit. Grieving may also take place after medical transition has occurred. Grieving is different for each individual, ranging from feelings of sadness to feeling as if one's child has died and will never return.

**These feelings are natural.** They can be related to you realizing that your child's future will not be exactly the same as you had imagined it. This is often difficult for parents. As hard as it may be, it is important to accept these feelings and channel them into support and respect. Also remember to take care of yourself so that you can better take care of your child and support them through this journey. **Trust yourself and your child along this journey, and know that your emotions and experiences are authentic.**

It may be helpful to continue reflecting on your feelings throughout the journey. Talking circles or support groups for parents going through similar experiences may help.

It is okay to tell your child that you are processing their journey, but you don't want to place an extra burden on them by showing them you are afraid, upset, or unsure of what to do next. Do not expect them to be your support system--they are already being so brave to tell you about their identity and journey. Asking questions can help both you and your child progress along the journey, but try to remain unbiased and non-judgmental while doing so. **Your child needs you now more than ever.**

# FOSTERING RESILIENCE

The journey you and your child have embarked on may be filled with strong emotions, unpredictable changes, and unanswerable questions. Trust in your ability to succeed along this journey, no matter the challenges you face. Trust is healing.

Your resilience is defined by how you are able to handle tough times and change for the better. Resilience is a sign of your strength.



*“Human resiliency is like a willow tree branch, able to stretch, bend and then come back to almost the exact shape, but changed. When we experience life events that require us to be resilient, who we become is also changed.” (Gray-Smith, 2012)*

You may find the following techniques helpful in strengthening your resilience: self-reflection and coping, connecting with Native traditions, and continual celebration of your child (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Techniques to strengthen resilience

Self-Reflection & Coping	Native Tradition	Celebration
<p>Taking time to reflect on your own identity, your connection to relatives and ancestors, and the coping skills you have developed can help through this journey.</p>	<p>Reconnecting to traditions and stories can help foster support and celebration. Look for or start up your own talking circles or support group for parents.</p>	<p>Celebrating your child and their future within your family and community.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>= RESILIENCE</b> Culture, identity, community, family, spirituality, Indigenous worldviews</p>		



## Self-reflection and coping

- Mindfulness helps us to compare two contrasting things or ideas to each other, and to accept both without judgment. This process helps us become aware of the present moment and release fears about the past and the future.
- Meditation is a mindfulness tool that helps us reflect on our emotions and experiences. Self-reflection allows us to be present and listen to our hearts.
- We also learn self-compassion through mindfulness and meditation. This is especially important as we go through life changes. When we practice self-compassion and treat ourselves with kindness, we can let go of difficulty and move forward. Positive thoughts and self-compassion are good medicine.
- Self-reflection can also assist with reconnecting to traditions. We can think about where our lives and challenges fit into the larger picture, and how our actions relate to what ancestors experienced. Self-reflection is grounding.
- Mindfulness and meditation are especially useful when accessing mental health resources is difficult. They can be done anywhere, on your own, and are free.
- You can teach your child these skills so they can develop their coping mechanisms and resilience from a young age.



### Resources:

- [Kristin Neff's TED Talk on compassion](#)
- [Kristin Neff's website, focused on self-compassion](#)
- [Learn about mindfulness through the story of two wolves](#)

## Reconnecting with Native Traditions

*"Two-Spirit identity is about circling back to where we belong, reclaiming, reinventing and redefining our beginnings, our roots, our communities, our support systems and our collective and individual selves."*

Reconnecting with Native traditions is another important step towards building resilience. Finding talking circles or support groups in your community may help you accomplish this. Any action that helps you and your child reclaim pride in their transgender or Two-Spirit identity can help to erase colonized, binary gender expectations.

Embracing this traditional view is so important for healing. It helps promote your child's self-esteem and confidence, allowing them to "come in" to their true identity. The larger community also benefits, and traditions are revitalized.

### **Dr. Alexandria Wilson**

Two-Spirit professor from Opaskwayak Cree Nation

## Celebration

Celebration is the third technique you can use to develop your resilience. You and your child can celebrate their gender identity through the arts. Painting, graphic art, music, acting, dancing, and comedy are all ways transgender and Two-Spirit peoples have shared their worldviews and experiences. **Youth may find special connection to art as it creates an opportunity for them to express their individual views as they progress along their gender-affirming journey.** The arts also provide an opportunity for parents, relatives, and communities to celebrate transgender and Two-Spirit people.

Celebration can also come in the form of preparing sacred foods for your child, embracing them with good words and kind thoughts, and advocating for them in community ceremonies.



## PARENT PERSPECTIVES

Strong and supportive Indigenous mothers in the Pacific Northwest share thoughts and experiences related to raising a transgender child.

**What are some ways you have been able to take care of yourself through this journey?**



"I had gone back into my own therapy and my counselor helped me. It was more about me putting aside my hurt and anger to really sit down and listen and accept [my child] and go on the journey. It was hard for both of us, it really was, and it took a while for us to get there...where we could talk to and understand one another. And then once we got to that point then I had to go through my mourning period. I was losing the [child] that I thought I had, and now I had a [another child]. So it took me a while to get to that point. It was hard. To say, 'Okay, mourn this loss', and become more loving and accepting of the [child]."

"All we do is rely on interpersonal relationships, and trust in the family."

"No two journeys are the same. When I look back on it, I can see little signs from when [my child] was little. Elementary school, maybe even pre-school...that he wasn't the female assigned at birth that I thought he was going to be. But he had to come out in his own time and his own way. Some people, boom, as soon as they can form a coherent sentence at 3 or 4...well not everybody is going to follow that path. There's taking the time and being able to fully express yourself and to hear the other person...and be able to have a conversation. But whatever way you need to get to that point, I just hope that you can get to that point. Because things will be so much easier for everybody. Your thoughts, emotions, and identities...and be able to have real conversations and acceptance."

**What advice do you have for other parents experiencing this all?**



### **Counseling can help with healing.**

"All I know is that [my child] was so confused. It took a long time to listen and understand what the other was saying and going through. I hooked him up with a counselor...was able to help navigate through this. He still sees his counselor to this day, and they have a good relationship."

**Using pronouns and chosen names can take time to get used to.**

"It's tough but you can't get down. Mistakes are okay, we are trying ...we're slipping up. [I tell him] we're human, we're slipping up, please try to be patient and we will do better with it. I'm not perfect."

**It is natural for you to be afraid as a parent.**

"Safety is a valid concern. My child isn't gonna grow into the man he needs to be if I don't let him leave the house. So I just have to trust that he's listened to my concerns and that he makes good choices. I remind him that I'm worried about him and that I don't want anything to happen to him."

**It is good medicine to engage in tough conversations.**

"Talk about what happens on the news. We will watch 'I Am Jazz' together and talk about things that Jazz experiences. We have discussions together and that way we stay informed and we have an idea...and there will be times when I can say, 'You see, this is why I'm scared'. I would recommend, have the conversations about these different topics. Granted bathroom bills may be bigger in [one state] than they are in [your state], but still have the discussion. Just because it's over there doesn't mean it won't happen over here, or you won't end up over there."

"Don't be afraid to have these frightening conversations. It's a chance for everyone to get their point of view out, so there's more understanding. And when there's more understanding you can see where everyone is coming from and support each other with this."

**What is your advice for people who want to connect to history to help with this journey, but grew up away from the reservation?**



"My family is a product of intergeneration trauma. My grandfather went to boarding school and literally had the Indian beat out of him, so he and my grandmother went out of their way to make sure my Dad and Dad's family stayed away from tradition... When [my child] started coming out I was looking for history to see how [our] people dealt with transgender people...We have been taking comfort and solace in the large number of transgender and gender non-conforming and other LGBTQ within our community...we are trying to band together until we unearth some research that will get us back 100+ years to find out how this was handled traditionally."

# SUPPORT GROUPS FOR FAMILIES



## Examples in Washington State

- **Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children Support Group**
  - Parent/family groups by child's age: 3-9 years old, 9-13 years old, 14-20 years old, adult aged children
  - Facilitated play group and tween group meets at same time as parent/family group
  - Held at Seattle Children's Hospital and other locations in Western Washington State.
  - Contact Aiden Key at 1-855-4-GENDER (1-855-443-6337) or email: [info@genderdiversity.org](mailto:info@genderdiversity.org)
- **Ingersoll Gender Center**
  - Support groups for students and significant others, families, friends, and allies
- **Northwest Two-Spirit Society: for Two-Spirit individuals and allies**
  - Email: [hcalfloodingsr@yahoo.com](mailto:hcalfloodingsr@yahoo.com)



## National Resources

- **City of Angels Two-Spirit Society (Los Angeles)**
- **Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (San Francisco)**
- **General search to find support groups across the US**
- **PFLAG- find a chapter**
- **Gender Spectrum**  
Online support group/forum
- **Ally Moms: Stand With Trans**  
Phone call, text service as well as online information

### Support groups (continued)

- Online information about Native people who identify as transgender or Two-Spirit is somewhat limited, but that doesn't mean you are alone. Tribal leaders and cultural centers may have a better sense of local support systems. There are also online opportunities to connect with parents from other tribal nations or communities.
- Think about setting up talking circles for parents and families with similar experiences. This can help provide support and connect to traditional practices.
- Always remember to think about safety for yourself and your child when seeking information.

## FINDING MEDICAL CARE

There are many places where you and your child can seek care. This may include a typical doctor's office, hospital, free clinic, pharmacy, dental office, and even schools.

### Where do I begin?

When seeking any kind of care for your child, it is important to think about finding a provider who has experience working with LGBTQ or Two-Spirit patients. You may ask friends and allies in your community for their gender-affirming care recommendations. You may also reach out to local LGBTQ2S support groups, when available.

An online search using the general provider links listed below may also be helpful.



### General provider search

- [WPATH provider search](#)
- [GLMA provider search](#)
- [Health Service search engine](#)
- [Healthcare Equity Index survey](#)
  - Ratings for facilities across the US about their ability to provide gender-affirming care for LGBTQ2S people
- [Comprehensive clinical care map for transgender and gender expansive youth](#)



### Telehealth and virtual appointments

- You may be able to access gender focused care from an online provider. For example, in Washington State, [QueerDoc](#) provides a wide range of health services. To find similar options in your state, try googling a combination of the following words: telehealth, virtual health, online appointments for transgender or LGBTQ patients.
- Telehealth is a relatively new service so doctors may not yet be licensed near you, but it may be a good starting point in your search for care.

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## WHY IS MENTAL HEALTH CARE SO IMPORTANT?

Transgender and Two-Spirit youth face higher risks for low self-esteem, substance misuse, and other mental health challenges. This increased risk results from biases and prejudice they face in society. AI/AN youth face similar risks due to historical and intergenerational trauma. This makes **mental health care even more important for AI/AN youth** who identify as transgender or Two-Spirit.

Mental health providers can help youth think through their feelings and concerns related to gender identity and possible transition. Mental health professionals can also help youth develop coping mechanisms that will be beneficial along their journey.

Early support from mental health providers and families is extremely beneficial in helping youth overcome underlying mental health issues and prevent future ones. Mental health providers should not convince your child to accept a gender identity that does or does not align with their assigned sex at birth. Instead, their overall role is to create a welcoming space for youth to discuss and explore all of their identities. They are also great at helping youth develop strategies around disclosing their identity, helping with social transition, and building self-esteem and acceptance. The best healing takes place when culture and traditions are incorporated. Mental health providers also play a role as advocates and educators for parents, family members, and schools (Johanna, Rosenthal, Hastings, & Wesp, 2016).

## HOW DO I FIND A MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER?

The following diagram (Figure 8) demonstrates some helpful tips to keep in mind when seeking mental health care. Mental health providers may not always be available in your community, and you or your child may fear being discriminated against, but it is important to seek help if needed. Your primary care doctor can be an extra resource to help you find mental health care.

If your child needs emergency support, refer to the crisis hotline section of this Toolkit.

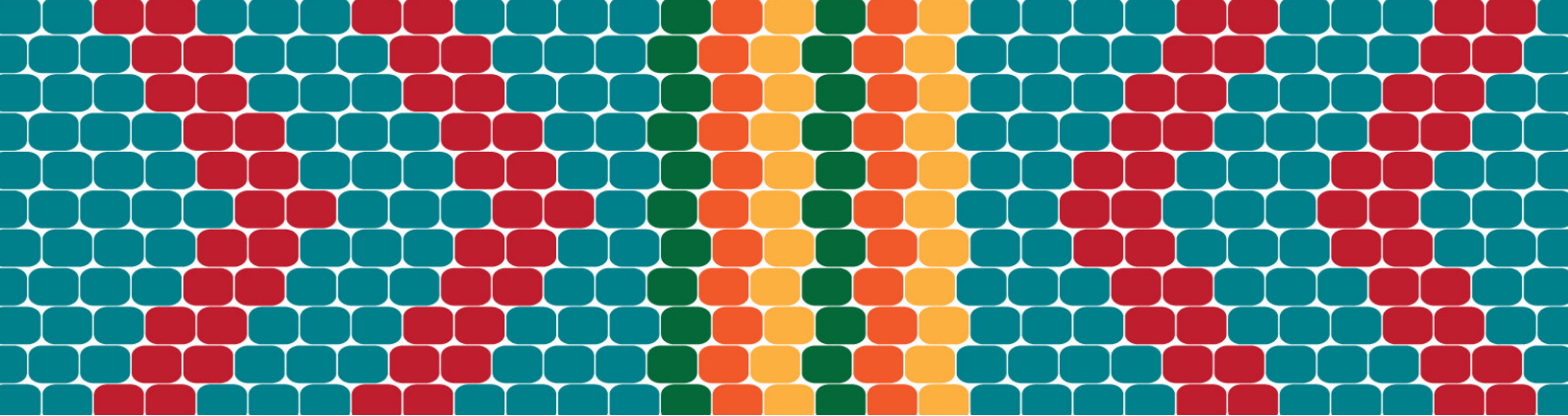
Figure 8: Searching for mental health providers

<b>Finding a mental health provider</b>	<b>You've found one... now what?</b>	<b>Other considerations</b>
<p><b>Types of provider</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Therapist</li> <li>• Counselor</li> <li>• Social work</li> <li>• Psychologist</li> <li>• Psychiatrist</li> </ul> <p><b>Search options:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word of mouth from primary care provider</li> <li>• GLMA, WPATH, Healthcare equity index searches</li> <li>• Virtual (online) care</li> </ul>	<p>Does the provider have experience working with children and adolescents dealing with similar gender-related challenges?</p> <p>Give the office a call and ask about provider experience with similar patients.</p> <p>Do they take your insurance? Are they scheduling new patients?</p> <p>Does your child want to go to the visit alone, or with a friend or relative?</p>	<p>Are they a good fit?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does provider seem at ease talking with you and your child?</li> <li>• Did your child feel comfortable during the encounter?</li> </ul> <p>Does the provider have relationships with other LGBTQ2S friendly providers?</p> <p>Finding a therapist or counselor may take multiple tries—with multiple providers—before the fit is right.</p>

# WEBSITE REFERENCES

## Families and Relatives

- **Planned Parenthood gender discussion with preschooler:** <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/preschool/how-do-i-talk-with-my-preschooler-about-identity>
- **Kristin Neff TED talk:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSplr4>
- **Kristin Neff website:** [https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/%20\(with%20meditation%20exercises\)](https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/%20(with%20meditation%20exercises))
- **Video about mindfulness:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzKryaN44ss>
- **Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children Support Group:** <http://www.genderdiversity.org/family-support-groups/>
- **Ingersoll Gender Center:** <https://ingersollgendercenter.org/what-we-do/support-group/>
- **Northwest Two-Spirit Society:** <https://www.facebook.com/groups/nw2spiritsociety/>
- **City of Angels Two-Spirit Society (Los Angeles):** <https://www.facebook.com/groups/543290225692505>
- **Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (San Francisco):** <https://www.baaits.org/>
- **General search to find support groups across the US:** <https://forge-forward.org/view/trans-support-groups/>
- **PFLAG- find a chapter:** <https://pflag.org/find-a-chapter>
- **Gender Spectrum:** <https://genderspectrum.org/lounge/groups/>
- **Ally Moms: Stand With Trans:** <http://standwithtrans.org/ally-parents/>
- **WPATH provider search:** <https://www.wpath.org/member/search>
- **GLMA provider search:** <http://www.glma.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=939>
- **Health Service search engine:** <http://radremedy.org/>
- **Healthcare Equity Index survey:** <https://www.hrc.org/hei/about-the-hei>
- **Comprehensive clinical care map for transgender and gender expansive youth:** <http://bit.ly/HRCmapgender>
- **QueerDoc:** <https://queerdoc.com/services/>



## Crisis Hotlines

If you or a friend needs any mental health support or is having a mental health crisis and/or suicidal thoughts, the following resources are available. They are all LGBTQ2S friendly!

### **TRANS LIFELINE:**

**877-565-8860**

Crisis line staffed by transgender folks, for transgender folks; toll-free

### **THE TREVOR PROJECT:**

**866-488-7386**

Crisis intervention and suicide prevention available 24/7 from counselors trained in supporting LGBTQ youth

### **CRISIS TEXT LINE:**

**TEXT HOME TO 741741**

Text at any time to start texting with a crisis counselor

