

The Washington Post

As Pride celebrations move online during the pandemic, who will hug the queer kids?

By Amber Leventry

June 8, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

As a queer, non-binary parent of a transgender child, Pride is a sacred space for my family. My kids march front and center in a parade that highlights and celebrates the diversity that created them.

Not all kids are given this chance to feel supported, though. Some face a lack of support at home or in their community. That's why amid the glitter, drag queens, rainbow flags and pronoun pins of Pride celebrations, parents from grass-roots advocacy groups offer hugs at the celebrations to anyone who wants or needs one. Two of the biggest organizations doing this, Mama Bears and Free Mom Hugs, started independently of one another in 2014 by two mothers of gay children. Both groups have the same mission: Take care of queer youths.

Liz Dyer started [Mama Bears](#) as a private Facebook group of about 200 to educate and empower moms of queer kids and help them support their own children. But Dyer says the organization's members have become very passionate about supporting all LGBTQ people. "Mama Bears often show up at Pride events offering hugs and wearing shirts or carrying signs that express their support for the LGBTQ community," she says.

This year, though, as celebrations are postponed, moved online or canceled because of the covid-19 pandemic, my heart sinks as I wonder: Who will hug the queer kids in the absence of physical Pride events?

For the queer youths who are not out or not supported at home, Pride offers a place to see allies and parents showing up for all LGBTQ youths. It gives them hope that things will get better. Many queer kids *need* a hug from a supportive parent. A [study done by George Washington University](#) found that two years after learning their child wasn't heterosexual, many parents still struggled with the news just as much as when their child came out to them. That is a long time for those kids to feel rejected or judged by a parent and someone you love.

Heteronormative biases pave the way for parents to be disappointed when their kids are "different." Most queer kids are born to straight, cisgender parents, and the assumption is that their child will also be straight and cisgender. Some parents adjust — some more slowly than others — while others refuse to accept their child for who they are.

Attachments are severed and in some cases a queer child may experience verbal or physical abuse, be subjected to conversion therapy, or be kicked out of their house.

LGBTQ youths are already at [risk for increased mental and physical health problems](#) compared with their cisgender, straight peers. Lack of family acceptance increases these risks and may lead to homelessness — as many as 40 percent of homeless youths identify as LGBTQ according to [The Trevor Project](#). [Family rejection](#) increases the likelihood of suicide attempts, depression, drug use and risky sexual behaviors. Covid-19 has added another layer of [negative mental health implications](#) for LGBTQ youths because schools, peer groups and LGBTQ centers that offer outlets and safe spaces are closed or off-limits.

Shelly Rodden is the sponsor of the Gay Straight Alliance at Eau Gallie High School in Melbourne, Fla. Their weekly meetings included mental health check-ins. She didn't realize when the school dismissed for spring break that the remainder of the school year would be canceled because of the pandemic.

“I recognized early on that the students in our club would be especially impacted by the social implications of covid-19. I know that many live in homes that are not affirming, and this makes them particularly vulnerable. Because of this, I reached out to the officers of our GSA, and together we have been successful in conducting weekly virtual meetings.”

Rodden says that while it's not the same, she is fortunate to be able to provide space to be a supportive adult for her students. As the vice president of Space Coast Pride, the largest LGBTQ organization in Brevard County, she knows canceling Pride festivals closes another door on the kids who desperately need to be seen and feel loved. “This is a difficult time for us all,” Rodden says.

Without in-person Pride events this year, Dyer wanted to be sure they still had a way to support the queer community, specifically the people who don't have supportive families. Vanessa Lee Nic, also of Florida, is an activist and parent to transgender son Dylan. Since 2017 she has been one of the 11,000 moms who are part of the [Mama Bears Facebook](#) group. She happily participated in the [video Dyer and her son Nicholas are creating](#) to showcase moms like Lee Nic, to remind members of the queer community that they are not alone.

Lee Nic is also part of a group called [Ally Parents](#) that offers support through talk or text to queer kids who need validation and affirmation. “I have connected with so many beautiful souls who have reached out to me through Ally Parents and I'm going to make sure to celebrate them during Pride Month by reaching out to them individually.”

Sara Cunningham founded the nonprofit organization [Free Mom Hugs](#), which has chapters throughout the United States working to educate families and allies while affirming and celebrating LGBTQ individuals. Members travel to Pride festivals each year and open their arms in support of queer youths. The group recently wrapped up a [Virtual Tour](#), a week-long event with nightly variety shows and panel discussions.

And affirming parents of LGBTQ kids recognize their mission goes beyond Pride. Jess Kell, of Vermont, is also raising a transgender son. While she will miss having an in-person opportunity to wear her Mama Bear T-shirt and soothe the hurt of queer folks who are desperate for support, she knows the work is still there, during Pride month but also all year.

“In our home, Pride is about making sure that our son knows that we won’t ever give up working to make the world a safer and more welcoming for him and his peers. It’s about access to locker rooms and health care, about pronouns, visibility, and representation,” Kell says.

Kayden Taylor, of Florida, agrees. Taylor is a transgender man and on the board of [ALSO Youth](#) in Sarasota, a nonprofit drop-in center for LGBTQ youths and their allies. Taylor facilitates the trans youth support group for people ages 16-24. The center has been offering support services through Zoom and plans to throw a virtual Pride party. Taylor and his colleagues are putting together goody bags for youths to pick up before the party. “Every day my focus is allowing the youth we serve to live authentically and be themselves when many of them are unable to do so in their homes or daily lives,” says Taylor.

Even without Pride events this year, parents, advocates, and group facilitators will continue to wrap their arms around LGBTQ youths just like we do every day. We may not be able to hug the queer kids this Pride Month, but we will keep fighting for the safety and happiness they deserve.

To that end, Taylor wants queer youths to know that, even in the absence of in-person celebrations this year, “You are worthy, you mean something, and you are loved by many; you have something to give to this world. So get your Pride flags and wave them high because we will continue to fight for you and with you.”

Amber Leventry is a writer and advocate who lives in Vermont. They run [Family Rhetoric by Amber Leventry](#), a Facebook page devoted to advocating for LGBTQ families one story at a time. Follow them on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @amberleventry.