

# Attachment-informed Family Treatment in LGBTQ+ Community Settings: A Thematic Analysis of Youth and Caregiver Perceptions

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## INTRODUCTION

- While the majority of LGBTQ+ youth are healthy, functioning, and resilient, between 15%-40% make a suicide attempt each year—rates that are 2x-3x higher than their heterosexual peers (Fergusson, Horwood, & Beutrais, 2005; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Russell, 2003).
- The quality of family relationships can be both a risk and protective factor for suicidality (Diamond, et al., 2014; Ryan, et al., 2009; Ryan, et al., 2010)
- This may be especially true for LGBTQ+ youth who may experience rejection on the basis of their identities and expression (Connor & Reuter, 2006; Kerr, Preuss & King, 2006)
- Interestingly, there are few youth suicide treatment approaches that target the quality of family relationships (Coolhart & Shipman, 2017) and few studies have examined these approaches in the contexts where LGBTQ+ youth are likely to present for treatment (Craig & Austin, 2016).
- Therapists working with these families in LGBTQ+ settings face unique challenges:

- Youth may have fears around disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity
- Getting multiple family members to participate in therapy
- Facilitating respectful engagement between family members
- Managing active suicidality of youth
- Re-exposing youth to family conflict in treatment

**The purpose of this study** is to expand the body of literature on LGBTQ+ youth suicide treatment approaches by investigating youth and caregiver perceptions of therapy after participating in a process-oriented, attachment-informed family therapy, in LGBTQ+ community settings (Attachment-Based Family Therapy; Diamond, et al., 2013).

## METHODS

- Conducted semi-structured interviews (ranging from 30-60 min) with youth (N=7) and caregivers (N=5) shortly after completion of therapy
- Interview questions focused on a) experience of treatment b) factors that influenced helpfulness of treatment
- Transcripts analyzed by three graduate students (authors) using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008)
- Initial codebook developed by coders independently based on first three interviews for both caregivers and youth
- Discrepancies on the initial codebook were discussed until consensus
- First author coded remaining transcripts and continued to adapt the codebook
  - 20% of transcripts were coded by another author
  - Discrepancies are being reviewed in ongoing meetings and the codebook is undergoing modifications

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Caregiver Themes

Preliminary Themes and Definitions	Subthemes	Code Definitions
Changes in Caregiver-Youth Relationship	Caregiver Shifts Toward Youth	Caregivers discuss emotional, perspective, and behavioral shifts (in themselves) toward their youth, as a result of participating in the therapy. Caregivers describe a shift in their emotion, behavior and/or perceptions regarding the relationship with their youth, while others describe these shifts in relation to the youth themselves.
	Communication	Caregivers reflect on communication with their youth. Caregivers speak to what they needed to learn to communicate more effectively. Others comment on the process of gaining perspective on communication with their youth in therapy.
Youth Changes	Caregiver Notices Youth Changes	Caregivers discuss how their youth's behavior, affect, and depression/suicide has changed. Examples include caregiver's perceptions that youth are more respectful, have better coping, and are more engaged in therapy or more open in conversations with the caregivers.
Perspectives About the Future	Change is a Process	Therapy starts, but there is more work to be done after treatment ended
	Real Optimism	Hopefulness about the future (e.g., they can overcome challenges, but are cognizant of current challenges and barriers)
Helpful Therapy Factors	Connection with Therapist as a Person	Felt comfortable and safe as a result of the personality of the therapist.
	Therapist Understanding	Caregivers liked how understanding the therapist was. Supported development of alliance.
	Therapist Flexibility	Caregivers describe how therapist involved them in the decision-making about the therapy and where it was going.
	Youth Engagement	Parent noticed youth engagement which led to openness in therapy

### Preliminary Youth Themes

Preliminary Themes and Definitions	Subthemes	Code Definitions
Shifts in youth's perception of self	Self-Awareness	Therapy helped youth develop a greater understanding of their own emotions, thoughts, and experiences, which youth perceived to be helpful.
	Self-Expression	Youth talked about how the therapy promoted expression of emotions and their experiences, which was perceived by youth to be helpful. Sometimes their expression was in relation to caregivers, while other times it was with regard to their own experiences not associated with caregivers. Some youth discussed how the therapy helped them feel motivated to express themselves to others (e.g., with caregivers, with the therapist, and socially in general). Often youth felt personally empowered after therapy as a result of this self-expression.
	Youth Perceptions of their ability to handle challenges	Youth discuss thoughts and strategies for coping with life's challenges, both with their caregiver and on their own. Youth talk about their perceptions of their own capacity to manage struggles in the future, post-therapy. Youth are cautiously optimistic about handling challenges in their lives and with their caregivers. Some discuss using caregivers as a resource, while others talk about maintaining the relationship. Overall, youth were confident in being able to handle current and future challenges, even though the future is still tenuous (with additional work to be done) for many.
Shift in relationship with caregiver(s)	Think Instead of React	Youth talked about how the therapy process helped them learn to think prior to reacting. Some youth also noticed their caregiver(s) also exercising this skill.
	Process Building Cooperation with Caregiver	Youth talked about how therapy has helped build capacity for cooperation in relationship with their caregiver(s). Youth talked about this in two different ways: 1) Youth talked about how after going through the therapy process, they started to have new experiences with their parent (e.g. observation of new external behaviors such as increased parental honesty and openness). 2) Youth also talked about how about how they noticed a shift in their perception of their parent (e.g. changes in how they viewed their parent such as viewing caregiver as more mindful of their feelings and reactions, caregivers appearing calmer in the face of their emotion and/or challenges).
Characteristics of the Therapeutic Process	Movement Happened	Youth reported that one of the positive aspects of the treatment was that they experienced clear progress as a result of the therapy. Some youth talk about experiencing progress more broadly, while others discuss specific areas that they notice had gotten better (e.g. relationship with caregiver).
	Shift to Trusting the Therapeutic Process	Some youth talked about how developing trust in the therapeutic process was gradual because the therapy was very different from previous therapies they have experienced.
	Sensitivity Integrating Identity Where Relevant for Client	Youth felt that the therapy integrated identity into the conversation when relevant to the client. Some youth talked about the benefit about having a therapist who had a similar identity although having a similar identity was not seen as a requirement.
	Bringing Underlying Issues to the Surface	Youth discussed how therapy brought some of the underlying issues (personally and relationally with caregiver) to the surface, which youth noted was helpful, albeit emotionally difficult. Many of these issues were in relation to caregivers, though other were focused on youth's personal challenges. Some youth discussed how this process allowed them start anew with their caregiver.
Characteristics of the Therapeutic Relationship	Shift to Trusting the Therapist	Some youth talked about how developing trust in the therapist was a gradual process.
	Feeling Validated by the Therapist	Youth discussed experiences of feeling validated by the therapist. Feeling validated was often linked to the therapist facilitating the exploration of issues within a context that was very affirming. Some youth specifically found it helpful that the therapist took the time to not just validate but to fully hear the youths' perspectives in a nonjudgmental way.
	Therapy Providing Solutions	Youth discussed how therapists tended to be very engaged in helping youth find realistic solutions to their concerns, which felt different from previous experiences with therapy. Youth described how they experienced their therapist as invested both emotionally and behaviorally, and the therapy was both focused and organized. For example, some youth discussed how therapist connected youth to outside resources that were tailored to their needs. Therapist directiveness was especially helpful in providing solutions.

## DISCUSSION

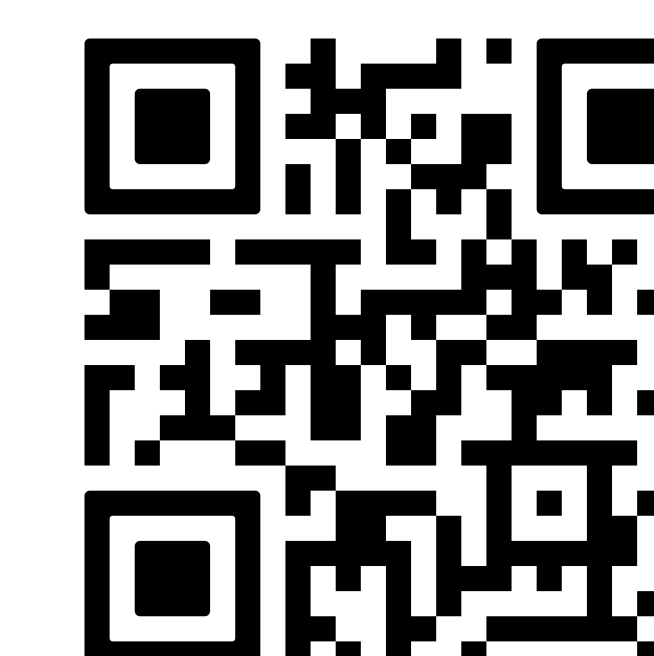
- Preliminary analyses revealed four themes for caregivers and four themes for youth.
- Youth noticed changes within themselves through therapy (e.g., self-awareness, self-expression, and managing challenges) as well as shifts in their relationships with their caregivers.
- Youth discussed thinking instead of reacting and greater cooperation with their caregivers.
- Youth described how they perceived the therapy, including ways in which therapeutic movement happened and what the therapist did to facilitate the process.
- Caregivers reported emotional, behavioral, and cognitive shifts in how they understood their relationship with their youth and more effective communication.
- Caregivers noticed changes in their youth's mental health (e.g., better coping, more openness, and more respectful behavior).
- As a result of therapy, caregivers felt more hopeful about their child's future. Caregivers described factors that made the therapy acceptable, such as connection with the therapist, therapist understanding, and flexibility about where therapy was going.

## Implications

These findings suggest that both the youth and caregivers in our sample had positive experiences in an attachment-informed family treatment. Our data suggests that a strong therapeutic alliance with both youth and caregivers can create positive intrapsychic and interpersonal changes. Further, encouraging transparent conversations within families promoted hope. These results indicate that suicide interventions targeting the quality of family relationships alongside suicidality may be appropriate for some LGBTQ+ youth and their families.

**Limitations:** This sample only consisted of youth with engaged caregivers who knew about their treatment and their LGBTQ+ identity. No rejecting caregivers, without knowledge of their youth's identity participated in this study. Future studies could examine this.

## References



## Examples of Themes

