

## Sibling Support for Gender-Questioning and Trans Youth



### What this research is about

Parental support has been proven to be a protective factor for gender-questioning, nonbinary, and trans children and youth. Affirmative systemic therapy (AST) is an emerging trend in family therapy that “aims to affirm and celebrate diverse identities, particularly in the context of gender and sexuality.” This approach can be particularly useful for families with a gender-diverse child. Family therapy can help parents and their child navigate these life changes and create a supportive and affirmative home environment. While there has been much study to support this, there is a lack of research on the role of siblings, or the “sibling subsystem,” in family therapy.

This article explores in depth how the inclusion of siblings in AST could have beneficial outcomes for families with a gender-diverse or questioning child.

### What the researchers did

Based on intersectional feminism, therapists using AST aim to challenge the common assumptions and privileges afforded to heterosexual and cisgender identities that are built into traditional therapy. They focus on supporting healthy family relationships, instead of following rigid ideas about what a “family” should look like or how it should work. Using a case vignette and existing literature, the researchers demonstrate how AST for families with a gender-questioning, nonbinary, or trans child can benefit from the inclusion of siblings.

### What the researchers found

The relationship with a sibling is often the longest relationship a person will have in their lifetime. Because of the shared nature of their environment, upbringing, education, and social circles, siblings can

### What you need to know

Gender-questioning, trans, or nonbinary children often face challenges when disclosing their gender identity to their families. Affirmative systemic therapy (AST) can be a useful tool to help parents with a gender-diverse child discover the best ways to affirm and support their child. However, much of the research into family therapy has left out the role of siblings. Siblings share home environments, social circles, and confidences. They often play an important role in each other’s key life transitions.

This article examines the historical exclusion of siblings in family therapy research and practice. Through a case vignette, it illustrates the potential positive outcomes of including siblings in AST. These include avoiding singling out the gender-transitioning child as the “problem” in the family, gathering richer background information of family dynamics, and breaking down unhelpful gender patterns and relationships that could impact long-lasting positive change across the family system.

play a large role in each other’s key life transitions. It has been documented that siblings, especially older ones, often play a protective role toward the younger. Research has also shown that siblings are usually the first source of disclosure for any type of “secret.” This could be anything from gender questioning or bullying to sexual orientation and romantic problems. Youth going through a transition regarding their gender may experience discrimination or oppression. This can also come from the family, where negative attitudes are expressed against their gender identification. Non-acceptance by family and loved ones has been shown

to increase the risk of suicidal ideation in gender-transitioning youth.

Studies have shown that siblings are usually the first ones being told about one's gender transition, and that siblings are an important source of support, in-family advocacy, and respect. Although there is a lack of research on the effects of non-supportive siblings, some studies suggest that the siblings of a gender-transitioning child may feel they are being overlooked by their parents in the process, or they may fear becoming the target of transphobic acts by association.

By not including siblings in AST, therapists could lose access to important information about family dynamics and patterns of behaviour. A sibling can also be an ally, providing a generational perspective around gender-related ideas. The shared solidarity between siblings could be leveraged by the therapist to help parents see how they can be more supportive.

The exclusion of siblings from AST sessions could reinforce any feelings of resentment or abandonment they may be experiencing when the gender-transitioning sibling becomes the focus of parental attention. On the other hand, having the therapeutic sessions focus only on the gender-transitioning child could reinforce the perspective that the child is the "problem" in the family. The exclusion of siblings could also undermine the end goal of the therapy, which is to create long-lasting positive changes.

Working to untangle family relationship patterns can help bring the family system into better balance. This can create the conditions for long-lasting positive change, including helping family members unpack their gender identity assumptions while creating space for them to voice their concerns, enabling them to offer support to their gender-diverse child in a more genuine and authentic way.

### How you can use this research

More research into the sibling subsystem in family therapy should be conducted. Methods of including siblings in family therapy could be modelled to improve family functioning.

### About the researchers

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Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

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